

The Soil and Water Conservation District Marks its 75th Anniversary

The Dubois County Soil Conservation District was born on September 19, 1945.

The first records of the Soil Conservation District were typed by unknown hands on a manual typewriter, the copies on yellow or pink paper so thin you can see through it. It closely resembles the tissue paper that in the year 2021 we put into gift bags, to protect and conceal our gifts. The file also includes a telegram!

While the Soil Conservation District was officially born in fall of 1945, and the first year of official duties completed in 1946, the yellow and pink tissue paper documents reveal that a great deal of labor to protect local soil began many years before. A letter dated December 7, 1942 was sent by Mr. R.H. McMurtrie of Huntingburg to Ward L. Studor, District Conservationist, located at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana. Mr. McMurtrie was requesting conservation assistance on his farm. Where today we would take our cell phone out of our pocket and make this request from our District Conservationist located in Jasper, in 1942, a letter was likely the only option. He notes that he was completing a five-year planning program and was requesting additional assistance, while acknowledging that World War II may not allow Ward L. Studor to travel down to Dubois County to visit the farm in person. Mr. McMurtrie, after completing the work begun in 1937, noted, "...we want to again thank you and take a lot of satisfaction in having built up a couple of the most run-down farms in Dubois County."

The next letter isn't dated until December 11, 1943; it is noted busy schedules derailed efforts to begin the conservation district. Then, as now, there was always more work than hours in the day. R.O. Cole, Purdue Extension Soil Conservationist in Lafayette writes to Ward Studor, now located in the Washington Indiana Courthouse, and asks him to contact C.A. Nicholson, Dubois County Agricultural Agent with the Purdue University Agricultural Extension Department. Their plan is to reach out to local church leaders and ask them to discuss soil conservation with their congregations.

Notable in the file is another letter written to Ward Studor in February 1944. The letter is written on USDA Agricultural Adjustment Administration letterhead, and is from Bruno Ragle, Chairman of the Dubois County Agricultural Conservation Association, requesting conservation assistance for a landowner. Over the next months many letters were mailed between Ward Studor, Bruno Ragle, and C.A. Nicholson. The three men were planning two field events for local farmers to see and learn about conservation practices already built on farms in the county. The timing of the field events was an issue: although they were pleased at the turnout, weather and planting prohibited many farmers from attending. Never fear, Bruno Ragle assures Ward Studor, the farmers who attended the field day will pass the news around to their neighbors.

Soil conservation promotion efforts continued, and the Huntingburg Kiwanis Club requested a presentation by Ward Studor. Mr. Studor contacted Ag Agent C.A. Nicholson about scheduling farm visits for him since he was going to be coming to Dubois County all the way from his office in Washington, IN. He made arrangements to spend the night locally. The old documents note that there was a great deal of interest in soil conservation during the 1930s and 1940s in Dubois County among the county farmers and businessmen.

1944 transitioned into 1945 and the process of forming a soil conservation district moved along, including having the required public meetings. Ward Studor notes that "it is evident that a lot of time had been spent in the organization of this meeting by Mr. Nicholson and others." After this public meeting, township representatives carried petitions across their townships for signatures. Only five townships were to be included in the soil conservation district: Boone, Madison, Bainbridge, Patoka, and Cass. More than enough signatures were collected, and plans were made for a public hearing at Ireland High School on April 5, 1945. Once public comments were made, a referendum would be held in which 60% of the "land occupiers" had to be in favor of the formation of the district.

There was a great deal of interest in conserving soil, but formally forming the district was not without considerable opposition. The 29 pages of minutes from

the April hearing show statements made by residents in favor of a district were met with catcalls and an uproar from the crowd. World War II was still being waged, and many landowners objected to the term “land occupiers” in Indiana District law; they felt it sounded like “Fascism, Communism or Nazism”. Some participants noted that their sons were in Germany fighting against Nazism. Other landowners spoke strongly about the result of people receiving free money from the government; they referred to it as a “governmental Santa Claus” that would lead to entitled people giving up their liberties. But many spoke to the benefits of working together to protect our natural resources, and how good soil and clean water was vital for the success of local farms and for life in general.

