In 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, creating the Cooperative Extension System. Thomas Cooper, the NDSU Extension Service’s first director, also was hired in 1914.

“It is through Extension’s help that men and women may develop within themselves the ability to bring about a better condition in the community.”
— Thomas Cooper, NDSU Extension director, 1914-1917.

Sen. Hoke Smith of Georgia and Rep. A.F. Lever of South Carolina, the act’s two primary sponsors, were important to the passage of this legislation. But the rest of the story demonstrates how this important movement and organization evolved.

The Extension concept really began much earlier with men such as Jonathan Baldwin Turner, Liberty Hyde Bailey and Seaman Asahel Knapp.

Turner, a professor at Illinois College, led a movement calling for the creation of agricultural colleges. This effort led to Congress passing the Morrill Act of 1862, which allowed states to establish a university from the sale of federal land the states received. These institutions were known as land-grant universities. NDSU is North Dakota’s first land-grant university.

Bailey, of New York’s Cornell University, was known as the “Father of Horticulture.” The botanist led the Commission on Country Life, which President Theodore Roosevelt established to study needs and find solutions to rural life issues at a time when rural America was emerging as a progressive frontier. The Country Life Movement was credited with taking knowledge from the universities to the people in each state.

Knapp was a college instructor and administrator who took up farming later in life in Iowa and then Louisiana. He drafted a bill to establish experimental research stations, which laid the foundation for a nationwide network of agricultural experiment stations.

These men experimented with the concept of applied education and field demonstrations, and their work paved the way for the Smith-Lever Act.

Two other men, George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington, both of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, also had major roles in the development of the Cooperative Extension Service.

Carver, an innovator in agricultural research, introduced alternative crops and promoted better nutrition for people by using the Jessup Wagon, a portable classroom. Washington was an adviser to President Roosevelt and the Country Life Movement. Washington also was a very progressive educator in the Southern black institutions. These two men understood the value of learning by doing, or the hands-on approach to education.

Carver hired Thomas Campbell, a protégé, as the first black county Extension agent. Campbell’s version of the Jessup Wagon was called the “movable school.” These early models provided the groundwork for Extension agents across the country to take their knowledge into the fields and small towns.

The first white county Extension agent in the U.S. was William Crider Stalling. He was appointed to serve in Texas in 1906 by Knapp, who then was with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stalling was a farmer and Methodist minister who was known for his corn-breeding efforts. He launched the idea of forming “corn clubs” for boys. Those clubs were one of the forerunners of the 4-H program.

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In North Carolina, Jane McKimmon emerged as a pioneer in the home economics field. She led girls’ clubs called “canning clubs” and served as a speaker at Farmers Institutes. She later led the women’s division of the Farmers Institutes and provided momentum for what became the 4-H movement.

One of the first to champion the economics of running a home was Catherine Beecher, sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Both were leaders in the mid-19th century in addressing domestic science, with emphasis on education for women. The Morrill Act of 1862 promoted domestic science as land-grant colleges sought to educate farm wives while men were educated in agricultural methods.

The home economics movement started with Ellen Swallow Richards, the first woman to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and later the first female instructor. Her chemistry work led her to become an expert in water quality and applying scientific principles to domestic situations.

At the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, she designed the Rumford Kitchen, which served nutritious meals, along with a healthy dose of nutrition education, to thousands. She shunned an invitation to participate in the Women’s Building, saying that none of her research was just about women’s work, but rather for all.

Ultimately, she led the movement to improve the quality of life for individuals and families. She worked with others tirelessly to elevate the discipline of home economics to a legitimate profession, integrating science and economics. Today, the field is known as family and consumer sciences.

Albert Belmont Graham often is credited with starting the first 4-H club, which he formed in Ohio in 1902. He used the name 4-H to represent the emphasis on Head, Heart, Hands and Health, which are components to success in life. He promoted the use of hand-on learning activities for boys and girls. He later became one of the early Extension Service directors at the federal level.

Liberty Hyde Bailey came to North Dakota in 1914 at the invitation of Alfred Arvold, who established the Little Country Theatre on the North Dakota Agricultural College (now NDSU) campus. Arvold and the “Little Country Theatre” movement partnered with Bailey, who spearheaded the formal Extension Service movement for the nation.

The two entities merged culture and agriculture by traveling across the state in a “Student Train” car from Burlington Northern. Communities were treated to educational information and cultural experiences in the form of speeches and plays. Arvold wrote publications for Extension and was very well received across the state in partnership with a variety of professors and researchers who delivered the latest information to people in North Dakota.

All these individuals knew that teaching new methods to adults and advancing the agricultural and home economics programs likely would be more successful if education was brought to the people in their communities and research was taught in an applied manner that made sense to the masses. They also learned quickly that adults were hesitant to change their ways, but if they took time to engage the youth, the young people were more likely to try new methods and bring the results to their families.

Agriculture certainly has expanded beyond corn breeding, and home economics has expanded beyond canning clubs.

The early work of these pioneers led to the current NDSU Extension Service, which targets four major program areas: agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, 4-H youth development and community vitality.