Chapter XI

THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN POLK COUNTY

The need for public schools was paramount in the thinking of the first settlers of Polk County. The urgency for schools was reflected by the action taken by the three county commissioners before the first general election of county officers in December, 1872, when the board of three commissioners appointed the first County Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Richard J. Reis. The organization of the county did not take place until early in the following year.

The early history of the public schools of Polk County has been fully covered by a former County Superintendent of Schools N. A. Thorson in the HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY OF POLK COUNTY published in 1916. Copies of this history are found in the libraries of the county.

Only a brief resume of observations of the writer will be made of the schools before 1916. It is difficult for one today to realize the original land area and the school problems involved in such a diverse region. The portion of the original county, east of our present county line, was detached to Beltrami County before any schools were established. The county lost nineteen school districts when the area north of the Clay and Becker counties, north to the present southern line of Polk county, was detached from Polk to form Norman County. Additional school districts were lost when Red Lake County was formed out of the north central part of Polk County.

Marked progress in the effectiveness of teaching in the rural schools has been made during the writer’s fifty years observations of the schools in Polk and other Red River Valley counties. State aids to rural schools not only enabled the districts to secure better teachers, but to get that aid the schools had to meet state specifications regarding heating, lighting and sanitation. The educational qualifications of teachers were raised through the years, from permits with little normal training on up to four years of normal school or its equivalent with salary premiums today on the amount of graduate training.

The first big step forward was the building of the two-teacher schools, of which there were a number in Polk County. In other less populous districts, farm families cooperated in transporting their children to village or town schools and paid tuition. The real big step was made when the districts around Eldred consolidated and dedicated the first consolidated school in the county in 1912. It was a gala night for Eldred and rural education when a special trainload of people and George E. Vincent helped the community dedicate their building. The Trail Consolidated School was dedicated in 1914.

The evolutionary changes going on in the improvement of quality of teaching, improved facilities, loss in numbers of pupils attending rural schools and improved methods of transportation
all helped pave the way for the school reorganization for the communities in the county that desired to merge with the larger school districts. In compliance with the School Reorganization enabling Law, Chapter 421, Laws of Minnesota, in 1947 a School Survey Committee was formed with representatives from each of the village and town schools.

Quoting from the Final Report of the School Survey Committee submitted on November 1, 1948, regarding school districts in Polk County: “At the present time there are 210 school districts in Polk County. There are nine districts which maintain high school and 200 which maintain ungraded elementary schools. If the proposals made by the Survey Committee are approved by the voters in the areas affected, 28 districts will be eliminated, leaving nine districts maintaining high schools and 153 maintaining ungraded elementary schools.”

The report continues, “In the 1947-48 year 101 rural districts maintained their own schools. Six of them employed two teachers each, three employed three each, and the remaining 92 employed one teacher each, making a total of 113 teachers in the ungraded elementary schools. One hundred districts closed their own schools and transported their pupils to other schools. The open schools had an enrollment of 1,833 pupils, or an average of 17 pupils for every teacher employed. Enrollment varied in the one-teacher schools from 3 to 37 pupils. A total of 770 pupils were transported to other public schools from the 100 closed schools; an average of 7.7 pupils per district. In these districts the variation in the number of pupils ranged from a low of one in each of three districts to a high of 27 in one district.’ On the “Per Pupil Cost,” the report continues, “In the 1947-48 school year the cost of maintenance in Polk County rural schools was $189.22. In the nine high schools the average per pupil cost was $174.74, and in the latter both grade and high school pupils were included. Rural schools received an average of $77.56 per pupil from state funds, and the high schools received $81.92 per pupil. Rural schools spent an average of $111.66 per pupil received from local taxes. As may be expected, schools having a small enrollment had the highest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil varies from a low of $75.10 to a high of $647.70.”

With these facts you can see why the voters in school districts have exceeded the recommendations of the Survey Committee in hastening this latest phase of educational advancement. While some counties in northern Minnesota are fully reorganized so that every boy and girl has access by bus to a city or village high school, yet in Polk county the geography of the county makes complete reorganization of the county difficult at this time.

