

PLOWING NEW GROUND

THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY HISTORY OF THE TEXAS STATE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION BOARD



BY DAN K. UTLEY
WITH RUSTY RAY

TEMPLE, TEXAS
2014

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Agency Principles

Goal

It is the goal of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board to ensure the availability of Texas' natural resources for future generations so that all Texans' present and future needs can be met in a manner that promotes a clean, healthy environment and strong economic growth.

Mission

It is the mission of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, working in conjunction with local soil and water conservation districts, to encourage the wise and productive use of natural resources.

Philosophy

The Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board will act in accordance with the highest standards of ethics, accountability, efficiency, and openness. We affirm that the conservation of our natural resources is both a public and a private benefit, and we approach our activities with a deep sense of purpose and responsibility. We believe the existing unique organizational structure of soil and water conservation districts, whereby owners and operators of the state's farm and grazing lands organize and govern themselves through a program of voluntary participation, is the most realistic and cost effective means of achieving the State's goals for the conservation and wise use of its natural resources.

Foreword

A Matter of Heritage

By Nolan Ryan

To me, the history we in Texas hold so dear is closely tied to the natural resources we have been so blessed to inherit. As stewards of the soil and the water that sustain the foundation of our existence, we are part of a continuum that reaches far back into the past and, hopefully, will continue well into the future. I grew up in the coastal area of Texas, an area rich in agricultural productivity, and early on I learned to appreciate what the land means to us as a people. In addition to my career in baseball, I long ago ventured into the cattle business, and when I did, I was once again reminded of how important it is to respect the land, which is the foundation of our society and economy. Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to serve on some remarkable teams that accomplished much against great odds, but no team is more important to me than those who work selflessly to ensure the continued viability of our natural resources across the generations.

It is because of that abiding appreciation I have for our agricultural past—and future—that I am pleased to provide a foreword for this commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board. In these pages you will learn about its founding at the height of the Great Depression, when our collective resources were so badly depleted and facing an uncertain future. You will also learn, though, that despite the seemingly insurmountable devastation of the time, the people who knew the land the best worked together and in a partnership with the government to form a new conservation ethic that remains at the core of agricultural practices to this day. This is no coincidence. It has taken a great deal of resolve by many fine and dedicated people from across the state working selflessly through

district and area boards, with unprecedented local control, to develop, maintain, and improve the systems that sustain our soil and water for everyone. As you read this history, you will hear their words and learn firsthand of their passion for their efforts. In those words are the quiet assurances of the past about a program that has represented our very best as a society, but there is also the unmistakable ring of promise that we are still moving in the right direction as our state and nation become even more dependent on fertile soil and an abundant, clean water supply.

This is the story of the Texas heritage that has meant so much to me and to all of us who make our homes in the Lone Star State. It is in many respects an untold story to this point, but this commemorative history will no doubt change all of that. As the story unfolds and you listen to the voices of those who have made it possible, I hope you will join me in thanking the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board for a job well done and in celebrating with other Texans a proud history of service and dedication to a noble cause. There is still work to be done, but the plans and leadership are in place for the tasks ahead.

Two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is more stylized and appears to be 'G. L. ...'. The signature on the right is more cursive and appears to be 'L. ...'.

Acknowledgements

In a report such as this, with multiple layers of responsibility and review, there are myriad people to recognize for their good work and support. All were integral to the successful completion of the project, but first and foremost are three groups that represent the best and the brightest of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board. They include: agency staff, both past and present, who have served with great purpose and diligence to meet goals and objectives, and to serve the people of Texas; those who have served as agency directors to guide the organization; and the men and women at the district level who consistently work tirelessly and selflessly to provide a quality program statewide. With regard to the agency staff, there are particular individuals to note because of their direct involvement in this publication. They include: Rex Isom, Executive Director, who worked to secure funding for the project and also provided important direction and vision along the way; and Mel Davis and Clyde Gottschalk, who provided important background historical information and access to archival materials. All three also generously participated in the oral history component of the research by serving as interviewees. Thanks are also due Amy Devereaux and Karen Preece, of the Temple staff, for their excellent work overseeing contracts and related paperwork. And, of particular note is the contribution of Public Affairs Specialist Rusty Ray, who personally shepherded the project every step of the way for more than a year, working with agency personnel, district members, historians, and many others to set up meetings, tie up loose ends, keep everything on track and on schedule, and serve as a liaison for the board on all necessary decisions. Rusty also sat in on each of the oral history interviews, from the Rio Grande Valley to the Hill Country and Southeast Texas, ensuring the quality of that effort through his insightful questions and obvious pride in the agency he serves so capably.

Additionally, there were a number of other people without whom this history would be sorely incomplete. They include those individuals who shared their memories and insights of board and district work through oral history. Their names and elements of their personal stories are included throughout this report, where the relevance of their contributions to the success of the program through the years is clearly evident. The oral histories required a great deal of logistical and institutional support, and for that, thanks are due Rex Isom, Adrian Perez, Johnny Oswald, Ben Wilde, Joel Clark, and Tony Franklin.

There were also a number of individuals who were integral to the collection of historical materials, which came from a wide variety of sources. Two of the most remarkable are the daughters of former TSSWCB Executive Director Carl Spencer. Out of their abiding love for their father and great appreciation for his important contribution to the overall story, as well as a shared sense of history inexorably tied to the family's generational stewardship of the land, Cheryl Spencer and Nancy Spencer Hyde provided important perspectives of an important era in the agency's past. Their enthusiasm and their willingness to help record previously untold dimensions of history added significantly to a broader understanding of and appreciation for the human side of the agency's work. Another person who made a significant contribution to this report is Patsy Daniel Beasley, who grew up on a Bell County farm and still oversees local agricultural operations. Her knowledge of farming practices and her assistance with historical resources proved invaluable to the historians in the research phase.

Those helpful with regard to specific historical collections included the staffs of the Temple Public Library, the Oklahoma State University Library, and the Texas State Library and Archives Commission. Thanks are also due the Bell County Historical Commission for related assistance in reviewing an application for an Official Texas Historical Marker commemorating the significant contributions of the agency.

Once the manuscript came together, it was important to have knowledgeable agency staff provide a thorough review of both the text and the context. To that end, the writer is indebted to Rex Isom, Clyde Gottschalk, Mel Davis, John Foster, Don Brandenberger, and Rusty Ray.

And finally, sincerest thanks for a job well done to the ever-thorough and always-insightful Cynthia J. Beeman, of Austin, who served as editor, formatter, co-researcher, and trusted friend during every step of this project.

Dan K. Utley

May 2014

Introduction

This 75th anniversary history of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board reflects the significant roles played by committed individuals working together for the common good of Texas residents and for the preservation of the land that sustains them. As an understandably complex story told large, it can only cover certain elements of the past. It would be impossible, therefore, to recognize by name everyone who has been integral to this story. I would be remiss, however, if I did not mention specific groups that have added to the richness, diversity, and great accomplishments we now celebrate. The only reason the TSSWCB still exists 75 years after its establishment is because of the soil and water conservation districts—and they, in turn, exist because of the producers. The nature of what the producers do for a living—providing food and fiber for our great state and nation—garners respect from all of us, and we are continually mindful of their fundamental contributions they make to our shared history of the land. This is the celebration of a success story that has worked across the state and generations because it is based on local control by those closest to the issues.

There are also a group of people not mentioned specifically in this history that nonetheless helped shape its parameters through the years. They include a vast assemblage, both past and present, of district employees, state board staff members, board members, and their families. Also on the team are those businesses, organizations, and political entities that have been trusted partners in broader objectives through the years.

Our hope is that as you read *Plowing New Ground* you will have a greater appreciation for our history and our land, and for how the past still informs the present and helps us all plan for the future. These are important connections on which to reflect, especially since those connections include all of us, whether we grew up on a farm or in an urban environment, or whether our family history reaches far back into the state's past or we started somewhere else and got here as fast as we could. There is something in this history for all of us. Thanks for your contribution to that story.

Rex Isom, Executive Director

Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board

1.

Life and Land Turned Upside Down: The National Need

"Farmers are not asking for special favors. They ask only an even chance as compared with other workers. But people don't understand. . . . It may be that the dust will choke us down; It may be we shall wake some happy morn and look again on fields of waving grain. So good night, dear friend, and a happier to-morrow."

Caroline Henderson, January 28, 1936
Letters from the Dust Bowl

This is ultimately a story of hope and promise and community, and a celebration of human ingenuity and perseverance. It is also, at one level, a chronicle of a successful public program founded on a unique state and local partnership that has worked effectively for the common good for three-quarters of a century. It is a story that resonates statewide not only because it deals with basic societal needs, but also because it reflects fundamental ideals of democracy through direct involvement and input by those closest to the resources. To appreciate fully the story's present, however, it is necessary to understand its past, which began at a time of great despair and uncertainty in our nation's history—a time when the nation's economy directly reflected the health of its agricultural productivity.

The Great Depression, bookended in the U.S. by unprecedented prosperity of the 1920s and a Second World War in the 1940s, was an era marked in large part by confusion, frustration, sacrifice, and dreams deferred. It was also a time of great hope, because central to the American character was a belief that lasting solutions to the nation's problems were not only attainable, but within easy reach. The reasons for the economic decline of the era are myriad and

"The ultimate meaning of the dust storms in the 1930s was that America as a whole, not just the plains, was badly out of balance with its natural environment. Unbounded optimism about the future, careless disregard of nature's limits and uncertainties, uncritical faith in Providence, devotion to self-aggrandizement—all these were national as well as regional characteristics."

Donald Worster
Dust Bowl, 1979

include social and political factors far beyond the scope of this work. There are many connections, to be sure, but as historian Donald Worster noted in his book, *Dust Bowl*, "The thirties began in economic depression and in drought. The first of these disasters usually gets all

the attention, although for the many Americans living on farms, drought was the more serious problem.” Although Worster focused his study on the most severe element of that drought—the Southern Great Plains—he also conceded the area of impact, especially with regard to the economy, extended far beyond. While droughts were, and are, commonplace and cyclical, occurring every three to five years in many parts of the country, the one of the 1930s was somehow different. It began in the East, where below-normal rainfall and high temperatures combined to drop ground water levels and wilt crops in the field. As it spread westward there was increased devastation, far beyond the norm, and by the end of the decade only two states—Maine and Vermont—had escaped the grip of the drought. Occurring in tandem with the global economic decline brought on by other factors, it proved particularly devastating and overwhelming.

As the crisis quickly exceeded the practicality of individual response, so too did it surpass the capabilities of both the federal and state governments. As West Texas agricultural historian Gary L. Nall wrote in *The Depression in the Southwest*, the inadequate response resulted from “a lack of experience in erosion control, the dependence upon the cooperation of numerous agencies, the shortage of funds, and the failure to coordinate a plan of attack....” But he added, in a statement that will prove central to this evolving story, “Effective measures came only when federal, state, and local officials joined with farmers and ranchers to implement a long-range conservation plan.” In the early days of the depression, though, the necessary systems did not exist, nor was there even universal recognition of the need for conservation. In the administration of Pres. Herbert Hoover, and even in the earliest days of the following presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, immediate drought relief seemed the only logical solution, given the nation’s pressing needs. Under the latter’s New Deal there was emergency legislation that established the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Resettlement Administration, the Farm Credit Administration, and similar programs. To many

The CCC

Among the earliest and most effective programs of Roosevelt’s New Deal was the Civilian Conservation Corps, established in 1933 to provide employment and family assistance to young men through a variety of programs that included the development of parks, the planting of trees, and the construction of soil and water conservation measures, including those directly assisting farmers and ranchers. Known as Roosevelt’s “tree army” or “soil soldiers,” the young men made significant and lasting changes to the environment working under the unofficial motto of “We Can Take It!”

involved in agriculture, though, such programs, while helpful, seemed to be more about treating the symptoms rather than addressing whatever the systemic causes might be. At that point, no one was even certain what those causes might be, other than natural. With time, however, it became increasingly clear that the devastation caused by the drought was at least in some discernible measure manmade.

In the 1920s, in the time of prosperity, agricultural markets were, at best, increasing at steady rates, or at the least, stable and predictable. It was a time of increased mechanization and agricultural expansion. So as markets fluctuated from time to time in the latter part of the decade, the local response was often the cultivation of former native grasslands or greater livestock limits on existing pasturage—with little regard for what those seemingly insignificant measures would mean on a larger scale. As a result, by the onset of the national drought in the 1930s, the additional removal of ground cover and the practice of overgrazing began to take their toll—and then the winds began to blow.

While farmers and ranchers out West were no strangers to dust storms, they were not prepared for either the severity or regularity of those that soon began to occur. “With no sod to hold the earth in place, the soil calcified and started to blow,” wrote Timothy Egan in *The Worst Hard Time*. “Dust clouds boiled up, ten thousand feet or more in the sky, and rolled like moving mountains—a force of their own. When the dust fell, it penetrated everything: hair, nose, throat, kitchen, bedroom, well....The eeriest thing was the darkness. People tied themselves to ropes before going to a barn just a few hundred feet away, like a walk in space tethered to the life support center.” And, as is commonly told in oral history accounts of the Dust Bowl, drivers turned on their headlights to see and chickens went to roost in the middle of the day. The storms had a ferocity and density never seen before, and they came to be known by many as “black blizzards.” They scoured the land, cutting deep through the topsoil to the hard pan and driving massive dunes before them, while leaving pockmarked, hummocked, and useless land behind.



