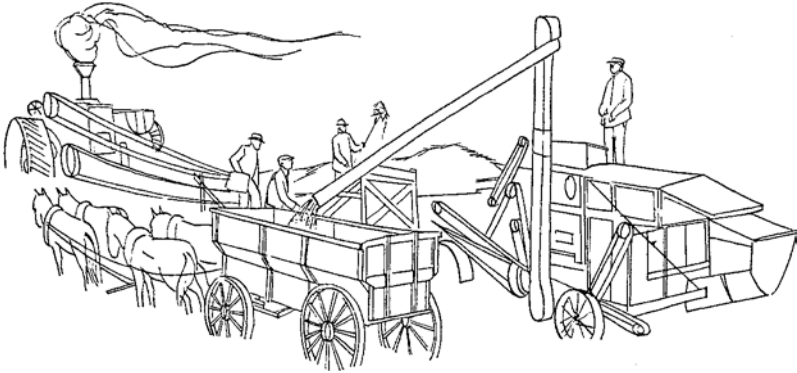


CHAPTER 12



The Second Boom

THE SETTLEMENT OF NORTH DAKOTA was completed by a second boom which began in 1898 and continued, though with declining exuberance in its later years, to the First World War. The boom was a reflection of national trends. After the depression of the 1890's, the United States entered a period of extraordinary economic growth. Railroads expanded their trackage and equipment at a fast rate, the value added to raw materials by manufacturing doubled, and millions of European immigrants poured into the nation. Urban population increased rapidly. The national wealth more than doubled.

While the second boom in North Dakota was an aspect of this unusual national growth, it also helped to mark the disappearance of the frontier. As the arable, unoccupied lands of the last West began to be taken up, the demand for food rose faster than its production. The prices of both farm produce and farm land went up. Prospects of a food shortage faced the nation and stimulated a westward surge of land seekers.

A flood of new settlers poured into North Dakota, especially onto the Missouri Plateau. From 1898 to 1915, some 250,000 latter-day pioneers entered the state. Then the influx of population, begun in 1871 when the railroads reached the Red River of the North, came to an end. After 1915 the movement was to be outward, away from North Dakota. That would begin a new era in North Dakota history.

But the boom itself had most important consequences for the state. Outsiders gave North Dakota a railroad network which was best suited to a more densely populated region. By 1915 they had invested some \$100,000,000, but sparse population tended to limit their profits. To their credit, however, the railroads did bring a rush of settlers eager to get a share of the last free or cheap land. By 1910, two-thirds of the population

had been born outside the state. The country was filled with people who did not understand it very well. They covered western North Dakota with small farms, a pattern of settlement unsuited to the semiarid climate, and so created the problem of slow and painful readjustment to hardships caused by scanty, uncertain rainfall.

The speculative rush increased land values. Their rise made wheat farming, an extensive agriculture requiring cheap land, less profitable, for it raised the cost of capital and hence of production, even though yields were declining. Increasing tenancy, a result of higher land costs, also took some income away from landowners. As a solution to such difficulties, the "Better Farming" movement, promoted by outsiders from more humid and densely populated southern Minnesota, preached a gospel of diversification which emphasized dairy farming. Dairying, however, did not mix well with wheat farming and was not too well suited to the remote, semiarid country. Diversification made only slow progress.

RAILROAD BUILDING

From 1898 to 1915 the railroad mileage of North Dakota almost doubled, increasing from 2,662 miles to 5,226. Construction stopped with the outbreak of the First World War and was never resumed. In 1898 the state already had over three times as many miles of railroad in proportion to its population as did the United States, but large areas of North Dakota were still without railroads. There were none on the Missouri Plateau except the main lines of the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern.

Construction began with the extension of branches across the Drift Prairie and onto the edge of the Missouri Plateau. In the first years of the boom, from 1898 to 1904, some 550 miles were built. The Northern Pacific added 234 miles of branch lines, reaching Denhoff, McHenry, Marion, Oakes, Esmond, and Linton. The Great Northern added about 125 miles to its branches running toward the Canadian boundary, reaching Walhalla, Hannah, Souris, Munich, and Mohall. The Soo built 110 miles from Kulm to Wishek, then both north to Bismarck and south to the state line. The Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul (commonly called the Milwaukee) built a branch from Roscoe, South Dakota, to Strasburg and Linton.

In addition to the building of branches, two new railroads appeared in the state. William D. Washburn, wealthy Minneapolis miller and promoter of the Soo, organized the Bismarck, Washburn and Fort Buford Railway Company in 1899. His primary aim was to reach the thick lignite beds he owned at Wilton. In July, 1900, the new railroad began to

run trains to Wilton, where the mine was soon producing one hundred tons of lignite a day. In 1901, Washburn laid track to the town of Washburn, and in 1904 he sold his railroad to the Soo. Meanwhile, in 1902 the farmers of Ramsey County organized the Farmers' Grain and Shipping Company and built a railroad from Devils Lake to Starkweather and then in 1905 to Hansboro.

