The School begins (1905-1911)

It was generally believed that once the Northwest Experiment Station was established and successfully conducted for a period of time, an agricultural school would follow as a natural sequence. Professor Willet Hays continued to agitate for such a school, as did William Robertson, a member of the faculty at the Central School, St. Paul.

When A.D. Stephens was elected State Senator from the Crookston area, more impetus was added to the campaign for a “regional” school at Crookston.

In 1905, the Minnesota legislature appropriated $15,000 to open the school and to build a school building. Like the St. Anthony Park school, Crookston’s school would be part of the University of Minnesota system, and would provide training in the technical and practical business of agriculture and give instruction in the arts of homemaking.

Three main reasons were given for beginning the school at Crookston. First, the parent school at St. Anthony Park was operating at near capacity; second, the students in northwest Minnesota found the distance to St. Anthony Park too far to attend; third, soil and climatic conditions in the Red River Valley were considered radically different from those in the remainder of the state. Teaching efforts geared to Valley conditions were considered advantageous.

The first school building had three floors. The first story was devoted to the dining hall, cooks’ quarters and heating plant. The second floor was for classrooms, and the third floor had nine dormitory rooms and a bathroom. The girls’ dormitory was located at the farmhouse.

It was necessary to borrow $2,500 from Crookston citizens to meet salaries and expenses during the first year of the school’s operation in 1906.

William Robertson became the second superintendent in 1905, and was the first school superintendent. There were 31 students enrolled in the first class.

The Northwest School of Agriculture offered a three-year course, beginning in October and closing in March each year. Expenses totaled $15 per month for room, board, heat, lights and laundry. There was also a $5 entrance fee, a $5 deposit refunded at the close of the term, and $1 each for textbook rental and reserve fund.

During the second year, 41 students registered. That year, the legislature voted funds for a boys’ dormitory (Stephens Hall) and for a science building (Owen Hall).

Superintendent Robertson died unexpectedly in 1910. His successor was Conrad G. Selvig, a young man who had been superintendent at Glencoe. Selvig came to a fledgling school with many ideas to implement. One of his major tasks was to secure able faculty members. He, also, was plagued with several problems dealing with the physical implementation of campus buildings and needs. The wells that supplied water to the campus did not meet the needs.

Eventually funds were appropriated to install a water main from the campus to connect with Crookston’s water supply. It was important to design a “campus plan” so future building would come about in a logical fashion. Station buildings had to be moved to allow for future expansion of the school campus. Often funds appropriated fell short of the amount needed to complete a specified project. According to Selvig, “The first three years were not easy ones.”

However, year by year, the school and experiment station began to look more like an established institution. Trees were planted. Buildings were added and landscaping was done. Drainage eased the swampy conditions, and research was under way at the Experiment Station in many areas.

In December 1910, the Northwest School of Agriculture held its first annual short course, the forerunner of the annual Farmers’ Week and Women’s Meetings, and the Red River Valley Winter Shows. Selvig had found short courses were well attended when he was in Glencoe, and he felt the idea had merit. The short course was to feature a farm crops exhibit. The short course and show were the first events held in the newly constructed building (Kiehle), which was completed only days before the event.

By 1911, there was a yearbook. The class of 1911 was comprised of seven males and nine females. The class motto was, “Prepared, Yet Just Begun.”

Several student writing selections were included in the paper-backed annual. Olga C. Lindfors, writing on “Essentials of Domestic Art and Science,” gave a thorough list of the areas taught in cooking, sewing and home management. She closed with the thought, “We have the care of many, dependent on our ability to use, and make practical, what we have learned at the Crookston School of Agriculture. Is not our work as important as that of the professional man? Ought we not put as much zeal and thought and study into it?”