Dust storm approaching Stratford, Texas
April 18, 1935

NOAA photo

While federal officials struggled to deal with the drought in the context of a spiraling national crisis, and local farmers and ranchers continued to plea for assistance at any level of government, there were those working on the national scene to bring both scientific and pragmatic solutions up for consideration by all. The most vocal was Hugh Hammond Bennett, who eventually became known as “the father of soil conservation” for his tireless work in advocating for proper land management and local control. Bennett was undoubtedly the right man at the right time. Born in the Piedmont area just east of Charlotte, North Carolina, he learned about agricultural conservation practices from his father, William Osborne Bennett. Of those years, he often recalled his family’s extensive work to contour the land in order, as his father admonished, “to keep the land from washing away.” Upon graduation from high school in the 1890s, he enrolled at the University of North Carolina, where he focused his studies on geology and chemistry. Despite economic setbacks that served to delay his college work, he persevered and earned his degree in 1903. In one of those serendipitous moments that often define a career, when a chemist position he sought at the U.S. Department of Agriculture failed to materialize, he opted instead to work with the agency’s Bureau of Soils. There he began as a fieldworker, conducting onsite soil surveys first in Tennessee and then in other states. In time, he would work in all the existing 48 states and thus become uniquely qualified to speak to the national soil erosion “menace,” as he described it.

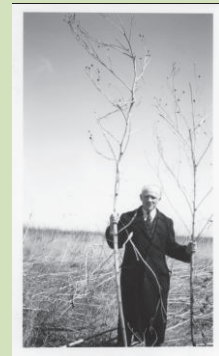
Because of his experience as a scientist and farmer, and because of the obvious passion and depth of knowledge he brought to his profession, Bennett managed to secure much-needed funding for soil erosion research, even before the onset of the depression. Additionally, his reports on the devastation of the phenomenon spoke not only to immediate concerns, but trans-generational damage to land productivity as well. He also published widely outside his work and soon became the recognized national leader in the call for soil erosion research. As such, he made an important Texas connection that marked a turning point in his career. Through his association with A.B. Connor, director of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, he received an invitation to speak

***Horace Valentine Geib
(1890-1970)***

A native of Kent County, Michigan, Horace Valentine Geib was an important early leader in soil conservation efforts, working directly with Hugh Hammond Bennett to develop what became known as the Dalhart Plan. He received his doctorate in soil agronomy from the University of Iowa and became an agricultural attaché for the U.S., working with such countries as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Colombia, and the Philippines. He retired from foreign service in 1957 and died in 1970 at Kerrville, Texas.

before the U.S. House Appropriations Committee by member Rep. James P. Buchanan of the 10th Congressional District of Texas. His testimony there led to an increased appropriation within the Department of Agriculture in 1929 for the establishment of a soil erosion research program. As part of that endeavor, Bennett set up ten erosion investigation stations across the country, including two in Texas, at Temple and Tyler. From the Temple office, he dispatched H.V. Geib to conduct intensive field surveys from the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles to New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. Geib's reports resulted in some of the earliest onsite scientific observations for areas heaviest hit by the drought. Providing detailed analytical data, he documented extensive devastation and soil loss far greater than originally speculated. He also called for inter-agency cooperative efforts to provide direction for a wide range of approaches to ending erosion—the basis for demonstration projects to follow.

Late in 1933, during Roosevelt's first presidential term, Bennett became director of the newly-created Soil Erosion Service in the Department of Interior, and with Geib's assistance he developed a number of demonstration areas, including one east of Dalhart in the Texas Panhandle near the community of Conlen. Chosen to oversee the project was Henry Howard Finnell, a Michigan native and the former director of the experimental agricultural station at the Oklahoma Panhandle Agricultural and Mechanical College (present Oklahoma Panhandle State University) in Goodwell. Given his extensive background in education, Finnell believed the best solution to overcoming poor agricultural practices was in providing the best available information on best practices directly to the farmers and ranchers. He also believed in an almost continual ground cover of crops on tillable land, in addition to the practices of tilling and contouring. Finnell began implementing his ideas in 1934 and achieved promising results, but almost simultaneously, as Nall notes, the dire situation in the region deepened far beyond the scope of demonstration farms. In the spring of that year a series of major dust storms, unlike any experienced before, began to rake the land in the Midwest.



**Henry Howard Finnell
(1894-1960)**

Comprehensive soil conservation measures Finnell implemented successfully at Dalhart in the 1930s became standard practice for stopping the spread and severity of dust storms.

Photo 1975-001b2f17p4,
H.H. Finnell Collection, Special
Collections and University
Archives, Oklahoma State
University Libraries



Scenes near Dalhart,
Texas, mid-1930s.

*Library of Congress
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An epic dust storm that was far different from preceding ones occurred on May 9, 1934. Rising in Montana and Wyoming and whipped by high winds over the Dakotas, where it picked up even more topsoil, the storm eventually carried more than 300 million tons of dust aloft. As Worster observed, “By late afternoon the storm had reached Dubuque and Madison, and by evening 12 million tons of dust were falling like snow over Chicago—4 pounds for each person in the city.” Moving as fast as 100 miles per hour, the storm soon spread to Buffalo, Boston, New York, Washington, and Atlanta. It eventually moved out into the Atlantic, where ships’ crews as far out as 300 miles from the coast reported being enveloped in the dust.

Not one to squander such opportunities, Bennett used the reports of such storms to his advantage, ramping up calls for a comprehensive federal conservation program on into the spring of 1935. On one notable occasion, while testifying before a special Senate committee in Washington, he even used the news of an impending storm to delay the proceedings for special effect. Although the storm slowed in its approach, the gamble eventually paid off. As Bennett biographer Wellington Brink described the situation, one senator noted the darkening skies and then another surmised it might be the dust of which they had just been speaking. Bennett agreed, and together witnesses, staff, and senators went to the windows. There, the dust storm “rolled in like a vast steeltown pall, thick and repulsive. The skies took on a copper color. The sun went into hiding. The air became heavy with grit. Government’s most spectacular showman had laid the stage well.” Almost on cue, nature had delivered the physical evidence needed to move the legislation along.

The true turning point, though, occurred later on a day now known as Black Sunday. Timothy Egan’s description of the seminal black blizzard that would by its very nature alter the national discourse on erosion provides a graphic account of its fury as it blew eastward across the plains:

A Sunday in mid-April 1935 dawned quiet, windless, and bright. In the afternoon, the sky went purple—as if it were sick—and the temperature plunged. People looked northwest and saw a ragged-topped foundation on the move, covering the horizon. The air cracked with electricity. *Snap. Snap. Snap.* Birds screeched and dashed for cover. As the black wall approached, car radios clicked off, overwhelmed by the static. Ignitions shorted out. Waves of sand, like ocean water rising over a ship’s prow, swept over roads. Cars went into ditches. A train derailed.

The day was April 14 and, as Egan added, “The storm carried twice as much dirt as was dug out of the earth to create the Panama Canal. The canal took seven years to dig; the storm lasted a single afternoon.” The next day, a dispatch in the *Washington Evening Star* filed by Associated Press reporter Robert Geiger of Denver, included the following line: “Three little words achingly familiar on a Western farmer’s tongue rule life in the dust bowl of the continent—if it rains.” Although Geiger would later use the phrase “dust belt,” his earlier statement held in the public consciousness and provided the moniker by which the phenomenon and the era came to be officially known. The exact boundaries of the Dust Bowl would grow and shift with time, but essentially it included parts of Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas. As it moved, it took in parts of Nebraska and the Dakotas as well. While regional in focus, it was nevertheless a national disaster, both economically and socially, exempting no one from its grip. Consequently, Congress quickly passed Public Law 46, the nation’s—and the world’s—first soil conservation act, and President Roosevelt signed it into law on April 27, 1935.

Hugh Hammond Bennett testifying before a U.S. Congressional committee about soil erosion: “To the nation as a whole, uncontrolled erosion has brought a gradual and continuing reduction of productive agricultural land.”

*Library of Congress
Photographs and Prints Division*



Among other things, the legislation created the Soil Conservation Service in the Department of Agriculture, and Hugh Hammond Bennett became the first director. With even more authority and with the nation's attention focused on the need for conservation measures in agriculture, Bennett set about, with the aid of others, to define a program based on his long-held concept of coupling technical assistance with local input and control, in effect leaving the farming to farmers, as Brink observed, even if it was the new concept of conservation farming. As Bennett later noted, "Our specialists were told to go out on the farmer's land with the farmer himself and there decide, cooperatively with him, what could and should be done in each of his fields, each pasture, woodlot, gully, and on every acre of idle land and all other land on the farm, to conserve soil and water."

"I consider the soil conservation districts movement one of the most important developments in the whole history of agriculture. It has proved even more effective, I am convinced, than we had dared to expect."

Hugh Hammond Bennett

By the close of the 1930s, key elements of a new national conservation ethic for agriculture were in place at the national level. What was needed next was to work in partnership with state and local governments, and to involve in a direct and meaningful way those who were closest to the land. Texas and Texans would be called on to play key roles in that development, a fact the national leaders fully understood. At a special conservation conference held at Nacogdoches in July 1937, Hugh Bennett told a crowd of 3,000 farmers, ranchers, and business leaders, "Effective methods of fighting erosion have been devised, but it is a problem that calls for cooperation." And he added, "It is a fight that touches the lives of the banker, the merchant, the teacher and the clergyman as well as the farmer. We must treat each area as a separate problem in accordance with its individual needs and adaptability." His sentiments were echoed almost exactly a year later by President Roosevelt on a visit to Amarillo. Speaking at Ellwood Park on, ironically, a rainy day, he said, "Back in the East, in Washington and on the Hudson River I have seen the top soil of the Panhandle and of Western Kansas and Nebraska borne by the wind high in the air eastward to the Atlantic Ocean itself. I want that sight to come to an end. It can be ended only by a unified national effort by you who live in this area. You are giving us that backing." In short order, the president would initiate a national call for action, and the Texas response would set in motion a new order of business for those who worked the land.

2.

Galvanizing Calls for Action: Texas Responds

"I need not emphasize to you the seriousness of the problem and the desirability of our taking effective action. . . . The Nation that destroys its soil destroys itself."

Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt

While stories from the Dust Bowl and the refugees it created spread across the nation in the 1930s, galvanizing calls for action on a scale never before imagined, there was some reason for at least cautious optimism about the future. Out of adversity came hope, borne of a national resolve that no problem was too great for Americans working together for the common good. This idealism would help shape the national dialogue for relief, recovery, and reform even as the dark shadows of an economic depression lingered far too long. And with the idealism came an understanding that the various parts of the problem were not isolated but rather connected. As a result, the solutions would need to be comprehensive, multi-faceted, diverse, and far reaching—and they would require input from both government and individuals working together. This new resolve provided a measure of hope that would be at the center of change.

To understand how the change occurred and that it stemmed in part from various sources, it is important to understand the context for agricultural conservation as it existed in Texas prior to the Great Depression. Long before wind-driven Panhandle soils first fueled black blizzards, there were many working to introduce new conservation measures in the state. Such efforts represented both federal and state efforts, as well as the innovative work of individual agriculturalists and conservation advocates. At the federal level, two noteworthy pieces of legislation prior to the crisis of the 1930s provided all states with important tools for shaping a new conservation ethic. They were the Morrill Act of 1862 and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. Pres. Abraham Lincoln signed the former into law during the Civil War, so it was not until 1866 that it extended to the former states of the Confederacy. Named for its author, Rep. Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont, the act provided for colleges of engineering and agriculture in each state. The first two such institutions established in Texas were what are now Texas A&M University and Prairie View A&M University, both started in 1876. Building on that successful national

foundation in education, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act to provide statewide cooperative extension service programs in partnership with the land grant schools to convey technical assistance and enable farm and home demonstration projects. Such projects utilized input from farmers and ranchers, a key component of both state and federal programs to follow.

In 1931, progressive-minded Gov. Dan Moody, who grew up along the blackland farm belt of Williamson County, sought to build on emerging concepts and innovations. He called for a special soil and water conservation committee to seek a broad-ranged statewide approach to agricultural conservation. Members of the committee reflected that intent through their involvement in farming and ranching, forestry, banking, water engineering, government, and reclamation. At a meeting of the special committee at Waco in 1931, John A. Norris, a pioneer leader in water conservation in Texas, cited scientific studies that spoke to the relationship between soil and water erosion. Due to antiquated farming practices, he noted, the Colorado River watershed alone carried enough soil in its annual runoff to cover 18,000 acres with a foot of soil, far greater in depth than the prevailing cultivation zone. In conjunction with groups representing cattle breeders, crop-specific farmers, agricultural workers, and others, such gatherings helped keep the public dialogue active. So too did the continuing work of such people as Norris, a civil engineer by training who was instrumental in the creation of both the Lower Colorado River Authority and the earlier Brazos River Conservation and Reclamation District (Brazos River Authority), the first state agency in the U.S. to provide comprehensive management of a complete watershed system. The agencies' reliance on local conservation plans would also prove integral to other statewide measures to follow.