During the early years of the boom the principal railroads were making substantial improvements. They ballasted roadbeds, straightened curves, lowered grades, replaced wooden bridges with steel ones, laid heavier rails, and added new locomotives and rolling stock. In 1900 the Great Northern built large shops in Minot; the Northern Pacific constructed a large depot in Bismarck; and the Soo bought a very large locomotive, a decapod, considered the second largest in the nation. Passenger fares were reduced from four to three cents a mile, and North Dakotans took some pride in the crack trains, such as the Northern Pacific's *North Coast Limited*, which crossed the state. Hill of the Great Northern was much interested in the traffic of the Pacific Northwest and the Orient. He organized the Great Northern Steamship Company in 1900 and ordered two large ocean steamers, the *Minnesota* (launched in 1903) and the *Dakota* (1904).

There was a lull in railroad building in 1904. Then came three big years: 1905 with 528 miles, 1906 with 144, and 1907 with 273. Much of the new trackage was the result of a raid by the Soo, a project of the Canadian Pacific Railroad and the Minneapolis millers, on territory already served by the Great Northern. Unfortunately, such over-building lessened the chances for low-cost transportation and thus added to the difficulties created by the semiarid climate, the sparse population, and the consequent low volume of freight in proportion to railroad mileage and investment.

In 1905 the Soo built the "Wheat Line" from the Red River at Oslo, Minnesota, to Kenmare, paralleling for nearly 250 miles the main line of the Great Northern. In 1906 it built a 100-mile branch from Drake to Plaza and another reaching westward from Flaxton. Both infringed on Great Northern territory. That railroad extended some of its northern branches and built new ones starting at York, Towner, and Berthold.

Some of the new Great Northern and Soo branches were on the Missouri Plateau. In 1905 the Northern Pacific extended lines to Streeter and Turtle Lake, both on the plateau east of the Missouri River. But when the Milwaukee crossed the southwestern portion of the state in 1907 on its way to the Pacific Coast, it laid the first tracks on the Missouri Slope since the building of the main line of the Northern Pacific in 1879-1880. The railroads continued to make improvements: water reservoirs, heavier

rails, and more locomotives and freight cars. In 1906 the Northern Pacific began its "Hi-Line" bridge, a mile long and 148 feet above the river, across the Sheyenne Valley at Valley City.

The last spurt of construction occurred between 1910 and 1914, when the railroads laid 1,025 miles of track in North Dakota, 523 miles in 1912 alone. In 1912 the Soo put into operation a line from Fordville to Drake, roughly parallel to the main line of the Great Northern for 130 miles, and during the next two years it extended its branches from Plaza and Ambrose. Also in 1912, the Great Northern inaugurated service on the Surrey Cutoff, 208 miles of track from Fargo to Surrey which runs parallel to much of the Soo's Hankinson-Portal line. The Midland Continental Railroad, an ambitious scheme to connect Winnipeg and Galveston, Texas, was only able to build from Edgeley to Wimbledon.

The railroads built other branches during these years and for the first time put them on the Missouri Slope. In 1911 the Milwaukee laid track from McLaughlin, South Dakota, to New England. The Northern Pacific started lines running north and south from Mandan. The southern branch turned west to Mott; the northern one turned up the Knife River Valley at Stanton and reached Killdeer in 1914. About the same time, another Northern Pacific branch extended south from Beach, and a Great Northern line came to Watford City. A little later, the Great Northern built to Grenora.

The outbreak of the First World War virtually ended railroad construction in both the state and the nation. In North Dakota the Great Northern had 1,872 miles of track, the Northern Pacific 1,496 miles, the Soo 1,269, and the Milwaukee 378.¹ Including the shorter trackage of other lines, the state had 5,226 miles of railroad. Because of its thinly scattered population, North Dakota had almost three times the railroad mileage in proportion to its population as did the United States—74 miles per 10,000 people for North Dakota, 25 miles per 10,000 for the United States.

CONFLICT WITH THE RAILROADS

The capitalization of the railroads and the investment in their

¹North Dakota Board of Railroad Commissioners, [*Annual Reports, 1899-1914*](#); Joseph G. Pyle, *The Life of James J. Hill* (2 vols.; Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1917), I, 51-62; James D. Johnson, "[A History of the Midland Continental Railroad, 1906-1950](#)" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1952), pp. 12-84. A map showing construction by years is in Lewis F. Crawford, [*History of North Dakota*](#) (3 vols.; Chicago: American Historical Society, Inc., 1931), I, 256; mileages built are in the *Statistical Abstract, 1900-1922*.

transportation systems were vital matters to North Dakota. By 1915 outside capitalists had invested, at an estimated \$20,000 per mile, some \$100,000,000 in North Dakota railroads, yet they had issued stocks and bonds for more than three times that amount. For its whole system the Great Northern's capitalization was about \$78,000 per mile, the Northern Pacific's about \$95,000. Although a part of these amounts represented costly construction through the mountains and expensive terminals outside the state, it still seems as if the railroads were seeking to earn a return on an investment which was to a considerable extent fictitious.

Aside from the fictitious element in the capitalization of the railroads (practically a universal phenomenon in corporation finance), both mileage and investment in the railroads of North Dakota were inescapably high in proportion to the population. For these reasons, North Dakotans—like other westerners and also southerners, all of whom shared the same predicament—had to pay high freight rates. These charges, which reduced the standard of living, were part of the toll paid for both the remoteness of the state and for the dependence of its people on outside capital.