As a matter of historical interest, School District No. 1 at Crookston was organized in March, 1876. The eight other high schools of the county are: East Grand Forks, Fisher, Climax, Fertile, Mentor, McIntosh, Erskine, and Fosston.
Aerial view of buildings of the Northwest School of Agriculture and Experiment Station at Crookston. School buildings (classroom, administration and dormitories in main and secondary quadrangles center of picture, barns and farm buildings in background.) (Photo 1957.)
**THE NORTHWEST SCHOOL OF AGRICULTURE AND EXPERIMENT STATION**

The Northwest School of Agriculture and Experiment Station at Crookston serves the Red River Valley counties in the dual capacity as a branch of the Minnesota Experiment Station and as a Regional Sub-Collegiate Branch of the University of Minnesota. The Experiment Station was established by the State Legislature in 1895 after assurances had been given by the late James J. Hill, president of the St. Paul and Pacific Railway that three quarter sections of land in Section 19 Crookston Twp. Polk County would be given the University for Experiment Station purposes. The St. Paul and Pacific Railway was absorbed as a part of the Great Northern Railway and in 1903 that Company gave the University of Minnesota a Conditional Deed with an option to buy the land at any time for $25.00 per acre, the conditional deed had a reversion clause in which the land, if not used for experimental or educational purpose during any three year period, was to revert back to the donor. (Clear title to the entire section, minus the railroad’s Rights of Way was given in 1939 when a committee appointed by the University Regents met with the Great Northern officials regarding the acquisition of the remaining 68 A. of the southwest quarter of the section. The Committee consisting of W. T. Middlebrook, Comptroller, R. J. Quinlivan, Regent, and myself, convinced the railroad officials that with more than three quarters of a million dollars invested on that site indicated, a perpetual interest by the University in that land.

Great credit for the idea of establishing regional Experiment Stations in Minnesota, to be coordinated with the Central University Experiment Station in St. Paul, should be given to Willet M. Hays, then director of the Minnesota Experiment Station. The enabling legislation for the establishing of Regional Experiment Stations in both Northwestern and Northeastern Minnesota was passed by the 1895 Session of the Minnesota legislature, due largely to the work of Senator P. M. Ringdal of Crookston and members of the legislature of Northeastern Minnesota counties. (An interesting and detailed account of the leadership exerted by the Senators from Polk County in the Legislature to passage of the bills establishing the Experiment Station in 1895 and the School of Agriculture in 1905 has been recorded by the late C. G. Selvig in both his book entitled the TALE OF TWO VALLEYS, 1951, and his Article in the 1916 edition of the HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY OF POLK COUNTY) Senator A. D. Stephens was credited by Selvig as being the dynamic force behind the legislation establishing the School of Agriculture at Crookston in 1905.

It is not the intent of the writer of this report to repeat the published historical record of the Experiment Station and the School of Agriculture, but rather to report the historical highlights of its growth and accomplishments during the fifty years
of his service and observations of its history.

The first Superintendent of the Northwest Experiment Station was Torger A. Hoverstad (1895 to 1905). Superintendent Hoverstad during his ten years of service, introduced new and better varieties of farm crops, (a precedent which has been followed throughout the history of the Station.) New varieties worthy of mention were: an improved selection of Fife (Minn. 163) and Blue Stem (Minn. No. 169) wheats, Minn. No. 13 corn, Alfalfa, White Blossom Sweet clover, Brome Grass, Red and Mammoth Clovers. Other cereal varieties and flax were brought into the Valley in a program of crop diversification. He encouraged livestock production and helped organize the Red River Valley Dairymens' Association in 1903 and served as its first president, officers serving with him were Levi Steenerson, Secretary, and Esten Estenson, Treasurer. The lack of drainage on the Experiment Station grounds hampered the experimental work with crops. Supt. Hoverstad however, secured some $2,000 from citizens of Crookston and constructed an open drainage ditch from the southeast corner of the farm to Crookston. This ditch carried the water through a road ditch to Central Avenue in Crookston, then west to Alexander Street, then south through storm sewer tile to the river. Oddly enough when the drainage ditches for the farm were completed in 1909 the drainage water was diverted west and north into Judicial ditch No. 60 where the farm outlet had a depth of seven feet. Hoverstad was an advocate of tree planting for prairie farms. He planted the main windbreak at the Station in 1896 and 1897. The trees were planted in experimental blocks in which the broad leafed hardy trees were planted alone and in combination. The chief broadleafed trees planted were: Green Ash, White Elm, Boxelder, Cottonwood, White and Golden Willow. The evergreen species that succeeded were Red Cedar, Black Hills, White and Colorado Blue Spruce. A block of several hundred Hackberry trees still growing in nursery rows upon my arrival, came according to Hoverstad, from seedlings collected by Esten Estenson along the Red River at Climax. White and Red (Norway) pines did not succeed on the heavy alkaline soils of the Station. Pines which did succeed, included in the landscaping development of the Campus in later years were, the Scotch, Mugho, Montana, Jack and Austrian pines. Norway spruce varieties and species of Junipers and Arbor Vitae are now growing on the campus.

