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Pioneering in Agricultural Education

OREN C. GREGG and Farmers' Institutes

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IN THE late nineteenth century—a period of rural depression, despair, and agitation for the farmer—Ignatius Donnelly became in the minds of many a symbol of Minnesota agriculture. Land speculator, man of letters, politician, and self-proclaimed leader of the common people, the “Sage of Nininger” eagerly seized the banner of reform and strove to put himself at the head of Republicans, Anti-Monopolists, Greenbackers, and Populists in turn.¹ But while men like Donnelly were assailing the malefactors of great wealth and their followers with voice and pen, other agrarian leaders, by less dramatic but perhaps more effective methods, were attempting to improve the lot of Minnesota farmers through the introduction of better farming techniques and the medium of agricultural education. In this group, few were more successful or worthy of attention than Oren C. Gregg.

Born on November 2, 1845, at Enosburg, Vermont, Oren C. Gregg was one of several

sons of an itinerant Methodist minister. The father hoped for a better life for his boys and he was determined that they should have sufficient education to improve their chances of success. Accordingly, one son, David A. Gregg, was educated for a career which ultimately made him a prominent Boston architect, and Oren was sent to the Fort Edward Institute and the Plattsburg Academy, both in New York State, where he gained education sufficient to allow him to take a rural schoolteaching position at the age of sixteen. Two years later, with the Civil War at its height, Gregg secured a clerkship in the provost marshal's office at Plattsburg, where he was in charge of draft and enlistment records.²

When the Civil War ended, Gregg was approaching twenty and he felt that the selection of a career was a prime necessity. The ministry attracted him, since he was deeply religious, but he had developed a strong love of the land from his paternal grandfather, whose Vermont dairy farm was widely known. The rapid settlement of Western lands, however, was making the thin and rocky soils of his native state seem increasingly unattractive. Gregg therefore decided to migrate westward, and he went to Minnesota late in 1865. After settling temporarily in Mower County, he served as a lay minister in various communities and

¹ John D. Hicks, “The Political Career of Ignatius Donnelly,” in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 8:80-132 (June-September, 1921).

² Oren C. Gregg, “Biographical Notes,” Gregg Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society; Edward D. Neill, *History of the Minnesota Valley*, 856 (Minneapolis, 1882). In later life, Gregg claimed that the most important subject studied during his academic career was geometry, which taught him to reason. See Minnesota State Horticultural Society, *Annual Report*, 1926, p. 179.

taught in a rural school while looking for a suitable farm that would be a permanent home. After establishing himself in a modest way, he returned to Plattsburg in the spring of 1868 and there on May 25 he married Charlotte I. Carter, his beloved Lottie, who through more than fifty years was a helpmate and a partner in all his accomplishments.³

After five years of teaching and preaching in southern Minnesota, Gregg concluded that opportunities for farm ownership were limited there, so he determined to move farther west in order to take advantage of the federal government's generous land policy. In 1870, he and his wife migrated to Lyon County, selected a homestead, and settled in an abandoned log cabin formerly occupied by Indian traders. Lyon County in 1870 was raw country, consisting of unbroken prairies; there he found few neighbors and no towns worth the name. The nearest railroad was eighty miles away to the east and south. Moreover, rainfall in the area was distressingly sparse and, to a New Englander, the country appeared to be distinctly semiarid.⁴

Gregg and his wife attacked their problems with insight and determination. Naming their prairie homestead Coteau Farm from a range of near-by hills, they set out to make it a model for the area. They built a comfortable home and commodious farm buildings, and over the years increased their holdings to more than four hundred acres. Farming, however, did not require all Gregg's time, so he devoted considerable attention to public service. He continued to act as a lay minister, holding ordinary services when regular ministers were unavailable and occasionally officiating at marriage ceremonies. In addition, in 1872, he was elected auditor of Lyon County and, as a rock-ribbed Republican, served in that capacity for ten years.⁵

IT WAS as a dairyman, however, that Gregg established his reputation. Prior to 1880, wheat was the major interest of Minnesota

farmers. Relatively easy to produce, requiring little capital outlay, and readily marketed, the crop was consistently a frontier favorite. Dairying on the other hand required daily attention, necessitated the investment of substantial sums in stock, buildings, and fences, and was limited by the availability of near-by markets. Butter made on the farm could be shipped considerable distances, but its manufacture required a great deal of attention, and the finished product was often poor indeed, commanding prices which at the most did little more than provide a family with a few simple necessities from the local store. In addition, Minnesota dairying was badly handicapped by the inability of farmers to keep their cows producing milk through the winter months. As late summer approached and the native grasses withered in the sun, the cows went dry, freshening only in the spring when nutritious feeds again became available.⁶

Somewhat earlier than most Minnesota farmers, Gregg recognized that overreliance on wheat farming could only lead to soil exhaustion and poverty. Consequently, he resolved to break with tradition and to engage in progressive dairying. Gregg studied the problem of year-round production, recalled that his grandfather had been able to produce excellent butter from Vermont grasses, and concluded that with a proper

³ Arthur P. Rose, *Illustrated History of Lyon County*, 257 (Marshall, 1912); *Barnum Herald*, February 5, 1926; Gregg, "Biographical Notes"; Lottie I. Gregg to Gregg, December [4], 1905, Gregg Papers.

