Biographical Sketch

Mel Davis was born in Ambrose, North Dakota in 1927. After graduating from North Dakota State University he worked as a vocational-agricultural instructor. He served in the Navy in 1945 and 1946.

Upon joining the SCS in 1952 he was a soil conservationist in his native state. Following several promotions, he transferred to Pennsylvania in 1963 to serve as assistant state conservationist. From 1968 to 1972 he was state conservationist there. While in Pennsylvania, Davis became field representative for the northeastern United States in 1972, a position he held until his promotion to assistant administrator in 1974. He was also director of the SCS Technical Center in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania during this time.

Following the retirement of Kenneth Grant, Davis served as administrator from June of 1975 to September of 1979. During these four years, SCS responded to a variety of pressing problems and outside criticism while under tight budget constraints. He also led SCS when it took on three major new projects: the Rural Abandoned Mine Program, the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act, and the Rural Clean Water Program. In 1979 he moved into the education under Secretary of Agriculture Robert Bergland. Shortly thereafter, he retired from government service.

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July 20, 1993

Interviewed by Steve Phillips, Historian with the Economics and Social Sciences Division of SCS, in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

conditions. I thought I could make a contribution with my background, my educational training and desires for the future.

PHILLIPS: Was there anything in your education or studies directly connected to soil conservation or soil

professional ladder, of course, never did I dream of ending up at the highest rung of that same ladder some day.

PHILLIPS: What year did you join SCS?

DAVIS: I joined SCS in the summer of 1952.

PHILLIPS: And at what position?

DAVIS: As a soil conservationist in Mott, North Dakota.

salary and I thought I had to work as many hours as it took, as many days as it took, year-round and that's what we did.

PHILLIPS: Was a lot of evening time taken up with conservation district meetings and such?

DAVIS: There were educational meetings, conservation district meetings, cooperating agency get-togethers, field days, and tours. There seemed to be no end to it and thus there was no lull in activities.

PHILLIPS: One of the big changes was the move from the regional system to the state office system.

DAVIS: The regional offices were in existence when I joined the Soil Conservation Service and there was one in Lincoln, Nebraska. As I said a bit ago the line officers were the administrators, state conservationists, area conservationists, and work unit conservationists. The regional office was headed by a line officer at that time as opposed to what it later became, a technical service center. When the Eisenhower Administration took over there were some thoughts of changing SCS from an organization that had been very active and very successful, to one of no existence at all. The regional offices were the result of that type of thinking and

PHILLIPS: Did SCS employees have any particular views on this change?

DAVIS: Every SCS employee had a view and those views were very different. You had to have an official view which was maybe this way but an unofficial opinion which was the other way. So there were lots of views--strong, good, bad, and indifferent. Some states loved the abandonment of the regional office. Some states and some employees were assigned to those states out of those regional offices, like it or not. It was more of being ordered than being selected, as I discussed a moment ago.

PHILLIPS: This is a broad question but some of the debates in the Service seem to be over what the state level

have a strong national program of developing standards and specifications, as an example, for soil and water conservation practices. The program back in the early 1930s and 1940s, but that's history. SCS was never designed to have nor did it ever have the sort of control over land that

DAVIS: Well, keep in mind that these things constantly changed as we went from the horses to the tractor to

We did many things on what we called water spreading, just putting dikes in so that when the snow melted

operator, because of their experiences with drought, Depression and all these other things were much more knowledgeable of the Soil Conservation Service. We worked together hand in glove to try to help them.

How did we approach them? We approached them any way we could, through educational meetings and group meetings. We had a program at one time called "finding Elmer." In "finding Elmer" we had group

PHILLIPS: And went to Pennsylvania in what position?

DAVIS: I came to Pennsylvania as an assistant state conservationist.

PHILLIPS: Tell us about that position.

DAVIS: The time I came into that position, it was a new position in Pennsylvania. I came in there as an assistant state conservationist for

DAVIS: You're comparing apples and oranges. It was entirely different. Let me say Pennsylvania had a good conservation program in those areas where they had one. The history of conservation districts and the problems between various agencies and the Soil Conservation Service in Pennsylvania, I'm sure is quite well known, and I don't choose to get into that. We had to do a lot of work in the creation of soil conservation districts even after I came here thirty years ago because the Extension Service in Pennsylvania had fought the creation of districts for some good and valid reasons. There had to be a lot of work done in what I call general relations with cooperating agencies

217 that required districts to be created on a county-wide basis.

PHILLIPS: What were some of the specific erosion problems in Pennsylvania?

DAVIS: Well, in Pennsylvania, there were erosion problems because of the high moisture--rainfall--as compared to North Dakota and many other places. Pennsylvania was farming country where erosion was a big problem from water, not from wind. Soil conserving and soil building were important. You can go to northeastern Pennsylvania; the old rock fences were there. When the snow melted

mining, particularly deep open pit mines, to say nothing about sink holes and a whole group of other things.

PHILLIPS: What about Public Law 566, the Small Watershed Program, in Pennsylvania?

DAVIS: It was an excellent program nation-wide, and could be adapted almost anywhere. Pennsylvania had a good program of public law 566 watersheds in planning and development at the time I came to the state. We carried it out vigorously and we did one thing in Pennsylvania, I think, that was highly beneficial. Not that it wasn't done elsewhere, but we did incorporate multiple use of the water-retarding structures wherever possible. I'm talking about municipal water supply, recreation, and all those sorts of things.