Local newspapers played a role in the formation of the district. Press releases and editorials in newspapers, including the then called Jasper Herald, noted that 71% of the eligible farmers voted in the referendum, and 77% voted in favor of forming the district. The articles note that farmers not included in the five-township area can carry petitions and begin the process to include their area into the district. Later documents note that the Herald routinely ran a popular column, entitled Conservation’s Candid Camera.

Kenneth Welton, State Conservationist for the USDA Soil Conservation Service, assisted R.O. Cole, Ward Studor, and C.A. Nicholson through the process of creating the district. Claude A. Gramelspacher, Bainbridge Township, and Albert E. Rudolph, Boone Township, were sworn in as Supervisors by the State Committee, according to Indiana law, on August 31, 1945. The process for nomination and election of the remaining three Supervisors culminated in the oaths of office being taken on January 10, 1945 by Ora Blesch, Cass Township, Hubert Wagner, Madison Township, and Gus Ahrens, Patoka Township at the very first official business meeting of the Soil Conservation District.

January 1946 sees C.A. Nicholson arranging for temporary office space for the new Soil Conservation District in the Purdue Agricultural Extension office, then located in the “Federal Building”, the US Post Office on 6th Street in Jasper. Later that year, Albert Rumbach, Postmaster, converted a 14’ x 18’ storage room into

office space for the Soil Conservation District. Uebelhor-Struckman Chevrolet Company provided storage space for a US Government owned vehicle at a price of \$0.50 per day, allowing the USDA Soil Conservation Service to station a Technician in the newly formed Jasper Office. In February 1946 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the USDA and the Soil Conservation District, allowing any branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to cooperate with the district. Hermann A. Beck became the first Soil Conservationist stationed in Dubois County, housed in the Jasper Post Office basement. Beck remained about one year, until he was stationed in Okinawa after the war ended.

On January 11, 1949, Marion Township was added to the Soil Conservation District, and in November 1949, Columbia and Ferdinand Townships were included as well. In 1955, Hall, Harbison, Jackson, and Jefferson Townships were added. There were small exceptions of land in Cass and Patoka Townships where landowners refused to sign the petitions and allow their property to be part of the District. Another change occurred in 1961: the name of the District was changed to Soil and Water Conservation District. And in 1977, a stroke of a legislative pen set the boundaries of the district as the county lines, so the entire county officially became a part of the Soil and Water Conservation District.

The minutes from 1946 show the work of the District being carried out by the five Supervisors, who received no monetary compensation for their time. They were assisted by the two or three USDA Soil Conservation Service staff members stationed in the Jasper office. The men divided themselves into committees to carry out the Soil Conservation District (SCD) workplan. Over time, the District also had men who volunteered as Associate Supervisors, who served on the committees and assisted in getting the work accomplished. SCD operations included field days, providing education materials to schools and churches, county driving and airplane tours, attending state meetings, and planning for the annual meeting. An early annual report notes about the air tours, "The "back forty" has no secrets from aerial visitors, and several men last summer stated that he was going to go home and do something about it." The annual report also mentions that these same men began farming in horse and buggy days, and what a thrill an air tour was for everyone.

The early minutes note that the first piece of District equipment, a disc plow, was purchased by the five supervisors themselves in July 1956. The District also had a USDA owned dozer used for conservation projects. When it was sold, equipment was purchased for use in Dubois, Pike, and Martin Counties. Documents from the early 1960's reveal watershed area programs being formed. If County residents made the request, the federal government provided funds for flood control to improve soil and water quality. These watershed areas were formed between the Districts, across county lines. During this time frame, the SWCD Supervisors purchased a tree planter to assist landowners who wished to reforest their property. The SWCD sponsored a 4-H Soil Conservation Award during the late 1960s and began a soil judging competition as well.

