GROWTH IN THE VALLEY, 1895-1920

In the Beginning

Because of its unique geological attributes, the Red River Valley was selected as one of two locations for consideration of an experiment station in Minnesota. Polk County’s senator at the 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 legislators worked together, coming up with two identical bills that included both stations in the Senate and the House bills. The 1895 legislature appropriated $30,000 to procure equipment and to conduct two sub-experiment farms, one at Crookston and one at Grand Rapids.

James J. Hill, president of the railroad company involved in rail construction in the Red River Basin, was a powerful economic and political figure in the late 19th and early 20th century of Minnesota’s history. He gave a conditional gift of 476.61 acres of land for use by the University of Minnesota to establish an experiment farm to learn to farm the soggy sod and later to teach residents of the Valley what was learned.

Some of the administrators of the University of Minnesota were not in favor of starting a unit at Crookston. They argued that all the research necessary could be accomplished at the main University. Despite changes in University leadership, the railroad leadership, and in organizational bureaucracy, a clear title to the land was obtained by the University in 1939 after several years of sustained effort led by Superintendents A.M. Dowell and T.M. McCall. This initial land for the Northwest Experiment Station was three-fourths of Section 19, Crookston Township.

The Early Years

Torger A. Hoverstad, first Northwest Experiment Station superintendent, arrived with his family, furniture and a few farm implements in a couple of boxcars. Hoverstad was instrumental in the preliminary organization of the Northwest Experiment Station. During his years with the Station he introduced better selections of several crop varieties, including ‘Red Fife’ and ‘Haynes Bluestem’ wheats, Minnesota No. 13 corn, alfalfa, white blossom sweet clover, bromegrass, and red and mammoth clovers. He helped organize the Red River Valley Dairymen’s Association and became its first president in 1903. Hoverstad planted the main windbreak at the Station in 1896-97 and he directed much effort toward drainage of the land. Polk County and the City of Crookston each gave $1,000 to help construct an open drainage ditch that was used until 1909, when the tile and surface drainage system was completed.

Hoverstad gave tree planting his first priority, early pictures of the campus can confirm the “bare” feeling of the prairies which the first settlers confronted. The large groves protecting the campus were all planned and mainly planted during this era. Hoverstad reported that the tree seedlings were “mudded in” and that the workmen had to wear high boots due to the high water level. The 1896 plantings included evergreens such as Colorado blue, Black Hills and white spruce, Scotch pine and balsam fir. Many of the large Colorado blue spruce, Black Hills and white spruce, now standing on the campus were transplanted to their present locations in the years of 1912-14.

Not all trees survived. Many trees failed on alkali spots. Superintendent Hoverstad reported that some 10,000 young white and Norway pine and spruce transplants, planted as a cooperative project with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, failed.

1895 saw a “bumper” wheat crop in the Red River Valley. Travelers reported oceans of wheat. The railroads hauled wheat as fast as they could. Elevators were filled and piles of grain were in the streets of villages and towns. This was the last bumper crop of grain for many years.

The first experimental grain plots in 1896 were 4’ x 4’. A large number of varieties were tested that year. The new Minnesota variety No. 163 (Glyndon) was found to be superior to the commonly grown varieties, Fife and Haynes Bluestem.