High freight rates were a serious obstacle to the development of manufacturing and hence of a more diversified economy. As such, they contributed to North Dakota's economic disadvantage, which persisted in spite of the state's great wealth-producing capacity. By discriminatory freight rates the East held the South and West as colonies; North Dakota inevitably shared the bondage of the agricultural sections.²

So in North Dakota the railroads and the people were in constant conflict. The railroads sought economical, profitable operation. They built lines cheaply, sometimes laying used rails on an unballasted bed and making improvements later. They converted old boxcars into stations and wished to take off unprofitable trains and to close stations where receipts were small. They entered politics to escape taxation, to block anti-railroad legislation, and to elect their friends to office. For their part, the people kept the railroads under pressure to give better service. They demanded that stations be kept open, that freight cars be supplied promptly, that crack passenger trains stop at nearly every town, that the railroads pay more taxes, and that freight rates be lowered.

The people felt that the railroads failed to meet the transportation needs of the state. The failure was due in part to the concentration of the year's traffic in the fall and early winter with the marketing of grain. But

²Capitalization given in *Poor's Manual of Railroads, 1915* (New York: Poor's Publishing Company, 1915), pp. 696, 1225, 1448; Wendell Berge, *Economic Freedom for the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1946), pp. 97-121.

it also resulted from poor management, especially the desire of the railroads to move only long trains. In 1905 the railroads failed to move the grain crop effectively, and the following year, although the crop was no larger, they did an even poorer job. The 1,600 elevators in the state could store only a third of the crop. By December the terminal elevators at Duluth, Superior, and the Twin Cities were still almost empty, while in North Dakota the rural elevators were jammed and much wheat, covered with snow, was in open bins along the tracks. The financial loss to the state in insurance, interest, storage charges, and lower prices was serious. And when snow blocked the railroads, an early winter caught coal dealers without fuel.

The fuel shortage sharpened resentment against the railroads. In January, 1907, the legislature said that people were in danger of freezing because of the railroads' negligence or, perhaps, their contempt for state regulatory legislation. A member of the Interstate Commerce Commission, which investigated the situation, condemned the railroads for not following "a policy of operation aimed specifically to meet the needs of the grain raiser."

In the continuing conflict each side had some success. Many state officials, the recipients of free passes, were friends of the railroads, and the railroad commissioners often seemed like their apologists. Yet the legislature compelled them to fence their lines, to build stations, and to operate daily freight and passenger trains. The state board of equalization steadily increased their taxes—from about \$500,000, or \$187 per mile, in 1900 to \$1,900,000, or \$371 per mile, in 1915. These sums were much larger than South Dakota collected: \$72 per mile in 1900 and \$312 in 1915.

The comparison suggests that North Dakotans, even before the rise of the Nonpartisan League, were more radical than their neighbors to the south, with whom they had much in common. In the struggle the people of the state, feeling keenly their entire dependence upon the railroads, could hardly be expected to admire the giant corporations, so obviously rich and powerful, which, moving in secret ways, influenced public officials and exploited townsmen and farmers alike, reducing their incomes by freight rates designed to earn a return on fictitious capitalization.

Although railroad agents, conscious of the power of the corporations they represented, were sometimes insolent, the railroad managers usually sought to conciliate a hostile public opinion. Thus the Northern Pacific cheerfully ran a daily passenger train to Streeter for an average of eight passengers and a loss of thirty-five to forty dollars a trip. James J. Hill himself was much concerned for the welfare of the region. "You are now

our children,” he said, “but we are in the same boat with you, and we have got to prosper with you or we have got to be poor with you.”³

The railroads resisted legislative efforts to reduce freight rates on lignite, an important expense in a cold country. The legislature set up a schedule of low lignite rates in 1893, again in 1895, and once more in 1903. Each time, the railroads, arguing that the rates were confiscatory, refused to accept them. In 1905 the railroad commissioners themselves called the rates “unjust and confiscatory.” Two years later the legislature, angry with the railroads because of a fuel shortage, again reduced lignite rates and the attorney general secured an injunction from the North Dakota Supreme Court forbidding the railroads to ignore them. After an eight-year legal battle, the United States Supreme Court, reversing the state court’s decision in favor of the rates, ruled on March 8, 1915, that a state may not compel a railroad to charge a rate on a particular commodity that does not yield a reasonable return on the investment.⁴

THE COMPLETION OF SETTLEMENT

The railroad building of the second boom brought to completion the settlement which had begun when the railroads reached the Red River in 1871. As the railroads extended their branches, lines of villages and towns sprang up along the new tracks. From 1900 to 1910, a total of 137 new ones were incorporated; only 75 had been incorporated up to 1900.

The railroads advertised for settlers. The Great Northern offered special rates to men who wanted to come out to North Dakota to work in the harvest and, while there, look over the country. Pamphlets, filled with the letters of successful pioneers, emphasized the advantages of North Dakota— “Where Wheat is King.” After 1909, although the boom was slackening, the Great Northern alone moved 64,000 new settlers into the state.

