The history of the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture reaches back to the early 1900s when it was created as an agriculture high school. The Nebraska Legislature in 1911 provided for another secondary school of agriculture (the first being in Lincoln), to be located in southwestern Nebraska. It was to do for the western farm boy and girl what the secondary school of agriculture in Lincoln had been doing for the boys and girls of the state in general. An appropriation of $100,000 was made by the Legislature, and the Board of Public Lands and Buildings was authorized to pick out the site and arrange for the building.

The location of the present Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture campus originated as an idea in 1910 by then-Governor Shallenberger. His vision resulted in the introduction of the 1911 statute to establish a state residential high school in the southwest quadrant of Nebraska. Much of the political posturing from towns in that area and opposition from eastern Nebraska towns set the stage for a heated debate. On May 30, 1911, Curtis Nebraska, in Frontier County was selected as the site of the Nebraska School of Agriculture (NSA) and construction began in 1912 on Agriculture Hall.

Agriculture Hall was dedicated on August 15, 1913, and welcomed its first students in September. Courses offered in 1913 were described as follows: A strong and practical course in agriculture and manual training and regular high school subjects offered for the young men who wish to go back to the land. A course will be offered for young women in sewing, cooking and the art of housekeeping, along with the regular high school subjects. Eventually, dormitories were built to house the students.

The new school’s enrollment in 1913-14 was 121, including 56 men and 65 women. The next year the enrollment was 199, and for the succeeding years, 193, 161, 141, 143, 175, 172, 197, and for 1922-23, 230. A remarkable feature of this school has been the large number of women in attendance. In 1922-23, for instance, there were 120 women and 110 men. Since the school was a state institution, no tuition was charged. Room and board cost $4 a week and the students stayed in the best homes in Curtis.

Besides a regular eight months' course, the school offers a special two months' term after the holidays each year for the man or boy who must stay on the farm most of the year, and a summer session affording eight weeks' training and instruction for rural teachers. Primarily the school aims to fit young people for a successful life in the open country. It offers all the courses of the ordinary high school and in addition the industrial and agricultural subjects, such as wood work, soils, stock judging, forge work, farm machinery, and the like, for the boys, and sewing, cooking, art and decoration, home nursing, and similar subjects for girls. In addition, there is special work for those who desire to prepare to teach, as well as for those who desire to enter the University of Nebraska on completion of the course.

The school maintained a demonstration farm of 475 acres for working out the practical farming problems of that section of the state. The buildings included, besides the main building, a superintendent's residence, a gymnasium, a building for agricultural engineering, residences for the engineer and foreman, as well as the necessary barns and sheds.
Cyrus V. Williams was the first superintendent of the Curtis School. He was succeeded about 1918 by Allan P. Davidson. Charles K. Morse became the superintendent in 1919. NSA served as a state residential high school for towns in western Nebraska without a high school until 1968 when it closed its doors after graduating over 3,000 young men and women. In the early 1960s, a Nebraska Unicameral legislature interim study revealed there was a serious shortage of adequately trained, technically educated, work force to meet the needs of farmers, ranchers and agribusiness related industries in Nebraska. Accordingly, in 1965, legislation was passed establishing the University of Nebraska School of Technical Agriculture (UNSTA), mandating a change in mission from NSA as a state high school to a post-secondary educational program of technical agriculture. UNSTA was now part of the University of Nebraska and administered as a two year technical school through the UNL College of Agriculture (now the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, known as IANR) and the residential instruction program (now the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, known as CASNR). The high school and school functioned together for three years as the last class of high school students graduated in 1968.

The first two school programs of UNSTA were Ag Machinery Mechanics and Ag Drafting, and Surveying and Soil Science. Ag Business and Commercial Horticulture programs were begun in 1966. The Production Ag program was added in 1967 and Veterinary Technology in 1968.

