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Stephen Gross: My name is Stephen Gross and it's S-t-e-p-h-e-n, G-r-o-s-s. I'm an associate professor of history at the University and I'm the director of the West Central Minnesota Historical Research Center and University Archives.

Chris Butler: In your opinion, what was the social impetus or imperative from switching from the Indian boarding schools to this new system of ags schools?

Stephen Gross: In terms of Morris, there's a combination of things. On the one hand, on sort of a larger macro level, it's the progressive era and there is an increased emphasis on efficiency and the use of science in dealing with social problems and rural life. Agriculture is seen as an area that really needs to be worked on, that really needs to be improved. Earlier on in that decade, Teddy Roosevelt had created this commission on country life that issued this report that really called for reform in agriculture. So that's part of the story at least on sort of a larger national level. On a local level, it's boosterism, that there are interested people within the Morris community, the businessmen who know that there's this school here that has been abandoned and that they're really very, very, very interested in pushing for the use of this land. At the same time I think they're probably cognizant of the need for some reform on local agriculture, to make it more scientific, more efficient. Efficiency is really a buzzword for that time. So, I think you have a kind of symmetry, these two things coming together.

Chris Butler: I want to expand on that. To use a phrase that you used previously is that "West Central School of Ag represented a second great transformation from rural capitalism to increased rule of government, education and technocrats." Explain more what you meant by that.

Stephen Gross: Historians of rural America talk about these two great transformations and the first one, and it's really hard to date these things exactly because it happens at different times in different areas. The first great transformation is where people go from being subsistence or subsistence plus farmers. That is, they're growing enough food to feed themselves and perhaps to engage in some trade with other farmers or with the local merchant but they're not full-fledged capitalists. They're not really doing this because they want to make a lot of money. Beginning the turnoff the last century, around 1800 you started to see farmers becoming more and more interested in commercial kind of farming. The second great transformation, this is a term that's coined by a historian named Hale Barron. It has to do with government playing a more important role, technocrats of various sorts, and these could be agronomists, egg economists, rural sociologists, this sort of thing, the rise of the modern cooperative movement. So, agriculture is becoming increasingly modern, less distinguishable from the rest of America. It's a time in which agriculture is also becoming much more specialized. Most people, for instance out here 100 years ago or so, were really engaged in mixed farming. They were doing wheat of course but they were also engaged in dairy. They were raising beef cattle. They had pigs. They had chickens. They had a little garden for the family. It gave them an increased flexibility in order to adjust to whatever would happen to market conditions. And what's on the horizon is a movement towards greater specialization so when you look at West Central Minnesota today, everybody's growing one, two or three crops. Nobody is doing dairy anymore. Again, that's on the horizon.

Chris Butler: That's a result of Teddy Roosevelt and Progressivism. There's also a character involved named Henry Wallace. Who is he?

Stephen Gross: Henry Wallace was an activist of sorts, an intellectual of sorts, a journalist who was really at the forefront of this transformation. He and a fellow with a wonderful name of Liberty Hyde Bailey, so the founder of real sociology. Both of these guys were on the Country Life Commission. Together they advocated for a more thoroughgoing reform of rural America. It's not just agriculture. It's rural America, so they're interested in the economics of farming but they're also worried about the sociology of rural life and the report from the Country Life Commission advocates in both directions. Farmers have to become more much scientific. They have to become smarter. They have to start listening to agronomists and horticulturalists and pay attention to all these new advances. But they also need to pay attention to the quality of life and one of the interesting things about the Progressive Movement in general and how it addressed rural life is that there are these two aspects of it. There's sort of this community aspect, this sociological aspect but then there's also this harder, scientific part of it also.

Chris Butler: You're talking about the various areas that Progressivism was reaching in terms of infusing science into modern agriculture and looking at social life. There was also a perception of who women enjoyed rural life prior to- what it should be like. Explain that to me.