⁴ P. V. Collins, "The Father of Farmers' Institutes," in *Northwestern Agriculturist*, 22:463 (May 11, 1907); Minnesota Dairymen's Association, *Proceedings*, 1896, p. 228. A brother, William R. Gregg, followed Oren to Lyon County and in his later years was postmaster at Lynd. See *Barnum Herald*, February 5, 1926.

⁵ Rose, *Lyon County*, 257; *Marshall Messenger*, December 24, 1875, April 5, 1880; Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 277 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14).

⁶ Merrill E. Jarchow, *The Earth Brought Forth: A History of Minnesota Agriculture to 1885*, 207-209 (St. Paul, 1949).

balance of grain and cultivated hay, such as clover, he could induce his cows to calve in the fall instead of the spring and thus produce a steady flow of milk through the winter months. After several years of experimenting with feeds, breeds of cattle, and shelter and care for his stock, Gregg achieved his aim and became one of the first successful winter dairymen in Minnesota.

Winter dairying was only one of the progressive practices followed on Coteau Farm. If dairy cows were to be properly fed through the long winter months, corn, hay, and other feed crops were required. Furthermore, it was necessary to maintain soil fertility and to conserve moisture, which all too often was inadequate. Consequently, Gregg soon developed a system of diversified farming and crop rotation, while using fertilizers and experimenting in an elementary way with techniques of dry farming. Finally, he and his wife, by trial and error,

developed a method which produced butter with such superior qualities of texture, smell, and flavor that it quickly became a favorite with local consumers. Encouraged, Gregg began entering his "Solid Gold" product at local fairs and dairy conventions, where it was a consistent winner.⁷

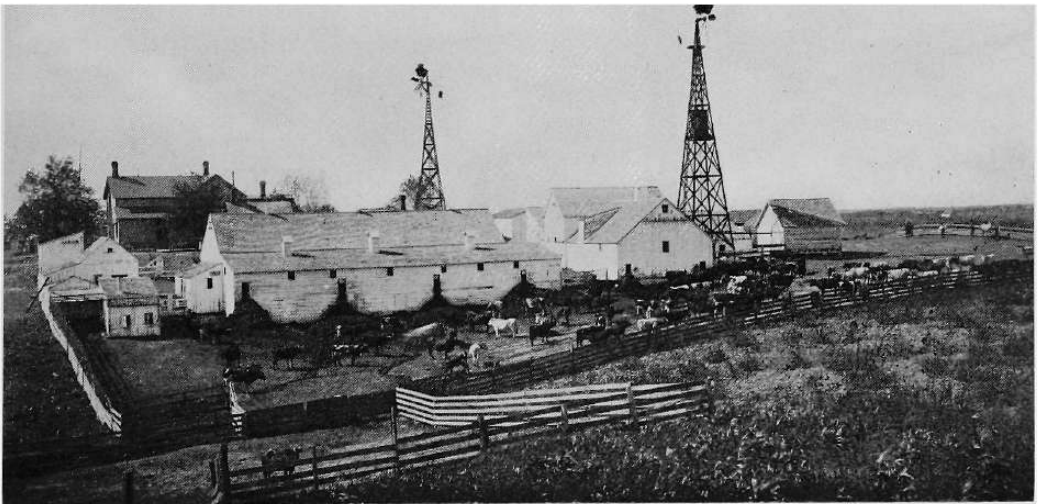
Gregg's advanced ideas and methods soon attracted the attention of agriculturists and businessmen throughout Minnesota. Farmers visited Coteau Farm to see the results of his work, and they learned to follow his example. Various railroads, recognizing that diversified agriculture would produce heavier and more certain traffic than wheat growing, sent agents to study Gregg's methods. In the early 1880s, the Winona and St. Peter Railway offered to provide him with a pass and expenses if he would go to dairy conventions and county fairs and explain his methods to groups of farmers. Since Gregg had an evangelical desire to teach, he gladly accepted.⁸

⁷ W. P. Kirkwood, "The Man Who Roused the Farmer," in *Northwestern Miller*, 88:649 (December 13, 1911); Rose, *Lyon County*, 257; *Minneapolis Journal*, February 3, 1926; *Barnum Herald*, February 5, 1926.