UNSTA’s future was in doubt beginning in FY 1986, when budget woes caused the University of Nebraska Board of Regents to consider closing the school to balance the University budget. In April of 1987, in response to midyear budget cuts in late 1986, the Board of Regents voted to phase out and discontinue the program offerings of UNSTA no later than July 1, 1988. Termination notices were extended to all faculty and staff. No new students were accepted in the fall of 1987.

The Board of Regents action caused a groundswell of support to overturn the decision. Supporters were able to get legislation introduced during the 1987 legislative session in progress to keep the school open. LB 656 was passed which changed the name of the school to the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture (NCTA) and placed the college under the control and management of the University of Nebraska until July 1, 1989. A companion appropriation bill, LB 656A was also passed with a two-year appropriation for the continued operation of NCTA through June 30, 1989.

However, Nebraska Governor Kay Orr vetoed a portion of the appropriation for FY 1988 and all of FY 1989, leaving only sufficient funding to phase out the program by June 30, 1988. The Legislature sustained the veto, and it appeared UNSTA would close.

Now, needing to decide what to do with the facilities, Governor Kay Orr appointed a special task force to review the best use for the former UNSTA campus. The task force worked during the summer and fall of 1987 looking at alternate uses for the physical plant. The task force concluded the best use was as a two year technical education program and recommended the continuation of the school with an expanded and updated role and mission.

The Governor then appointed an Evaluation Team to aid in defining what the new role and mission would be and how it would be put into operation. This committee reported to the Board
of Regents in December of 1987 with a plan for re-establishment of the educational institution at Curtis and proposed new legislation.

During the 1988 Legislative session, LB 1042 was introduced on behalf of the Governor and passed which established a new mission for NCTA under the control and management of the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska. The bill also provided for a separate line-item appropriation for NCTA. The Board of Regents delegated administration and management of NCTA to the Vice President/Vice Chancellor for Agriculture and Natural Resources and specified operational policies and procedures through enactment of Executive Memorandum 12 as revised.

Initially the Dean of the College of Agriculture (subsequently named the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources-- CASNR) also served as Dean of NCTA. Then in 1995, a residential Dean position was established, located on the campus of the college at Curtis. The Dean was assigned to report to the Vice President for Agriculture and Natural Resources.

In 1991, LB 663, the implementing legislation for the Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education, directed the Commission to review NCTA by July 1, 1995 and make recommendations regarding whether management should remain under the University of Nebraska or be transferred to Mid-Plains Community College. The Commission recommended to the legislature that administration and management should remain with the University. During the 2003 Legislative Session LB 7 was passed which struck obsolete language regarding the option of transferring NCTA to Mid-Plans and the Coordinating Commission review.

NCTA was initially accredited in 1975 as a branch campus of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In 1978 and 1988, this accreditation was continued. In 1998, at the time that the University of Nebraska-Lincoln was being reviewed, NCTA was not included due to its separate status within the University system. NCTA submitted General Institutional Requirements for review and, in November 1999, approval was given to begin the self-study and evaluation process. In October 2001, the site team visited NCTA and, in January 2002, NCTA received “Initial Candidacy” status. In February of 2004, NCTA received stand-alone accreditation status for a period of five years by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association.

Currently, four majors are available at NCTA, after losing the Agriculture Mechanics Technology major to budget cuts. These majors are Agribusiness Management Systems, Agriculture Production Systems, Horticulture Systems, and Veterinary Technology Systems.

NCTA, with a student enrollment of approximately 300 students, occupies a 77-acre campus which adjoins the town of Curtis, Nebraska, on the northeast. The College owns a 562-acre farm which serves as a field laboratory. The farm includes grain storage facilities, cattle growing and finishing facilities, and a completely diversified dry land and irrigated farming operation.

REFERENCES

These Fifty Years, a history of the college of agriculture of the University of Nebraska, by Robert Platt Crawford, associate professor of journalism and agricultural editor, University of Nebraska Press 1926.

Alan Moeller, Assistant Vice Chancellor of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.