Chapter XVI

AGRICULTURAL FAIRS IN POLK COUNTY

The desire to foster the production of high quality livestock and crops through county, regional, state and national fairs and exhibitions came to America with the immigrants from Europe and the British Isles. It must be admitted that the most enthusiastic support for our county and regional fairs, before the turn of the century and up until the advent of the automobile were men who “followed the horses”. As a result the race track generally and grandstand were the central attraction around which the fair was built. The few exhibitors interested in improving the quality of our crops and livestock remained loyal to the fairs and helped most of the Fair Association to survive through the race horse depression years. Stage shows and carnival attractions today generally fill the grandstands at the county fairs and the horse and automobile races make the circuits of the Regional and State Fairs. The encouragement and awards offered junior exhibitors (4-H and F.F.A.,) has built and maintained interest in the livestock, crops and home economics department of the county and larger fairs.

The original Polk County Fair at Crookston with a race track and a few minor buildings for livestock and crops, was located where the present ball park now stands. The Fair Association was reorganized in 1913 into the Northwestern Minnesota Agricultural Association and was relocated on the southwest corner of Section 19 Crookston twp, the section on which the Northwest School and Experiment Station was situated. This Association received state support and opened its entries to the northwestern counties of the State. As a July or summer fair it competed with the Fertile and Fosston Fairs and was discontinued around 1925 and its charter was transferred to the East Polk County Fair at Fosston. The buildings and conditional deed to the property was transferred to the Red River Valley Livestock Association division of the Red River Valley Winter Shows. In the final distribution of the property, the University of Minnesota purchased the equity held by the Red River Valley Livestock Association which no longer used the land for an Agricultural Fair and the Great Northern Railway transferred the title unconditionally to the University and it is now part of the Northwest Experiment Station.

The Fair at Fosston, according to Franklin Vikan, in the Diamond Jubilee History in 1958, was the first Fair in the county to receive State support. It was organized as the “Thirteen Towns Fair Association” in 1893. The Fair continued until 1905 at which time the Fertile Fair Association took over the State County Fair aid. Some fifteen years later a Fosston Community fair for east Polk County was organized. This Fair was financed by the community until the charter of the discontinued North-
western Minnesota Agricultural Association was transferred to Fosston for the East Polk County Fair. The Fair has been in continuous operation as a summer fair since its reorganization and has served its area very well. Credit for the reorganization, according to Franklin Vikan, goes to Ole Hem of Fosston. The long time Secretary of the Fair was H. Algaard. The Present officers of the East Polk County Fair are: Rueben Tweten, President; C. O. Gunhus, vice president; V. G. Whaley, secretary, and Roy Leervig, treasurer.

The Polk County at Fertile, which serves primarily West Polk County has had the longest continued existence of the Polk County Fairs. It has well equipped buildings and equipment for Crops, Livestock, Poultry 4-H and F.F.A. exhibits. An excellent grandstand and track entertainments.

The first fair at Fertile, according to Hjalmer Erickson, a pioneer of the Fertile community, was staged by the Polk and Norman County Fair Association in 1894. Fairs were held during the three following years but for lack of support the Association failed, losses were cancelled and buildings were sold. George Kronschnabel was the first president and J. Walseth the first secretary of this first Fair Association.

The history of the Polk County Fair Association at Fertile written by Hjalmer Erickson at the time of the Golden Anniversary of the Fair in 1954 appears in the Fertile Journal of July 1 of that year. The first officers of the present Fair organization were John Holsten, president 1904-1908, and James F. Hanson, secretary. The Fair has been in continuous operation annually since 1904 and is now splendidly equipped with all necessary buildings, grandstand and race track with all debts paid. The present officers of the Fair are: Albin Johnson, president; Hjalmer Erickson, vice president; Reynold Erickson, secretary and Solon Gullickson, treasurer.

The Red River Valley Winter Shows and Northwest School’s Farmers and Homemakers Week held annually at Crookston has become the most famous winter fair in the entire Northwest. While this winter classic is commonly known as the Red River Valley Winter Shows today yet the educational features for farmers and homemakers emanating from the Northwest School and the University have ever been dominant. The Winter Shows began at the Northwest School and Experiment Station at Crookston in December 1910 under the leadership of the late C. G. Selvig, Superintendent. The primary objectives of the first meetings and shows were—to bring to the farmers and homemakers the latest information on production and marketing of crops and livestock, problems of the homemakers and to exhibit products from the farm and from the home. Implement dealers, manufacturers of farm commodities and merchants enthusiastically supported the first exhibitions of crops, baking and sewing by donating fabulous sweepstakes prizes for wheat, other small grains and corn. Concrete stave silos valued at $300 and $400 were given in
consecutive years for grand champion small grain samples with farm implements valued up to $100 offered as first prizes in other classes, cash and merchandise prizes were awarded in the second and third brackets in crops and homemakers exhibits. The second shows during the winter of 1911-12 (the first in which the writer participated) and 12-13 shows brought crowds from all of the counties of the valley, which taxed the capacity of the facilities at the Northwest School. So the shows were moved to Crookston in 1914 where vacant buildings were used for the shows and the Grand Theater was used for meetings.

Speakers of national fame, authorities from the Minnesota Experiment Station and Extension Division and from nearby states and Canada and liberal prizes for exhibits attracted thousands of farm families to the Shows annually. The railroads cooperated with the shows by running special trains with special round trip rates.