In 1905 the legislature had appropriated \$20,000 to advertise the state. The commissioner of agriculture and labor used some of the money to start the *North Dakota Magazine*, a promotional enterprise, in 1906. From 1905 to 1910 his organization distributed 170,000 copies of the magazine, 265,000 folder-type maps of North Dakota, 10,000 wall maps, and 370,500 folders and circulars.

A mania to secure land seized people. It was stimulated by a rise in the prices of agricultural produce and farm lands which had begun in the

³Mary Wilma M. Hargreaves, [*Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains, 1900-1925*](#), Harvard Economic Studies, Vol. 101 (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 225-226; North Dakota Board of Railroad Commissioners, [*Annual Report, 1907*](#), pp. 100-110; *Statistical Abstract, 1908*, p. 267; 1916, pp. 304-305.

⁴[*Grand Forks Herald*](#), March 9, 1915.

late 1890's. Moreover, the United States Bureau of the Census had reported that the frontier of unoccupied land was drawing to a close in 1890. In the 1890's public men in Great Britain and the United States began to say that the growth of the population and the end of unoccupied and tillable land meant a shortage of food because food consumption was increasing faster than food production. These trends, they said, would mean scarcity and high prices; they would make the farmers the most prosperous class. Officials of the United States Department of Agriculture held these ideas in 1905; the next year, James J. Hill expounded them in an address at the Minnesota State Fair.

These ideas lay behind the feverish rush to western North Dakota in the days of the second boom. By 1898 farmers and speculators had taken the larger part of the railroad land east of the Missouri River. In the late 1890's the D. S. B. Johnson Land Company of St. Paul bought all of the Northern Pacific land in Foster, Wells, and three other counties. From 1900 to 1904 the Northern Pacific sold 1,569,000 acres west of the Missouri to ten individuals or land companies in tracts ranging from 36,000 to 420,000 acres for an average price of \$1.63 an acre. In 1902, for example, the Golden Valley Land and Cattle Company bought a strip thirty miles long and nine to fifteen wide.

Sometimes land companies bought large tracts from ranchers to retail in small farms. Speculative funds for this purpose came from the Twin Cities. Thus W. D. Washburn bought a large block of land in northern Burleigh and southwestern McLean counties, and in 1909, James C. Young of Minneapolis reportedly held 1,000,000 acres in North Dakota, part of it near Dickinson. The Western Land Securities Company of St. Paul was active in Stark County. In 1904, W. H. Brown and Company of Chicago opened an office in Richardton and began a heavy promotion of the 200,000 acres it held south of that place. There were countless speculators, large and small. In 1906, Alexander McKenzie invested in some 300,000 acres; he was estimated to have made a million dollars from the rise in values by 1909. Speculators advertised in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, where land values were rising, brought delegations of bankers, businessmen, and retired farmers out to western North Dakota, and sold them tracts of from one to eighteen sections (the railroad land in one township). Such investors and speculators brought in settlers by the carload. Hugh Connorrnan Short (father of Don L. Short, United States congressman from 1959 to 1965) was a Northern Pacific land agent in those years. He lived in Iowa and brought parties of land seekers to the Belfield-Sentinel Butte-Beach area before he himself fell

in love with the country and went into ranching.⁵

Everyone believed that rising values would quickly enrich land-owners, so thousands who had never farmed before and had no idea of what farming was like rushed to get a quarter-section on the old, easy terms before the cheap land of the frontier was all gone. There was, Bishop Cameron Mann wrote about Linton in 1903, “such a rush of business that the stores are open until midnight.... The hotel where there were several beds in each room [had] several people in each bed.”

About half the newcomers in western North Dakota had at least some experience in farming, and about half came from other walks of life, many from business but others representing fifty-nine occupations—banker, jeweler, dock worker, cigar maker, art student, blacksmith, minister, printer, college professor, and so on. Unmarried women also homesteaded; there were stenographers, schoolteachers, widows, daughters of settlers, and elderly spinsters. Both the businessmen of the new towns and railroad employees caught the land fever. They filed on homesteads, built claim shacks, slept in them long enough to comply with the law, and hired others to plow and seed the required acreage. These latter-day pioneers soon dotted the unsettled countryside with their shacks. They filed original homestead entries on 1,100,000 acres in 1898 and then each year took up more and more land until in 1906 they filed on 2,700,000 acres. This was the peak, but in every year from 1898 through 1908, except 1899, they filed on more than 1,000,000 acres. Then filings tapered off, down to less than 600,000 acres in 1914. By that time most of the unappropriated public land in North Dakota had passed into private hands. But some homesteading continued into the early 1920's.