PHILLIPS: Do you have any comments on relations with the Corps of Engineers? Did they have many objections to the watershed projects?

DAVIS: Well, the Corps of Engineers and the Soil Conservation Service had many areas of conflict. In my personal experience in Pennsylvania, the Corps of Army Engineers, whether it be the Baltimore district, the Pittsburgh district, or the Cincinnati district, was generally good. We understood each other. We got together and called a spade a spade. Two hundred and fifty thousand acres or less, we took a look at. Over two hundred and fifty, we said to the Corps, "You take a look at it." We communicated, which perhaps was the most important thing. There were areas of conflict and areas of concern but no real problems.

PHILLIPS: Where did you go after the assistant state conservationist position?

DAVIS: I became state conservationist for Pennsylvania in 1968, upon the retirement of Ivan McKeever. I served in that position for four years. In 1972, I left the position of state conservationist and went to Upper Darby to head up our technical service center. I directed the technical staff that provided support to the thirteen northeastern states and the Caribbean area at that time. I was also the administrator's field representative. It was not a line officer position but you were sort of called the administrator's eyes and ears to the various states. The administrator, even though he had fifty state conservationists reporting to him, couldn't possibly keep a finger on all of them. So he worked with and through the field representatives to see what was going on and why.

PHILLIPS: Was it unusual for a field representative to have the other post that you held concurrently?

DAVIS: No, they all were set up that way. From the time they were created, which was an evolution after the abolishment of the regional offices back in 1954, it evolved so that all of

the technical service centers were headed by a director who was also the administrator's field representative.

PHILLIPS: How did you come to be selected for the state conservationist position?

DAVIS: It's like everything else, you never really know, I guess. I was selected to became a state conservationist in Pennsylvania by Don Williams. Mr. Williams, a fine administrator and a fine gentleman, never really talked to me about the position. I was in a training center at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy out on Long Island, New York, when I got a phone call about my becoming state conservationist. Actually, my wife and kids knew it before I did. Mr. Grant was administrator then and I'm assuming they went through a panel process where the personnel office and other people at the national level made a list of qualified people for the job. The administrator made a decision on who he would like to serve in that position Anything above a grade thirteen at that time had to be approved by the Department. That was the way it went.

PHILLIPS: Just to back up a bit, I have a couple of broad questions. Could you address the shifting emphasis in SCS? During the 1960s and 1970s, the trend was first toward more environmental concerns and second more toward urban and suburban concerns, correct?

DAVIS: I would like to separate out environmental. I'll get into that a little later. The first shifting of emphasis, I think, was toward the urban areas. When I say that I don't mean that was bad. They had soil and water resources, they had soil and water conservation problems, just as the farmer and rancher did. I don't think the original legislation or any interpretation of it thereafter really said farmers and ranchers. Now some people wanted that and, true, we worked mostly with those people because they controlled the large areas of land. But I had no qualms with providing technical assistance to urbanites, to conservation groups, and organizations that were trying to solve problems that were not strictly related to agricultural land. True, we were a part of the Department of Agriculture but that didn't limit us to them. Again, local conservation districts and others needed to set the priorities and we, the agency providing technical assistance in the field of soil and water conservation, needed to help carry out those priorities.

PHILLIPS: Wasn't there growing concern over water pollution, pesticide use, run-off, and such?

DAVIS: Yes, they become more and more concerned about water quality and water pollution, primarily because of erosion. Due to erosion, soil particles, silt, and sediment carrying nitrogen, phosphorus, and potash flowed off the farm fields and caused algae to grow on the ponds. True,

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DAVIS: Yes, Hurricane Agnes, of course, came on in 1972. At that time, I was just leaving the state conservation job in Pennsylvania and going to the technical service center in Upper Darby. We played what I would call a major role in the emergency work that was needed. It was not all to prevent the flooding

conservationists and their staffs in reference to soil and water conservation problems, pushing development, and even the selection of people for everything from going to graduate school to heading up an EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) program, which was coming into its own at that time. I spent about half of

keep the programs that we had in soil conservation on track. When the boss, Butz, said something, you didn't run around the country and contradict him. You maybe had to run around the country and try to pick up after him but you didn't run around and contradict him.

PHILLIPS: Could you give us some background to your selection as administrator in 1975?

DAVIS: I can't give much background on that. Assistant Secretary Bob Long was in the chair over in the Department at that time. He went through the SCS career people and made the selection and that was it.

PHILLIPS: Shortly thereafter the Carter administrator came on the scene. Was there a change in priorities or the way things were done?

DAVIS: When I became administrator Dr. Butz was the head of the Department of Agriculture and Gerald Ford was the President of the United States. The election, of course, changed all of that and thus we had the Carter Administration as you referred to. Did it bring about any change? Now, we'll come back to that question you alluded to a bit ago about environmental issues. We should never forget this--maybe I should have woven it in earlier--in 1972 we had an energy crisis in this country. I was in Upper Darby at that time. Simultaneous with that and continuing on to this day with the energy crisis was the environmental surge. The Carter Administration happened to come in then because of the desire of the American electorate. With it came a group of the environmental types. So when you ask did it have any influence or change priorities or SCS policies, an accumulation of those things, including a new administration, caused changes.

PHILLIPS: Can give us any specific areas where you saw those changes?