Stephen Gross: A huge focus of the Country Life Commission was on the status of women in rural America. The view of the commission was that women were oppressed, that they were worked half to death. They were having way too many children and that they were socially isolated. And so one of the primary things that the Commission advocated was reform in the lives of women. And of course, they're right. The Commission was totally right. Women's lives, not just in rural America but in America in general at this point in time was really pretty terrible. But rural women also had the secret sources, these invisible sources of power. The Commission was not really conscious of that, was not sensitive to that. When you read it today, it sounds to be more than a bit patronizing but in any case, one of the things that the Commission then is advocating is that well, it's not just men that need to learn about scientific farming but farm wives need to learn about scientific housekeeping. So from the very inception of the West Central School of Agriculture, it was designed to serve both men and women but in both cases, boys were supposed to return to the farm and tell their dads about how to do things in a scientific, efficient kind of way and daughters were supposed to return to the farm and tell their moms how to do the same sorts of things. It's all really very much reliant on sort of a middle class, urban bourgeoisie kind of model, sort of the notion that you have this sort of separate spheres at work in rural America. Men do field work and they work with animals. They do outdoor stuff. They're responsible for the productive end and women are responsible for the reproductive end. They have kids. They take care of the house. They do the cooking and the cleaning, etc. But the reality is that women were doing a lot more than just taking care of kids, taking care of the house, cooking and cleaning that they are in effect a kind of reserve labor force on the farm. They do whatever needs to be done. If they have to work with livestock, they do if they have to. If they have to participate in the harvest, they do. But the reformers don't really see this. Instead, they're advocating a kind of reform that really has much more to do with applying an urban model and insisting that women occupy themselves with these sorts of household duties. Sorry--

Chris Butler: What was Women's Week?

Stephen Gross: I don't remember exactly when it began and I don't remember exactly the year in which they stopped it. But it went through the transitional period after the campus became University of Minnesota Morris, so originally--

Chris Butler: Can you go back and say "Women's Week"?

Stephen Gross: Women's Week began in the early days of the West Central School of Agriculture. It's important to keep in mind that the West Central School is not simply a school. It's also the extension service. So they're doing all these extension sorts of things so they're doing a lot of summer programs. Women's Week was a summer program, just like they would do different kinds of institutes for dairy farmers, sheep raisers, these kinds of things. So Women's Week begins around 1920, again, I don't know the exact date. Then Women's Week continues well past the time period when West Central School of Agriculture dies and thus becomes University of Minnesota Morris. But it's operated by West Rock or what- the prior iteration of West Rock. So, it's an opportunity for farm women to leave the farm and come to Morris for- it's not really a week. It's like two or three days. And take short courses of one sort of another. Early on, this is my reading of it, they're doing things that are much more practical so canning, doing a short course on canning, this is a new technology in the teens and the 1920s. Later on it becomes more of an opportunity to bond, to flee sort of the drudgery of farm work, especially in the summer, to catch up with other women. We have lists in the archives of attendees over the years and it's really amazing the number of women we repeat year after year after year. It's kind of a Chautauqua kind of thing. You know, Chautauqua is this old, 19th Century phenomenon in which you'd have sort of this traveling tent show and you'd have lecturers and other kinds of entertainment. It looks an awful lot like that in which by the end, they're doing little programs on foods around the world, that sort of thing, hints on home decorating and so it becomes less practical and more- the adjective escapes me, frilly? Maybe not as serious. But still, I think that in a way- I don't want to stretch this metaphor too much but in a way Women's Week is sort of early consciousness raising. But again, this sort of premise on the notion that rural women are really pretty isolated.

Chris Butler: I want to shift in talking in broad strokes about the student body of West Central School of Agriculture. How would you describe it?

Stephen Gross: The student body at West Central changes over time. Early on it's very, very, very northern European, meaning Scandinavian and to a certain extent German. The administrators at West Central would accumulate all this information, which has been preserved, about the demographical profile of the student body so we know a lot. They were not necessarily as systematic and consistent in collecting this data as we would have liked but they would ask students their religious affiliation so it's very Lutheran and very, very, very Protestant, very few Catholics, very few Irish, Italians- the American Indian waiver is in effect from the very beginning. This is not just a product of West Central becoming the University of Minnesota Morris. But there's only, I think, one American Indian student. There may have been a couple that attended West Central School. There's interestingly a handful of African American students that attended; teens or '20s, 1930s, again the exact date escapes me, really very local. It's Stephens County. It's Pope. It's Otter Tail. <inaudible> area of research is Stearns County which is one county over. It's the most Catholic county in the country in 1900 and 1910 and you have a hard time finding any Stearns County kids who ever attended until the 1950s. But there are a number of regional schools like the West Central School so there's one in Waseca. There's one in Crookston. They're all drawing from a regional base. It changes by the 1950s. It's pretty apparent. Diversity is a relative thing, right? But it's becoming more diverse. The other thing, let me just backtrack really quickly, early on teens and '20s, the students attending West Central School are children of immigrants. So there's another part of this larger Progressive effort to reform rural America. It's not just about encouraging community. It's not just about teaching scientific agriculture but it's also about Americanizing kids. It's pretty apparent that everybody has English but my guess is that early on, everybody is bilingual or at least a good percentage are bilingual.