Meanwhile, the federal government had changed the land laws. It repealed the Pre-emption and Timber Culture acts in 1891, and in 1909 it passed the Enlarged Homestead Act, which allowed settlers in certain states to acquire a 320-acre claim for five years' residence and improvement. North Dakota was included in the area to which the law applied in 1912. That year, Congress reduced the period of residence required on all homesteads from five years to three; that is, residence was

⁵Hargreaves, *Dry Farming*, pp. 73-77, 417-426, 449; story of Don Short by John O. Hjelle, *Bismarck Tribune*, June 4, 1958, reprinted as an advertisement in the *Grand Forks Herald*, October 31, 1958; Robert H. Bahmer, “[The Economic and Political Background of the Nonpartisan League](#)” (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1941), pp. 22-25; E. A. Willson, H. C. Hoffsommer, and Alva H. Benton, *Rural Changes in Western North Dakota*, North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 214 (Fargo, 1928), p. 19.

required for seven months of each year for three years.

The provisions for acquiring public land by a cash payment were important. Under the homestead laws the settler could commute his claim after fourteen months' residence (it had been six months until 1891) and secure title immediately by paying \$1.25 an acre or \$2.50 if the land was within the railroad land grant. Commutation, as the practice was called, enabled either the farmer or the speculator to acquire public land without living on it for five years, or after 1912 for three years. Acquiring title to his homestead allowed the settler to use it as security for a loan.

Many of the newcomers were nonfarming speculators, and the number of commuted homesteads increased. Before 1899 less than 10 percent of the homesteaders commuted their entries. But by 1903 some 60 percent were commuting, and from 1900 to 1910 homesteaders commuted entries on 5,800,000 acres and fulfilled the term of residence to make final proof on 5,600,000 acres. Of course not all who commuted were speculators. Perhaps a third of those who filed on homesteads in the ten years from 1900 to 1910 were speculators who did not stay on the land. An investigating committee reported in 1904 that less than 35 percent of all entries commuted in the previous six years in the Minot and Devils Lake land districts were occupied, and that a large part of the claims had been transferred to other owners within two years after commutation. The committee judged that 55 percent of the commuted entries were made for speculative purposes. By 1904 almost 90 percent of the entries at the Minot land office had been commuted.

Many speculators left without ever having farmed; others farmed a while but soon gave up and sold out to their neighbors. Some had never farmed before; some lived in town, still plying their trades as teachers, carpenters, and businessmen, and did not even try to make a living on their claims. Many homesteaded land unsuitable for farming. Some tired of "batching it"; others discovered that their farming experience in humid regions was not much help on the semiarid Missouri Plateau. Many left because the country had become too thickly settled; there were simply too many small farms.

Gradually the smaller farmers sold out to the larger ones and left the country. From the beginning, farms were larger within the Northern Pacific land grant, where the settler could homestead government land and buy railroad land. The history of Fertile Township, Mountrail County, illustrates how quickly many of the newcomers left and how farms became larger. Part of the Fort Berthold Reservation, Fertile Township was opened to settlement in 1916. That year, there were 123 settlers in the township, almost one for every quarter-section. By 1919,

however, there were only 73 farms in the township, and by 1924 only 40. There was practically no abandoned land.

Throughout western North Dakota, those who stayed were usually married men with a farm background who had come to make a home. Although some of the inexperienced made successful farmers, the farmers were better “stayers” than the nonfarmers, the married better than the single, the foreigners better than the natives, the Germans and German Russians better than the Norwegians and older Americans, and the native-born from Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin better stayers than the native-born from Minnesota and eastern North Dakota.⁶ Plainly, those who had traveled the greater distance were more apt to stay. But the foreign-born, especially, were attracted to the land. In 1910 almost 51 percent of the farmers were foreign-born: 10,886 were born in Norway, 7,734 in Russia, 4,825 in Germany, 4,251 in Canada, 3,635 in Sweden, 1,318 in Denmark, 1,304 in Austria, 839 in Ireland, and 627 in England.⁷ For them, North Dakota meant ownership of farms, the satisfaction of an old land hunger.

Although many of the newcomers soon left, the population of North Dakota increased during the second boom. From 1900 to 1910 it grew 81 percent, or from 319,000 people to 577,000, the largest increase in the history of the state. From the beginning of the boom in 1898 to its end about 1915, the population rose from an estimated 270,000 to 637,000 (the number counted in a state census taken in 1915). This was an increase of some 367,000, or about 135 percent.

The largest increases occurred on the Missouri Plateau, but many counties of the Drift Prairie, and many towns grew substantially. The population of the Missouri Plateau rose from 47,000 in 1900 to 187,000 in 1910, an increase of 296 percent. The population of the Drift Prairie increased from 151,000 in 1900 to 262,000 in 1910, or 74 percent. The population of the Red River Valley grew from 122,000 in 1900 to 128,000 in 1910, an increase of only 5 percent. By 1910 the Missouri Plateau, with 50 percent of the state’s area, had 32 percent of the population; the Drift Prairie, with 40 percent of the area, had 45 percent of the population; the Red River Valley, with 10 percent of the area, had 22 percent of the population.

The older towns grew rapidly. Fargo rose from 9,589 to 14,331, Grand Forks from 7,652 to 12,478, Jamestown from 2,853 to 4,358, and

⁶Willson, Hoffasommer, and Benton, *Rural Changes in Western North Dakota*, pp. 20-68.

⁷United States Bureau of the Census, *Abstract of 1910 Census with Supplement for North Dakota*, p. 618.