DAVIS: Environmentalists were more and more calling the shots and I did not necessarily call them environmentalists. Some were true preservationists. In any case, perhaps the first impact of this had been years before Carter and his people came to town in the channelization argument on watersheds under the Soil Conservation Service and the Small Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act. Whether we should clean out stream channels and all those sorts of things would be one example. At the time of the change in administrations, the more environmentally inclined people came to Washington, including President Carter. There were more and more demands and pressures to change our rules and regulations under which we carried out a program. These, of course, were developed by the Soil Conservation Service in cooperation with others and carried out by us

because we were expending the dollars through local sponsors. There became more and more pressure to change these things, to quit doing this or do this another way. On the other side of the coin was still the same group of land owners and operators out there having the same problems of flooding or drainage. I maintained then and I maintain now that the two can live together. As long as you have private ownership of land in the United States, you cannot just stop something that has been going on, farming, for example, in certain areas

those people who were most critical of the Soil Conservation Service and its activities: Those environmental groups, and I can take the National Wildlife Federation as a specific example, gave me hell up one side and down the other, yet they never came to my office to sit down and talk to me about these problems. They would leave it up to you to come over there because they thought that they were in the driver's seat now. They were, to a degree, because they had people in power. Congress, the president, the secretary, and the assistant secretary

something else. I hope forever that we have private ownership of land and those who own and control it will have the largest say about the use of it, while not disregarding laws, not

environmental preservation. Don't misunderstand me, I think conservation, planning, application, development, food production, and fiber production can go on in a very

PHILLIPS: Other than those two groups, who else did you deal with as

made them very close partners in all of this. They were close partners and

with them at the national level, and I believed that carried over to the states. Keep in mind that state by state there was always some little fracas going on.

PHILLIPS: What is an example of a state level conflict?

DAVIS: In a state level conflict they may want the Soil Conservation Service to do nothing with urban people. The Soil Conservation Service and its mandates under the law were to help all people, but there were states that said, "We don't want anything to do with those folks. You spend all your time with farmers and ranchers." Well, to answer that, we had an obligation to all the people, they were all citizens and all

Plains Conservation Program, a program designed for an area of the country to solve a specific problem, wind erosion. I'm still a believer that you can't have one design in one program administered the same way all over the United States. Otherwise we'd only have one dam design that would fit the Grand Canyon and a little tributary of the Yellow Breeches Creek near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Therefore, you have to have local adaptation. I still believe that that's a good approach to soil and water conservation problems and solutions in this country. It's going to have to be designed much closer to the problem. I don't know the answer, maybe it should be designed more on the basis of rainfall belts or something of that sort rather than on a general

same thing is true of the Department of Agriculture and the Soil Conservation Service. Leaders come and leaders go but you have got to have a national program and a national focus and a national direction of those programs with flexibility to allow things to be done and done right. Timeliness, the right people at the right time at the local level, is a very difficult problem for an administrator or any of his staff.

PHILLIPS: The other administrative question I have concerns your reorganization in 1976. You ended up with three deputy administrators serving under you. What was your reasoning behind this change?

DAVIS: My reasoning was this; it started with the administrator of the Soil Conservation Service way back in 1954 when they eliminated the regional offices. The span of control of the administrator just got to be too great; there was no way he could put his arms around everything. I thought it advisable back then in 1975 and

PHILLIPS: You had to check with the assistant secretary?

DAVIS: Oh yes, the assistant secretary and other people in the Department had to sign off on any of these reorganizations. Don't think that the Soil Conservation Service administrator can do these things unilaterally, he can't.

PHILLIPS: But they placed enough trust in you and they were receptive, correct?

DAVIS: They were receptive and did, in fact, approve my proposal. Thus we reorganized into the three deputy areas. It was done primarily to try to achieve more harmony between the common functions there. In other words, we had a deputy administrator for soil survey and a deputy administrator for watersheds but there was much more involved. The soil surveys were just one part of the program needed to carry out a soil and water conservation program, so when

DAVIS: Of course, we suffered budgetary pressures back at the time I

PHILLIPS: Another problem connected to budget issues was the Government Accounting Office

Plains program or in the conservation operations program or whichever one they were looking at. I never refused to sit down with them and discuss the details of why they came to this conclusion and why was I doing it this way. We could generally find a common ground. Not always, but generally.

PHILLIPS: Can you detail any specific changes that came out of their comments or criticism?

DAVIS: Are you asking me a question that I maybe shouldn't answer? There were some subtle changes that took place with the approval of the Department. There weren't big changes that came about even when these reports were transmitted to Congress. We answered a lot of mail from congressmen and others about those reports and press articles but they never really caused any big change, in my judgment, during my tenure.

PHILLIPS: Every two or three years another article comes out saying, "There are so many farmers in the Department of Agriculture. If you get right down the basis of all of this we still have so many acres of land in this United States and we have to feed many more people each year. The soil and water resource problems are the same or worse now than they were back then. When I say "back then," don't ask me when that was, it's sometime in the past. So when they say we have too many employees at the Department of Agriculture doing the wrong thing, I can't agree with them. We may have a few too many or may be a few short in some agencies and organizations. I can't defend, of course, every agency in the Department of Agriculture. I did then and I still believe now that I can defend the agency of the Soil Conservation Service and its many thousands of employees. I hope that there's reason and justification in the national interest to keep this thing going.

