World War I
Impact and Aftermath
World War I impact on Extension work set a pattern and precedent for many future emergency programs. European allied countries involved in the war were torn up and short of labor forces. Their food supplies were very low and one of their priority requests was for food. “Food will win the war” became a national slogan and the whole country became involved in it. County agents were charged with urging and helping to increase agriculture production. Home economists were charged with teaching housewives how to conserve food and to substitute and utilize high yielding crops such as rye and barley in family meals.

At that time fewer than half (21) of the counties employed county agents and only four home economists were on the staff. The United States Department of Agriculture deemed it advisable to increase Extension staffs in order to help with the war food production needs. Emergency funds were allocated to North Dakota for that purpose and eleven so called “emergency agents,” 8 men and 3 women, were employed in 1917. Those emergency funds were continued for several years to help make adjustments following the end of the war and part were subsequently integrated into regular funding.

War emergency programs reported in Extension’s June 30, 1918 annual report included:
- Campaigns for increased food production
- Campaigns for United War Work and Red Cross subscriptions
- Liberty loan drives
- Advisor work on local draft boards
- Recruiting and routing of labor supply
- Assistance in organizing Defense Councils
- Cooperation with the War Food Administration in vegetable canning projects, use of substitute for wheat flour, promotion of family gardens, and testing grain saving efficiency of threshing machines
- Use of federal seed loans
- Promotion of animal disease, rodent and insect control to save food

One goal of the U.S. Department of Agriculture was to have at least one county agent in each county by March 1, 1918. Emergency war funds were provided for that purpose but due to the lack of men trained and the low salary scale approved for agents, that was not possible. Much of the money was not used and was returned to USDA. However, some future well known Extension workers got their start at that time. Among them were William L. Guy, Sr., Rex Willard and E.J. Taintor.

Extension’s designation as the educational arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture has resulted in many exciting and interesting tasks as well as “bail outs” for the North Dakota Extension program. That designation has carried with it responsibility both for informing and organizing people to understand and carry out USDA programs and activities. It has been extensively and successfully used for many emergency programs and quite a few Extension workers have left Extension and gone on to become administrators of such programs.

First major use of that responsibility was for WWI emergency programs already mentioned. Fulfilling that responsibility not only helped the war efforts but also stimulated interest in Extension at a time when it was beginning to lag.

One job assigned to county agents during WWI deserves some special mention and that was the recruiting of laborers for harvest of the 1917 and 1919 crops. Town women and children were recruited to shock grain but securing men for threshing was more difficult as workers had to be obtained from larger populated areas. Many laborers came through commercial labor offices in the Minnesota Twin Cities. Their knowledge and ability for handling horses and hauling bundles was often questionable and many laughable and pathetic stories about them could be related. Some became recruits for a loosely organized labor group named the Industrial Workers of the World and called IWW’s. That group demanded excessively high wages and struck and picketed many threshing crews. More than one crop field was burned and threshing machine wrecked during those strikes and agitations. Although this writer was only 8 years old at that time he vividly remembers the excitement when four sticks of dynamite were found in a load of wheat bundles just before they got into his father’s threshing machine. However, most were competent hard workers and WWI labor recruiting was a creditable undertaking. One county agent reported he had recruited 602 farm workers during 1917.

Much of the 1920’s and early 1930’s were economics disasters for North Dakota farmers. Poor crops, low product prices and high indebtedness aroused their suspicions and many were easy victims for political propaganda. During that period several counties had votes taken on county agent work.

War and inflation caused wheat prices to about double in 1917 and stay at that level through 1920. Hog and beef prices also rose sharply but dropped back in 1919. Those high prices tempted farmers to buy more land and land prices doubled, tripled and even quadrupled and interest rates rose accordingly. Farm tractors began to replace horses and farmers went further into debt to make that change. New farm buildings including houses enabled lumber yards to flourish. Everyone was optimistic for the future but the future held a stacked deck for many of them.

Loss of much of the war time export market caused overproduction of both agricultural and industrial
products and unemployment began in 1919 with deflation in full force by 1920-21. Land prices dropped back to prewar levels and grain and livestock prices also fell drastically. Many farmers, implement dealers, storekeepers and others went bankrupt.

That background formed a fertile bed for groups like the North Dakota Taxpayer's Association, the North Dakota Farm Holiday Association and political opportunists. Their targets were any and all means for reducing taxes and Extension work was included and voted out in several counties. Extension was on hard times from then on until the agricultural emergency programs of the 1930's demanded its assistance.

It has been said that Extension has a "bastard" inheritance in that it has three fathers - the "Great White Father" in Washington which passed the Smith-Lever Act in 1914 and assumed part of the support for the new baby, the reluctant state legislature at Bismarck which was very slow in claiming any paternity financial responsibility and the local hard pressed county commissioners who strongly favored roads over any other expenditures. Although Extension was ushered in with a flourish and richly nourished by World War I responsibilities, it, like the returning WWI veteran, was often shunned when it needed support in the 1920's. There were 36 counties with county agents in 1919 but that number was gradually reduced and by 1932 only 21 counties retained Extension agents.