Bismarck from 3,319 to 5,443. But the really spectacular increases came in the newer places. Devils Lake grew from 1,729 to 5,157, Minot from 1,277 to 6,188, and Williston from 763 to 3,124.

At the eastern end of the state, where many were leaving for the Canadian Northwest, three counties actually lost population in the decade: Walsh declined 3.9 percent, Traill 4.3 percent, and Pembina 17.5 percent.⁸ At the western end of the state, Williams County had a population of 1,530 in 1900; it and Divide County (a part of Williams in 1900) had 20,249 in 1910. Billings County had a population of 975 in 1900; it and Bowman County (a part of Billings in 1900) had 14,854 in 1910. Such increases in population were an outstanding example of the Too-Much Mistake. The semiarid Missouri Plateau was acquiring more people than it needed, more people than it would have opportunities for. The stage was being set for a long-continued exodus.

EXPANDING WHEAT PRODUCTION

Although the rush to western North Dakota proved to be a mistake for many people, the years after 1898 were good ones for American agriculture. The population of the nation was growing more rapidly than farm production; prices were rising; and the farm surplus was disappearing. Plenty of rain fell, and on the Missouri Plateau new settlers reaped good yields in spite of their inexperience with the semiarid country.

The completion of settlement changed the scale of North Dakota agriculture. In 1900, North Dakotans operated 45,000 farms with 15,500,000 acres; in 1910 they had 74,000 farms containing 28,400,000 acres. The average farm size had increased from 343 acres to 382, which compared favorably with the 138-acre average of the United States as a whole. The value of all farm property rose from \$255,000,000 to nearly \$975,000,000.

Expansion, however, did not change the character of North Dakota agriculture. Wheat was still king. From 1898 to 1915 the acreage planted to wheat doubled, going from 4,300,000 acres to 9,400,000, and production rose from 69,000,000 bushels to 159,000,000, a record crop rarely approached in subsequent years. In more than half of the years from 1890 to 1919, North Dakota was the leading wheat state, ahead of Kansas, its closest rival. In North Dakota wheat accounted for nearly 60 percent of the value of all farm crops and livestock in 1909 and about 80 percent of the cash income. The other cash crop was flax; North Dakota

⁸Paul F. Sharp, "[The American Farmer and the 'Last Best West,'](#)" *Agricultural History*, XXI (April 1947), 67-69.

produced more than half the crop in the United States. Flax was a crop for virgin land and also a gamble; the land soon became "flax sick," and production fell off. Large quantities of oats, hay, and barley were also raised, largely for domestic feed. Oats were fed to horses, by far the most valuable livestock. In 1909 the value of the wheat crop (117,000,000 bushels and the largest yet produced) was \$109,000,000; the value of the oat crop was \$24,000,000; the value of livestock products was \$16,000,000; and the value of the flax crop was \$15,000,000. North Dakota was really a one-crop state.

NEW VARIETIES OF WHEAT

There was, quite naturally, much interest in new and better kinds of wheat. At the outset, Red Fife, a hard red spring wheat which was also called Scotch Fife, was the variety most commonly grown. Introduced from Canada, it made North Dakota's reputation as "the land of the No. 1 hard." In the early 1890's, L. H. Haynes of Fargo took the lead in planting Bluestem, a variety which ripened later than Red Fife. It was very satisfactory when growing conditions were good. Soon after the turn of the century it was grown more extensively than Red Fife. But neither was resistant to stem rust, a destructive disease, and there was much testing of varieties at the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. About 1895, Preston, also known as Velvet Chaff, was introduced from Canada. Preston had a little more tolerance to rust, and while it was grown on about 750,000 acres by 1919, it had a tendency to shatter when ripe, a lower quality gluten, and less market appeal than other wheats.

Durum wheat, introduced from Russia, was first raised in North Dakota in the late 1890's. Encouraged by the United States Department of Agriculture and the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, farmers steadily planted more and more durum. It yielded more bushels per acre than common wheats, grew more vigorously, and was usually more resistant to drought and rust. Durum-wheat flour, however, did not have the strength of gluten that flour from common wheat possessed, and was used only for macaroni products. At first the leading durum was Arnautka, but after the bad rust years of 1916 and 1919, Kubanka replaced it as the leading variety. Minidum, an amber durum, was released by the Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station about 1917 and soon became the leading variety. Although only moderately resistant to rust, it was an excellent yielder and ranked high in macaroni quality. When durum was first introduced, agricultural experts believed that it might be better suited than hard red spring wheat to the drier conditions of western North Dakota, but durum came to be most successfully grown

in eastern North Dakota outside the Red River Valley. After 1917, from 20 to 40 percent of North Dakota's wheat acreage was planted to durum, and the state raised from two-thirds to three-fourths of the nation's total output.

After the coming of durum, the next major step was the introduction of Marquis wheat, a new hard red spring variety. It had been developed in Canada in 1903 by Dr. Charles E. Saunders of the Central Experimental Farm at Ottawa. He crossed an early-ripening Indian wheat, Hard Red Calcutta, with common Red Fife and produced a variety then superior to all others for North Dakota. It was not resistant to stem rust, yet its earliness permitted it to escape injury from both heat and rust and so gave it an advantage over Red Fife. Marquis was first grown in North Dakota in 1912. With the serious losses to rust in 1914 and 1916, many farmers discontinued growing the older Red Fife and Bluestem varieties in favor of Marquis. By 1919, Marquis was being grown on four and one-half million acres, about two-thirds of the hard reel spring wheat acreage of the state.

