Harry Hedin, another 1911 graduate, wrote an historical sketch of the experiment station and traced the development of the school. In discussing the experiment station land near the campus, he wrote, “The land is made up of black clay loam, very hard to work. It is low, making it necessary to install a drainage system before the land could be used. There is on the farm two miles of open ditch and nine miles of tile drainage. By means of this combination the soil has been changed so fair crops can now be grown.” Hedin’s words illustrate the fact that even then the Northwest Experiment Station was involved in improving the agricultural methods in the Valley, paving the way for the rich agricultural future to come.

“I predict a bright future of great usefulness for the school and station.”

Dean Albert F. Woods, Department of Agriculture, University of Minnesota, wrote, “This type of school fills a place in our educational system not possible for any other type of school to effectively occupy. It is a school where agriculture as a business and profession is made the dominant note. It trains for the farm and country home, and the improvement of rural conditions.”

Woods concluded, “I predict a bright future of great usefulness for the school and the station.”

Years of growth (1911-1917)

The Northwest School’s early days could be considered “years of growth.” More staff were added, more buildings were constructed, programs were added, enrollment increased. The first graduating class was in 1909, but by 1911, an alumni association was organized. The object was to “bind more closely the graduates who have been closely associated during the school course . . . and to make known to the public the splendid advantages offered by the Northwest School of Agriculture, especially to the young men and women of Northwestern Minnesota.”

By 1913, there were six school buildings. Stephens Hall and Robertson Hall were dormitories; the Sidney M. Owen building was for farm engineering and dairy classes; the first classroom building, the Home Economics building, was for “domestic science.” There was the James J. Hill Building for classes and the new administration building, named in honor of David L. Kiehle, former State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Regent and University professor. Four buildings were formally dedicated on December 5, 1912—Owen, Kiehle, Robertson and Hill. James J. Hill was present for the dedication and attended a “farm style” dinner afterward.

Hill wrote in the 1913 annual, “Every institution engaged in giving instruction in modern farm methods is not only contributing to the advancement of an industry which must always be the foundation of national prosperity and stability, but it is a guidepost pointing the way to what must and will be, for a majority of the young people of our country, the happiest and, if rightly followed, the most successful occupation.”

At the dedication ceremonies, Hill told Superintendent Selvig, “Come to see me at my office, and I’ll give this school a building or provide a fund for some unmet need.” Selvig thanked him and noted he had a long memory. Said Hill, “That’s all right young man; remember it.” Selvig did, but shortly after their meeting, the railroad magnate died. Wrote the young superintendent, “He left a legacy for Northwestern Minnesota even if fate intervened in regard to that promised building.”

Railroad magnate James J. Hill speaks to a Crookston assembly in 1908.
Summer practicums were established procedures by 1912. The theory was, students would attend school for six months and pursue a "practicum," or as it was later known, a "home project," at home or on the farm for the other six months of the year.

Following the advice of University President George E. Vincent, that there be "no blind alleys in our schools," the Northwest School offered a fourth-year advanced course, which focused totally on academic studies.

A central heating plant was constructed in 1913, and by 1914 construction was begun on a second boys' dormitory. In addition to Superintendent Selvig, there were 15 faculty members employed at the school by 1914. Selvig noted, "I sought the best teachers and Station staff members procurable. Most of them were young, but they were well prepared. They grew in stature with the years. To them is due full credit. The work was hard. During the early years salaries were low."

School activities continued to expand. Music, public speaking, debating, Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Activities, athletics and other activities were added. For six months, the school was "home" to the young students, and attempts were made to provide enjoyable and broadening experiences for them.

An early scene at the experiment station.

The experiment station made its influence known in the area. An annual visiting day at the station became popular with farmers and their families. Research was done concerning black stem rust of wheat, alfalfa growing and livestock production. According to Selvig, the 1860 census reported 1,932 head of cattle in Valley counties. By 1910, the number stood at 337,587. Selvig was awed by the Valley soil and the agricultural potential. "What a heritage," he pronounced. "Do you know the potent powers of this soil and the wonders it can perform?"

The Farmers' Week events continued to gain support, but it was decided that attendance would be facilitated by moving the programs to the city. Winter weather was unpredictable, and it was necessary to go from the campus to Crookston in horse-drawn conveyances. Crookston's Grand Opera House was secured for the meetings, but soon crowds strained that building's capacity. Moves began to acquire a building that could accommodate the "Red River Valley Farm Crops Show," as it came to be called.

The Red River Valley Livestock Association was organized and incorporated. Shares were sold for $10 to obtain funds for constructing a building for $15,000. The building was to house farm crops exhibits and to have a livestock judging room, as well as provide quarters for livestock in the basement area. The first building was ready for the 1919 show. In 1920, Annex A was added, and Annex B was ready for the 1921 shows. According to Selvig, there were more than 2,600 stockholders of the Red River Valley Livestock Association.

An early-day poultry class.

So, on all fronts, growth took place. The 1916-17 school year showed an enrollment of 160 students in the regular three-year program. Added to that were 47 enrollees for the junior shortcourse, 145 for the summer training for rural teachers, and 1,824 for the farmers' short course. In one year, more than 2,000 persons had—in one way or another—been served by the Northwest School of Agriculture.

An early view of Kiehle Building.