"It has been said by men who have the best qualifications for making the guess that \$50,000,000 worth of Texas soil every year is swept into the Gulf on the floods of its streams. Yet the State does little about it--indeed, nothing, aside from providing for terracing demonstrations and authorizing counties to lend their machinery to individuals for use in terracing. Each is a worthy endeavor but both make a highly inadequate effort to minimize the irreparable loss the State suffers from the sterilization of its soil."

Alonzo Wasson,
former editor, *Dallas Morning News*,
February 5, 1935

Despite such structured governmental programs, there were also those individuals who worked on what seemed at first glance to be a smaller scale, but whose efforts were nonetheless vital to the overall advancement of agricultural conservation. Many of these were agriculturalists implementing sound conservation measures on their own land and often ahead of their time. Row

crop terracing in the state, for example, dates to an 1882 demonstration plot by Marmaduke Howell in Newton County. Given today's widespread acceptance of such fundamental practices as terracing, contour plowing, tank construction, and crop rotation, it is difficult to comprehend there was a time when they were considered unconventional and even controversial. Yet, the Howell demonstration and similar efforts, while successful and promising, were often criticized as too costly or time consuming—and in some cases too localized—to adequately address the immediate needs of small independent farmers and ranchers. As a result, many old techniques thus prevailed even into the early tractor era and beyond. Even then, though, there were clear signs that historical practices could no longer go unchallenged when they proved detrimental to the soil and water, and also obstructed economic recovery and increased productivity.

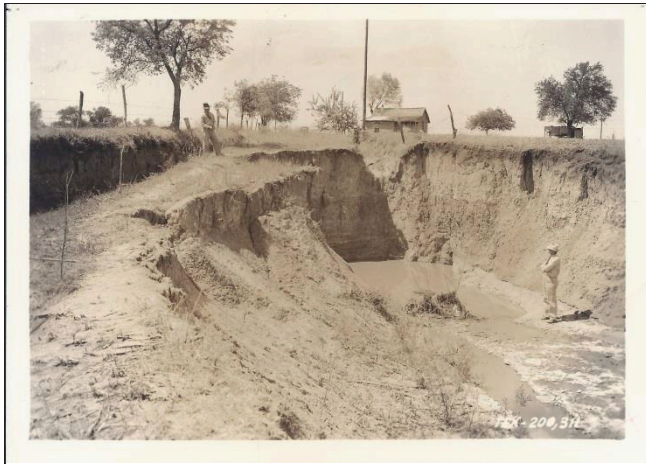
The year 1935 proved to be a pivotal one for agricultural conservation measures in Texas, further indication of continuing momentum toward a comprehensive solution to longstanding problems. In April of that year, tree planting on a large scale got underway southeast of Childress as part of the state component of the national shelterbelt program. At the same time, Lieutenant Governor Walter F. Woodul, through his capacity as acting governor while James V. Allred was away, called on the Texas Legislature to enact emergency legislation to further address severe wind erosion problems in several counties of the Texas Panhandle—part of the Dust Bowl area. Senators Clinton Small of Amarillo and Arthur P. Duggan of Littlefield, who had persuaded Woodul to take immediate action, introduced a bill that eventually became the Wind Erosion Act of 1935. Among its provisions, the bill called for a process by which voters in affected counties could establish special wind erosion districts, subject to local political control, for the purpose of accepting and disbursing federal grants. In a particularly controversial measure, it allowed for a “level of compulsion,” whereby district officials had the authority, when faced with landowner reluctance or opposition,

The Great Plains Shelterbelt

Started in 1934 in response to the devastating erosion of unprecedented dust storms, this vast federal environmental undertaking called for the systematic planting of largely native tree stock along fencerows and in wide bands from the Canadian border south into Texas. Administered initially by the Works Projects Administration with assistance from the U.S. Forest Service and the Civilian Conservation Corps, the windbreak project placed more than 200 million trees within the first few years of its existence. Today, remnants of the original shelterbelts can be found throughout the Great Plains, where there are ongoing efforts to restore these historic landmarks of the cultural landscape.

to enter private property and implement the necessary measures on their own. The gravity of the situation, legislators believed, called for such actions, and the bill passed. Significantly, though, in terms of longstanding influences, the wind erosion district provision in the act became the model for key conservation legislation to follow in the ensuing years.

Also in 1935, legislators continued deliberations on a statewide conservation bill authored by E.M. Davis of Brownwood. A native of Burnet County and a former Lampasas County Attorney, Davis represented Brown County as chief justice prior to service in the House of Representatives (where he initially introduced the bill) and then later the Texas Senate. Davis' bill called for establishment of a State Conservation Board of select state officials, with special funding through automobile license fees. Like the Wind Erosion Act, it provided for conservation districts administered by county officials who could accept and administer federal grants. Although there would be no compulsive authority in the bill, it allowed for a system of levying fines on non-participating landowners. The Davis bill would continue to be debated and eventually be rolled over into broader legislation considered in the following session.



Former county road site, 12 mi. NE of Waxahachie, Texas, Ellis County, 1940. Less than three years previously, the road was open for traffic.

*Photo by George L. Gowan, USDA-SCS
Copy in TSSWCB archives*

Another significant element of the change equation in the mid-1930s emerged when farmers began to organize for the purpose of sharing knowledge and seeking a voice in the political process. The group that figured prominently in that regard was the Texas Soil Conservation Association, which had its initial meeting at Austin in April 1937. There, organizers selected V.C. Marshall of Heidenheimer, Bell County, as the first chairman, and he would continue to be a key player in both the association's legislative efforts and in the development of a state board. The group met again in Austin that summer and then formally organized on July 13 at a statewide meeting in Temple, which had been designated as the

association headquarters. The meeting drew hundreds of farmers who gathered in the municipal auditorium to hear a number of speakers, including Congressman W.R. Poage, who addressed them on the national crisis of soil erosion. Under Marshall's focused leadership, the association quickly gained traction and in short order became the leading force in working for a comprehensive state conservation law.

Government sign promoting land terracing to prevent erosion, Taylor, Texas, April 1939

*Farm Security Administration
Photo by Russell Lee
Library of Congress Prints &
Photographs Division*



By the late 1930s, many of the fundamental elements were in place—or at least under consideration—that would allow individual states the necessary means of providing the new direction necessary to meet their own unique agricultural challenges of the Great Depression. Overall, the trend of the decision-making process was in the general direction of the national need, with the clear understanding that those closest to the area of concern—the farmers and ranchers—must be involved in the solutions. In 1936, the federal government took an important first step in that direction by proposing a model conservation law for states to enact. On February 26 of the following year, Pres. Franklin Roosevelt provided the national charge in a letter he sent to each governor, urging their cooperation in securing the partnering legislation that would be necessary. First citing the successes of the Soil Conservation Service and its demonstration projects, the president then added:

To supplement the Federal programs, and safeguard their results, State legislation is needed. At the request of representatives from a number of States, and in cooperation with them, the Department of Agriculture has prepared a standard form of suitable State legislation for this purpose. . . . The Act provides for the

organization of ‘soil conservation districts’ as governmental subdivisions of the State to carry on projects for erosion control, and to enact into law land-use regulations concerning soil erosion after such regulations have been approved in a referendum. Such legislation is imperative to enable farmers to take the necessary cooperative action.

Since Texas leaders had already been discussing a statewide response to the need for conservation, they moved quickly to consider the salient points of the model bill. Although Texas would not be among the very first to adopt such a measure—that distinction belonged to Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, Nebraska, and a handful of others from the West, Midwest, and South—it was not far behind. As it turned out, the delay in the political process proved to be fortuitous and, in the long run, fundamental to the Texas approach, which became the model in its own right for other states to follow.

Abandoned Wise County farmstead, March 29, 1940
"Once a very prosperous family lived here, but, due to economic conditions and crop failure, the people have moved out."

*USDA/SCS photo 25-Tex-3,
Wise County, 3-29-1940.
Copy in TSSWCB archives.*



Years later, V.C. Marshall wrote of his first encounter with the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law proposed by the Department of Agriculture.

I recall the day that that came to Texas. It was a cold Saturday morning—we were working six days a week at that time—and W.H. Duquee of Palestine, who was my assistant at that time, and I sat and read that Standard Act, and I recall very vividly my impression of it—I just thought it was foolish—it didn’t hold together—it wasn’t tenable, but the second and third times we read it, the parts began to fall into a pattern and we began to realize that there was the basis of something great in that old Standard Act.

Although Marshall and others found some merit in the law’s potential, they also appreciated that it was only a blueprint for states to follow and that it might bear little

resemblance to the original once it made its way through the legislative process. To help guide that decision making as best he could, Marshall met and corresponded with Henry A. Wallace, then the Secretary of Agriculture (and later vice president). The two men shared similar concerns about particular elements of the Texas bill that began to emerge, most notably with regard to measures allowing for landowner exemptions, administrative oversight by commissioner courts, the potential for taxing authority, and district boundary lines that mirrored county lines. Facing a tight deadline if the state were to participate fully in the initial programs, Texas legislators hurried the bill through late in the session, despite its obvious shortcomings. A concerned Wallace wrote to Allred, “from our hurried analysis. . . there is considerable question whether the act provides an adequate basis for the co-operation of this department,” and added that it could even “raise administrative or legal obstacles of considerable importance.” Rather than risk the possible challenges, which would only serve to unduly delay relief to the suffering farmers, Allred felt he had no choice but to veto the bill, which he did in June 1937, hoping the legislators could agree on a substitute measure in upcoming sessions that would address the major flaws and allow the state to participate in the national conservation program.

The fight continued into the next session, when a new problem arose. Then Gov. W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel had come into office on a platform of smaller government, and he was determined not to approve the establishment of any new boards. In fact, he favored consolidation of several disparate programs that related to fish and game protection, livestock sanitation laws, seed research, and water engineering under the umbrella of soil conservation. He also strongly favored a state sales tax to provide the necessary funding.

The author and key supporter of the revised farm conservation bill in the Texas Legislature was Rep. Bailey B. Ragsdale, chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. A native of Denison schooled at a Corsicana orphanage, Ragsdale was a farmer at Crockett, Houston County, when he ran for office. In partnership with Sen. Louis J. Sulak, a newspaperman and former University of Texas regent from La Grange, Ragsdale worked tirelessly to push the new version of the legislation in order to avoid another veto. He traveled around the state promoting his bill, even calling for a statewide meeting in Austin of farmers from more than a hundred counties to provide input on the legislation. Held in February 1939, the conference came to be known as the Dirt Farmers’ Congress, and it provided much-needed grassroots support for the measure. In the process of fighting for the legislation, however,

Ragsdale soon found himself at odds with O'Daniel on both the sales tax proposal, as well as a separate pari-mutuel horseracing bill the governor favored. On the matter of agricultural reform, however, Ragsdale knew he had the broad agricultural and legislative support he needed to move forward and so refused to give in to the governor. In the end, he prevailed, and the legislature voted overwhelmingly for the new conservation measure. Never one to give in quietly, though, the governor staged one of those "only in politics" moments to assert his power. As the *Dallas Morning News* reported on April 20, 1939, "The sponsors of the conservation bill had planned to make the Governor's signing of it a gala occasion, showing O'Daniel with a gold pen poised while the sponsors stood around the table evincing keen interest. The picture was taken," the story went on, "but the pen never fell to sign the measure." O'Daniel chose instead to stall. Within days, however, the governor reconsidered his initial plan to veto the measure and signed it on April 24, although the original signing date remained.



The "bill signing" ceremony for the State Soil Conservation Act, April 20, 1939. Despite the formality of the occasion, the governor did not actually sign the bill until several days later, after he reluctantly chose to forego a veto over concerns he had about the legislation. Seated, Gov. W. Lee O'Daniel. Standing, left to right: John Gorhan, Waco; Sen. Louis J. Sulak, La Grange; V.C. Marshall, Heidenheimer; Sen. Dorsey Hardeman, San Angelo; Ralph W. Moore, Granger; Rep. A.B. Tarwater, Plainview; Rep. Robert Fuchs, Brenham; Rep. Bailey Ragsdale, Crockett; Fisher Alsup, Temple.

After years of pleading and advocacy by farmers, and stalling and maneuvering by politicians, Texas finally had a comprehensive conservation bill. And because it passed by overwhelming margins in both houses of the legislature, it went into effect immediately. Central to the bill was the formation of the Texas State Soil Conservation Board, forerunner of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board (TSSWCB), and the local creation and operation of conservation districts subject to the vote of landowners. The bill meant Texas farmers and ranchers could then determine their own agendas for receiving technical assistance, availing themselves of educational programs and competing for federal grants.

As an aside to the long political struggle that led to the legislation, Bailey B. Ragsdale and W. Lee O'Daniel remained adversaries for years, with the representative even calling for the governor's ouster at one point. With the advent of America's involvement in World War II in the 1940s, however, such political rivalries paled in comparison to the more pressing national needs for mobilization and victory. Ragsdale enlisted in the army and served in the Italian theater as part of the 361st Infantry Regiment. Sadly, on June 3, 1944, one day before Allied forces moved into Rome, he was reported missing in action. Later confirmed dead, he was buried in the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery at Nettuno.

