

South Dakota School for the Deaf Farm

Overview

The South Dakota School for the Deaf (SDSD) Farm was an essential part of the school's operations from the late 1880s until its closure in 1949. Established during the administration of Superintendent James Simpson, the farm served as a source of food, income, and vocational training for students. At its peak, the farm encompassed more than 100 acres and operated as a fully self-sustaining agricultural system within the school campus.

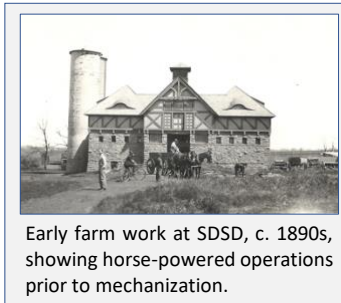
Establishment and Early Development (1887–1890s)

The SDSD farm was formally established in 1887–1888 with the purchase of approximately 20 acres of farmland. At the same time, a substantial barn was constructed, along with supporting agricultural infrastructure.

Early improvements included:

- A windmill and elevated water tank for water supply and fire protection
- Development of an orchard and planting of hundreds of trees
- Construction of livestock facilities, including hog, poultry, and dairy operations

In 1892, the school constructed a silo—believed to be the first at any deaf school in the United States, and likely among the earliest concrete silos in South Dakota—marking a significant advancement in agricultural practices.



Early farm work at SDSD, c. 1890s, showing horse-powered operations prior to mechanization.



Location: Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Coordinates: 43°32'51.5"N
96°42'04.3"W

Established: 1887–1888

Peak Size: 145 acres

Major Expansion: 1917
(Howard Simpson)

Primary Uses: Food, student labor,
revenue

First Silo: 1892
(early concrete silo in
region)

Sold: 1949

Final Land Sale: \$78,000

Expansion and Operations

A major expansion of the SDSD farm occurred during the administration of Superintendent Howard Simpson. In 1917, an additional 109 acres of land were acquired following legislative approval, significantly increasing the size and capacity of the farm. Simpson played a key role in expanding and modernizing the farm into a more advanced agricultural operation. Improvements during this period included the construction of a large modern barn, additional livestock facilities, and a round concrete silo. The expansion reflected Simpson's interest in strengthening agricultural education, particularly as many students came from farming backgrounds. The farm eventually reaching approximately 125 acres under cultivation and educational.



Expanded SDSD farm acreage and facilities following the 1917 land acquisition under Superintendent Howard Simpson.



Main SDSD farm barn, central to livestock care and daily operations.

Agricultural Production

The farm produced crops and livestock, including:

- Corn (used primarily for silage)
- Alfalfa and oats for feed
- Dairy cattle, hogs, sheep, and poultry
- Fruits and vegetables from a seven-acre orchard

These products supplied much of the school's food, supporting both students and staff.

Facilities and Infrastructure

The SDSD farm developed into a complete agricultural operation with:

- Barns and dairy facilities
- Silos and root cellars
- Creamery and machine sheds
- Poultry and livestock buildings

Continuous improvements were made throughout the early 20th century, including new barns, additional silos, and upgraded drainage and utility systems.

Educational Role

In its early years, the farm played a significant role in student life and education. Older pupils regularly participated in farm work, including:

- Milking cows
- Harvesting crops
- Filling silos and maintaining equipment
- Assisting with general farm labor

Some students remained on campus during the summer months to continue farm work, and limited compensation was occasionally provided.

At the time, agricultural labor was considered an important component of practical education and character development.



SDSD pupils posed with dairy cows during milking, reflecting hands-on agricultural training.

Economic Importance

The SDSD farm contributed financially to the school's operation. Income from farm production supplemented state appropriations and endowment funds. During particularly successful years, the farm generated over \$4,000 in net profit, a substantial sum for the period.

Peak and Extent

By the early 20th century, the farm had reached its greatest extent, covering approximately 145 acres, with about 125 acres actively farmed. The land extended across a large portion of what is now eastern Sioux Falls, forming a significant agricultural presence adjacent to the school campus.



Dairy herd at SDSD, contributing to the school's food supply and farm income.

Decline and Closure (1940s)

By the 1940s, several factors contributed to the decline of the SDSD farm:

- Economic challenges: Reduced productivity due to soil conditions and rising maintenance costs
- Deteriorating infrastructure: Farm buildings required significant repairs
- Urban development: Expansion of city streets and highways made farm operations more difficult
- Educational changes: Agricultural labor was increasingly viewed as less appropriate for student training

Superintendent Arthur Myklebust concluded that the farm was no longer sustainable or aligned with the school's educational mission.