Professor William Robertson was the second Superintendent of the Experiment Station and beginning with his appointment in 1905, he assumed the duties of directing the Experiment Station and the newly established School of Agriculture. He began his service with the fiscal year of 1905-06 and served until his untimely death in February, 1910. With his many years of experience as professor at the School of Agriculture and College at St. Paul, Professor Robertson established a curriculum of academic and vocational training which extended to the farm homes.
of the students. Three years of school work above the eighth grade were offered, with credit for projects completed in the home and on the farm. The Northwest School of Agriculture in 1906, with one school building, serving as administration offices, class rooms, dormitory for boys and a farm house serving as dining hall, home economics laboratory and dormitory for girls got off to a good start. Needed buildings and equipment were added through the years. A class room building for Agriculture, Science and Farm Mechanics (the Owen Building) was built the next year followed by a Boy's Dormitory and Dining Hall (Stephens Hall) in 1908 an Administration Building housing the School Library, Offices, Auditorium and Gymnasium (Kiehle Building) and a dormitory for girls (Robertson Hall) in 1910. In addition to a competent academic staff, Superintendent Robertson secured specialists in Poultry, Farm Crops, Animal and Dairy Husbandry and Agricultural Engineering and Horticulture to teach in the School and initiate research projects in their respective fields. The installation of a surface drainage system augmented by an elaborate system of tile lines was Superintendent Robertson's greatest contribution to the Agricultural Research program at the Experiment Station. Judicial Ditch No. 60 with a depth of seven feet at the Station outlet into the ditch made possible the successful research programs that were to follow in later years. The drainage project was made possible through the active cooperation of the Department of Agricultural Engineering, University of Minnesota, United States Office of Experiment Stations with John T. Stewart, Drainage Engineer supervising the project. Upon the death of Superintendent Robertson in February, 1910, the members of the teaching and Experiment Station staff, under the chairmanship of L. P. Harrington, carried on the work of the School and Station until the arrival of the new Superintendent C. G. Selvig in July of that year.

Conrad G. Selvig, M. A., a prominent school superintendent from Glencoe, Minnesota was appointed by the University Board of Regents to succeed Professor Wm. Robertson as superintendent at the Northwest School and Experiment Station and assumed his duties on July 15, 1910. Upon arriving at the School and Experiment Station, Mr. Selvig saw that a school campus was developing in a farm yard of an Experiment Station. He saw the necessity of moving farm buildings to make room for new and necessary School buildings. Funds were secured from the Legislature for the moving of the farm buildings and at my suggestion, an Architectural and Landscape firm made a landscape plan for the location of the then present and future buildings. With a few minor exceptions, the plan adopted for the location of buildings made in 1911 has been followed through the years.