⁸ Collins, in *Northwestern Agriculturist*, 22:463; Horticultural Society, *Annual Report*, 1926, p. 179; Gregg, "Biographical Notes."

WHILE GREGG was winning favorable attention with progressive farming techniques, other leaders in Minnesota were wrestling with the problem of agricultural education. By the early 1880s, many farm-

A Minnesota dairy farm of the 1890s



ers had begun to recognize the need for new and better methods, but guidance in this direction was inadequate or totally lacking. The University of Minnesota had been unable to attract farm boys to its classes in agriculture and was practically isolated from the farming population. In 1882, Edward D. Porter, professor of agriculture, instituted a four-week lecture course in an attempt to find some means by which farmers could be reached. Since the effort was sufficiently satisfactory to justify continuation of the work, similar courses were given in 1883 and 1884. Such educational methods, however, were no final answer to the problem. Although 1,181 persons participated in the 1884 course, a majority of those attending resided in or near the Twin Cities, and Porter recognized that some new means must be found by which farmers in all parts of the state could be contacted.⁹

No further steps were taken in 1885 because Porter was attending the centennial exposition in New Orleans, and by 1886 the situation was critical. Then the Minnesota Farmers' Alliance, a political organization which was formed in 1881 but which showed little power until 1885, launched a militant attack upon the university, claiming that the institution was not fulfilling its responsibilities to the farmers of the state and calling for the establishment of a separate agricultural college.¹⁰ Consequently, Porter and other university officials faced the dual problem of finding a way to educate farmers and pacifying the most vocal agrarian organization then active within the state.

In seeking a solution, state authorities turned to Gregg, whose reputation by 1885 had reached such proportions that he had been recommended for the position of dairy commissioner. Former Governor John S. Pillsbury took the initiative, called Gregg to the Twin Cities, and asked what the Lyon County dairyman would recommend. Recalling his experiences in giving talks on dairying at county fairs, Gregg suggested

carrying lectures to the farmers. He proposed a series of regularly scheduled meetings at various points throughout the state and went on to emphasize that such gatherings should feature speakers who could instruct farmers in language understandable to the common man. Such a program, he felt, would mark a beginning in agricultural education while at the same time pacifying groups critical of the university. Accordingly, the executive committee of the board of regents on February 10, 1886, cancelled plans for another lecture course by Porter and authorized him instead to hold a number of meetings or institutes at various towns in the state. Furthermore, Porter was instructed to secure Gregg's assistance in the work.¹¹

In spite of considerable opposition from suspicious farmers who thought the meetings had some political implications, Porter and Gregg, aided by a corps of speakers ranging from university faculty members to ordinary farmers, held thirty-one institutes in 1886. They concluded that their reception justified further efforts in 1887. More important, however, the work of 1886 convinced Minnesota lawmakers that institutes were worth while, leading them to appropriate seventy-five hundred dollars a year for their support. The measure, which was

⁹ University of Minnesota, Department of Agriculture, *Report, 1881-86*, p. 19, 32-36, 122 (St. Paul, 1887); Andrew Boss, *The Early History and Background of the School of Agriculture at University Farm, St. Paul*, 29-31 (Minneapolis, 1941); James Gray, *The University of Minnesota*, 57, 60 (Minneapolis, 1951); University of Minnesota, Executive Committee of the Board of Regents, "Minutes," December 17, 1881, November 29, 1882, University of Minnesota Archives, Minneapolis.

¹⁰ Gray, *University of Minnesota*, 96-99; *Ariel*, 9:83 (March 15, 1886); *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, February 26, 1886; Gregg to William Watts Folwell, April 9, 1914, January 28, 1915, Folwell Papers. All Folwell Papers cited are from the collection in the University of Minnesota Archives.

¹¹ Gregg to Lucius F. Hubbard, March 25, 1885, Governor's Archives, in Minnesota State Archives; Boss, *School of Agriculture*, 31; Executive Committee of the Board of Regents, "Minutes," February 10, 1886; Gregg to Folwell, April 9, 1914, Folwell Papers; Gregg, "Biographical Notes."

passed in 1887, placed the meetings on a firm foundation.¹²

The act established a nine-member board of administration to supervise the institute program and authorized it to select a superintendent who would receive an annual salary of fifteen hundred dollars for directing and personally conducting the meetings. In April, 1887, the board members assembled and chose Gregg for the position.¹³ This was, indeed, a fortunate selection. Long experience and careful observation had taught Gregg the fundamentals of Minnesota agriculture and familiarized him with its needs. Few men were more aware of the need for changes in techniques and farming programs. Moreover, Gregg's character, which proved a handicap in later life, was a distinct asset in 1887 and the years which followed. A proud, dogmatic, and self-assertive man, with the minister's ability to scold without angering, he alone did much to make the institutes a success during the early years when farmers blinded by partisan passions opposed or ignored them.¹⁴