Sale of the Farm (1948–1949)



Map showing subdivision of the SDSD farm into approximately 170 individual lots for public auction in October 1949. The land was organized into blocks and tracts to support residential and urban development.

In 1949, the South Dakota Legislature authorized the sale of the SDSD farm as part of a broader shift in educational priorities and financial management. State officials determined that the farm was no longer economically sustainable, noting that it was being operated primarily by hired labor and was not producing sufficient returns.

In March 1949, livestock and machinery were sold at public auction, generating approximately \$14,400. A second auction in April 1949 disposed of farm buildings, including barns, sheds, and a concrete silo, bringing in an additional \$5,297.

The final phase involved the sale of the farmland itself. Approximately 113 to 115 acres were subdivided into blocks and roughly 170 individual lots. These parcels were offered at public auction over several days in October 1949 under the supervision of state officials.



The main SDSD farm barn being relocated in 1949 to the east side of Sioux Falls, near Sycamore Avenue and 6th Street. The structure remained in use until it was removed in the 1990s for construction of Washington High School.



Final day of original barn was photographed by Renee Knochenmus before being dismantled.

The land sale generated strong interest, with bids frequently exceeding appraised values. Initial sales brought in approximately \$17,000 on the first day, with additional sales raising further funds. In total, the land sale produced approximately \$78,000.

Portions of the land were acquired by private buyers and developers, while some tracts were purchased by the City of Sioux Falls for public use, including playground and park development.

By the end of 1949, the SDSA farm had been fully dismantled, and its land repurposed for urban development and recreational use.

Aftermath and Controversy

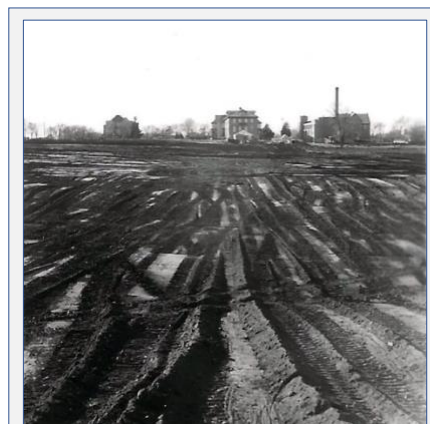
In the years following the 1949 sale of the SDSA farm, questions were raised regarding certain land transactions connected to the former school property. By 1959, attention focused on parcels of land that had been purchased during the original sale and later resold for commercial development.

One such example involved property near 10th Street and Logan Avenue, which had been acquired as part of the farm land sale and later became the site of commercial development, including a motel. Some of the individuals associated with these transactions were public officials or prominent community figures, drawing increased public scrutiny.

Reports at the time noted that portions of the land had appreciated in value following the expansion of highways and urban development in Sioux Falls. This led to concerns among some observers that the land may have been sold at prices below its long-term value, allowing private parties to benefit from subsequent resale or development.

State officials and those involved in the transactions defended the process, emphasizing that the original sale had been publicly advertised, competitively bid, and conducted in accordance with state law. They also stated that infrastructure developments, such as highway expansion, had not been altered to benefit specific individuals.

No formal findings of wrongdoing were established, the situation generated public discussion regarding the management and long-term impact of the SDSA farm land sale.



Former farm land being cleared and graded for athletic fields following the farm's closure.

Legacy

Following the closure of the farm in 1949, portions of the former farmland were repurposed for campus use. Part of the land was developed into athletic facilities, including a football field and track, reflecting a shift in priorities from agricultural work to student recreation and physical education.

In later years, the site continued to evolve as the surrounding area developed. Today, part of the former SDSA farm land is occupied by the Children's Home Shelter for Family Safety (formerly Children's Inn). The facility provides 24/7 emergency shelter and support services for women, children, and families experiencing domestic violence, abuse, stalking, or neglect.

The transformation of the land—from working farm, to school athletic grounds, to a modern community support center—reflects the broader transformation of both the school and the city of Sioux Falls over time.



Approximate area of the former SDSA farm overlaid on the modern Sioux Falls aerial map.



Street view from Google Earth Pro showing Children's Inn on the former SDSA track and field, representing a meaningful transition of the land to serve families and community needs.

[See Full Historical Record](#)