Drought and depression years of the early 1920's and most of the 1930's brought more federal and state programs into action. Grasshoppers and drought prevailed in much of North Dakota during that period and county agents were kept busy organizing and coordinating programs of USDA designed to alleviate those problems.

Grasshopper control activities started in five counties in 1919, expanded to 21 counties in 1920 and became statewide 1933-39. Poison baits were the only practical methods during those times and tremendous efforts were required for organizing and coordinating control programs that were not too popular. One aftermath of those early poison bait programs has been the location and disposition of unused bait and arsenic supplies. Even 40 years after the last poison bait program small quantities show up and have to be disposed of.

Drought periods of the 1920's-1930's meant starvation of thousands of cattle and sheep unless they could be quickly moved or fed supplies shipped in. Coordination of emergency transportation for both outgoing livestock and incoming feed supplies became major Extension tasks. Included in that was the Government Livestock Buying Program of 1934-36.

Extension Staff — 1922-23
Drought periods also meant shortages of seed grain and livestock feed and here again much Extension effort was required to coordinate securing of adequate supplies and government loan programs to farmers for purchase of those supplies.

Organization and administration of the 1933 Agriculture Adjustment Act breathed new life into the Extension program and provided funds for an agent in each county. Extension specialists were utilized to explain the program and supervise the election of community and county committees. County agents became executive secretaries for county AAA committees and while this became a large part of their work it also opened the way for introducing regular Extension work.

Little by little county committee members and office personnel became able and anxious to take over full administration and operation of the federal Agriculture Adjustment program and by 1947 all county agents were freed from that responsibility.

The “Black Blizzards” and intermittent floods of the 1930’s resulted in establishment of the Federal Soil Conservation Service in 1934. Under that program the federal government would provide technical assistance to farmers for planning and carrying out soil and water management and conservation practices. A requirement for receiving the service was the organization of Soil Conservation Districts and Extension became responsible for conducting educational programs and elections for such districts. Subsequently several county agents resigned to become employees of the Federal Soil Conservation Service and were assigned to work with locally organized districts. Some of those were Donald Lawrence, Matt Beaus, Robert Montgomery, G.N. Giesler and J.A. Bartruff. Organization of Soil Conservation Districts started in 1936 and continued into the 1950’s when all areas of the state were included in districts. Each district elected its own Board of Supervisors and in most districts the local county agent was elected as secretary for that Board. That arrangement continued into the 1960’s. It was a good relationship but pressures of other Extension work and many staff turnovers made the change desirable.

Livestock sanitation, mostly contagious disease control, was a responsibility of the USDA Bureau of Animal Industry and the State Livestock Sanitary Board. There were very few veterinarians in North Dakota prior to 1950 and federally employed veterinarians were sent in to test cattle for tuberculosis and brucellosis. It became the county agents responsibility for coordinating those testing programs which were resisted by some farmers and never very popular. In this writers home township during the 1930’s there was some resistance to tuberculosis testing of cattle. However, it was quickly overcome when one herd of about 40 cattle had all but 9 head react to the test. Most of those reactors subsequently proved to be badly infected with TB. That particular herd was owned by a man who was well trained in butchering and preparation of many kinds of sausages, smoked meats and other meat preparations. He processed his own animals and sold the meats in surrounding towns. He also traveled throughout the community during winter months and helped others prepare their own meat. After his herd was found infected with tuberculosis, resistance to TB testing quickly disappeared.

Rural electrification promotion and organization became major assignments for Extension agricultural engineers and county agents starting in 1935. Everyone wanted those services but many feared that costs would be far beyond their means. Numerous meetings, circular letters, personal contracts and demonstrations were necessary before many farmers would sign a membership application.

Two Rural Electric Cooperatives received REA loans in 1936. Baker Electric Cooperative received $60,000 to build 51 miles of line and serve 256 customers in Benson and Pierce Counties. They were first to complete construction and became North Dakota’s first Rural Electric Cooperative to become operational under the REA program. Southern Cass County Electric Cooperative at Kindred received $440,000 to build 405.5 miles of line and serve 1,280 customers in parts of Cass, Barnes, Ransom and Traill Counties and was the second operational RE Cooperative by the end of 1937. Plans were underway for several other projects but were slowed by WWII. Richland, Sargent and Ransom RE Cooperative was able to obtain a loan and squeeze into operation before WWII shut down all additional projects. Conclusion of WWII propelled Extension forcefully into Rural Electrification expansion and Extension gave outstanding service and leadership to it.

Looking back from 1939 to 1914 and Extension’s first quarter century in North Dakota it appears that without early private funding and subsequent special emergency federal programs funding, Extension may not have survived. During that period Extension’s potential audience was going through a transition from the original homesteaders, many of whom had little formal education, to their sons, daughters and grandchildren with much more formal schooling and many of whom had 4-H experience. However, women’s Homemaker’s clubs, 4-H leaders and organized agricultural associations remained stalwart Extension friends and supporters and laid solid foundations for continuing Extension programs and financial support by county governments.