In outward form, the Minnesota institutes under Gregg's direction were much like those in other states. With the exception of one or two isolated years, the educational gatherings were held in winter and summer, the former season being the more important in terms of numbers and attend-

ance. Individual institutes lasted from one to three days, with sessions in the morning, afternoon, and occasionally in the evening. At each session, four to six lectures were given by Gregg and members of his speaking staff, who by training or experience were qualified to instruct in some phase of farming or rural life. At one time or another, every aspect of Minnesota agriculture was covered by the institute lecturers. Farmers were encouraged to participate freely in the discussion which followed each talk. Evening sessions normally featured fewer speakers and the lectures were on topics having a wider appeal. Various types of entertainment often lightened the intellectual fare. Local businessmen played an important role by making suitable halls available, advertising the meetings, and occasionally providing free noon meals or offering other inducements to draw farmers into town.¹⁵

Certain practices which Gregg developed differed sufficiently from those followed in other states to distinguish the Minnesota institutes and to give the superintendent a national reputation among institute workers. After the first half dozen years, for example, he stopped using university faculty or experiment station personnel as lecturers, relying instead on "practical" men who had actually performed on the farm the tasks and methods they described. University men, Gregg believed, usually talked over the heads of common farmers and did not have the fire and enthusiasm necessary for an inspiring institute speaker. To find the men he wanted, he searched throughout Minnesota and recruited many from other states. Gregg firmly believed the eye to be a more effective learning organ than the ear. Consequently, he used demonstrations, ranging from cattle judging in the streets to charts and graphs, as a vital part of almost every lecture. In addition to regular meetings, Gregg arranged special institutes—conclaves devoted to particular phases of agriculture like wheat growing or dairying—whenever he felt that concen-

¹² Department of Agriculture, *Report*, 1881-86, p. 37-39; *Farm, Stock and Home*, 2:171 (April 15, 1886); John Hamilton, *History of Farmers' Institutes in the United States*, 51 (United States Department of Agriculture, Office of Experiment Stations, *Bulletins* No. 174—Washington, 1906); Minnesota, *House Journal*, 1887, p. 238, 251, 426, 828.

¹³ "The Development of Agricultural Extension Work in Minnesota," from a file in the office of the dean, Institute of Agriculture, University of Minnesota, St. Paul; Gregg, "Biographical Notes"; Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1887, p. 380.

¹⁴ Horticultural Society, *Annual Report*, 1887, p. 196-199 (St. Paul, 1887); Dairymen's Association, *Proceedings*, 1907, p. 102-111.

¹⁵ Thomas Shaw, "Minnesota Farmers' Institutes," in Minnesota Farmers' Institutes, *Annual* No. 10, p. 38-47 (St. Paul, 1897); *Northwestern Farmer*, 10:36, 13:113 (February 1, 1892, April 1, 1895).



DEMONSTRATING *livestock selection* at an institute in 1897

trated instruction was justified. Institutes were sometimes held when farmers gathered in large, general meetings sponsored by other groups. Among the more popular were the so-called fair institutes, held during the 1890s in conjunction with the annual state fair. Finally, Gregg was among the first to recognize that farm wives as well as their husbands needed assistance. As early as 1890 he initiated cooking schools which were held in conjunction with the regular institutes and were conducted by women who had been trained in "domestic economy."¹⁶

The apathy, suspicion, and in some cases bitter hostility with which many Minnesota farmers viewed the early institutes disappeared as they learned that the meetings had no political significance and that Gregg and his lecturers wanted only to teach them new and better methods. They soon found, too, that a great deal of common sense information could be acquired at the institute gatherings. As interest increased, attendance grew, until it was difficult to find halls large enough for the crowds which gathered wherever an institute was announced. With the expansion of the work, legislative appropriations were gradually increased, until eighteen thousand dollars a year was granted in 1903. At that time, only three other states were more generous in their support of institute programs.

Meanwhile, the number of Minnesota institutes increased from 58 in 1887-88 to 158 in 1903-04; and by 1906-07, the last year of Gregg's superintendency, attendance figures reached 67,063.¹⁷

As Gregg's success in Minnesota became known among farm leaders and institute workers, he and his speakers were invited to participate in meetings in other states. As early as 1889, they went to the Dakotas, where agricultural education programs were getting under way. Gregg also participated prominently in the Wisconsin meeting at which a national association of institute workers was organized. Early in 1896, George McKerrow, head of the program in Wisconsin, invited persons involved in the movement to assemble at Watertown to discuss common problems.