Chris Butler: I'm glad you picked up on that. I wanted to address that. We have a lot of information about the function area. These schools were effective because they were six months of the year and children could still go home and be of help. But there was also an idea of civilizing farm kids. What did they do specifically in terms of "civilizing"?

Stephen Gross: In retrospect, I've used that term, the term 'civilizing' before to refer to this larger mission. I think I'd want to rethink the use of that term. I don't think it's totally accurate. I think you can draw that line and make that comparison between what's going on on campus with these children of immigrants and American Indian kids during the boarding school days. But it's still different. It's still different. I think acculturating is probably better than civilizing. Just a really quick example of this, this is from a newspaper story in one of the Morris papers, 1909/1910 so the transitional period from the government American Indian Industrial School to the West Central School of Agriculture. There's a dormitory on campus that I suspect, I'm not totally sure but I suspect that it's a dormitory that was actually moved from the vocational school in Clontarf and was relocated here. We have pictures of it. I'm sure you guys have seen it. It's that old white frame building with the mansard drift, right? So that's the dormitory. It also doubles as a dining hall. One of the first things they do when they're preparing for West Central kids is they take the open dormitory in the upper stories and turn those into individual rooms. So American Indian kids are going to sleep in an open dormitory but children of immigrants going to West Central School of Agriculture are going to have their own rooms. I find that really interesting and it says a lot.

Chris Butler: What does it say?

Stephen Gross: These kids are different. They're not Indian kids. The task of Americanizing is different. You don't have to teach. You don't have to teach these kids about private property. You don't have to teach these kids about capitalism. That's so much of the agenda on the part of educators in dealing with American Indian kids has to do with that. It's attacking their culture and aiming to eradicate that culture and in its place, instill these ideas, this faith in capitalism, this belief in private property. With immigrant kids, you don't do that. That's already done. Early on, up until like 1918, up until the War, up until World War I there is this sort of notion that you can be a hyphenated American. You can be German-American or Norwegian-American or a Swedish-American so at least there is that kind of residual faith in a kind of dual identity. It's not the case with American Indian kids. It's really different. It's interesting the superintendents, if you look at the yearbooks, the yearbooks are really lovely and we have the entire series of them. They're always prefaced with comments by the Superintendent. First by Superintendent Higbie, then by Miller and they talk about what we're really about here is turning you guys into citizens, not just citizens of the United States but citizens of the world, and that becomes a primary emphasis after World War I. There is this sense that they're on the cusp of something really, really, really great, that the whole world is going to change. It's a wonderful kind of idealism, liberalism if you would, which dissipates really quickly in the 1920s but you're going to be a citizen and you're to be a responsible citizen. So this means you need to learn American government. You need to learn American history. You need to be able to conduct yourself as a responsible member of this society. Now, to reach for a little bit more context and to make these guys- I don't think it's the Superintendents or the people here on the ground, the teachers who are necessarily this cynical but there's a kind of cynicism to this larger movement to reform rural America in that this occurs on the heels of the Populous Movement. Farmers disrupt the system. They don't fit neatly into the system in the 1880s and 1890s and so the election of 1896 in which the People's Party, the Populous Party nominates William Jennings Bryant and he's also nominated by the Democrats. That's really a pivotal election in American history and that kind of populism doesn't go away. To acculturate, to civilize if you would, to assimilate these people really has a lot to do with blunting their political power, I think. It's not necessarily very effective because Minnesota then gives birth to the Farmer Labor Party based upon these same Populist ideals.

Chris Butler: Acculturation or Americanization, whichever you prefer to call it, they used meal time.