PHILLIPS: One of the figures that several people have mentioned is Verna Mohagen and her role in systematizing career advancement in SCS. Do you have any recollection of

Robinson Center in Crawford, Nebraska. That's where I met her. Verna Mohagen made an impression of various kinds on anybody she met, worked or talked with. She was truly the director of personnel and perhaps the individual closest to the administrator and state conservationist in the

conservationist of the United States, a woman who happens to still work in that capacity in the county in which I now live in Yuma, Arizona. We tried to do what we could to carry out equal rights for women's programs and we made special emphasis to try to train them, to bring them up, if that's a good

only administrator there. The rest of them sent somebody else from their agency or organization, but I was there as an administrator of an agency because I felt that strongly that there ought to be equal opportunity regardless of race, creed, color or sex. In that setting, I tried to promote these programs. I'm not saying people before me didn't, but in some cases they simply couldn't do much. There could be a woman graduate in business administration, but the technical standards and technical qualifications set up by the Civil

people. You had to work to overcome this. We've overcome it, I hope. The government of the United States has overcome it but I was a little bit leery then and now that people were sought, considered, and put into jobs that they weren't qualified to do either from training or experience background. They might have had a degree in it, but they were put into a job that maybe did more harm to the movement than it did good. I tried as an administrator to keep a balance in this whole thing.

Agriculture. When the laws were passed by the Congress, they didn't specifically say SCS. In most cases, they said the Department of Agriculture. You immediately recognized what was going on. You set up a group working to develop an

PHILLIPS: So were these meetings, when you held them, contentious?

DAVIS: It varied from meeting to meeting. Surely you tried to have a calm meeting. If I had a bone to pick with the Forest Service, I would go

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the committees, and all of the studies that go to develop a memorandum of understanding are really where the benefits come.

In our case with the Forest Service, this memorandum of understanding had to do with lots of things. We agreed in the memorandum of understanding who would do what in the Small Watershed Program. The appropriations were made to the Soil Conservation Service but we actually transferred money to the Forest Service for them to use either themselves or with their cooperative state agency, such as the state forester, to carry out certain studies of runoff in the wooded areas for the Small Watershed Program. It was just having the best available technicians at the time do the work necessary to solve the problem. That was the purpose.

PHILLIPS: How about relations with Congress? You testified frequently on the Hill I assume?

DAVIS: I testified on the Hill many times. I would have to classify the relations between Congress and the Soil Conservation Service before my time and during my tenure as good, excellent as a matter of fact. Sometimes the Department of Agriculture didn't like the relationship we had with Congress because we could respond. We had an organization that if somebody wanted to know something out of Congressman Whitten's district in Mississippi, with a phone call or two we could have it because we had an organization out there to get and supply the information and respond to Congress. Congress knew that and the Congress liked that. I'm not saying the Department of Agriculture always liked it because we could respond so much quicker than they could. Our relations with the Congress were good because they not only liked our program but knew what our program did and why we were doing it. We kept them informed.

PHILLIPS: Others have mentioned Congressman Jamie Whitten, would you care to elaborate on his role in soil and water conservation efforts?

DAVIS: Jamie Whitten was called the "permanent Secretary of Agriculture," but nobody new in town knew that, particularly, the new Secretaries and administrators. Jamie came into office in 1941. Jamie Whitten was involved in many things and he never let anybody forget his influence. We never forgot the influence that he had on dollars, principles, and on programs.

In reference to my relations with Congress, I kept them informed but I never let the political process control the organization. In other words, I kept my workers away from that and Jamie Whitten and others respected that. They did not get involved in my appointments, jobs or positions but I kept them informed of actions I had taken and actions I was going to take. They understood and respected us for it.

PHILLIPS: Other than Whitten, are there any other Congressmen who come to mind as major supporters of SCS or USDA?

DAVIS: Well, there were a lot of them we could talk about. Of course, being a native of North Dakota, we had a man known as Mr. Wheat, Senator Milton Young, an excellent supporter who served on the Agriculture Appropriations Committee in the Senate. Mark Andrews, a Congressman from North Dakota, likewise. He was a Republican but his office was right next to a Democrat, Jamie Whitten. These people had quite an influence really on what was going to happen. Because in the Congress, there are a few people in each specialty--agriculture, defense, you name it--who are the ones the rest of the Congress looks up to. If Jamie did or said something, very seldom did the rest of the Congress or the rest of the committee ever go against him. You had to have the right relations with these people. There's maybe too many of them to mention that were friends of the Soil Conservation Service. You could go to Ed Jones of Tennessee and William Natcher of Kentucky and the list goes on and on. I'm not saying they weren't broad minded and weren't concerned about the environment or doing some things important to environmental issues, but generally you found that your supporters were from the old-line agriculture from the standpoint of production of fiber and food, and then conservation. It's in that setting that they supported you.

PHILLIPS: Was there much opposition from any Congressmen?

DAVIS: You always had opposition. There were Congressmen, I don't want to get into naming them, who "took us on."

PHILLIPS: Did they have any particular explanation for disliking SCS?

DAVIS: Sure, they had two reasons. One, an environmental group got a hold of them. They were fed the wrong information. They were not willing to open their ears to the total thing. There are two sides to every story. We had our friends and we had our foes. On balance, we had many more friends than we did foes. The same thing is true in the Secretary's

Office of Management and Budget who were examiners of the Department of Agriculture. Specifically some of them were assigned to the Soil Conservation Service. We had our friends and our foes there. Part of it, of course, was simply created because there are only so many federal dollars available and when you're administering a program, there's got to be give and take. Various budget people, various examiners, and various congressmen just simply picked up on one, two or three issues and that was what they pushed either directly or indirectly through their staffs. They would oppose others and that's the way it was. That was the ball game.