¹⁶ Kirkwood, in *Northwestern Miller*, 88:650; Horticultural Society, *Annual Report*, 1892, p. 70-73; *Farm, Stock and Home*, 3:226, 6:369 (June 15, 1887, October 1, 1890); *The Farmer*, 25:772 (December 1, 1907); *Northwestern Farmer*, 14:182 (June 15, 1896); Shaw, in *Farmers' Institutes, Annual No. 10*, p. 41-49; Thomas Shaw, "The State Fair," and "Minnesota State Dairy Institute," in *Farmers' Institutes, Annual No. 8*, p. 24-30, 43-48 (Minneapolis, 1895); Gregg to Juniata L. Shepperd, undated, Shepperd Papers, University of Minnesota Archives.

¹⁷ Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1903, p. 323; United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook*, 1904, p. 621; *Farm, Stock and Home*, 4:309 (September 1, 1888); *Farmers' Institutes, Annual No. 17*, p. 3-7, No. 20, p. iii-vi (St. Paul, 1904, 1907).

Gregg served as temporary chairman of the meeting, which convened on March 13, 1896, and which resulted in the organization of the American Association of Farmers' Institute Managers. At the second annual meeting, held at Columbus, Ohio, on October 27 and 28, 1897, Gregg was elected to an executive committee which also included Kenyon L. Butterfield, a widely known agricultural educator from Michigan. Throughout the next decade, the Minnesotan was a prominent delegate at the annual sessions.¹⁸

WHILE SERVING as superintendent of farmers' institutes, Gregg made still another major contribution to the promotion of agricultural education in Minnesota. It was

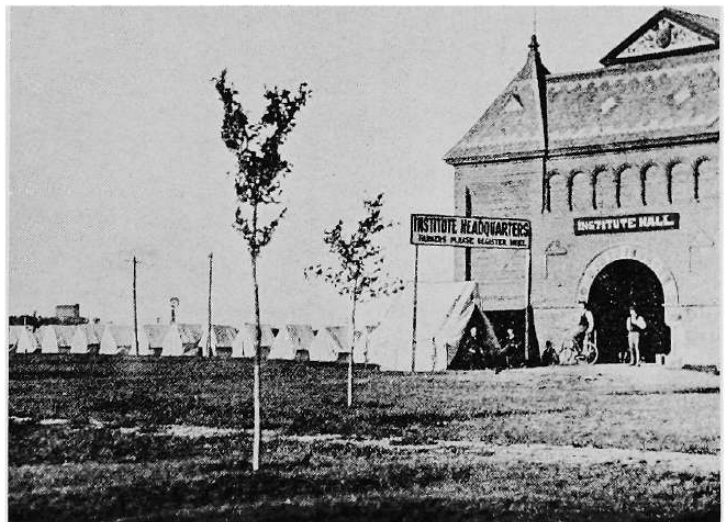
¹⁸ *Farm, Stock and Home*, 5:133 (March 1, 1889); Hamilton, *Farmers' Institutes in the United States*, 11-14; W. H. Beal and John Hamilton, eds., *American Association of Farmers' Institute Workers, Proceedings*, 1906, p. 11 (United States Department of Agriculture, Office of Experiment Stations, *Bulletins* No. 182). The title of the organization was changed to American Association of Farmers' Institute Workers, in order to broaden its appeal.

¹⁹ Andrew Boss, *Minnesota Experiment Station, 1885-1935*, 10-12 (University of Minnesota, Agricultural Experiment Station, *Bulletins* No. 319); University of Minnesota, Agricultural Experiment Station, *Annual Reports*, 1893, p. vii, 1899-1900, p. 559-561.

connected with the work of the University of Minnesota experiment farm, which began to flourish after 1887, when Congress passed the Hatch Act extending federal aid to state agricultural experiment stations. The need for substations, especially in southwestern Minnesota, where topography and climate were much like those of the Great Plains, soon became apparent to staff members of the university farm. To provide land for such a local experiment station, in 1893 Gregg offered to let the university use as much of Coteau Farm as it might need. In addition, he announced, he would allow his machinery and other equipment to be used free of cost, making it necessary for the state to provide labor only.¹⁹

The university board of regents not only gladly accepted the offer, but it decided to utilize the entire farm. Furthermore, it resolved, doubtless with the consent of the Farmers' Institutes board, to reimburse Gregg for the use of his property by allowing him to keep the proceeds from advertising in the *Farmers' Institute Annual*. This volume of articles on Minnesota agriculture was published yearly by the institute management and distributed to farmers who attended the regular meetings. Under this arrangement, Gregg received an

THE institute hall
and headquarters at the
state fair, 1895



average of \$1,150 each year as compensation for the use of a farm valued at \$25,000, and the state experiment station was enabled to establish its first branch, beginning work there in 1894. Several months later James J. Hill contributed land for the Northwest Experiment Station at Crookston.²⁰