Stephen Gross: Yes. This is just my sense but I'm truck by the fact that the most formal building on campus was the cafeteria. It's Belmar Hall and Belmar Hall now has three stories but early on it didn't. It had two stories. What are now the two top stories was a gymnasium. It was a single story. You can see that written on the windows that they have taken these long windows that extended two floors up and they've broken that up into two sets of windows. The dining hall was on the ground floor. It was expected that people would dress fairly formally for dinner. The way that I read the symbolism here that that message is that eating is important. Dining is important. It's a dining hall, right? A cultured people don't rush through meals like you do on the farm. You're going to dress for dinner. You're going to approach this in a formal kind of way. Again, it's very much sort of an urban, middle class kind of thing and if you think back that 100 years ago all men for instance, wore suits, even if you were a skilled craftsman you would have worn a tie. You look at pictures of small town grocery stores. Everybody is wearing a tie. It's a more formal kind of time. But not for farmers.

Chris Butler: You invoked Populism a moment ago. I want to shift to Clarence Johnston and his influence on the early years. What was he trying to achieve with his architectural vision?

Stephen Gross: I don't think it's simply Johnston. I think it's also Marlon Nichols [ph?]. And this is the landscape architecture firm which designs a plan within the first couple of years of what the campus is going to look like and that sort of collaborative effort between Clarence Johnston who is, as you know, the in house architect for the University of Minnesota. So I think it's a collaborative thing between the landscape architects and Johnston. I would be interested in whether or not there's any other input either from people in the Twin Cities, from other administrators because it's part of the School of Agriculture or whether or not there's any input from local folks. Having said all of that, there's really a huge emphasis here on creating a campus that is Populist and Democratic that is designed to look like a small village. Again, part of what the Country Life Commission guys are saying is that rural life is too isolating and that people are disconnected. They're alienated. They're not part of a community. Superintendent Higbie gives a speech early on that's reported in the Morris Paper in which he comments on social conditions in rural Stephens County and he says the problem with Stephens County is that there's too much tendency, too many people renting farms. As a result, these people are not responsible community members. They don't feel connected. So the idea with the campus landscape is to connect students, to make them feel like they're part of a community, that they're part of a village. So the mall, early on, it's not the mall, it's the square as if you'd have a town square. The architectural forms work in much the same way. These are craftsmen style buildings. They are very horizontal. They're built with brick. The interiors are designed in such a way- the dormitories have fireplaces. Fairly formal kinds of lounge areas. They're cottages. Interestingly, you have a Superintendent's house on campus where <inaudible> is today and at a cottage for either junior or senior girls. So it is a residential campus from the very beginning.

Chris Butler: I believe they all had front porches.

Stephen Gross: Right. Exactly.

Chris Butler: What would be the significance of that?

Stephen Gross: Well, I don't think the front porches on the dormitories has a lot of practical significance because people are beginning school in October and ending in March and it's too damn cold to go outside. So I think it's expressive of this notion that this is supposed to be like a small town. I've talked about this when I teach and I remind students, if we were building this campus today, it would not look anything like this. This is really a product of that larger mentality that we associate with the Country Life Commission. Interestingly, the historic campus takes place really quickly. By 1930, give or take, and the construction of the old gymnasium, the historic campus is in place. There's all this incredible amount of pressure to provide more dormitory space because they never know going into a school year exactly what the enrollment is going to be. So they never have enough space. They never have enough space, with the exception of the really bad years during the Great Depression. So there's this real pressure to quickly build this campus and very successfully I think. I think it's lovely.

Chris Butler: UMM or West Central fulfills its mission to its students in the surrounding area by doing what?

Stephen Gross: That is a good question and it's a tough question. It's a tough question because the surrounding area has changed. I am not totally convinced in all honesty we still do that. I think we were better at it. I think we were better at it 100 years ago, 75 years ago, even early on in the campus's incarnation as a branch campus, as a university campus. We were better at it. We were better at it because we took extension and continuing education much more seriously. Now some of that was lopped off when West Rock moved across the highway. That involved a battle, a fight on campus that I really can't speak to but other people here on campus could. West Central, I think in many ways was a better fit for the larger community when it came into

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existence, if that makes sense? It was largely an agricultural community. I think the mission of that institution, of West Central, was defined much more broadly than we do today. I think we've become more narrow. #### End of GrossStephen.mp3 ####	