The great success of the Red River Valley Winter Shows through the years has been due largely to its organization, which is unique in agricultural fair circles. Valley wide organizations have given enthusiastic support to the meetings and shows. When the Shows moved to Crookston in 1914, the Red River Valley Development Association and the Crookston Commercial Club (now the Chamber of Commerce) gave direct financial support to the meetings and shows. When the first Livestock Show was made a part of the Winter Shows in 1917, the Red River Valley Livestock and R. R. V. Dairymen’s Associations affiliated with the parent organization. The Agricultural Extension Service of the University cooperated with the Shows from their beginning, the County Agricultural Extension Agents from the Red River Valley Counties have cooperated through the years by serving as Superintendents and assistant Superintendents of the various departments of the Livestock and Crops Shows. The Red River Valley Development Association through the years has sponsored the premiums on the Crops Division of the Winter Shows through appropriations from the counties for the county and district prizes.

Livestock judging contests between Farmer’s Club began at the second year of the Winter Shows and have continued through the years. The first Livestock used for the livestock judging came from the Northwest Station’s flocks and herds supplemented by different breeds of horses from nearby farms. The first livestock, exhibited as a part of the Winter Shows was shown in Sathre’s Garage in downtown Crookston at the 1917 Show, with $300 offered in cash prizes. An interesting sidelight on the enthusiasm and loyalty of the early exhibitors was their continued support to the Shows through the years. A family record for years of exhibiting cattle and swine was made by P. M. Finkenbinder family, their continuous record of showing livestock began in 1917 and extended through 1960 and three generations of the family.
The enthusiasm of the livestock breeders, after the successful 1917 show, for permanent livestock exhibition buildings, prompted C. G. Selvig and the writer to go on a scouting expedition to Brandon Manitoba. The success of the Brandon Winter Livestock Shows, their buildings and judging arena inspired the Red River Valley Development and Livestock Associations to start a drive for funds to buy property and erect buildings for a permanent home for all divisions of the Winter Shows. Cropsmen, poultrymen, Chambers of Commerce of the Twin Cities, Duluth and towns of the Valley combined forces on a drive for funds and $20,000 was raised that year and the Pavilion on Broadway adjacent to the Armory was built in time for the 1919 Shows. The livestock was housed in the basement, the main floor made room for concessions and a judging arena and the second floor housed the Crops Show, the Poultry Show was held in a nearby building, the Armory and Presbyterian Church were used for meetings.

Epochal dates in the history of the Red River Valley Winter Shows and Northwest School’s Farmers and Homemakers week are:

1910 December (last week) First Meetings and Shows at Northwest School.

1912-13 Meetings held at Northwest School and Exp. Station.

1914 Meetings and Crop Show held in downtown Crookston; First R. R. V. Rural School Contest held, County winners compete annually.

1917 First Livestock Show held. Northern Minn. Poultry show held in combination with Winter Shows.

1918 Drive for funds for Winter Shows Buildings.

1919 First Show held in Livestock Association building. First Purebred Livestock Sale held.

1920-21 Fourth Street and Elm Street buildings constructed ($50,000).

1923 to ’25 Two Donation Sales held (Farmers donated livestock to help pay on indebtedness on buildings.)

1940 Final payment on debt $7500.00 paid in full.

1957 Winter Shows Board of Managers reorganized with assets of the Livestock Association combined with Winter Shows.

1958 Agitation for new buildings on a new site, to relieve overcrowded conditions for Shows and Sales, also to seek adequate parking space.

1959-60 Goal of $450,000 set for new buildings on a new 20 acre site purchased from University on U. S. Highways No. 2 and No. 75.
The Red River Valley Winter Shows and Northwest School's Farmers and Homemakers Week has, to a very large degree, accomplished its objectives through its first fifty years of its history. Not only old but new horizons lie ahead for the Winter Shows. Perhaps as great changes lie ahead in farming methods and practices as have been made during the past fifty years.

Tribute and credit is due the more than 2600 stockholders, men and women from all walks of life who had enough faith in promoting the livestock industry of the Valley to put their money, gratuitously in the project. Business men who contributed their time and money in cooperating with farmers, helped develop a solidarity of spirit that has made the Red River Valley a great Agricultural Empire. It is impossible to list the names of all men who have contributed to the success of the Winter Shows. A few of the men who served in official capacities at the Winter Shows are:

Presidents—C. G. Selvig 1910-27; A. A. Dowell 1927-37; T. M. McCall 1937-56; B. E. Youngquist 1956 to date.

Board of Managers and others assisting in the organization were:
C. C. Strander S. M. Sivertson, W. R. Low, Joseph Ball, E. W. Spring of Crookston, Leslie Welter, Moorhead; Frank Jeffers, Sam Hunt, H. V. Higgins botham of Red Lake Falls, Wm. Dahlquist, Thief River Falls; Sam Olson, Ada. The more recent Board of Managers include: Harold Thompforde, C. M. Pesek, Stuart Melcod, Thief River Falls; Adolph Skyberg, Fisher; O. C. Soine, Crookston; Frank Forbes, St. Paul. H. A. Pflughoeft, St. Paul; William Strickler, Euclid.

Business managers of the Shows through the years have been:

The new main unit of the Winter Shows building is now under construction on a twenty acre site secured from the Northwest School and Experiment Station on the S. E. corner, Sec. 24, Lowell Twp. adjacent to U. S. Highways ‘2’ and ‘75’ on the north edge of Crookston. The main, clear span, steel, insulated building 180' by 300', costing $300,000 will be ready to house the 1962 Crops, Livestock and Industrial exhibits.