3.

Democracy in Action: The Formative Years

"Soil conservation districts constitute a defense program for the American farmers."

Louis P. Merrill, U.S. Soil Conservation Service,
speaking at Temple, Texas, December 16, 1941

Despite whatever misgivings Governor O'Daniel might have had about the details of the bill, he remained a strong supporter of conservation and was therefore fully cooperative as the new board eagerly began its work—and that work got underway almost immediately. On May 1, 1939, the governor issued a proclamation calling for “the Commissioners Court of each county of the State of Texas to call a Convention of the landowners” in each precinct by May 15 for the purpose, ultimately, of designating delegates to district conventions to be held at Plainview, Fort Stockton, Kenedy, Crockett, and Stephenville a week later. There, each district would select one member of the State Soil Conservation Board, which would meet for the first time at the end of the month in Temple. Thus, just over a month after the signing of the legislation, the mechanism would be fully in place to formally organize the board and commence the urgent business at hand.

In a May 8 letter to John M. Fouts, general manager of the Trinity Improvement Association in Fort Worth, the governor provided insights into his own perspective of the bill, leaving the clear impression he saw it as a model for government efficiency. “I am particularly interested in the fact that the management of this Act,” he wrote, “springs from the grass roots. . . and I think this method of organization can well be carried further so that every State department which has to do with farming, livestock raising, and all other services connected with agriculture and horticulture can be consolidated into one great agricultural department.” Quite obviously he had not given up on his resolve to merge programs, but that would be a battle for another day. At this point, he was fully on board and, as it turned out, a key participant in the first convention.

On Monday, May 29, delegates from across Texas gathered in Temple to discuss mutual conservation concerns and to witness the formal organization of the board. The first board members were: Walter Cardwell of Luling; Horace K. Fawcett of Del Rio; W.G. Kennedy of

Muleshoe; J.P. Martin of Nacogdoches; and V.C. Marshall of Heidenheimer. In the days leading up to the meeting, there were newspaper estimates that the attendees might number ten thousand, and while no accurate figure is known to exist, there are indicators the meeting was indeed a big event. As the *Dallas Morning News* reported the following day, “The rally drew thousands of farmers, agricultural leaders, and soil conservation experts to Temple. . . and preceded the beginning Monday night of the Central Texas Chemurgic Conference [dealing with industrial uses for agricultural products] which will continue sessions Tuesday.”



The original State Soil Conservation Board in front of the Scott and White Hospital Dairy Farm, Temple, May 29, 1939. Left to right: Horace Fawcett, W.G. Kennedy, V.C. Marshall, Walter Cardwell, and J.P. Martin. This log cabin is preserved and is now located on the grounds of the Scott and White Hospital complex on S. 31st Street, Temple.

TSSWCB archives

After years of bad news, hopes ran high as the gathering of farmers kicked off with a banquet at the Doering Hotel (later the Hawn Hotel at the NW corner of 4th and Central) honoring Dr. Hugh Hammond Bennett, Chief of the U.S. Soil Conservation Service. Following “Hill Billy Music” by the Allen Thomas Blue Jackets, a dance number by the Louise Baily School of Dancing, and a hearty meal of roast beef, potatoes, and peas, Governor O’Daniel served as the toastmaster, and former governor James E. Ferguson of Temple provided formal greetings. Both Rep. Ragsdale and Sen. Sulak addressed the crowd and then afterward all adjourned to Woodson Field, the high school football stadium (15th and Elm Street), where they heard Bennett speak. Praising Texans for their determination to enact a sweeping conservation

bill, he told the crowd, “The passage of the districts law is the culmination of a conservation movement which has grown from a mere dream of a few years ago to an active force winning a battle against land decline.” And for added emphasis, he noted, “The districts movement is a people’s movement—a movement from the ground up. I can’t help but believe it is a great step toward a more perfectly functioning democracy.”

Bennett’s words and the spirit of the gathering were not lost on the new board members, who, although faced with staggering issues, seemed prepared for the challenges ahead. At the Temple meeting they selected Marshall as their chairman and announced they would soon accept the first petitions for setting up local districts. Although there was some discussion of where the board might establish its headquarters, the members made no immediate decision on that point. However, from the luncheon program it is clear that Temple was the only viable location under consideration. With promotional material provided no doubt by the city’s chamber of commerce, one of the key sponsors of the event, the program text read:

TEMPLE is headquarters for the Texas Soil and Water Conservation Association.

TEMPLE is headquarters for the Black Land Area Soil Conservation Service.

TEMPLE is headquarters for the Elm Creek Watershed Project which is the largest of its kind in the entire United States.

TEMPLE is headquarters for the U.S. Soil Erosion Experiment Station.

TEMPLE is headquarters for the Texas Black Land Experiment Station, second oldest experiment station in America.

TEMPLE is headquarters for the Brazos River Conservation & Reclamation District, a \$50,000,000.00 Federal project seeking to harness the floods and erosion in the Brazos Valley.

TEMPLE is headquarters for Company 1829 (V) [i.e. World War I veterans] CCC Camp whose corps is engaged in soil conservation work.

Temple before World War II

Founded in 1881 and named for Bernard Moore Temple, chief engineer for the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway, the town of Temple became an important commercial center that once rivaled Belton as the seat of government for Bell County. By the time the Texas State Soil Conservation Board formed there in 1939, the town had a population of more than 15,000 and a diverse economy based on medicine, education, railroading, manufacturing, agriculture, and soil conservation research.

Of particular note is the reference to the Elm Creek Watershed Project, an ambitious and extensive water control measure that eventually reached from near Moody in McLennan County, across the entire northern and eastern portions of Bell County, to Cameron in Milam County. Then in its infancy, having been started only a few years earlier by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, the project covered the main channels of the Elm Creek tributaries and all feeder streams as well. It was a national model for efficient water conservation and the prevention of soil erosion and so was a major part of the tours set up for the participants. It served as an important visual reminder of what could be done through public-private partnerships to stem the continual degradation of the state's agricultural resources.

The Temple conference, labeled by some as a conservation rally, proved to be an ideal means of launching the work of the Texas State Soil Conservation Board. In order to build on the publicity and momentum, the board soon took steps to address the state's conservation challenges and to set up the mechanism for establishing the districts that were at the core of the legislation. To that end, they toured state conservation programs in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma in order to help determine details of how the Texas program might best be run. Agency records reveal the initial board members wasted no time in traveling the state to promote the new conservation reforms. In their field visits across Texas, they worked directly with farmers and ranchers, and associations such as the Southwestern Cattle Raisers' Association, while also keeping the governor, attorney general, and other political leaders apprised of their progress through what seemed to be direct and open access. In June 1939, as anticipated, the board voted to establish its headquarters at Temple, and on July 20 it began receiving district applications. On September 7, Marshall wrote to Governor O'Daniel, providing him with a transcript of a recent board hearing in Waxahachie. The cover letter left no doubt of the new program's early success:

For your information, the State Board, to date, has conducted in excess of forty public hearings, and have, to date, more than fifty applications for districts. Apparently this number may reach one hundred by the first of the year. It was anticipated by the Legislature that not more than twenty districts would be formed during the biennium. Although I have known that there is great interest among landowners in this program, that interest exceeds by far what I have anticipated.

Then perhaps in anticipation of the next round of favorable legislation or funding that might be in the offing, he added, “For the Board, I wish to say that we will be pleased to have suggestions from you at any time concerning the prosecution of this work.”

As Marshall had earlier demonstrated, however, he was not willing to wait on others to frame the agenda, and the board evidently followed his lead. In a carefully crafted move, Marshall sent a telegram to the governor on the morning of December 6, stating: “I HEREBY PRESENT TO YOU MY RESIGNATION AS MEMBER OF STATE SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICT NO. 5. SINCE THE BOARD IS NOW IN SESSION AND WILL LIKELY ADJOURN AROUND NOON. I WILL APPRECIATE EARLY ACCEPTANCE.” The reply from O’Daniel followed later that day: “I accept your resignation. . . effective at once, but wish to thank you for good services you rendered while serving as Member of this Committee.” That seemingly informal exchange paved the way for the board to name Marshall its first executive director, and newspapers carried the story the following day. “V.C. Marshall, Temple, resigned Wednesday as chairman of the State Soil Conservation Board and was appointed state administrative officer in charge of the program.” His replacement on the board was Walter W. Cardwell of Luling.

Committee of 100

V.C. Marshall accomplished much through the political process, but he always understood that he needed more than a good idea to succeed. Early on, with regard to conservation, he conceived the idea of a Committee of 100, comprised of knowledgeable and influential agriculturalists throughout the state who were committed to work through political channels to bring about positive change. The Committee figured prominently in the defeat of the 1937 bill, but also in passage of the subsequent bill in 1939. It has remained a concept utilized from time to time through the years to address issues of particular concern to the agricultural community.

Significantly, at the same meeting the board announced full approval of the first twenty-one districts, which were then allowed to proceed with elections, and tentative approval of six others. What the newspapers failed to report, however, was that the board had received 124 applications by its July deadline; Marshall had been right in his prediction to the governor. The exact numbers for the first approved districts fluctuated a bit in the following months due to election proceedings, compliance concerns, and other matters, but on April 30, 1940, Texas Secretary of State M.O. Flowers formally certified the first group: Duck Creek; Floyd County; Concho; Martin-Howard; El Paso-Hudspeth; Wilson County; Karnes County; Hays-Caldwell-Travis; Lavaca-Navidad; Comal-Hays-Guadalupe; Nacogdoches; Kaufman-Van Zandt; Bowie

County; Harrison County; Sulphur-Cypress; Hamilton-Coryell; and Central Colorado. Over time, the number of districts would increase to more than 200. By the close of 1939, it seemed, the State Soil Conservation Board had reached an important transition point, but as the new executive director told, they had only begun to scratch the surface.



The concept of soil conservation districts caught on quickly in Texas, with farmers and ranchers gathering in small groups throughout the state to start the deliberations and paperwork necessary to be certified. Within the first years of the program, the numbers of approved districts far exceeded even the most generous predictions.

TSSWCB archives

It is important to note that as soil and water conservation districts formed and received certification, the members came together and established the Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts. The Association is a 501(c)3 organization with a focus on educational, scientific, charitable, and religious work concerning the conservation, maintenance, improvement, development, and use of land, soil, water, trees, vegetation, fish and wildlife, open spaces, and other renewable natural resources. It also advocates for soil and water conservation districts and the state board on the state and national levels. Through a cooperative agreement, the executive director of the state board is designated as an advisor to the association and is authorized to supervise its employees co-located in the state board office to carry out the duties and programs for the association.

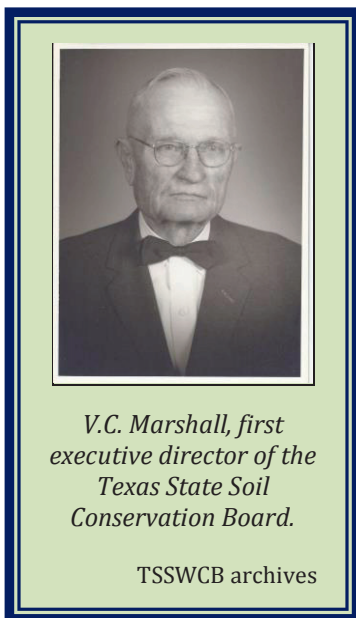
The selection of V.C. Marshall as the agency's first executive director proved to be one of the board members' most important early decisions. As they no doubt realized, he was the right man for the job at the right time. Known by some as "Square John" for his straightforward approach to life and work, Vernie Caldwell Marshall exhibited important leadership traits of resolve, thoroughness, pragmatism, and personal integrity, and he had also

Reed's Lake

In the late 1840s, Mississippian John Burnett Reed homesteaded a tract of land in Bell County by a small lake believed to be an ancient buffalo wallow fed by flood waters of the nearby Little River. In its early years, the Reed's Lake Settlement boasted a cotton gin and a school known as Burgess, which consolidated with Academy following World War I, thanks in part to the work of V.C. Marshall.

demonstrated a depth of understanding about the need for conservation unparalleled in Texas. He was in many ways the state's equivalent of H.H. Bennett, and over time he gained a lasting and much deserved reputation as "the father of Texas soil conservation districts." His leadership of the board in its formative years, as well as his commitment to the democratic principles inherent in the district structure, set a solid foundation for many early successes. His personal route to the agency leadership, however, was not as direct as it might have seemed to many at the time.

Born in 1885 on a Bell County farm his grandfather homesteaded years before the Civil War, Marshall grew up in the dispersed agricultural community of Reed's Lake, not far from Academy and Rogers. Schooled at Salado College, Southwestern University, and Texas A&M



College, he established himself in Bell County as a farmer, businessman, and public servant. In 1912, he married Mary Ann Hickerson, and to the union were born eight sons, all of whom graduated from Texas A&M. For a time, Marshall was a banker and merchant in Heidenheimer and also owned cotton gins in partnership with his brothers. As the head of the Bell County School Board for sixteen years, he helped influence legislation that allowed for the consolidation of small rural schools and for the use of state funds to purchase buses. His work also led to the establishment of the Academy district (now Little River-Academy), one of the first independent rural school districts in the state.