About 1915 the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station began a scientific program of crossing wheat varieties to produce new ones—a replacement for the older system of plant selection. By 1918 it had developed and was testing Kota, a hard red spring wheat of Russian origin and the first variety that was resistant to stem rust. Soon other rust-resistant wheats were developed; Kota and the others, though not put into extensive farm production, supplied wheat-breeding materials which had rust resistance.

The searchers for better varieties of wheat were true heroes of the land, for Red Fife, Bluestem, the durums, and Marquis were highly important in making North Dakota productive of much wealth. The introduction of a valuable grass adapted to the nature of the country also benefited the state. The seed of brome grass, a native of central Europe and China which was extensively cultivated in Hungary and Russia, was distributed in North Dakota in the early 1890's. It rapidly became one of the most valuable forage grasses in the state—highly palatable as pasture grass and excellent for making hay. Brome grass has a fine and extensive root system, often penetrating to depths of five or six feet, and is well suited to regions with moderate rainfall and low to moderate summer temperatures, such as prevail in eastern North Dakota. It is only moderately drought resistant, however, and did not do well in the western part of the state.⁹

⁹Theodore E. Stoa, "[A Brief History of Wheat Variety Changes on Farms in North Dakota](#)," *Bimonthly Bulletin*, North Dakota Agricultural Experiment

THE ECONOMICS OF WHEAT FARMING

There was a real need for agricultural diversification in North Dakota, for more income from livestock. Average wheat yields were declining in the Red River Valley: the fields were becoming weedy; the seed was often of poor quality; more work was required to produce a crop. The valley was losing its status as “the land of the No. 1 hard” and becoming “the land of No. 2 and 3.” People were reluctant to admit it. When Professor Henry L. Bolley of the Agricultural College released the results of a study showing that the land was “wheat sick,” he nearly lost his position. Yet many believed that something was wrong. “In 1914, as my sworn statement will show,” said Senator Asle J. Gronna before an audience in Grand Forks, “on an investment of between \$350,000 and \$400,000 in farms, I sustained a loss of over \$4,000 and the farms were run in a good systematic way.”

For one thing, paradoxical as it may seem, the farmer was really hurt by the increased value of the land and therefore the increased share going to capital invested in land. This was true even though many who made money in North Dakota did so through the rise in land values. The average value of farm land per acre rose from \$11.00 in 1900 to \$26.00 in 1910 and to \$35.00 in 1920. The increase was welcomed, for virtually all farmers were speculators expecting a rise. Often the increase was spectacular. A farmer bought a section of land in Billings County for \$6.00 an acre and four years later sold three quarters of it for \$23.00 an acre. The rise was purely speculative; it was based upon the disappearance of free government land and not upon the increased earning capacity.¹⁰

The price of land went higher than the rate of return justified. The increase hurt the farmer who stayed on when he enlarged his farm; it benefited only the farmer or speculator who was selling out and leaving. Many lost money, for they were enlarging their farms to secure a more suitable size for the semiarid region. Some of them, of course, mortgaged their farms. Fifty-one percent of the farmers had mortgaged their farms by 1910; they owed forty-eight million dollars. The rise in land values increased the cost of raising wheat by increasing the cost of capital. Where the capital was borrowed, the cost was paid in interest on the farm mortgage.

Credit came from a variety of sources. The farmer might borrow

Station, VII, 6 (July-August 1945), 21-26; Warren Whitman *et al.*, *Grass*, North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 300 (Fargo, 1941).

¹⁰Bahmer, “[The Economic and Political Background of the Nonpartisan League](#),” pp. 48, 51, 5S-56, 67-68.

from a state bank, a life insurance company, or a mortgage or finance company. The state bank would probably use the mortgage as security for a loan from a big bank in Minneapolis or St. Paul. The Union Central Insurance Company of Cincinnati and the Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company of Milwaukee lent much money on farm mortgages in North Dakota. Every community had a moneylender who acted as an agent of outside investors.

Credit was expensive. The average mortgage ran for about five years with 8 percent interest. But the expense of abstracting titles, examining the property, recording the mortgage, and, in the newer sections, a bonus for getting the loan—all these were borne by the farmer. A study in 1914-1915 revealed that interest and other expenses averaged 8.7 percent for the state. This charge, together with the expense and uncertainty of mortgage renewal (few farms were paid for in five years), made the credit system a heavy burden on the farmers. Moreover, most of them had to buy farm machinery and supplies on credit. They would secure a bank loan for eight or nine months at an average of 10.75 percent interest; more often they obtained credit from a store. Merchants commonly gave a 7 percent discount for cash.¹¹

THE BETTER FARMING MOVEMENT

These and other problems compelled the farmers to think of new ways in which they could make their work more profitable. There had long been much talk about the evils of one-crop farming. James J. Hill had been preaching the importance of more livestock on farms since the 1880's. To promote his ideas, he gave away fifty young registered Shorthorn bulls along the Great Northern line in 1914.

