

## The first years (1895-1905)

Crookston had been on the Minnesota map for just a few years (it was incorporated in 1879) before plans were under way to locate an experiment station in the area.

A substantial portion of the credit goes to Willet M. Hays of the Minnesota Experiment Station at St. Anthony Park. Hays was professor of agriculture and agriculturist at the experiment station of North Dakota Agricultural College, Fargo, in 1892 and 1893. He traveled widely on both sides of the Red River Valley. He was impressed with the idea of "spreading the University" to different parts of the state. When Hays joined the Minnesota Experiment Station, he received a general consent from the Agricultural Committee of the Board of Regents to make a survey of Minnesota to consider beginning the development of regional stations and schools.



*First station superintendent, T. A. Hoverstad, poses at the Northwest Experiment Station with one of the station horses.*

Because of its unique geological attributes, the Red River Valley was selected as one of two locations for consideration in Minnesota. Polk County's senator at that time was Peter M. Ringdal of Crookston. Ringdal introduced a bill for the establishment of an experiment station to be located near Crookston. At the same time, House of Representatives member M.E. Craig, introduced a bill to establish an experiment station in the northeastern part of the state. The two worked together, coming up with two identical bills that included both stations in both the Senate and the House bills. The 1895 legislature appropriated \$30,000 to procure equipment and to conduct two sub-experiment farms, one at Morris and one at Crookston.

Several tracts of land were considered for the Northwest Experiment Station location. It was finally located by the Board of Regents at Crookston on land donated by the Great Northern Railway under the auspices of President James J. Hill and Samuel Hill. Hill offered the land to Willet Hays before the Board of Regents had formally considered the project. When Hays protested, Hill said to him, "Young man, you go ahead."

The land donated near Crookston consisted of 476.61 acres. It was unimproved land, and it posed a considerable drainage problem. The land selected was extremely low, but it was regarded as advantageous to have such a tract of land for experimental purposes and for investigational use.

Work at the farm began in 1895. The city of Crookston and Polk County each gave \$1,000 which was utilized for drainage work and for making roads around and through the Northwest Farm. Hays was given general charge of the equipment and plans, and T.A. Hoverstad was selected to be superintendent of the station.

As a portent of things to come, the first implements that were unloaded, along with horses and other farm materials, were soon soaked with rain. The man in charge of getting the first supplies to the station slept in an old barn during the night. When he woke in the morning, after a night of rain, he looked out and saw only one or two spots of the farm above water. Crookston residents referred to the land as the "duck pond," often mentioning the fact that the area was a perfect place to "bag" ducks.

Conditions weren't favorable. The spring of 1896 was extremely wet. Rainfall was so constant and excessive that it was difficult to plant crops in time for a growing season. In 1897, floods just before harvest nearly ruined the wheat and oats. A fire caused by lightning that year destroyed the barn, several horses and several farm tools and conveyances. In 1899, planting was delayed until late May and early June, and a hail storm came just before harvest. Unseasonably wet years followed until 1905. The main consideration was to secure a suitable drainage system.

The state legislature appropriated \$5,000 in 1903 for drainage. The ditching that followed removed some of the surface water problems, but the ditches weren't of sufficient capacity to remove water quickly after heavy rains or during spring thaws. In 1905, an additional appropriation of \$4,000 was made to be used for more drainage and for experimenting with tile drainage. The seasons of 1906, 1907 and 1908 were given up entirely to ditching and laying tile. The ditch was completed by 1909, and consisted of about 50,000 feet of tile plus a one and one-half mile open ditch.

With the drainage problem under control, more research and experimentation could be done in other vital areas of agriculture, dealing with crops, livestock and horticultural work.