PHILLIPS: We'll move on now to

local ordinances for local land use, zoning or planning if that was what they wanted. That was the purpose or design behind it. That was my hope when we started them, and it would be my hope today that they're still being used that way.

PHILLIPS: Was that a major thrust of your tenure?

DAVIS: Yes, I would say that it was a major thrust of the times to keep up with the environmental push and to keep up with demands when the Soil Conservation Service couldn't do everything for everybody as we were expected to do and we had sort of done in the first twenty-five to thirty years of our existence. Now, we couldn't do that anymore so we had to

PHILLIPS: Such as crown vetch?

DAVIS: Crown vetch is an excellent example and we did a lot of work with it. The Soil Conservation Service administered the plant materials centers, not research centers. That was done by another agency, ARS (Agricultural Research Service), and the states. We had plant materials centers which strictly took local seeds, seeds developed by colleges and universities, and tested, reproduced, and increased them for use on specific erosion problems.

PHILLIPS: Now we move on to RCA (Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act), a huge topic. I wonder if you can first tell me, did SCS have any specific role or any input into what came out in the RCA? Was RCA something SCS had been pushing for?

DAVIS: Well, to a degree we, the Soil Conservation Service, then the Department had been pushing for a resource assessment. That's really what RCA is. We had a role in pushing for and causing the original work, the original language that caused the appropriation or an allotment of money to make a resource conservation study. It was a very complicated and difficult thing. We tried to do it by soil types and by soil phases on a nationwide basis--a difficult thing to do--and put it all together in one package. If there was [illegible] have been involved and we were involved.

Much of the implementation of the RCA came after my time. It passed in 1977 but by the time we got everything up and running and funds to carry it out, time had slipped away. This administrator was about gone when the first reports were coming out.

PHILLIPS: What about the Rural Abandoned Mine Program (RAMP). We can talk about it in Pennsylvania or Appalachia in general.

DAVIS: Well, the Rural Abandoned Mine Program was another program passed by Congress to reclaim mined areas. It happened that Pennsylvania, West Virginia and some of the states in which I worked had a lot of these areas. The Soil Conservation Service had a lot of expertise that could come to bear on reclaiming these areas, so therefore we were and should have been involved in the reclamation of abandoned mines. We had a lot of information on erosion and sediment and it was no use for some other agency or organization to go out and recreate the wheel. We were involved and we got funds from the Department of the Interior and others to do this particular job. I think we had a role, we have a role, and it will be an ongoing role.

PHILLIPS: We've been talking [illegible]

agricultural groups unhappy over this apparent broadening of responsibilities during a time of budget constraints?

DAVIS: In a particular county or conservation district, they were not necessarily unhappy because it was the biggest problem in that county or conservation district. But as an administrator, if you start pulling resources out of a strictly agricultural area of North Dakota or Ohio and putting them into an Appalachian coal mine area in the hill country of Kentucky, the answer there is

PHILLIPS: Did you attend some fairly hostile meetings?

DAVIS: Oh sure, you like to go into a meeting and know how you're going to come out, but during those times you were never sure. You couldn't plan because you didn't know what was coming up. You had "warm" meetings and I was perturbed, disturbed, and all of the other "turbs" that you can mention, but I never left one of those meetings without gaining some knowledge and some insight into what both our organization, the Soil Conservation Service, and theirs

PHILLIPS: Did the scope of P.L. [illegible] That's what I alluded to earlier.

erosion, you name it. All of these things are not going to be solved by any one administrator or any one program. It's going to take a combination of several things over time. When I say time, in some cases that means new ownership. Time in some cases means what the farm machinery manufacturers are doing now. I still go to a machinery showroom or two. They have done a tremendous job in changing their machinery design to try and achieve better soil and water conservation, in my opinion. In my days in the field, they sold a tandem disk and tractor with road gears and that created a

had to plant windbreaks every twenty rods to keep wind erosion at a minimum on sandy soils or to hold snow and put moisture there. Unfortunately, some of those windbreaks were planted using the wrong species or on the wrong line. By that I mean they should have been on a contour rather than up and down the slope. As technology changed and times changed, those windbreaks served a purpose. They're still serving a purpose but the time has come when many of them maybe should be removed and replaced with a better practice. I simply say, as long as they're going up the conservation

melt laying there. So they were taken out, some of them were replaced with one row belts, a great improvement over the multi-row belts, and so it goes. This was a change in time, a change in technology, and a change in thinking.

PHILLIPS: Today wetlands have become a very controversial issue at the Department. During your tenure was it an issue, was it talked about?

DAVIS: Yes, and it was just as hot among the same groups of people who are still there. We developed wetland guidelines with the Corps of Engineers, the Department of the Interior, and the Fish and Wildlife Service. All of those guidelines helped achieve an understanding but did not solve the problem. The above a marsh, said the whole thing should have been classified as a wetland. There were people who said that wetlands were undefinable. There were people who said all of this area should be classified as wetlands. You go plug that drain up and see what happens. The issue of definition is still going on. I predict it is never going to be resolved to everyone's satisfaction, particularly at the national level. They may get it resolved in some states but it's not just a state problem; it's across state lines, and it's across international lines like the United States and Canada. The issue of wetlands, their definition, how they're going to be handled, and how much should be preserved will go on forever.