Gregg allowed complete freedom in carrying out experimental programs on his farm, even to the extent of altering the size and shape of his fields. The primary objective in the work was the solution of problems arising in an area of sparse rainfall, strong prevailing winds, and few trees. Tests were made to determine the moisture-retaining properties of soils, various tilling techniques were tried, rotation systems were worked out, and different types of forage crops were planted in order to obtain proof of their drought-resisting qualities. Field workers experimented with the growing of fruits, vegetables, and flowers under prairie conditions. Recognizing that shelter belts were valuable for protecting homes and farm buildings from the blasts of prairie winds, a prominent Minnesota forester, Samuel B. Green, planted various types of trees on Coteau Farm, in order to record their annual growth and study their ability to withstand Lyon County conditions. Not only did the research carried on at Coteau Farm provide the experiment station personnel with a great deal of information concerning agricultural conditions in southwestern Minnesota, but it also enriched the programs presented on institute platforms in that part of the state.²¹

Such advantages notwithstanding, in 1904, having developed its permanent substation system, the university decided to terminate the arrangement with Gregg. From the outset, certain handicaps arising from the use of his farm were obvious. Since the property was privately owned, the university did not feel free to make major changes or expensive improvements on it. Although Gregg placed no restrictions on the farm's use, its arrangement as

a private farm limited its value for experimental purposes. Finally, workers were handicapped by the lack of living quarters for a staff sufficiently large to carry on operations.²² Nevertheless, for ten years Coteau Farm played a major role in the scientific work conducted by Minnesota's agricultural college.

When the university withdrew, Gregg again began to operate Coteau Farm. A short time later he became involved in an unpleasant controversy over the arrangement by which the experiment station had used the property. Although it was clear that Gregg had suffered a financial loss, new members of the Farmers' Institutes board of administration in 1905 branded as illegal the compensation agreement made with the university board of regents in 1894. A ruling of the state attorney general concurred in this view. Bitterly unhappy because his motives and methods were questioned, Gregg fought the decision, but he was not exonerated until 1907, when friends succeeded in shepherding through the state legislature a bill legalizing the agreement made thirteen years earlier.²³

IN THE MEANTIME, Gregg's conduct of the institutes was beginning to be questioned. Some farmers claimed that the lectures failed to cover every aspect of Minnesota agriculture; others complained

²⁰ Willet M. Hays and others, *Progress at the Several Experiment Stations in 1896*, 308 (University of Minnesota, Agricultural Experiment Station, *Bulletins* No. 50); Collins, in *Northwestern Agriculturist*, 22:464; *St. Paul Dispatch*, November 7, 1905; *Pioneer Press*, November 8, 1905.

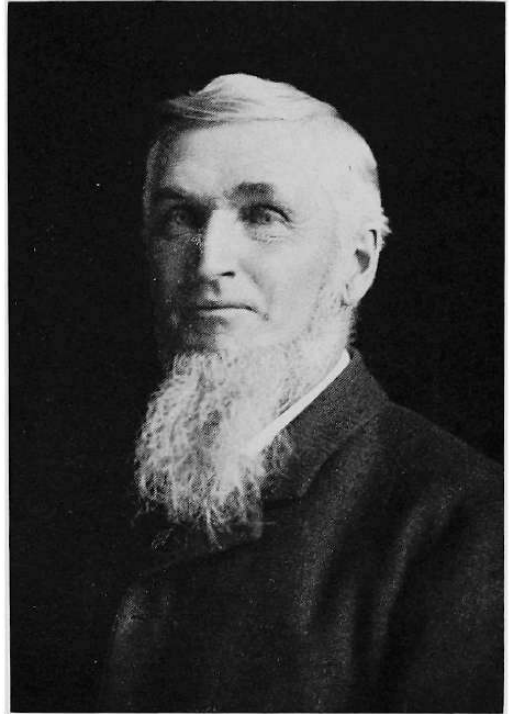
²¹ Minnesota State Grange, *Proceedings*, 1902, p. 40 (Minneapolis, 1902); Agricultural Experiment Station, *Annual Reports, 1899-1900*, p. xxvi, 559-561, 1897-98, p. xi; "Southwest Experiment Station, Coteau," from a file in the office of the dean, Institute of Agriculture.

²² "Southwest Experiment Station, Coteau," office of the dean, Institute of Agriculture.