Farmers' institutes worked in the same direction. The Agricultural College held the first one in 1894, after which they became a regular practice. On weekends, faculty members lectured without pay at farmers' meetings; the communities paid their hotel bills, and the railroads furnished transportation. The state soon began to appropriate funds, and by 1911 there were more than one hundred institutes annually. For the same purposes, the Agricultural College began to offer "short courses" for farmers.

¹¹Mildred L. Hartsough, *The Twin Cities as a Metropolitan Market*, University of Minnesota Studies in the Social Sciences, No. 18 (Minneapolis, 1925), pp. 125-136; Samuel Torgerson, "Early Banking in North Dakota," *Quarterly Journal of the University of North Dakota*, XIII (April 1923), 286-287; Alvin S. Tostlebe, *The Bank of North Dakota: An Experiment in Agrarian Banking*, Columbia University Studies in History, Economics and Public Law, vol. 114, No. 1 (New York, 1924), pp. 32-35.

In 1898 the Agricultural College organized the annual Tri-State Grain and Stock Growers convention at Fargo. Businessmen contributed funds for the meetings; the Northern Pacific and Great Northern gave free transportation to fifty farmers for the first one and charged nominal fares for later ones. Farmers came from North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota. Under the leadership of John H. Worst, president of the college, the Tri-State meetings became an agency to educate the farmers.

There were other educational efforts. Farm papers like the *Dakota Farmer* helped the cause. In 1906 the Great Northern sent out an agricultural demonstration train with lecturers, and in 1912 it organized a regular department for agricultural research and education. In 1914 the Agricultural College added an extension department.

“Better Farming” became a popular slogan. In Minneapolis and St. Paul, A. R. Rogers, a lumber dealer, collected \$43,000 from business interests to organize and back the work of the North Dakota Better Farming Association. The North Dakota Bankers Association joined in the scheme, and the Great Northern, the Northern Pacific, and the Soo each contributed \$5,000. Thomas Cooper of the Minnesota Agricultural College was hired to direct the association. The whole enterprise was an interesting example of North Dakota’s dependence on the Twin Cities and outside interests—in short, of its colonial status.

Soon Cooper was developing the first extensive system of county agents. He hired the first field worker in 1911, and the following year he had eighteen. Cooper employed the first woman agent to advise farmers’ wives in 1913. At first, Twin Cities businessmen and North Dakota communities desiring the service shared the expense. The association spent \$43,111 in the fiscal year 1911-1912 and \$62,530 in 1912-1913.

In 1913 the North Dakota Legislature passed a county-agent law. The next year, the work of the association was merged with that of the Agricultural College’s experiment station, and the college hired Cooper to direct county-agent operations. In 1913 more than 56,000 farmers attended 747 meetings; some of them organized 180 farmers’ clubs. When the Nonpartisan League was organized, Cooper used the county agents as a conservative political machine against it. William Lemke wrote on October 31, 1917: “Cooper is a mighty fine gentleman.... He represents Big Business and not the people.... His County Agents are... in politics. He should be let out.”

The Better Farming Association, however, was unable to change North Dakota’s emphasis upon wheat, the natural and most profitable product of its semiarid grassland. Although healthy diversification and a considerable increase in livestock were eventually realized, wheat remained, even in the 1960’s, the state’s principal crop and chief source

of farm income. The gospel of diversification preached by the Better Farming movement in the years before the First World War was really the gospel of the dairy cow. It was a gospel for a humid, densely populated country rather than a semiarid, sparsely populated one. Its enthusiasts, men like Hill and Cooper, were from southern Minnesota, a region of relatively small farms close to a large market for dairy products.

Throughout American history wheat had always been a frontier crop, and when the frontier stage ended in an area, that area turned away from wheat. The Better Farming promoters had seen this happen in Wisconsin and Minnesota; they quite logically thought that the same evolution should take place in North Dakota. What North Dakota needed, however, was diversification through beef cattle, like wheat a natural product for grassland. Many things advocated by agricultural experts—summer fallow, better seed, crop rotation—were valuable, but when Better Farming enthusiasts talked of livestock, they meant dairy cattle, not beef herds.

In some places the new system succeeded; in many places it failed. Starting in the 1890's, creameries were established in the Red River Valley, but they often went out of business very quickly. With large farms (essential for wheat) and only a few cows to a farm (an average of about three and one-half), the creameries had to gather cream from a large area, an expensive operation, and they could pay only a poor price. If the farmer's wife made butter for sale, she received just eight cents a pound for it. Dairy products were perishable, and markets were far away. Often there was no profit in dairy cows; the farmers, although abused for their stubbornness by advocates of diversification, sensibly stuck to wheat as their main source of income.¹²

¹²John Lee Coulter, "[Industrial History of the Valley of the Red River of the North](#)," [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), III (1910), 650-654; Pyle, *James J. Hill*, II, 361-362; Edward C. Blackorby, "[Prairie Rebel: The Public Career of William Lemke](#)" (Ph.D. dissertation [later published], University of North Dakota, 1958), pp. 211-212.