Because of Marshall's exemplary work in rural education, Gov. Miriam A. Ferguson, his friend and fellow Bell County native, appointed him as a delegate to a national educational conference in Washington, DC. There, as he later told, he heard "a Chinese graduate of Columbia University" whose speech on famine in the Orient became a turning point in Marshall's life. "He told us unless we conserved our farm land America would be like China—not able to produce enough food for its people. . . ." Marshall attributed that revelation to his ensuing concept of a model conservation program for the U.S. that would rely on "soil and water conservation service managed by farmers." As someone who practiced conservation measures on his own farm but who had also witnessed the unchecked, negligent depletion of soil in his home county, Marshall set about to make his idea a reality. He spoke widely of its potential and, over time, gained the attention of political leaders in Austin looking

for a viable solution to the ravages of the Dust Bowl era. As his son, Ellis G. Marshall, recalled, he enjoyed people and “if he told you something, he meant it.” The strength of his convictions not only enabled the implementation of his district plan, but it guided its further development even as the nation turned its attention to war preparedness.

As Marshall anticipated, given the early success of the conservation program, additional legislation was needed to further codify the policies and procedures, and to provide funding to serve the growing demand for new districts. By 1941, O’Daniel had resigned the governorship to move to the U.S. Senate, so the new governor, Coke R. Stevenson, signed the conservation act, which was essentially a thorough overhaul of the original legislation.

Gov. Coke R. Stevenson,
seated, signing the Soil
Conservation Law, 1941.
Flanking the governor on his
right is V.C. Marshall and on his
left is Sen. Louis J. Sulak.

TSSWCB archives



The advent of war, however, proved to be a new challenge for the Texas State Soil Conservation Board. While it needed to press forward with its objectives, it also realized the important role agriculture would play in the nation’s involvement in the conflict. During the war years, board members became even more proactive in their approach to conservation as they traveled the state and worked with local districts, always making the connection between good conservation practices and good citizenship. Speaking at the first meeting of Texas soil conservation district supervisors only days after the attack on U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor and then America’s formal entry into the war, Marshall called for increased yields and improved farm products to support the war effort, but without any damage to the soil, which he labeled “the farmer’s factory.” W.E. Moncrief, supervisor from Arlington, echoed the patriotic call: “The

soil is the farmer's manufacturing plant, and we're here today to consider ways to put more and better guards—more and better conservation measures—on our farms to protect the soil. Erosion is sabotage," he concluded, "weakening our nation just as any other form of sabotage does."

Following World War II, Texas emerged as a much different state. It was far more urban than it had ever been, and the post-war boom era brought increased prosperity and improved technologies but also great expansion that encroached further on former agricultural lands. Despite such shifts in society, the Texas State Soil Conservation Board continued to expand its role in economic recovery, securing increased appropriations through the 1940s—reaching \$5,000,000 in 1949—to help soil conservation districts establish their programs.

The year 1955 proved to be another turning point in the history of the board when Marshall announced his retirement. The man who had led the efforts to establish the board and then served as chairman and first executive director, relentlessly pushing for the continued viability of agricultural conservation in a rapidly-changing world, quietly chose to return to his farming roots. At the historic family farm in Reed's Lake, he continued the conservation practices he had preached for so long and worked to make his land more productive than ever. He and his sons continued to support local conservation districts, which he referred to as examples of "democracy in action." Much honored and much revered through the ensuing years, Vernie Caldwell Marshall passed away on February 12, 1968, and was buried in Greathouse Cemetery south of Temple. "He left a high mark as a result of his span on earth," his obituary read. "His was a great and fine contribution."

4.

An Exacting Business: Building on the Past

"A lot of soil and a lot of water have been saved by Texas farmers and ranchmen during the past 15 years, the years when conservation measures finally got the whip hand over soil and water losses."

Paul H. Walser
Soil Conservation Service, Temple, 1952

No longer faced with the crises of depression, drought, and war, but instead confronted with new challenges and opportunities, the United States began an era of unprecedented growth and change after World War II that carried on into the 1950s and 1960s—and beyond. With that change came increased market demands for agricultural products to sustain the development, but also new forms of mechanization to help meet those demands. Central to the impact the change would have on agriculture was the still relatively new concept of agricultural conservation, but in the short time it had been the focus of state and national efforts, it had moved from the era of demonstrations and concepts to mainstream planning. There was still much to be done, and not everyone was on board, but clearly the nation was headed in a new direction agriculturally.



"Cover crop of Hubam clover. This field was planted to rice in 1955. A rotation of one year rice and two years cover crop has been adopted for this field." The field was 2 mi. W of Manvel, Brazoria County.

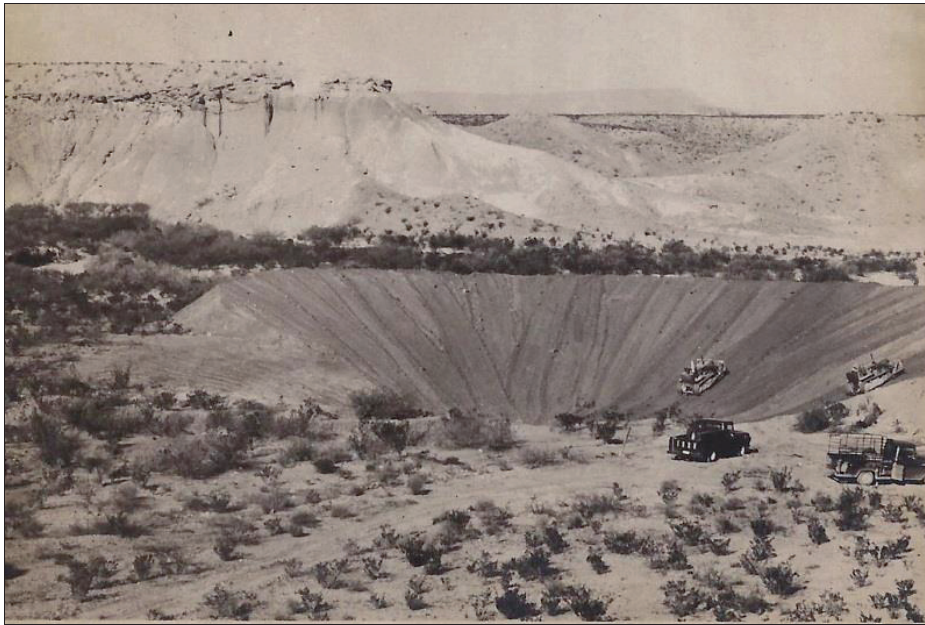
*Photo by John McConnell,
Soil Conservation Service
Copy in TSSWCB archives*

As change came to the farms and ranches of Texas, so too did it come to the Texas State Soil Conservation Board. With the departure of V.C. Marshall in 1955, the task of leading the agency passed to A.C. Spencer, then the assistant director. Arthur Carl Spencer was a native Texan, born in the Coleman County community of Novice in 1919. Educated at Denton, he had experienced firsthand the economic decline of the 1930s and the troubling effects it had on families. As his daughter, Cheryl Spencer, recalled, his family “moved around quite a bit. . . and Dad was deeply affected by the consequences of the Depression, and he was very emotional about the loss of the topsoil, about the Dust Bowl, about people losing their homes, about their whole lives being uprooted.” And, she added, “I think that’s why he determined, when he got to Sam Houston State Teachers College (Huntsville) that he was going to major in agriculture. . . . Dad knew that to farm, you needed to do it smarter than you were doing it, and you needed to take care of the land.” A high-principled, somewhat stoic, and devoutly religious man, Spencer had an abiding sense of what it meant to work hard and also what it meant to be poor. He never forgot those life lessons, and he brought them to bear in his own personal perspectives on the cultural value of conservation.

Spencer taught agriculture at Deport, in Northeast Texas, and then, following service in the Marine Corps, worked in Crockett and Madisonville for the Soil Conservation Service, through which he first met Marshall. In 1947, he went to work for the Texas State Soil Conservation Board as a field representative serving the Upper Leon District in Dublin. He enjoyed the work and seemed well-suited for it, but soon he received a job offer that took him, at least temporarily, in a different direction from district operations. In the summer of 1948, he accepted a position with the Friends of the Land, a relatively new national organization working to expand the concept of agricultural conservation within a broader ecological ethic—the beginnings of what would later be known as sustainable agriculture. An appointment letter from Houston banker C.M. Malone, a director of the Friends, outlined Spencer’s new assignment, which would be centered in Huntsville. “The purpose of this work is to educate people as to what conservation means, covering soil, water, timber and wild life [sic]. In this connection, stock



raising and dairying and poultry all form a part of the operation.” Through his work, Spencer met with a wide variety of groups, from youth organizations and civic clubs, to chambers of commerce, bankers, and farmers. As he saw it, his job was to promote “the economics of soil and water conservation,” and that appealed to his youthful idealism. “We can see that the health and economy of this country,” he wrote, “as well as the very roots of democracy and individual freedom are based on the soil.”



Pit type tank under construction on the Tony Hess Ranch 60 miles south of Alpine, 1962.

*Photo by Lamar Kay,
Soil Conservation Service.
Copy in TSSWCB archives*

While with the Friends, Spencer grew to appreciate even more the national call for action espoused by Hugh Hammond Bennett. Ironically, as his family likes to tell, he was at a 1948 Friends conference in Oklahoma to hear the “Father of Soil Conservation” when his second daughter was born. The speech Spencer heard, though, focused his resolve that the goals of the various conservation programs were attainable—and that they could be reached even within a generation. “I am going to start out,” Bennett said that day, “by saying that, in my opinion, the pressing soil conservation job of our nation can be done by about 1970—if adequate facilities are provided.” Then, carefully and methodically, he laid out the successes of the recent past, specifically singling out the soil conservation districts, which he rated “as the most efficient way yet devised for getting the land of America safeguarded before it is too late,” but then acknowledging the pace of progress might still not be fast enough. It was an inspiring speech, one that echoed through Spencer’s later writings and talks.

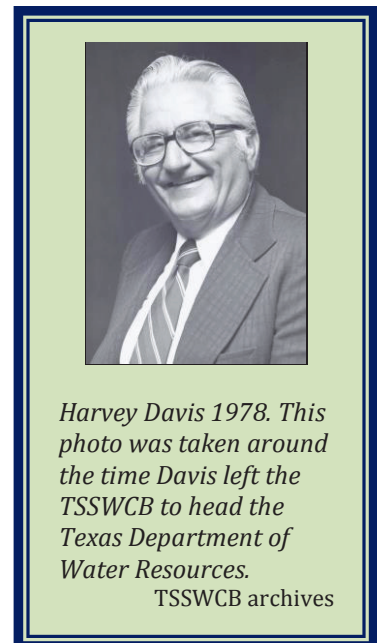
Aerial photo of parallel terracing on the C.M. Pearce farm 8 mi. ESE of O'Donnell, Dawson County.

*Photo by Sam Nix, 1966,
Soil Conservation Service.
Copy in TSSWCB archives*



Spencer rejoined the Texas State Soil Conservation Board in 1954 to serve as the assistant director and then, when Marshall retired, to assume the leadership position. He was, by all accounts, laid back in his administrative approach, but TSSWCB Special Projects Coordinator Mel Davis recalled he often said, “Every once in a while you’ve got to throw a shark into the tank to keep the little fish active.” Under Spencer’s direction, the board continued to grow its influence and to assume broader participation in state and national conservation measures, while also working to support the districts. In 1961, though, following the death of his wife’s mother, he resigned and the family moved to the old Oliphint homeplace near Huntsville called Lone Oak Ranch. He was an administrator in a local bank but also worked to implement conservation measures on the land, while at the same time returning to school to work on graduate degrees in agricultural economics and banking.

Succeeding Spencer at the Temple office was Harvey Davis, who brought a “hands on” approach to the office. As Mel Davis described his administrative style, “He told you what he was thinking; he laid out guidelines, directions, and you knew exactly where you were going.” Harvey Davis was born in Williamson County and had a tough childhood on what might have been considered a marginal farm. According to Bob Buckley, who started at the agency as a staff services assistant and worked his way up to executive director, Davis had a strong work ethic. “Harvey didn’t care who you were, he didn’t care what you looked like—as long as you could do the job and do what he asked you to



Harvey Davis 1978. This photo was taken around the time Davis left the TSSWCB to head the Texas Department of Water Resources.

TSSWCB archives

do, you were his friend and he would back you a hundred percent.” His main philosophy was, Buckley added, “do the best with what you’ve got, but don’t ever lock the back door.” Davis had an innate understanding of the state political process and used it effectively to further the agency’s programs, such as support of a legislative measure in 1969 that authorized the board to provide funds to districts on a one-to-one matching basis for daily operating expenses.

It was during Davis’ administration that the agency name changed to the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board to reflect its growing responsibility in water issues. Particularly significant in that regard was an executive order signed by Gov. Dolph Briscoe in December 1974 (DB-18; amended as DB-18A in 1976) that addressed state compliance measures under the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972. The amended version designated the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board as the planning agency for non-point source pollution (runoff from sources not readily identified) for agricultural and silvicultural practices, making it a key partner in water conservation measures.