PHILLIPS: Sort of changing track a

hauled it over the mountains to the people who might need it, the donkey

DAVIS: The two administrators of the Soil Conservation Service before

organization, people could be

that time. I knew about these things

PHILLIPS: You already briefly discussed changing jobs in 1979. What specifically was the job in the Secretary's office?

DAVIS: Well, I became an assistant to the secretary for international science and education and in that capacity, of course, I did quite a bit of foreign work for him. As a matter of fact, I was involved, very interestingly, in going to Egypt and Israel several times. That had to do primarily with the peacekeeping mission and the agreement between Carter and the heads of those two countries. They had several committees or assignments and I was on the agriculture group. At that time, I'd go to Israel and talk to the agriculture people. I couldn't fly directly to Egypt because they didn't have relations. I had to go to the island of Cyprus and become "neutralized" and then fly back to the other country. So I had a lot of interesting experiences along that line.

specifications, write the specifications, and do all of those things, but I don't believe that the same fellow who arrests the man should serve as the judge and jury for the man. I think that there needs to be a clear division. I don't believe that the Soil Conservation Service should be involved in what I'm going to call enforcement. They maybe should be involved with cross compliance between programs to see that if there is a requirement under one program it is being followed under another. But I don't believe the Soil Conservation Service ought to be the one who goes out and does the police work, and I use that term respectfully.

PHILLIPS: In conclusion, do you have any general comments on your career with SCS?

DAVIS: I would only say this; I think I had a good career with SCS. I think myself looking at it and anybody else looking at it would say that. I suppose

where you've been. I shouldn't be looking back, I look forward. I left the organization, but I'm not disgruntled with the organization at all. I still have a tremendous respect and love for the agency and always will have. For what happened or is happening to the agency, I have some questions and some grave doubts but somebody else will worry about them.

PHILLIPS: Have you been involved in soil conservation since your retirement?

many things and I have refused to do

Norman A. Berg

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Biographical Sketch

Conservation Act Management Group, and member of the Secretary of Agriculture's Coordinating Committee

Part One: April 9, 1992

HELMS: Norm, my idea about this is to go in chronological order. We may need to do this more than once and not really rush. We'll just start out with the basics, when you were born and something about early childhood and growing up.

BERG: I started life in Burlington, Iowa, a town on the Mississippi River. It's also the home of Aldo Leopold. My dad worked for a railroad as a machinist. He had been in the Navy as a chief petty officer and came back to Burlington and worked for the shop that kept the steam locomotives running. My mother had been born in Burlington. My dad came from Sioux City, Iowa, and his ancestors came from Norway and settled in southeast South Dakota and moved to Iowa. He eventually ended up at Burlington. My mother's background goes back to her mother being a Rohleder. Her grandmother was a Kelly having come from Ireland. There's a mix of backgrounds in my family, including some German background along with the Irish. Both of my parents were American born. My mother lived until she was ninety-three. She'd be one hundred and one as of the end of March 1992 had she continued to live.

My dad had bought a farm in Minnesota about eighty miles north of Minneapolis/St. Paul, close to the Wisconsin line. He bought that farm in 1914, four years before I was born, with help from his dad in terms of financing it. As I remember our summers, when he had a break from working he would drive me and my brother, who was two years younger, up to that farm in Minnesota. We would go across Iowa and up through southern Minnesota heading for the farm in a Model T Ford. The land that he bought was originally forested as was all of northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. It had been logged-over in the late 1800s and most of that land came back to second growth timber. If it was cleared it became agriculture. That was the objective of the farm that he had purchased--to clear it of the second growth and make it into a combination livestock and grain farm. It was really and truly a family farm.

I don't remember much about Burlington, Iowa, except that I think I started a preschool activity there and maybe a little bit into the third grade before we were moved permanently up to the farm in Minnesota, probably in the mid-1920s. By that time, there were four in the family, myself, a brother two years younger, a sister two years younger than that, and a sister eight years younger than me.

I do remember the hills in Burlington that we had for sledding. Obviously, we were able to have a sled. I can remember sledding on the hills close to where Aldo Leopold's family lived. I did not know that at the time, but since I have gone back to Burlington to honor Leopold at a city function I

have noted how strategically located they were up above the Mississippi River in a very affluent area compared to my background.

As we moved up to the farm permanently, the first task was to clear that land. Somehow my dad had been able to get enough together in terms of cropland that he could have some Holstein cows, chickens, and pigs. All the power was literally horsepower. We had at that time three horses. I can remember in the early

wagon wheels picked it all up. They just ballooned in size. That is the way it was out in the field when it was wet.

We also had some wetland--swampland--primarily peat that was being moved into agricultural use. That was very difficult because it required getting rid of the excess water. But on that farm we also had some very sandy soils that tended to blow when it was windy. In helping to clear the land, I can remember as a boy helping my dad set dynamite

often during the winter in northern Minnesota because the roads were not that well kept at the time I started school.

