

## First Women Work to Conserve Natural Resources

A district conservationist (DC), a soil conservation technician (SCT) and a soil scientist (SS) have something in common in Kansas: they all were first in their career field. Joan Gienger, DC, and Sandy Hudson, SCT, were the first women hired by SCS/NRCS in the late 1970s in their respective careers, and they are now retiring. Jody Gienger was hired in 2005 as the first soil scientist. Joan and Jody are mother and daughter.

**Joan Gienger**, St. Francis Field Office, was the first female to hold the DC position in Kansas. Joan said she has had some very interesting experiences in her 32 years of service with the agency.

"I was seven months pregnant with my daughter (Jody) and accompanied my soil con tech to the field to assist with a windbreak. When we arrived, the farmer looked at my belly and asked my soil con tech if I was his wife," remarked Joan.

"My SCT replied, 'No, she's my boss.'"



About her work with NRCS Joan says, "I like to see what the problem is, and then find the solution, and if possible, help them with financial assistance, seeing what programs are available." A downside to her job is paperwork and meeting deadlines.

When asked about other changes that occurred over her career, "Computers," she answered. "When I started we had none, all correspondence, conservation plans, and contracts had to be typed in triplicate."

Joan retired in December 2010, and plans during the growing season to expand her gardens and to sell the produce at the local farmer's market and in the winter offer weekly casseroles and breads or other goodies for sale.

Joan says she didn't influence Jody's decision to work for NRCS but rather asked her to become an Earth Team (ET) volunteer during the summer. She also looked for opportunities for Jody to accompany specialists when they were in the county working. So when the NRCS student trainee opportunity was announced, Joan let Jody know of it and Jody took it from there. Jody spent two summers as a student trainee and worked at an area office during the school year.

**Jody Gienger**, unlike her mom's occupation, works at the Salina State Office where she maps and classifies soils and spends the majority of her time outside. She says that is why she became a soil scientist (SS). "When I served as an ET volunteer during the summers in high school, I soon realized that DCs spend the majority of their time indoors doing paper work." A SS gets to do a variety of tasks such as identifying problems with soil moisture and erosion. She uses digital and satellite imagery to map soils and write soils descriptions. She samples soils and evaluates their quality, and works with information on watersheds, water quality, and changes in land-use patterns. Jody has worked for the agency just over five years.



When asked what her favorite part of the job is, she says combining agriculture and geology together on a daily basis.

**Sandra Hudson** started working for the Osborne County Conservation District in the late 70s and then worked for the Soil Conservation Service as a WAE before being hired as a permanent employee. She was hired as the first female SCT, at the Osborne Field Office, not a job usually offered to a woman let alone pursued by a woman. However, during the 70s women were beginning to be hired for jobs that were traditionally done by men. Sandy's first SCS boss said the agency was pushing to hire women in the field, and he knew Sandy had what it took to be a good SCT. She could work with people, she was meticulous, and she learned fast.



Sandy says she has walked about every piece of farm ground in Osborne County during her career of 30 plus years. With pride, she can see those windbreaks, ponds, terraces, waterways and other practices that she staked, producers implemented, and today provide protection to the natural resources. Now, some practices she staked are being rebuilt to accommodate new machinery and farming practices.

Osborne County has a lot of conservation-conscious farmers. During the 1985 Farm Bill years, Sandy said she staked over 300 acres of waterways one year, and she helped the field office staff for several years stake over 2-million feet of terraces annually. Sandy said that the average 160-acre field in Osborne County has a 3 to 8 slope and that amounts to about 30,000 feet of terraces. In the days before 4-wheelers to carry you across the fields, the SCT did a lot of walking. It also required 2 people to do the staking because laser levels were not available so one held the rod while the other ran the level.

It was not uncommon, Sandy says, too often be mistaken as the other SCT's wife. She recalls early in her career that everyone came into the office to see the "guys." She was sent to the field to layout terraces for a woman producer, who was not keen on Sandy doing the job. After that first job, the woman always asked for Sandy.

Sandy also served Kansas as special emphasis program manager for the Federal Women's Program and the Disability Program. She also trained many student trainees since Osborne County was as a training location.

Sandy says retiring is the hardest thing she has had to do, but she won't be far away as she plans to work in the ACES program. Sandy retired in December 2010.

Each woman, whether retiring or just beginning, says she can't imagine NOT working for NRCS, and doing the work they enjoyed/enjoy!

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