Superintendent Selvig with a trained staff of specialists in all departments of Agriculture and Farm Engineering, together with heads of Departments of the Central Minnesota Station outlined and started experimental projects of both regional and statewide
importance. The Experiment Station assumed a continuing leadership in the testing and introducing of new and better varieties of farm and horticultural crops. A notable achievement was the introduction of Grimm alfalfa to the Valley. In 1914 the Experiment Station distributed 18,000 pounds of Grimm alfalfa to more than 500 cooperators. The same year an elaborate and comprehensive fertilizer and crop rotation was started which continued through several rotation cycles. In livestock the shift was made from Milking Strains of Shorthorn to beef type Shorthorns, of the two dairy breeds the Guernsey breed was dropped and all dairy work was centered on the purebred Holstein herd. The breeding work with sheep was centered on the Shropshire breed and the feeding work with swine was done primarily with the Duroc Jersey and Yorkshire breeds. The school grew rapidly in the Selvig administration from 100 to 300 students. Buildings constructed during the Selvig administration, 1910-27, were: Classroom building (Hill Bldg.) 1913, Central Heating plant, 1914, Boys Dormitory (Selvig Hall) 1914, Dining Hall 1920, Animal Products, late twenties. Mr. Selvig organized the Red River Valley Winter Shows in 1910 and served as its president through 1927. His leadership in drainage matters led to the organization of the Red Lake and Clearwater River Conservancy project following the floods of 1919, while surveys and much ground work was done on the project yet final work was postponed on the project through the dry years of the thirties. After the high waters of the late thirties, new officers picked up the project and saw it through to successful completion. Conrad Selvig was a tireless worker and a dynamic leader. He was elected to Congress from the Ninth District in Minnesota in 1926 and served his district brilliantly for three terms. He retired due to illness in 1933 and later moved to Santa Monica, California where he passed away in August 1953.

A. A. Dowell, M. S., Ph.D. (1927-1937) was appointed as Superintendent of the Northwest School of Agriculture and Experiment Station to succeed C. G. Selvig. Dr. Dowell with a rich background of University teaching and Agricultural Extension service in Animal Husbandry did outstanding work in leadership in the improving flocks and herds in the Red River Valley, working through the Red River Valley Winter Shows, Livestock sales and other agencies. In the Experiment Station he helped build up the work in each of the departments in spite of curtailed financial support through the depression years. His insistence on the maintenance of high quality teaching carried the School of Agriculture through the depression years to a new peak in enrollment when he left in 1937. He gave impetus to cattle feeding in the Valley through the cattle feeding trials at the Experiment Station. New buildings constructed in the Dowell administration were: Health Service, Gymnasium and swimming pool, Sheep Barn and extensive remodeling of the Home Economics Building and School Dormitories. Dr. Dowell served as president of the Red River
Valley Winter Show and terms as president of the Red River Valley Development Association, the Red River Valley Dairy-man's Association, and the Red River Valley Livestock Association. He resigned his position in April 1937 to assume a professor-ship in the Department of Agricultural Economics at the St. Paul campus of the University.

T. M. McCall, B.S., M.S., the writer, after some twenty years as Horticulturist and many years field supervisor of the Experiment Station, succeeded A. A. Dowell as Superintendent in April 1937 and served until retirement in 1956, thereby completing forty-five years service to the University of Minnesota. Some highlights of accomplishment during the years include Assistance in clearing the title to the Experiment Station land; acquisition of 380 acres of additional land for the Experiment Station; holding an over-capacity enrollment of over 400 students annually; securing and holding dedicated teachers and department heads of the Experiment Station departments; giving full support to departmental heads in building up work in their local and co-operative projects; securing new and modern dormitory for girls (1946) dedicated as McCall Hall in 1958; cooperating with the Regional Swine Breeding Laboratory in developing the Minnesota No. 2 Swine; promoted the feeding of surplus and cull potatoes to beef cattle.

B. E. Youngquist, M.S., Ph.D., was appointed as Superintendent on July 1, 1956 and has served to date. Of historical interest is the fact that agitation for a Regional Branch of the University (Collegiate Grade) has resulted in enabling legislation by the State Legislature for the University Regents to act on this matter when they see a need for the change. A decision by the Regents favoring the change will await legislative appropriations to see fulfillment of the proposal.

The one remaining well preserved log cabin in Polk county. The Stardig cabin south of McIntosh built after the opening of the Thirteen Towns to settlers in 1883. (Photo Courtesy Franklin Vikan)