

Deuel County Farmer Passionate about Planting Trees

By: Joanna Pope, Public Affairs Specialist

There aren't a lot of farmers left in western Nebraska who can give a first-hand account of trying to farm during the dust bowl. Harold Pidgeon, a 92 year old farmer in Deuel County remembers the "dirty thirties" well.

"Here in 1935 the dust would fill up the sky and roll in and cover the fence line up to the top barb," Pidgeon said.

Having lived through such an ecological disaster – what some still call the greatest environmental disaster the United States has ever witnessed – must have left a deep impression.

That may explain why Pidgeon has such a passion for planting trees. During his lifetime he has planted over 8,000 trees. That equals over 100 trees a year since the age of twenty.

Anita Nein, Resource Conservationist at the Chappell Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field office has worked with Pidgeon on his tree planting projects. Pidgeon has done tree plantings every two years, mostly through the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program.

He has done a lot of hard, physical work to make sure those tree projects were successful by going back and replacing the trees that don't survive. He has done some replants almost every year according to Nein.

"Knowing how hard it is to do just 30 tree replants, I was impressed that someone 92 years old would come in and order 500 trees to replant in just one year," Nein said.

Maybe seeing how quickly things can change made Pidgeon want to do something for the land that would last for generations. Pidgeon has planted a majority of the trees in his later years. Back in his twenties he was just trying to make a living to support his family.

"There used to be a farm on each corner. Most of the farms are long gone. They couldn't make it during the dry years," Pidgeon said.



Joanna Pope, NRCS

Harold Pidgeon has planted over 8,000 trees across Deuel County. At the age of 92, this averages out to over 100 trees a year for the last 70 years. Pidgeon plants most of his trees through the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program.



Joanna Pope, NRCS

Pidgeon lives on the same land his father homesteaded in 1892. It is one of the few remaining homesteads in Deuel County.

drift during heavy snows. She wanted to contact landowners who would be interested in planting a living snow fence.

A living snow fence is a windbreak planted along a roadway. It works to capture snow and prevent it from drifting onto the road. Nein immediately thought of Harold Pidgeon. He owned land along the highway, and was an experienced tree-planter. The perfect combination for having a living snow fence planted on his property.

Nein contacted partner agencies to help make the living snow fence a reality. Eventually the living snow fence partnership included NRCS, the South Platte Natural Resources District (NRD), Nebraska Department of Roads, Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Foundation, Pheasants Forever, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. These agencies and organizations worked together to greatly reduce the cost to the landowner for installing the living snow fence.

Chances are that Harold Pidgeon would have been enthusiastic about the living snow fence regardless of the cost assistance, but he would probably never admit it. When you ask him why he has been so dedicated to planting trees he doesn't give you a direct answer. He just smiles with a chuckle and offers you some ice tea. But his actions obviously speak louder than words. ♦

Pidgeon managed to hold on. He still lives on the same land his father homesteaded in 1892.

You can tell he has a lot of pride in his home. All the out-buildings and barns have a fresh coat of red paint with white trim and are well maintained. A yard full of flowers surrounds his tidy farmhouse.

Harold Pidgeon's love of trees is not just having an impact around his home and fields. He has also worked with Nein on installing living snow fences, which have benefited winter drivers on Highway 30.

Nein had noticed how badly some places on the highway would