²³ Clarence H. Welch to Gregg, November 8, 9, 11, 20, 1905; Lottie I. Gregg to Gregg, December [4], 1905, Gregg Papers; *Dispatch*, November 7, 1905; *Pioneer Press*, November 8, 1905; Collins, in *Northwestern Agriculturist*, 22:464; Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1907, p. 616.

that Gregg's speakers did not explore subjects in sufficient detail; some critics indicated that they thought overreliance on out-of-state lecturers weakened the whole program because such men were unfamiliar with particular conditions in Minnesota; and still others bemoaned the lack of "business" education in the institute work. In reality, these critics were beginning to express the opinion that institutes of the old form had outlived their usefulness and that they should be replaced by more effective teaching devices. In fact, the inherent weaknesses of once-a-year meetings in any given community with no means of insuring that in planting season farmers would follow the lessons learned in December were becoming recognized throughout the United States. Everywhere, farmers were beginning to demand more thorough and comprehensive instruction.²⁴

Moreover, the agricultural colleges, no longer the weak and floundering institutions of the 1880s, were ready and willing to satisfy the rising desires of rural residents. Especially did the scientists criticize the employment of "practical" lecturers whose knowledge was usually limited by their own experiences. Such speakers, the college men maintained, accomplished little beyond imparting the most elemental facts to their audiences. This type of instruction was valuable in the 1880s, but by the early 1900s most farmers were ready for more advanced guidance. Agricultural college men were convinced that institutes, if they



OREN C. Gregg about 1905

were to be continued, should be conducted by scientists, and then only as part of a broader extension program.²⁵

Objections to Gregg's conduct of the institutes and criticisms arising from vaguely recognized weaknesses in the work erupted at a meeting of the Farmers' Institutes board of administration on August 8, 1907. When board members demanded changes in the institutes to bring them more closely into accord with the temper of the times, Gregg stated flatly that he would not accept another term as superintendent, thereby ending his connection with the program after twenty-one years of service and twenty years as head of the Minnesota institutes. The board replaced him with Archie D. Wilson, a thirty-one-year-old native of Hastings who had graduated from the college of agriculture in 1905 and remained on the campus as field foreman at the experiment station. His appointment, in fact, represented an attempt to establish closer cooperation between the college and the

²⁴ *The Farmer*, 21:202, 22:278 (April 1, 1903, April 15, 1904); *Northwestern Agriculturist*, 22:724 (August 31, 1907); *Hoard's Dairyman*, 38:738 (August 16, 1907); *Farm, Stock and Home*, 24:345 (June 15, 1908); John Hamilton, *Form of Organization for Movable Schools of Agriculture*, 5 (United States Department of Agriculture, Office of Experiment Stations, *Circulars* No. 79—Washington 1908).

²⁵ Agricultural Experiment Station, *Annual Reports*, 1907-08, p. vi; Madison Kuhn, *Michigan State: The First Hundred Years*, 239-243 (East Lansing, 1955); Wilbur H. Glover, *Farm and College: The College of Agriculture of the University of Wisconsin*, 155-159 (Madison, 1952).

institutes. During the next decade, Wilson gradually shifted the institutes into the newly established university extension service. As a result, although the older educational form continued to operate under its separate board, the old type meetings became a secondary form of extension work until they slowly died out in the 1920s.²⁶

Gregg's abrupt departure from the superintendency and the subsequent absorption of the institutes by more modern types of extension work in no way detracts from their importance and contributions during the period from 1886 to 1907. Nor did these events reduce the affection which many Minnesotans felt for the Lyon County dairyman who conducted the institutes. They assisted Minnesota farmers substantially in their shift from wheat raising to diversified agriculture. They stimulated the rise of the dairy industry and hog feeding, and they encouraged farmers to expand the acreages planted to corn and clover. They promoted the use of silos, which came to be a symbol of Minnesota agriculture, and popularized better tillage methods. In addition, the institutes did much to bring about a change of attitude toward agricultural education. They indicated clearly that the ordinary farmer, with only a common school education or less, was able and willing to absorb the basic principles of scientific agriculture and to apply them on his own farm, thereby justifying the development of more effective methods for taking scientific truths to people in rural areas. By the same token, the institutes caused farmers to look at the college of agriculture with a new respect and to conclude that the offerings of faculty members were worth attention. Thus, the institutes occupied a middle ground between the college and the countryside, and did much to bring the two elements together. Seen in this light, the instruction given at institute meetings, while sometimes crude and elementary, constituted the cornerstone upon which later forms of agricultural education have been built.²⁷

WHEN Gregg severed his connection with the Minnesota institutes in 1907, he felt no desire to retire from active work. Still vigorous at the age of sixty-one, with his usual enthusiasm and determined spirit, he resolved to continue the work elsewhere. Accordingly, he sold the major portion of Coteau Farm, retaining only a small plot as a site for a permanent home, and spent the next seven years lecturing during the institute seasons in North Dakota, Montana, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho. In addition, he served as associate editor of the *Northwestern Agriculturist*, writing a column on dairying.²⁸

By the end of 1914, however, agricultural education even in the West could no longer use his services, so Gregg returned to Minnesota and settled down to a life of semiretirement on the remnant of Coteau Farm. But if his responsibilities to Minnesota farmers had been shifted to other shoulders, he had lost none of his old pride and self-assertiveness. Always bitter about the manner in which the board of the Farmers' Institutes had treated him in 1907, and believing that he had been grievously wronged, in 1914 Gregg launched a drive to induce the University of Minnesota to declare him a "retired and accredited instructor" as a reward for his many years of work with the institutes. It is true that a pension was one objective of this effort, but an expression of public recogni-