"The Running Water Soil Conservation District of Dimmitt, Texas, scored a first in their area in conducting a Soil Conservation tour recently. The tour was broadcast live by Radio Station KDHN, Dimmitt. As the tour stops were made, people sat in automobiles and listened to a description of the various conservation practices observed on the tour. . . . A housewife in the area who listened on the radio stated, 'I didn't know such a thing existed.'"

Texas State Soil Conservation Board Newsletter, Feb.-Mar. 1965

Perhaps because of his experience in such efforts, Harvey Davis resigned from the board in 1977 to assume the directorship of the newly-established Texas Department of Water Resources. He was in turn replaced by Carl Spencer, who left the banking business to again follow what he considered his life’s calling—conservation. A significant piece of legislation passed during his second term as executive director—House Bill 1436—completely codified the agricultural laws of Texas for the first time and specifically included the role of the board under Title 7, Chapter 201. During his tenure also, the number of districts in the state reached 200, due in large part to his passion for traveling and visiting district meetings. Sadly, his extensive travel schedule took its toll on Spencer, who had long dealt with heart problems. In July 1982, while attending a meeting with Soil Conservation Service officials in Fort Worth, he suffered a fatal heart attack at the age of 63. His sudden death was, as Mel Davis recalled, “a shock and a blow.”

The work continued on, however, with assistant director John Millican immediately stepping in as acting director until Harvey Davis returned to lead the agency a few months later. Davis and Millican formed a strong leadership team, in large part because of the commitment they shared for the work of the agency. As Millican aptly observed, “We are supposed to leave the land in better shape than we get it, and that’s just something that I’ve had drilled in me.”

During Davis’ second term, major developments included legislative appropriations in 1983 for the Conservation Implementation Assistance Grant Program, commonly referred to as the Technical Assistance Program. The objective was to provide funding so local districts could employ soil conservation specialists for technical natural resource planning assistance to owners and operators of agricultural lands. Two years later, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 1083, which provided the mechanism for a much-needed Brush Control Program under the umbrella of the Agriculture Code. The goal of the program was to enhance the state’s quantity of water resources through selective control of brush species. Funding for the program, however, would not become a reality until 1999.

After a long and distinguished career in conservation work at the state level, Harvey Davis retired in 1989. He died at Temple in 2008, and an online memorial described him as a modern day John Wayne. “To call Harvey a character might be an understatement,” it read. “He was a philosopher, rancher, storyteller and walking history book. He was fiercely independent and loved life as long as it was on his own terms.”

"Two-row binder cutting (Bonita) grain sorghum on contour, terraced field." This undated photo from Wilbarger County shows the yields produced on the Alexander farm in a field extensively terraced only five years earlier.

Photo by E.W. Jenkins, Soil Conservation Service. Copy in TSSWCB archives



Davis' retirement in 1989 coincided with the agency's first half century of existence. During that time, three men, representing five separate regular administrative terms, steadily led the agency from its infancy as an unfunded and untested concept in a time of national crisis to the point where it was an integral force in the continuing development of modern agricultural conservation practices in Texas—building on a rich heritage of service by so many.

A Personal Perspective on Change:

In an oral history interview, John Millican, who twice served as interim director of the TSSWCB, provided a poignant depiction of how land use practices changed in his lifetime.

From his childhood in San Saba, he remembered:

"In an old field that I plowed, I kept plowing into this ditch that was running through it, and you knew that was the wrong thing to do, but that's all we knew. Every time it rained it would wash down. Yeah, you were aware, especially in those drought years, that something ain't right."

From his retirement more than a half century later on a farm east of Temple, he told:

"I don't know where [the conservation ethic] started, but that's what I try to do now. We're trying to get native grasses, native pastures started back on our land."

5.

Heading to the Diamond Jubilee: The New History

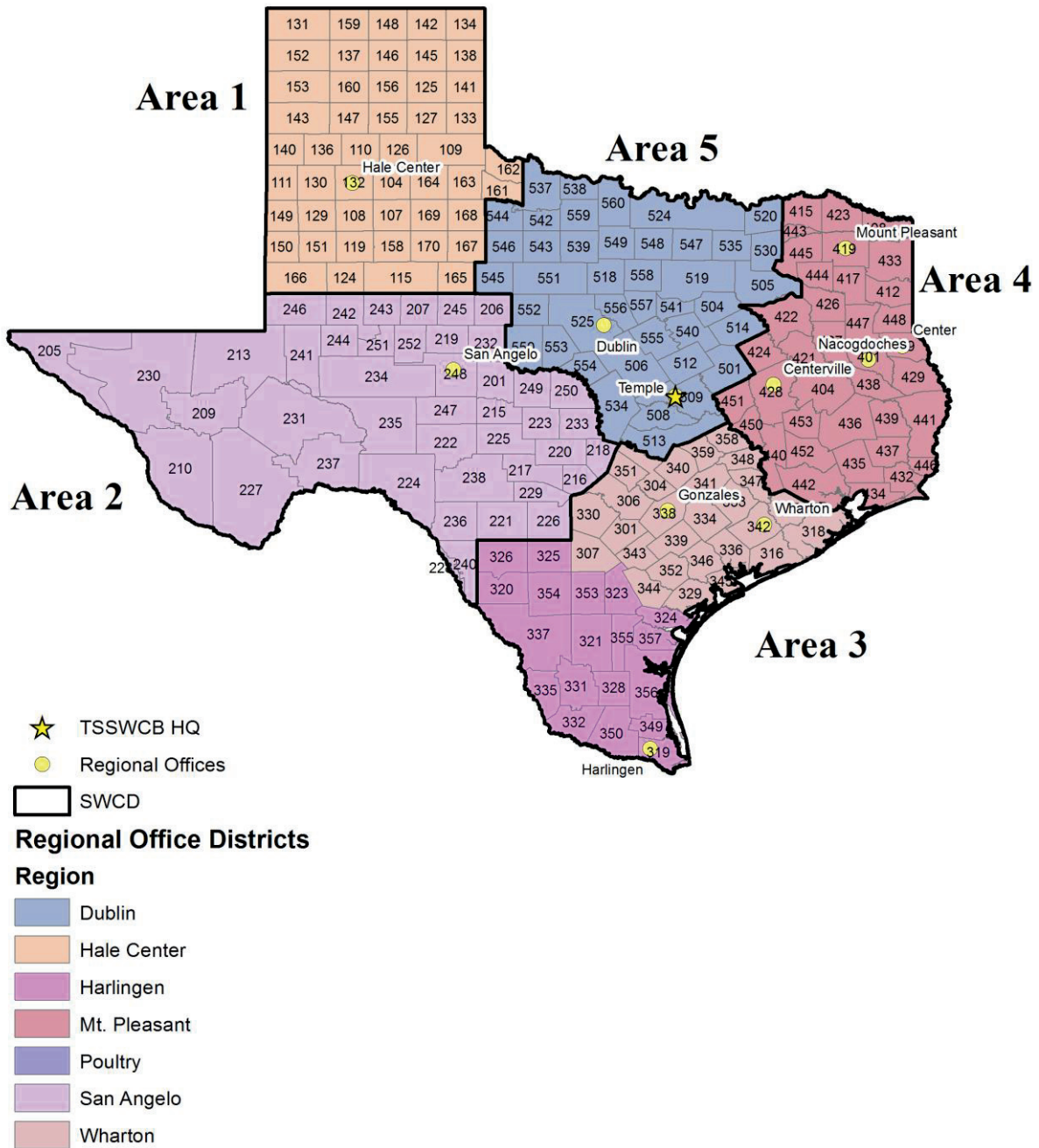
"No one has more bosses than a field rep."

Joe Freeman, TSSWCB field rep, retired

When Robert G. "Bob" Buckley became executive director of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board in 1989, it was an era of economic shortfall for the state government. His accounting degree served him well in that regard, but he had to learn the political situation quickly in order to shore up underfunded programs and grow others to meet increasing agricultural demands. "You would think that something as basic as soil and water conservation would be apolitical, but it's not," he noted. He soon learned that while there were different agendas at all levels of the agricultural industry at large, his agency's system still managed to work effectively. He attributed that teamwork to the historic structure of the board and the districts:

There was always disagreement about how things should be done between the cotton farmers in the plains and the forestry people in East Texas, and the cattle raisers out in West Texas. And somebody, when they set this program up, had some forethought that went into that, because when you look at the five state divisions, where the board members are elected from, it's almost on boundaries of what type of agriculture is involved. And it made for some interesting board meetings sometimes.

During his administration, the board not only struggled to maintain level legislative appropriations but also its very existence. When a proposed Natural Resources Coordinating Council of various agencies threatened to undermine the board's accomplishments and budgetary control, Buckley and Harvey Davis, by then a board member, worked in partnership with other agencies to kill the legislation. Even though it lingered on into a special session, it ultimately died in subcommittee. Despite what at times seemed a contentious political fight, the TSSWCB



2013 map of Texas showing areas served by the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board

emerged even stronger than before and in subsequent sessions enjoyed a renewed status as a leader in water issues. Senate Bill 503, which passed in 1993, named it the lead agency to address water quality issues relating to runoff from diffused, or nonpoint sources resulting from agriculture and forestry operations. The legislation created a voluntary water quality management plan (WQMP) certification program for landowners and also expanded the agency's environmental mission and nonpoint source pollution oversight through the 319(h) grant program of the Clean Water Act. As a result, in 1994, the TSSWCB began receiving half of the state's annual grant funds through that program, a significant development that gave it greater authority over proposed projects.

In the ensuing years, the agency expanded its role further into projects that addressed key issues related to composting, poultry mortality management, the proper land application of poultry litter, and other concerns. Especially with regard to new poultry industry mandates, the number of WQMPs increased dramatically.

In 1999, the TSSWCB received its first appropriation, under authorization granted in 1985 by a bill sponsored by Sen. Bill Sims, to implement a program to control water-depleting brush and trees, such as cedar and mesquite. Strong legislative support for the state funding came as a result of the political leadership of Rep. Pete Laney, of Hale Center, then the Speaker of the House. Laney's Texas agricultural heritage reached back generations and included service by himself and his grandfather on a local soil and water conservation district. An active farmer when first elected to office, Laney understood firsthand the need for brush control to enhance the water supply, and he knew the opportunity for an effective program existed through the district structure. His objective was to direct funds where they were needed and to coordinate various programs throughout the state to create technical plans while avoiding regulatory roadblocks. As he said, it gave farmers and ranchers "an opportunity to do things they wanted to do, rather than what they had to do; to let them identify problems in different parts of the state." Laney's actions came out of a deep-seated belief in the need for adequate water supplies. "It's a hundred percent necessity," he noted. "We don't have an option."

The new funds allowed the board to create a pilot project in the North Concho River Watershed north of San Angelo. Selection of the site reflected a 1998 report by the Upper Colorado River Authority that documented significantly decreased water flow levels along the North Concho from 1960 to 1996. Brush control appeared to be a viable option for recharging

the aquifer and increasing the water supply into O.C. Fisher Reservoir. Local districts worked directly with landowners to develop management plans for more than half the watershed, addressing brush control, soil erosion, water quality, wildlife management, and other natural resource concerns. Guided by the locally-generated plans and working in a broad-based partnership that included four soil and water conservation districts, as well as the City of San Angelo, the river authority, and various state and federal agencies, the project produced impressive results that proved the cost effectiveness of dramatically increasing the area's water supply. As expected, the invaluable lessons learned in the pilot project led to successful implementation in other watersheds, but additionally the program became a model for initiatives in other states as well.

Thanks to the direct involvement of Rep. Rob Junell, of San Angelo, then chair of the House Appropriations Committee, the legislature appropriated funds for the TSSWCB to hire a fulltime employee to work on the Brush Control Program. That position went to the local field representative, Johnny Oswald, who remained based in San Angelo. Additional funding came through subsequent legislative sessions that allowed for an increase in staff to work directly with landowners, to write plans and draft contracts, and to oversee compliance issues. Following a recent Sunset Commission review for the agency, the program name changed to the Water Supply Enhancement Program, with the main goal of increasing water supply to municipalities and other specifically-targeted areas. The connection between rural areas and cities is one Oswald sees as a key to the future of the agency. "I think it is environmental issues, dealing with urban issues. We'll always have to be flexible enough to see what the problems are and start working on them." To that end, he values the inherent strength of the board's unselfish commitment, which he believes has remained consistent through the years. "No matter how diverse they are or how they think about their area, they always come together to do what's best for conservation in this state. That's unique." Where

West Rocky Creek

Historically, West Rocky Creek was a free-flowing tributary of the Middle Concho River west of San Angelo. With its flow disrupted by the drought of 1918-1919, it remained an intermittent stream until the 1930s, when it ran dry. In the 1950s, long before state brush control legislation, five ranchers who owned extensive lands in the watershed began working together on a comprehensive range management plan that included the removal of water-dominant invasive species. The first sign of success came with a renewed spring in 1964, and by 1970, springs flowed on all five ranches, resupplying the aquifer and the creek, which carried water again for the first time in decades. Lessons learned in the West Rocky Creek experiment proved integral to the development of state legislation to follow in the 1980s.

they ultimately choose to allocate funds, he believes, is always “in a high priority area for the state of Texas.”