The school was a consolidated school,

BERG: No. He had no farm background. He was eager to learn. I can remember him getting literature from Iowa State, not the University of Minnesota, but Iowa State in terms of farm research and that sort of thing.

unemployed. We had all of our own resources in terms of food, butchered hogs and calves. Of course, we had chickens. The only cash we had came from our cream that was separated from the whole milk. We used to turn

young boy, I had all of the advantages of the outdoors along with the hard work and a good educational background. That school offered no electives in high school but it qualified graduates for the University

BERG: I had hoped that one of us would get more technical training in the agricultural area as we did not have vocational agriculture (vo-ag) at our high school. We did have a vo-ag department at another high school at Pine City, six miles in the other direction. I went to some evening classes there after I came out of high school and when I was home that year. I found that they had books on agriculture and there were people that knew more than I ever dreamed you could learn about agriculture. They also had a shop there that helped in terms of learning how to weld and do woodworking and that sort of thing. The Smith-Hughes instructor, the vo-ag teacher at the adjoining school, suggested that I look into the Minnesota School of Agriculture down at St. Paul, Minnesota. Secre-

What to do about the farm? My mother by that time had decided to sell the farm, move to town with her two daughters, and help them finish school. So I became a University of Minnesota student. The choice was somewhat limited in the agricultural field, but I began in the broad agricultural area that would qualify me to be a vo-ag teacher or an Extension agent. I was looking at courses broadly in terms of crops, soils, animals, and that sort of thing. I also was concerned about the possibility of the military even back in those days because we were heading in Europe into the beginning of World War II. So I enrolled in ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) at the University.

The University of Minnesota is split in terms of campuses. They have the

I had an opportunity, I think it was in 1938, to get into pilot's training in what was then the Army Air Force. I took a very rigorous physical exam and passed everything and they said there is one last thing that we need to

I had met the girl that later became my wife, Ruth, in the spring of my sophomore year. She had transferred after the first year from North Dakota State University to the University of Minnesota as a home economist. We

HELMS: Let me interrupt. During your study at the university, was there much in the way of what we think of as conservation activities?

BERG: There wasn't very much. We didn't hear about this sort of thing. I mentioned the fact that on the farm we

in that high school between the time I went out there in the early part of 1941 until they finished school that spring, but also I had classes through the summer, including a Future Farmers of America group. I got acquainted with the county agent. St. Louis is a big county up in northern Minnesota

juniors. That was a more attractive assignment. My wife and I were planning on being married and she was still working over at Crookston so we decided

but I was the expert, along with being a teacher for the senior class, arranging evening classes for farmers on a broad array of subjects, plus

Glacier Park. Their headquarters was in St. Paul, Minnesota. They recruited staff for all their work during the summer, out in Glacier Park, from the University students. During my time at the University of Minnesota, I had

first summer. Between my sophomore and junior years I went back up to the farm area that I had grown up in and helped a person wire farmsteads that were getting REA (Rural Electrification Administration) power for the

BERG: It was a little bit better. I went to work full-time as a Smith-Hughes teacher in Meadowlands at eighteen hundred dollars per year. The Floodwood offer was a little better, but not much. The first offer from SCS was twenty-one hundred dollars, I think.

HELMS: What year was that?

BERG: Because I had to disengage myself from the school, it took until February of 1943 when we finally reported to SCS out there. I gave the school the deadline between Christmas and New Years that I was going to make the break. They kept us on for a short time afterwards because they just didn't have anybody there at work day, six days a week, to find work for these people out on the farms and the ranches. That's what I ended up getting involved with first.

HELMS: They called them Civilian Public Service Camps?

BERG: That's exactly right. The camps themselves during the off hours were run by churches. We had more than church or religious objectors. We had some objectors on political grounds and we had some objectors that came in from the Jehovah Witnesses. If they did not stay in the camp, they were treated as deserters. Then it became the follow-up responsibility of some governmental agency, probably the FBI, to find out

of the key person at that location. The conservationist there was Verne Heidenrich. He was an excellent teacher. He had come from a ranch background. The culture in southern Idaho was completely different than what I had known in Minnesota. In Idaho, they had irrigation of the valley lands, and dry land farming with the wheat fallow on the sloping lands that were just below the forested lands on the public domain. Then they had the range lands. Verne was an excellent teacher for me because he understood that culture and led me through all the

have heard that before. They said, "That was the government's conservation measure and I don't worry about it." It needed maintenance but it didn't get any. It was the worst possible way to try to engage the local landowner. But it did provide work for these people and it did get some conservation work established in an area. That district was one of the oldest in the country. It was the Portneuf Soil Conservation District.

The CCC camp that was established

we called it, out of our Downey camp during the summer months to work out on this land utilization area. I did some work out there. We had a conservation plan there on that big holding. I think it was over 150,000 acres of land. We dug wells, we fenced the area, and we reseeded the area. We were working on a plan based on public money coming to the

our state office was in Boise, and the area office that represented that southern Idaho area was in Pocatello.

Most of the districts in that southeastern part of Idaho had already been established. There was one in Bannock County, which was the Portneuf district, one in Bear Lake,

SCS. At one time I analyzed the money coming in on that property. I did this after I came back from World War II, but I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself. It would have taken a hundred years to establish the plan on that land based on the money that was coming in from the federal government. I'll tell what we did

were three very strong districts there already and they all had some CCC background. There were some counties that hadn't organized districts that were close by.

I went into the Marine Corps in September of 1943 and came back to Downey in May 1946. I ended up

that is where they ended up putting me. They wanted me to stay in after the war was finished but I decided I would go back to Agriculture.