²⁶ *The Farmer*, 25:556 (September 1, 1907); *Northwestern Agriculturist*, 22:724; George A. Pond to Paul E. Miller, November 17, 1952, and A. D. Wilson to W. C. Coffey, January 5, 1940, in correspondence file, office of the dean, Institute of Agriculture; "Agricultural Extension Work in Minnesota," Institute of Agriculture; Agricultural Experiment Station, *Annual Report*, 1907-08, p. vi, 1911-12, p. xxxviii-xl.

²⁷ William MacDonald, *Agricultural Education in America*, 122 (New York, 1909); Oscar B. Jesness and others, *Andrew Boss: Agricultural Pioneer and Builder*, 74 (St. Paul, 1950); *Farm, Stock and Home*, 29:98 (February 1, 1913); Gregg to Folwell, April 9, 1914, Folwell Papers.

²⁸ Gregg to Folwell, January 5, 28, 1915, Folwell Papers; Rose, *Lyon County*, 256-258; *Kirkwood*, in *Northwestern Miller*, 88:650.

tion of his contributions to Minnesota agriculture doubtless was equally important to Gregg. Although university officials could see little justification for Gregg's claim, his many friends in the state legislature attempted in 1917 to create for him a position as "superintendent emeritus of the agricultural extension division." In this they failed, though they did succeed in establishing for Gregg what amounted to a pension of a thousand dollars a year. Four years later, the grant was increased to twelve hundred dollars, and it continued at that level until his death.²⁹

The acquisition of a pension did not mean that Gregg was ready to retire from all worth-while work. Long a student of dairy cattle, by 1918 he thought he had developed a system for judging stock by "natural law," which he maintained was revolutionary. Scientists paid little attention to his ideas, however, and Gregg spent five years attempting without success to secure endorsement for his technique from the University of Minnesota. Proud and dogmatic to the last, he engaged in an argument with Henry F. Nachtrieb, the distinguished biologist, over the relative merits of "practical" men like himself and scientists who refused to accept the principles he developed after years of experience.³⁰

Failing health caused Gregg to spend his last years in the farm home of Clarence H. Welch near Barnum. Since he and his wife were childless, they had at various times befriended young people. Welch was one

of those who had enjoyed the hospitality of Coteau Farm and, in addition, during the last twelve years of Gregg's superintendency of the institutes, the younger man had served as his secretary and general assistant. In 1922, Gregg moved to the Welch farm, where, on February 2, 1926, he died. His wife had died four years earlier.³¹

The passing of the aged agricultural leader inspired a multitude of laudatory expressions about his contributions to Minnesota agriculture. One writer observed that "Gregg was a great and vital force in the development of Minnesota agriculture." *The Farmer*, which in the early 1900s had been critical of his conduct of the institutes, said that "Gregg rendered a service to Minnesota agriculture which was of incalculable value."³² His best monument, however, is to be found not in such statements of praise, but in the high quality of twentieth-century agricultural education in Minnesota.

Memorials

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY has a Memorial Fund to which contributions can be made upon the loss of a relative or friend. Such gifts serve as appropriate expressions of sympathy and condolence, and help to support work that is a fitting memorial to any Minnesotan.

When a contribution is received, a suitable card is mailed to the bereaved family, and the name of the person whose memory is honored is recorded, with that of the contributor, in a Memorial Book.

Use the blank that follows in contributing to the Memorial Fund:

ENCLOSED is my contribution of \$_____ to the Minnesota Historical Society's Memorial Fund.

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Please send card to_____

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²⁹ Gregg to Folwell, April 9, 1914, December 30, 1914, January 2, 27, 28, 1915, Folwell Papers; Minnesota, *House Journal*, 1917, p. 662, 1,152; Minnesota, *Senate Journal*, 1917, p. 449, 741; Minnesota, *Session Laws*, 1917, p. 689, 1921, p. 946.

³⁰ Gregg to Nachtrieb, March 20, April 10, 1918, April 20, 1922, January 5, 19, 1923; Nachtrieb to Gregg, April 9, 1918, April 13, 1922, January 3, 1923, Nachtrieb Papers, in University of Minnesota Archives; Gregg to Folwell, May 15, December 21, 1922, Folwell Papers.

³¹ *Farmstead, Stock and Home*, 42:180 (March 1, 1926); *Minneapolis Journal*, February 3, 1926; *Barnum Herald*, February 5, 1926.

³² *Farmstead, Stock and Home*, 42:180 (March 1, 1926); *The Farmer*, 44:298 (February 20, 1926).



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