With the advent of the twenty-first century, the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board remained at the leading edge of conservation measures in the state. Bob Buckley retired in

Evidence of Effectiveness

“When you travel the state of Texas and look at farms and ranches, you can physically see conservation systems at work--whether it be terrace systems, range management, whatever it may be—you can see effects of conservation district programs at work.”

Clyde Gottschalk
Program Specialist, TSSWCB

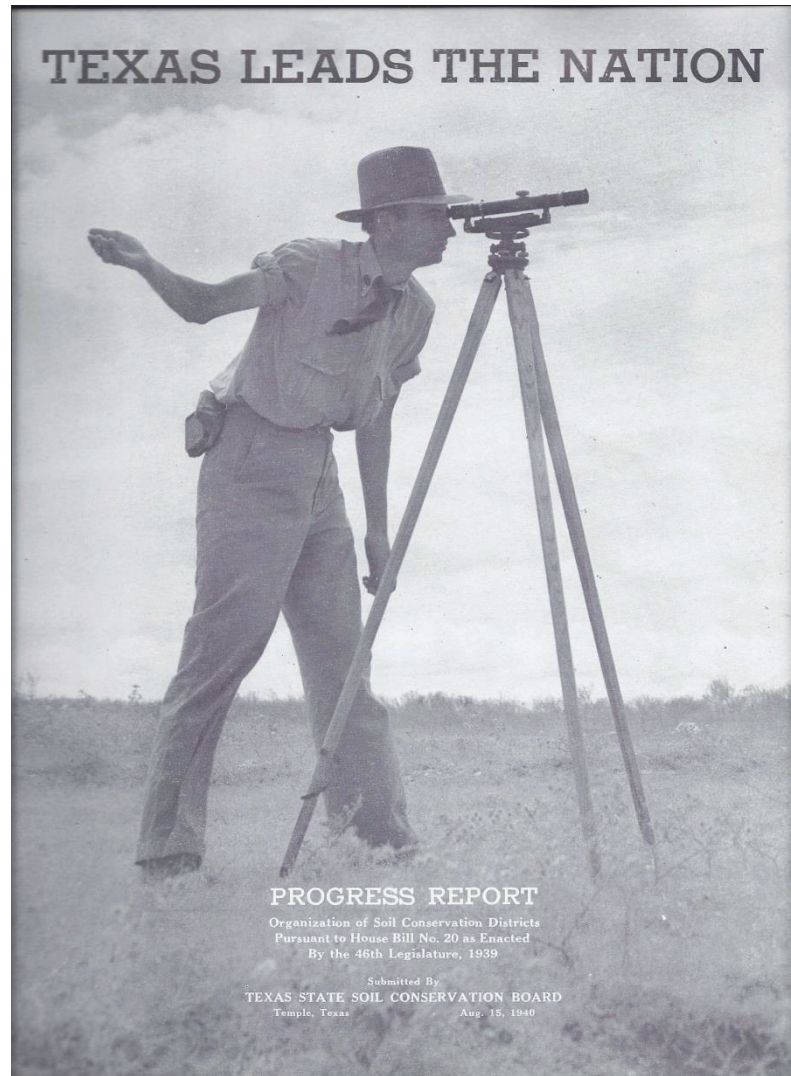
2002 and was succeeded by James Moore, during whose term the legislature passed a bill to add two governor-appointed members to the existing five members selected through their areas. In September 2003, Charles “Rex” Isom became the new executive director, first in an interim capacity and then on a regular basis in 2004. During his tenure to date, the visibility of the agency has continued to rise, with new responsibilities and partnerships, and new leadership possibilities, increasing at a steady pace. One of the most significant advancements came in 2009 when the legislature appropriated fifteen million dollars for the

operation, maintenance, repair, and rehabilitation of approximately two thousand federally designed and constructed flood control dams in the state. The legislation also provided more funding for specific technical assistance programming and, in an effort to keep the agency at the forefront of conservation planning, support for such technological advancements as database development, geospatial data management, and geographic information systems.

Despite such sweeping innovations and added responsibilities, however, the very foundation of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board remains the same in the 21st century as it was in the days of the Dust Bowl—the districts. It is the district structure that drives the engine, and that is clearly understood at all levels of the agency work. It is a system that continues to work as it was originally intended. As field representative Don Brandenberger described the democracy and independence of the grassroots structure, “It’s extremely difficult to bring an idea from Washington or Temple to there. It’s very easy to make an idea work from there on the way up.” And, he added, “These people are living it, and I am nowhere bold enough to say, ‘Hey, guys, this is a great deal and it’s going to work,’” because the landowners—as V.C. Marshall understood in the 1930s—“are going to be the first ones aware of a problem related to conservation.”

This cover from the 1940 Progress Report indicated that even from the very beginning, Texas was leading in the development of soil conservation districts. That trend continued on into subsequent decades as well.

TSSWCB archives



While the structure has remained much the same since the earliest days of the agency, there have nonetheless been significant changes that reflect an evolving society—increased urbanization, greater political challenges, and more diverse representation. Urban sprawl and the new infrastructure it fuels encroach daily on former agricultural lands and in turn alter the makeup of coalitions that historically worked together for agricultural conservation. Where it used to be a relatively clear-cut situation of urban versus rural, now the divisions are more complex, as Pete Laney explained. New coalitions of urban and rural interests, for example, are emerging to address mutual concerns of burgeoning suburban growth. In the Texas Legislature, where he worked for 34 years, Laney now sees a far different set of interests represented. When first elected to the House of Representatives in 1972, there were more than forty members actively involved in agriculture and now there is only one, but as the former speaker was quick to

point out, “he’s a lawyer; he just happens to farm.” Regardless, Laney remains an optimist, counting on the promise and potential for continued conservation progress, particularly with regard to water issues, where he believes there will increasingly be room for agreement on several levels.

Also a reflection of promise and potential is the increased public awareness of conservation needs that in turn brings new perspectives to the ongoing dialog. Because that trend is so relatively recent, an oral history project initiated in 2013 by the board resulted in the

Dividends

"People who are close to soil and water conservation realize that it does not cost, it pays. I witnessed this in the 1960s as my dad purchased a washed out, used up farm and through his efforts working with the local soil and water conservation district and the Soil Conservation Service turned that farm into a productive unit that still functions well some fifty years later."

Barry Mahler,
former TSSWCB chairman

collection of largely untold stories that speak to the democratic ideals inherent in the program structure from its inception. One of those who participated in the oral history project was Kendria Ray, who grew up on a ranch between Chilton and Marlin, and who majored in agricultural services and development at Tarleton State University thanks to a Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo scholarship for her FFA project, which was a cow-calf operation. Following completion of a master’s degree at Tarleton in agricultural science with emphasis on crop and soil science, she went to work for the soil and water conservation district in Hamilton on a job funded by a 319(h) grant. She was, in fact, the first technician in the state hired under that grant program. In 2000, she became the state’s second female field rep, working out of Gonzales. As she related, her experiences at the district level had been positive and productive, and she welcomed the new opportunity to advance. “There was a period of having to prove myself,” she acknowledged, “but that’s going to be true of any new field rep. That’s not unique to being a female. I’m out there doing the best job I can, just like everybody else.”

Another oral history interviewee who spoke to change in participation at the district level was Wade Ross, who worked as an agriculture teacher in Seattle, Washington for many years before returning to his home state of Texas in 1991. Out of his concern for his fellow African American farmers in the Navasota area, he founded the Texas Small Farmers and Ranchers Community Based Organization to provide assistance with state and federal programs. As part of that assistance, he encouraged others to participate and get involved. When he heard about the

work of the local soil and water conservation district, he followed his own direction, attending district meetings and spreading the word about the availability of programs and training opportunities. Given his background in education, he equates conservation plans for agriculture with lesson plans for teaching. His goals are many, but they include greater involvement by young people and the mentoring of farmers and ranchers of all genders and races to participate on local boards and TSSWCB committees, and to get involved in the political process. Also working to promote greater participation by the African American community is Waelder farmer Albert Nunn, who first learned of the Texas State Soil Conservation Board in 1970. A former educator like Ross—he was a teacher, coach, and administrator—Nunn received funds through a cost-share grant to build a water tank and plant Coastal Bermuda grass, and he later served on the district board for ten years.

In South Texas, three men—Andy Garza, D.V. Guerra, and Omar Garza—spoke in their oral histories of the growing importance of conservation planning to the Hispanic farming and ranching communities. Guerra told of his family’s proud heritage and historic ties to the land in Starr and Hidalgo counties. Tracing his genealogy from Spain to Mexico in the 1600s and then into the United States in the early 1800s, he placed his own story within broader contexts of agriculture, land stewardship, and public service. In 1962, he became a director with the Willacy-Hidalgo district, as his father had been, and he was the youngest director at that time. He told of attending his first state meeting in Lubbock, where it snowed. The following year the weather was more favorable when the meeting convened in his hometown of McAllen. To Guerra, a primary concern through the years has been public education regarding the benefits of conservation, and he sees in particular the ongoing value of working with young people through new means of communication and new strategies. He has been active in bringing about political change, working closely with U.S. Rep. Kika de la Garza, U.S. Sen. Phil Gramm, and others on a wide range of issues. Through his years of service to the soil and water conservation district, he has

The Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Association

“The Association has represented the State Board in Austin and Washington, DC for many years. It is our duty to convey to elected public officials the issues of concern for the Board, which has been out front with programs developed to aid and assist our cooperators in compliance with rules concerning EPA standards in certain agricultural businesses. These state programs have always been innovative and exceedingly successful.”

Bill Thomas, Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Association

seen great change in land use. “For years, agriculture was the number one source of income for the Valley; now it’s tourism,” he reflected. “Trailer parks now appear where orchards used to be, and many cattle ranches have transitioned to wildlife ranches, and some landowners are now converting to wind farms and installing solar pumps.” With more and more people moving into the area, water remains a key issue, especially with regard to sources shared with Mexico.

At the Kenedy County Courthouse in Sarita, Andy Garza told of his upbringing on a ranch between Riviera and Falfurrias, and how, as a student at Texas A&I University, he worked as an intern for the Soil Conservation Service, learning to draft conservation plans and to lay out terraces and grass waterways. Following service in the army, he completed a master’s degree in rangeland management at A&I and worked for the SCS and the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute. In 1988, he went to work for the TSSWCB, attracted by the potential of a long-term career with the agency. He observed closely the effective district work of D.V. Guerra, Mel Benavides, and others, and worked on a variety of important conservation projects that included irrigation, grassland development, grazing management, the Tree Assistance Program, and water quality planning. To him, Senate Bill 503 marked a turning point in the agency’s history. After that, he said, “Now we’re truly in the soil and water conservation business. We have our own technicians, we have our own engineers, we have our own planners. Now we’re writing plans right alongside NRCS [U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service]. And for the first time, we’re providing cost share assistance.” He also recalled the simple but sage advice Harvey Davis gave him when he first started in the business: “You need to go visit the district director at his house and drink a cup of coffee with him”—another reminder of the importance of district actions.

A Conservation Fighter

One of the champions for additional state funds to support the work of conservation districts was Irma Katherine Walden Hooks (1924-1984), who with her husband ran Hooks Airport in Harris County. A member of the local conservation district herself, she was one of about 40 women directors in the nation when she began serving in the 1960s. Her high visibility in conservation work and her political connections in Austin proved beneficial to increased support of the TSSWCB. As a 1971 UPI article on her noted, “Irma Hooks is one of the best things that has happened to conservation since stubble mulch and contour gardening, say land lovers in [the Houston] area. . . . No weekend garden clubs for her. She filled an unfinished term as a Soil and Water Conservation District director, and was elected on her own to another term.” It went on to add that the slogan she chose to sum up “her intense feelings” was “America—Love It Enough to Leave It for Someone Else.”

And in Rio Grande City, Omar Garza told of his early life ranching and farming near San Ysidro, where he learned about the need for water conservation and the value of brush removal. Trained at Texas A&I and Texas A&M, where he received a master's degree in agricultural education, he took a job with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service in Edinburg, where he worked with 4-H clubs and helped recruit young Hispanic students for the program. In 1975, he became the first Hispanic employee of the TSSWCB, working as a field rep in association with nineteen soil and water conservation districts. In those years, he recalled being uneasy at his first state meeting in San Antonio because there were so few Hispanic participants, but he saw that as a challenge for him personally. Consequently, he worked hard to encourage greater involvement by local producers, and in that process he felt he always had the support of the agency. In time, his efforts paid off with increased Hispanic participation. When Garza left the agency to take over the management of his family farm, he continued to serve on the local district board, while also working in county government and later with the UT-Pan American Community Engagement Department, through which he created the nonprofit Texas-Mexico Border Coalition. He remains on the district board, having served more than 33 years.

