The Depression years (1930-1936)

The Dirty Thirties, the Depression—by whatever name it went, the early years of the 1930’s created a tightening of belts that is still vividly remembered by persons who lived during that period. Even the productive Red River Valley felt the sting of drought, harsh winters, lack of windbreaks and decrease in earning and buying power.

In 1932 the school paper, The Northwest Monthly, reported “The rainfall at the Northwest Station during the first four months of the 1932 growing season has been the lightest since 1920.” The season was also one of the warmest on record.

History was made at the Northwest School in 1932 when the first of the second generation of students enrolled at the college. Dayton Hanson of Fertile was the first of many sons and daughters of alumni to attend. He was the son of Henry Hanson, who had attended from 1908 to 1910.

In December it was announced that school expenses would be reduced to allow a greater number of students to attend. “Though financial conditions throughout our rural communities have made it exceedingly difficult for many parents to send their sons and daughters to school, these very conditions make it all the more necessary for the young people of this territory to secure the kind of an education that will not only enable them to master the problems of the farm and the home, but acquaint themselves with the national and international problems that must be solved.”

Rainfall didn’t improve in 1933, and in September emergency repair work on the Kiehle Building was required. Due to the five-year dry period, the ground had been constantly shrinking. The footings of the building settled, causing extensive damage to exterior and interior walls. Special funds were made available by the Board of Regents for new footings and replacement of bricks on the southwest corner wall and entrance halls.

Enrollment continued to increase, and the Northwest School was dubbed the “School of Service,” equipping students for careers in agriculture, home economics, home nursing and business training related to agriculture.

Superintendent A.A. Dowell was given leave of absence in the fall of 1933 to initiate special research work in livestock marketing for the government in Washington. T.M. McCall, who had been with the school since 1911, was named acting superintendent. In 1934, Dowell co-authored the book, “The American Farmer and the Export Market.”

A “windbreak campaign” began in 1934. “The drought of recent years, insect pests and heavy fuel demands has so decimated prairie windbreaks that immediate action in tree planting is necessary to secure the necessary protection of farmsteads.” Northwest Monthly authors stated. Each farmer was encouraged to plant from 150 to 200 trees on each quarter section. In 1935, the entire student body signed pledges to plant at least one white elm on home grounds, designating the elms as Northwest School trees.

The silver anniversary celebration of the Northwest School Farmers’ Week was observed in early 1935. An historical pageant was presented during the Winter Shows, and from the interest it generated, it was decided to form a valley-wide historical society.

Students planted trees on campus and at home. The Memorial Tree Planting Project was inaugurated in 1935. Superintendent and Mrs. Dowell are on the left.

Students returning to school in the fall of 1935 found sound picture equipment had been installed, so talking pictures could be viewed. Students were eligible for state aid that fall, too. Any student under 21 years who had finished the eighth grade and who lived in a rural school district that didn’t maintain an accredited high school could attend the Northwest School with all fees paid. A new attendance record was established.

Close upon the heels of the silver anniversary came the celebration of the Northwest Experiment Station’s 40th anniversary, observed on June 15, 1935. Persons present included T.A. Hoverstad, first station superintendent from 1895 to 1905; C.G. Selvig, superintendent from 1910 to 1927; W.C. Coffey, dean and director of the University Department of Agriculture; and A.D. Stephens, former state senator.

Several factors accounted for the upsurge in enrollment (an increase of 10 percent in one year). One was no doubt the state aid. Another reason cited was, “The improvement in the economic situation on the farms of the country has made it possible for parents to give their sons and daughters the kind of training that will fit them for lives of usefulness on the farms and in the homes of this territory. During the darkest hour of the Depression, the farm people of the Red River Valley never lost their faith in the farm as a home and a place to raise sturdy, resourceful future citizens.”