I had the opportunity while I was in Washington to come down and get acquainted with the SCS office in Washington, at the same location as it is now. That was the first time I went into the chief's office.

school to be reoriented. That was my first exposure to that Palouse country. They had a school at Pullman, Washington, for returning vets.

HELMS: What was the purpose of that? To learn about new techniques?

BERG: New techniques. There hadn't been much change in policy as I remembered it, but they were, I guess,

state. They were going to send Harold Harris over to the Aberdeen Plant Materials Center. They wanted me to become, when I was ready, the work unit conservationist which then would have moved me from a P-1 to a P-2. I think that must have been in the fall of 1946 or early 1947. My wife and I moved to Pocatello. We had one daughter at that time. She was two years old the day we left Washington on May 1, 1946.

We went back to Idaho without a dime. It was really rough going. I had some money sent in from my Marine paycheck to savings bonds and that allowed us to have enough money to buy a refrigerator, a stove, and that sort of thing, but we could not see our way clear to do anything but rent to begin with. We did find a friend there, though, who had a place to rent. He was a high school teacher. We met people through a Methodist church there who were very helpful. That allowed us to begin building a foundation for a family and for the future.

I was able to do a reasonably good job as a work unit conservationist and attracted attention on up the line. In 1950 they asked me to take over what

The local person, the work unit conservationist, did not represent the Service with the district. The district conservationist represented the Service with the district. I had board meetings in several of these districts every month, plus helping get the new districts established. I had been working on that. We were able to find the younger landowners coming back, like I had, from World War II who were willing to carry the petitions to get people out for hearings and get people out to vote. My area was the first to get all the districts organized. This was not easy to do.

HELMS: What were the reasons for that?

BERG: It was a mix. There were people, and there still are, who feel that any government activity is going to interfere with their private property or raise their taxes or do something. That was some of the propaganda that was brought in. Extension had very strong programs through the state and there were some people at the university level of Extension who didn't feel that we needed to duplicate what they were doing. We didn't find that necessarily at the county level. In fact, these Extension agents at the

had been organized in the state. It showed the districts colored red and they'd hold that map up and say, "Look, if you're wondering what kind of an organization you're heading towards, this is it! (laughs)." Several of us suggested that they change the color to green. If we had a district in the county, it became green. We also had to defend the fact that there wouldn't be any additional taxes and that was a very sensitive matter. It's unfortunate, but that was built into the law.

The business of helping outside of a conservation district was changed somewhat when the Department decided that SCS would be responsible for the technical practices related to ACP (Agricultural Conservation Program) cost sharing. That changed our rules somewhat. But we still held a pretty tight line as to how much we would do outside of the district even on that type of work. Some delegations went into the "white counties," as we called those that didn't have a district, to certify that technical work was properly done on the more permanent type practices. That was a requirement that the Department placed on the SCS at that time.

HELMS: The predecessor to the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (the Production and Marketing Administration) sometimes had its own people for the agricultural conservation payments on the technical side, correct?

BERG: They did. The SCS did not want to have a duplicate technical agency so we did more and more of that work. Once the district was established, it wasn't a problem at all. Incidentally, we had been doing a lot of work with the old Production and Marketing Administration even before they made that assignment. But this made it more formal. It also provided eventually for that five percent transfer of funding that Congressman Jamie Whitten wrote into the act even before I came back to the District of Columbia.

The work in southern Idaho was very well accepted from the standpoint of the SCS. Many of those irrigated farms had been developed going back to the settlement of the Mormons. They were using primarily flood irrigation. There was a lot of erosion and there were a lot of problems from the standpoint of their return flows, the excess water coming off. Especially if they were irrigating elevated areas, if there was too much irrigation--and in a lot of cases there was too much application--it was showing up down below them and developing wetlands on lands that had been previously fairly well drained. They had been farmed well and then they began to get a higher water table because the land up above was putting out too much water.

We also had some severe gullying as it came off the upper benches into the lower valleys. There were rivers in all

stubble. They also, I thought, at that time were not at all acquainted with

piece of paper a complete resource management plan. But you better be prepared for the fact that they are going to take it one step at a time. Many of the people asked for help based on a single problem, not looking at the whole resource. You tried to get them to broaden their thinking. When we brought a soil map out and brought a topo map out and went over that with the farmer, we knew more about his land than he did, even [illegible]

single practice, and an advanced plan that brought them half-way to what ended up being a basic plan. In other words, it was a three-step approach. It was more in line with what I am talking about now.

We analyzed that even after I got back into Washington as to what still needed to be done. It was a matter of understanding from the very beginning that these people who owned and [illegible]

Then there was the actual work of doing it. We had the so-called "sub-professionals" to help us do a lot of that work. But SCS had to gradually wean itself in those areas by getting out of doing everything and turning the cost and the doing of it over to the farmer. Even in the early days when I came back from World War II, we were buying the stakes to go out and mark the one hundred yard markers on every field. Then we'd go out and mark how much of a cut or how much

know, I looked in a catalog, either a Montgomery or Sears, and you could buy a level fairly reasonable and you could do your own. I'd show you how to do it, where you read the target and how much to drop it next time you go across the field so you get a contour with a little grade." The guy looked at me and he said, "Come on over here and look at this." Then he took me into the shed and he showed me a two-by-four about thirty feet long with two legs on it, one about one half inch