In a program founded on the value of long-term investments and commitments, stories of such lengthy service are not rare. Another interviewee, Ben Sims of Paint Rock, became a member of the Concho Soil and Water Conservation District about 1957, a year that marked the end of a devastating drought in Texas. A veteran of World War II, in which he served as a top gunner on a B-24 over southern Italy, he worked hard as a young rancher to improve his land through a variety of conservation measures that included brush control. For that, he received a grant in 1965 for a tractor and stinger, and he now proudly estimates he has cleared more than a million detrimental trees, mostly mesquite and juniper. In his more than 55 years of service on the local board he has seen a lot of change, but he also sees that more is needed, in part because some of the conservation infrastructure of the 1950s and 1960s faces structural integrity issues. Regardless, Sims still believes in the profound potential of conservation, in general, and specifically in the mission of the TSSWCB that makes it possible for local districts to do what needs to be done. As the agency reaches a historical milestone—its Diamond Jubilee—the need, the response, and the work continue.

Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board



newsletter



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Temple, Texas
Phone PR 3-2250

APRIL – MAY, 1967

PRIZE WINNING ESSAY

PRESERVE OUR NATURAL RESOURCES

Conservation...can be defined as the wise use of our natural environment; it is, in the final analysis, the highest form of national thrift -- the prevention of waste and despoilment while preserving, improving and renewing the quality and usefulness of all our resources.

-- John F. Kennedy

America today stands poised on a pinnacle of wealth and power; yet we live in a land of diminishing beauty, vanishing open space, and an environment that is polluted daily by chimneys, smokestacks, incinerators, and garbage dumps. It is not too late to repair some of the mistakes of the past and make America a beautiful and productive continent again.

We must study and understand the intricate patterns of outdoor life before we can become wise enough to use the earth's abundance properly. If the beauty and bounty of the American earth are to be preserved, it will take thoughtful planning and a day-in and day-out effort by business, by government, and by voluntary organizations.

We must understand that man himself is a part of nature and must conduct himself according to her laws. Nature could get along very well without man, but humans could not survive long on this earth without the blessings of air, water, minerals, forests, wildlife, and productive soil.

The quiet conservation crisis is a serious threat. Quick action can be expected only when threats to the public health or public convenience are imminent. The largertask will not be undertaken unless a quickening conscience leads us to act now to protect the land for future generations. As George Perkins Marsh pointed out a century ago, greed and shortsightedness are conservation's mortal enemies.

We have reached the point in our history where it is essential that all resources, and all plans for



Adele Marie Primomo, Dilley, Texas, wins Fort Worth Press essay contest over more than 50,000 entries from High Schools throughout Texas. The Frio Soil and Water Conservation District sponsored Miss Primomo's essay in the contest.

their use and development, be perfected by those who make the over-all decisions. Those who decide must consider immediate needs, compute the values of competing proposals, and envision the future as well. For example, chemical contamination, the disposal of radio-active wastes, and sonic boom are problems which will require the careful measurement of social costs and social benefits.

A great task awaits those people who are conscientious enough to care about the welfare of their country - those people who cherish their past and believe in their future.

Like a defective instrument in a symphony orchestra, nature cannot produce beauty if all her parts do not blend together in harmony.

Conservation Essay

In 1967, Adele Marie Primomo, of Dilley, sponsored by the Frio Soil and Water Conservation District, won a state competition with her essay on conservation. It read in part, "A great task awaits those people who are conscientious enough to care about the welfare of their country—those people who cherish their past and believe in their future. Like a defective instrument in a symphony orchestra, nature cannot produce beauty if all her parts do not blend together in harmony."

6.

Scratching the Surface: An Epilogue

"I want young people to know and understand that there is a public institution that has conscientiously worked to preserve and maintain the productivity of this state's natural resources not only for the individuals who are here today but for those who are to come."

Clyde Gottschalk

As the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board enters its 75th year of existence, there is much to celebrate, remember, and honor. It has a proud and distinguished history, but as Rex Isom noted, "It's my opinion that the agency is just on the brink of becoming a major player in the conservation of our natural resources, primarily water." As the need for conservation grows in significance in the nation's collective conscience and as broader planning issues for society evolve from water quality to water quantity, the agency continues to build on its past to meet the future demands. "We are the implementation program that works on the land and goes out and has the confidence of the producers statewide to provide the technical expertise and the incentive to get those best management practices applied out on the land," Isom assured. "As producers look to find the programs that actually assist with the implementation of Best Management Practices, they find they are associated with the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board. We've been here basically since the Dust Bowl, and the delivery system is in every county of the state. *Every acre* is covered by the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board and its programs." And, to add emphasis to the story, he proclaimed with confidence, "I believe the best days of this program are just in front of us."

As promised in the opening lines of this Diamond Anniversary history of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, this has ultimately been a story of hope and promise and community, and a celebration of human ingenuity and perseverance. It has also been an overland journey that, like a well-maintained field, has myriad interconnected rows and terraces, any of which might have been a worthy route to follow. In the end, though, the board opted to tell a broad story that speaks to a cross section of the people, places, policies, and programs that have

sustained the agency for 75 years. These are the same fundamentals that cause all involved in the story to pause and honor the past, but also to carry it forward to future generations of Texans, who will be the benefactors and the new guardians of sound land stewardship. And as land ownership changes, the job of the local boards to educate them on the importance of soil and water conservation continues on as it has for the past 75 years. For, despite what Hugh Hammond Bennett predicted in 1948, the work did not end in 1970; it continues on. As someone aptly noted, the land and water have been around from the beginning, but conservation is only a few generations old. There is more to do, and that realization will lead to the next chapters still to come. This is the true context of the story—a story without an ending, but one that still meets a need. For, as Bennett also liked to note, “We have only begun to scratch the surface.”



2013 TSSWCB District Figures:

<i>177,108</i>	<i>conservation plans statewide</i>
<i>74,806,741</i>	<i>private acres preserved</i>
<i>1,373,333</i>	<i>public acres preserved</i>

Since 1938, the USDA-Soil Conservation Service (SCS), now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), has been working hand-in-hand with the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, the soil and water conservation districts, and agricultural producers to protect and improve the state's natural resources. This local, state, and federal partnership is a grassroots effort that provides technical and financial conservation assistance through several programs to help agricultural landowners and land managers reach their land management goals by voluntarily installing conservation practices on farms and ranches across the state. The benefits provided through this partnership reach far beyond the farm or ranch gate to impact all Texans with healthier soil for food and fiber production, water quality and quantity, more abundant wildlife and fish habitat, and a healthy agricultural economy that keeps rural Texas alive, and makes up about 10 percent of Texas' gross state product.

The longstanding partnership of NRCS and the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, and local soil and water conservation districts, has been strong for seventy-five years, and continues today. We look forward to many more years in this successful conservation partnership.

Happy 75th Anniversary, Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board.

Salvador Salinas
State Conservationist
USDA-NRCS, Temple, Texas

Appendix A—State Board Members

Area 1

State Board Member	Term of Service	Years of Service
William G. Kennedy	1939 -1943	4
W. M. Deck	1943 - 1945	2
S. J. Payne	1945 -1959	14
Frank Gray	1959 - 1986	27
Fred H. Squyres	1986 - 1991	5
Paul Robertson	1991 - 1999	8
Dayton Elam	1999 - 2003	4
Aubrey Russell	2003 - 2011	8
Scott Buckles	2011 - Present	

Area 2

State Board Member	Term of Service	Years of Service
Horace K. Fawcett	1939 - 1953	14
A. F. Leesch	1953 - 1968	15
Joe Antilley	1968 - 1992	24
Charles "Buddy" Clark	1992 - 2000	8
Edward G. Albrecht	2000 - 2004	4
Reed Stewart	2004 - 2008	4
Marty H. Graham	2008 - Present	

Area 3

State Board Member	Term of Service	Years of Service
Walter W. Cardwell	1939 - 1949	10
E. W. Wehman	1949 - 1980	30
C. F. "Dick" Schendel	1980 - 1998	18
Waldo Smith	1998 - 2000	2
Donald Swann	2000 - 2003	3
Guillermo "Memo" Benavides	2003 - 2005	2
José Dodier, Jr.	2005 - Present	

Area 4

State Board Member	Term of Service	Years of Service
J. P. Martin	1939 - 1957	18
J. S. Sharp	1957 - 1967	10
Albert Roach	1967 - 1988	21
Larry McCasland	1988 - 1990	2
Albert H. Evans, Jr.	1990 - 1996	6
Gene Sollock	1996 – 2000	4
Wayne Register	2000 – 2003	3
Jerry Nichols	2003 - Present	

Area 5

State Board Member	Term of Service	Years of Service
V. C. Marshall	1939 - 1940	0.5
C. M. Caraway	1940 - 1956	16
J. C. Porter	1956 - 1966	10
Henry W. Turney	1966 - 1981	15
Hermon L. Petty	1981 - 1989	8
Harvey Davis	1989 - 1997	8
James K. "Rooter" Brite	1997 - 2001	4
W. T. (Dub) Crumley	2001 - 2007	6
Barry Mahler	2007 - Present	

Governor Appointees

State Board Member	Term of Service	Years of Service
Larry D. Jacobs	2005 - Present	
Joe L. Ward	2005 - Present	

Appendix B—Executive Directors

Executive Director	Term of Service
V. C. Marshall	February 1940 - June 1955
A. C. Spencer	August 1955 - November 1961
Harvey Davis	December 1961 - November 1977
John Millican - Interim	December 1977
A. C. Spencer	January 1978 - July 1982
John Millican - Interim	August 1982 - December 1982
Harvey Davis	January 1983 - February 1989
Robert "Bob" Buckley	March 1989 - August 2002
James Moore	September 2002 - August 2003
Charles "Rex" Isom - Interim	September 2003 - January 2004
Charles "Rex" Isom	January 2004 - Present

Appendix C— Association of Texas Soil Conservation District Supervisors

The Association of Texas Soil Conservation District Supervisors began in 1942 and was a dominant force in educating farmers and ranchers about the benefits of soil conservation. The association, with a 25-member board of directors, maintained an independent office in Temple. In 1952, it began publishing a monthly magazine dedicated to all things, small and large, regarding soil conservation. Unfortunately, due to budget issues, that association dissolved in 1964. The following year, the Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts formed thanks primarily to the efforts of Gilbert Kretzschmar, Sr. of Bartlett. It was the intent of the new association to maintain a presence to assist districts in their efforts to educate landowners.

Below is a list of the association’s presidents from 1965 to 1979 and all board members from 1979 to 2013. Although not all the names of the past association board members are listed here, it is important to note that each has been vital to the success of the effort. Without the dedication and drive of such individuals to volunteer their time to the needs of soil and water conservation in the state, the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board and local districts would not be able to enjoy the remarkable accomplishments of the past and of a bright future to come.

YEARS OF SERVICE	PRESIDENT	AREA
1965-1967	Gilbert Kretzschmar, Jr.	5
1967-1970	A. L. Black	1
1970-1973	Doyle Hutcheson	5
1973-1976	Dee E. Brune	3
1976-1979	Kenneth Kuykendall	2

YEARS OF SERVICE	ASSOCIATION DIRECTOR	AREA
1979	Charles W. Wood	1
1979	David Tong	4
1979	Dee E. Brune	3
1979	Doyle Hutcheson	5
1979	Gene Gilbreath	5
1979-1980	Kenneth Kuykendall	2
1980	C. F. “Dick” Schendel	3
1980-1983	Hermon L. Petty	5
1980	J. E. Clark, Jr.	4
1980-1986	Joe Montgomery	2
1980-1991	W. Q. Richards	1
1981	N. Campbell Cox	4
1981-1990	Waldo Smith	3
1981-1985	Wilson Scaling	5

YEARS OF SERVICE	ASSOCIATION DIRECTOR	AREA
1982-1987	Judge Jerry McCasland	4
1984-1992	Charles "Buddy" Clark	2
1986-1992	Clyde E. Hale	5
1987-1995	Donald Swann	3
1988-1994	S. W. Dorrell, Jr.	4
1991-1993	Maurice Shepherd	5
1992	Jimmy Harrison	2
1992-1997	T. Michael Holt	1
1993-1998	John Earl Smith	2
1994-1997	James K. "Rooter" Brite	5
1995	James Earl Smith	2
1995-1996	Judge Larry McCasland	4
1992-2002	Guillermo Benavides Z.	3
1996-1997	Wayne Halbert	3
1997-2000	Wayne Register	4
1998-2008	Barry Mahler	5
1998-1999	Dayton Elam	1
1998-2005	José Dodier, Jr.	3
1999-2000	Edward Albrecht	2
2000-2002	Aubrey L. Russell	1
2001-2007	Marty H. Graham	2
2001-2013	William Thomas, Jr.	4
2003-2013	Ben Bono	3
2003-2010	Scott Buckles	1
2006-2013	Jule Richmond	5
2008-2013	Volney Hough	2
2009-2013	Pat Hudson	4
2011-2013	Rickey James	1
2013	David Basinger	4
2013	J. C. Mathiews	5
2013	Vicki Riser	3

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AND

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OF

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75 YEARS

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CONSERVING TEXAS SOIL & WATER RESOURCES



CONSERVATION BOARD

75TH ANNIVERSARY
1939-2014



ATSWCD

ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS SOIL AND WATER
CONSERVATION DISTRICTS