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?"
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. Kiehlé, former State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Regent and University professor. Four buildings were formally dedicated on December 5, 1912—Owen, Kiehlé, 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.