The first war years (1917-1919)

On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson appeared before Congress to discuss the impending war with Germany. "God helping her, she (our country) can do no other," he said.

By 1918, the "war to end all wars" was beginning to be felt even in rural Minnesota, and the yearbooks of 1918 and 1919 paint a picture of the feelings and events during those days of the first global conflict.

In his March 18 letter to the class of 1918, Northwest School Superintendent, C. G. Selvig, quotes Corporal Herbert V. Anderson, a 1917 Northwest School graduate. Anderson wrote, "I hope the graduates will realize the responsibility that is placed on them to apply the knowledge they have learned at school. They are, to a certain extent, responsible for our keeping. It would be quite impossible for us to be here (at the front, in France) if the farmers of America didn't produce enough food. If the graduates apply what they have learned, then we will be able to do the rest which will bring peace and honor to all mankind."

An entire section focuses on World War I in the 1918 edition of the Red River Aggie. Forty-eight names were listed under "Northwest School's Boys in Uncle Sam's Service."

Military drill was part of early regimen.

Two drill companies were formed on campus, and Patriotic Day was observed on December 19, 1917. The dominant theme was "save, serve and sacrifice."

A flag service dedication took place at the school in February of 1918, and was called "the most concrete demonstration of the Institution's genuine loyalty."

During the week of February 11, students presented the Northwest Farmers' Week. With the Farm Crops Show and Livestock Exhibit (forerunner to the Winter Shows), plus the Farmers' Week, the rapid development of agriculture in the Red River Valley was given a boost by providing information just for farmers. Patriotism was stressed throughout the sessions. "Farm, home and community problems were discussed only in their relation to service to our country and our allies," yearbook writers noted.

But not all of the 1917-18 year was spent contemplating a war in far-off Europe. Students viewed Mary Pickford in "The Little Princess," and basketball games were played regularly.

By 1917, there was a teachers' training course, which gave practical experience in teaching and directing household art and domestic science work in modern rural and consolidated schools. The course had begun in 1913, allowing qualified students to continue training at the Northwest School to prepare for college. Eleven persons were enrolled in that advanced course and in others offered for post-graduates.

Twenty-two seniors graduated in 1918. The freshman class was the largest yet—comprised of 118 members.

By the time the 1919 yearbook went to press, the sobering fact of war had made an impression. That year, the annual was dedicated to Northwest alumni who had "answered the call of duty and gave their lives that America might live." The service flag now had 135 stars representing graduates of the Northwest School who served during the war. Most stars were blue; seven were gold. Five graduates had died in France, and two in Army camps died from the pneumonia epidemic that ravaged the nation in 1918.

Superintendent Selvig wrote a letter to the "Boys of the Honor Roll." Despite the verbal extravagance of the time, his letter apparently came from the heart. "You felt America meant something to you and to the millions you represented and you were willing to offer any sacrifice to make this meaning true. What a proud record you and your comrades have emblazoned for the land that gave you birth. When the news of the Allies' successful advances came in the fall of 1918 we at home knew that some of you were in the line of battle with the flag floating proudly before you. We knew, too, that you would not come back till it was over 'over there'."

Servicemen's letters were reprinted on two pages. Some wrote detailed facts of life on the battlefield, some painted gruesome pictures of the casualties, some merely said they were lonely. A letter from Germany on December 28 traced one soldier's past few months, beginning with going into the trenches from March until May. He finished, "Some of the hottest fighting of the war was done between November 1-11. We went over the top about two hours before the Armistice was signed."
In 1918, the flu epidemic raged. The fall term was cut short, and on December 16 it is mentioned that all senior girls were sick with flu except Olga Spjut, who went to classes alone.

A class history written by Verna Imsdahl includes the items, “In the fall of 1918 there was a remarkable change noticeable in the seniors who arrived. Although their number had been reduced to 24, they lived up to the old adage, ‘Quality not Quantity.’ They were handicapped at the beginning of the term because of the irregularity due to an over-supply of the well-known enemies, the flu germs, and also the absence of the class advisors who had joined the field of war work and did not return until after Christmas.”

A high point of the year was the legislative appropriation of $10,000 for a concrete road between the campus and the city of Crookston. Pictures of roads from that period testify to the deep ruts that made travel nearly impossible.

R.W. Thatcher, dean of the department of agriculture, congratulated Northwest students. “To be able to go ahead steadily toward a desired goal, even with such distractions as epidemics of disease and changes from war-time to peace-time condition, is an achievement which promises well for your future success as individuals and as a school.”

Other words from his letter to the class of 1919 sound familiar and modern. “Now, as never before, the importance of a prosperous, contented rural population as a national asset is generally recognized.”

Plans and problems (1920-1930)

The world began to settle down to normal living again, but the war was not soon forgotten. A Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Memorial was proposed, and $2,200 was raised by alumni, faculty and friends to erect the granite monument. In the yearbook of 1920, the statement is made, “It is hoped that the road now leading into the campus from the bridge may be removed and two parallel roads be built in its place.” The monument would be erected between the roads.

Literally thousands attended the Dedication Day on October 5, 1920, when several special events took place. First, a new $100,000 dining hall was dedicated; the Memorial was unveiled; and the date signaled the opening of a paved road from Crookston to the campus.

Superintendent Selvig was delighted with the paved road, which was the first hard-surfaced road in the Ninth Congressional District. According to Selvig, much prodding had been done to get a paved road between the city and the campus, but little headway had been made. Then Regent M.M. Williams of Little Falls visited after a heavy April rain. Wrote Selvig, “When we emerged from the city’s paved streets and entered the gumbo highway to the school, Mr. Williams thought we should return. The car swerved from one side of the road to the other. It was necessary to avoid the pot-holes. It frequently happened that cars landed in the ditch and had to be hauled out.”

After the unnerving ride, Williams vowed to work for legislative funding. He did; eventually, the legislature voted $10,000 for the University’s share in improving the road.

During the early ’20’s, students chose a variety of topics for their special projects and presentations, including Future of the Draft Horse, Why You Should Choose the Guernsey Cow, Control of Sow Thistle in the Red River Valley, and Recreation on the Farm.