Times change, as do office protocols. The tissue paper letters refer to the support staff in the various offices as "girls". Nicholson, Studor, and Cole are very complementary of the quality of the work done by these ladies as they recorded and processed the early District documents. Prior to 1965, small stipends were paid to various women for their typing assistance. The 1965 records refer to District Clerk, Mrs. Mattingly, possibly spouse of longtime SCS employee Hugh Mattingly. 1964 minutes show that the Supervisors requested and received a \$1,500 appropriation from the Dubois County Commissioners and Council to pay Mrs. Mattingly, who worked five mornings a week in the District office beginning in January of 1965. In 1967, this funding increased to \$2,475. 1967 records refer to Mrs. Maurice (Beverly) Hoffman as District Clerk, and in 1968, Mrs. Earl (Betty) Englert staffed the office part time. In October of 1997, Betty Englert retired. Prior to her retirement, then SWCD Supervisors Robert Brunsman, Leo Betz, Dennis Freyberger, Duane Hopf, and Jack Welp made a request to the Dubois County Officials to make the SWCD Clerk's position full time. Their request was approved, and in 1998, Judi Brown became the SWCD District Coordinator, the first full time employee.

Funding for the District came slowly. The minutes show Supervisors' motions to pay bills, "when and if the treasury allows". Some requests for reimbursements went unpaid. Old ledgers show negative balances in the SCD funds. Early funding came from rental of the District equipment, including a land leveler and tree

planter. Donors covered the expenses for pancake and sausage suppers, the newsletter, and annual meeting meals. Early Annual Meetings were followed by social hours, where coffee and doughnuts were served by the wives of the SCD Supervisors. In February of 1959, a letter thanks Robert Gramelspacher of Jasper for his efforts with the Indiana legislature, after legislation passed allowing \$300 each for the 80 existing Conservation Districts in the state. The Supervisors sent a request for \$291, and ultimately received \$280 for operations.

The first annual meeting was held at the Tivoli Theatre, with three other groups, including the Purdue Agricultural Extension Office. A film provided by the USDA Soil Conservation Service (SCS) about conservation was shown. The early minutes show that the SCS provided a series of educational films that were shown at SCD meetings and loaned to schools. For the first annual meetings, coffee and doughnuts were the faire, and as the 1950s and 60s progressed, the food was either catered, or chili was prepared by the SWCD Supervisors and their wives. The VFW was a favorite location for the annual meetings in the 1980 and 90s, and their fried chicken dinners were also a favorite.

Time marches on, and change comes in its wake. The Soil Conservation Service, now known as the Natural Resources Conservation District, the Agriculture Stabilization Service, now the Farm Service Agency, and the Soil and Water Conservation District staff moved from the cramped space in the basement of the Post Office in fall of 1989. In 2021, one USDA staff member still remains in the Jasper Service Center who started their career in those basement rooms! Many Dubois County landowners likely remember visiting those basement offices over the years before the USDA Service Center moved to its suite of offices on Executive Blvd in Jasper. From the early years of the five Supervisors carrying forth the mission of the District, and then part time staff being hired, the SWCD now has three full time staff members, and two part time, all paid by Dubois County Government, plus two additional staff members funded through grants. Other changes are seen in the make-up of the staff in the Service Center: both men and women serve as field staff and conservationists. And in 2008, the first and currently only female Supervisor, Brenda Sermersheim, was elected. Brenda

has served as SWCD Chair since 2012. One thing that has not changed, though, is the dedication of the people serving Dubois County, as seen by the many years of service to the District both by the Supervisors, the Associate Supervisors, and the staff.

Saturday, September 19, 2020, the SWCD's 75th anniversary, was spent in the throes of a world-wide pandemic. All the in-person events that the SWCD typically hosts and participated in were cancelled beginning in March, and by late 2020, were held virtually. No fanfare marked the SWCD's 75th birthday. To honor all the people who came before, the celebration of the SWCD's 75th anniversary is going to be held at SWCD events throughout 2021.