

NRCS History Articles

Women in the Soil Conservation Service

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"Tama Jim" Wilson, who served for the longest tenure of any Secretary of Agriculture (1897-1913), found the importuning for jobs in the department the most vexing part of the job. "Finding places for deserving women on the request of Senators who righteously plead their cause is the greatest difficulty I meet with," he wrote to a senator. He found the situation of the unmarried women particularly distressing, as he confided to an old friend. "This is a great national eddy where human driftwood lodges. Young ladies are begging for the cheapest kind of labor here, who should go into families and do housework....So you see I have to look at the sad side of life here and sometimes I feel like taking my hat and going home to Iowa." The few women in the early days found employment in the lower paid jobs. In March 1864, nearly two years after the creation of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, the Commissioner received authority to employ women as clerks. In 1891 there were 169 women in the U. S. Department of Agriculture, constituting about 12 percent of the employees. Throughout the government about 14 percent of the government typists were women.

The Bureau of Animal Industry hired women in field offices to do routine microscopic examinations of meat, which was required by an 1891 law. A few women slowly found their way into professional positions. Among federal government departments USDA was the largest employer of women scientists, hiring about two-thirds of the government total in the 1920s and 1930s. American Men of Science listed 19 women scientists in USDA in the 1921 edition and 61 in the 1938 edition, two of whom were in the Soil Conservation Service. The Bureau of Plant Industry was a leader in government in hiring women scientists, especially plant pathologists. The Bureau of Chemistry hired a number of female chemists. Others found employment in the Bureau of Home Economics where the bureau chief, Louise Stanley, was the highest paid and highest ranking woman scientist in the federal government. But Stanley was the exception as other women scientists did not have the opportunity to advance in rank and remuneration.

Women librarians worked in the Department's library, which in time became the most outstanding agricultural library in the world. During the early twentieth century several women held the post of Librarian of USDA. World War II was perhaps the high point in women's employment in USDA. In 1939, 20 percent of the employees were women. The figure was 34.09 per cent in 1943, before dropping back to 21 percent in 1947.

Probably the first female employee of the Soil Erosion Service, predecessor to the Soil Conservation Service, was Lillian H. Wieland. On September 19, 1933, Hugh Hammond Bennett transferred from USDA to the Department of the Interior to head the Soil Erosion Service. The following day Lillian H. Wieland entered on duty as his secretary. Among the 12 employees in the Washington office in October 1933 were Wieland, Laura G. Fitzhugh, and Alberta Stanback. Most of the early women employees of the Soil Erosion Service and the Soil Conservation Service, as it was renamed in 1935, were in secretarial and clerical positions where they were integral to the success of the operations. From its beginning as a few scattered demonstration projects, SCS developed into a national organization with upwards of 3,000 offices and more than 15,000 employees. The main work of the agency was working directly with farmers and ranchers on conservation problems. Such a far-flung organization relied, in part, on competent professional secretarial and clerical work.

During the rapid initial growth of the organization, everyone felt the pressure to make a favorable impact so that the work would continue. Frances Hershberger recalled the early office work in Maryland. "[I] think all of us secretaries felt we helped to get the project for SCS in Maryland off to a good start. We worked diligently from 8 to 5, & for the first few months worked overtime. We not only worked 5 full days a week but also ½ day on Saturday." Though the early secretarial staff may not have worked personally on conservation practices on the farm, they could enjoy the sense of group accomplishment. Estella B. Williams started working in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, in 1935 and later transferred to Maryland. At the age of 91 (in 1989) in a retirement home in Hagerstown she wrote, "I still love to go through the country and see the strip cropping etc."

Like their male counterparts, quite a number of the women who found employment in the early days made a career of the work. Secretaries throughout the organization have often been invaluable in providing continuity in cases where heads of office changed frequently. They know the organization and the key conservation partners in state agencies, conservation districts, and other areas.

Some states did not have clerks for districts; the area clerk would travel to the districts to do the work. Marjory A. McTavish, the area clerk at Butte, Montana, made work trips to each of 11 district

offices four times a year. Now, when she speaks to groups and encourages young women to consider a career in the federal government, she uses a story to illustrate some of the attitudes that were all too prevalent about women's role in the federal government in the 1960s. "I was making a three-day trip, spending a day at Three Forks, then Townsend, and then Helena. I stopped in East Helena for gasoline. Now--this is in the early 1960s, and I am driving an olive green government sedan with decals on the door saying USDA-SCS and displaying government license plates. I drive into this station, roll down the window as an old fellow, the attendant, approaches the car, and I say, 'Fill it up, please.' He doesn't answer, just looks at me--then he proceeds to walk around the car. When he gets back to the open window, he says, 'Does the government let women drive their cars?'"

In addition to the Soil and Water Conservation Society, SCS also has had a long association with the conservation districts and their national organization, the National Organization of Conservation Districts. Women have also played a large part in this cooperation--probably none more so in the formative period than Mrs. Ellen Cobb of Spartanburg, South Carolina. While a secretary with the Soil Conservation Service, she began helping with the meetings of South Carolina's state association of conservation districts. By 1941 she regularly attended and kept notes at the meetings and assisted with the growth of the organization. E. C. McArthur, the first head of the state association, led an effort to organize a national meeting of district officials. Mrs. Cobb went to the meeting in Chicago in 1946 when the National Association of Soil Conservation District Officials was organized. Later Mrs. Cobb recalled the mood of the meeting that was so instrumental in the history of the conservation movement in the United States. It "was hot as Hades when those 17 men, plus McArthur, plus little me, sat around a table in the Morrison Hotel, and discussed the merits of a national organization, and I won't deny that some of them were doubtful; but after much talk, that great leader McArthur sold his idea." The group authorized McArthur to hire Mrs. Cobb as the Executive Secretary. McArthur died in an automobile accident in 1947, and Kent Leavitt of Millbrook, New York, was elected as the president. Mrs. Cobb was clearly the most knowledgeable person about McArthur's plans for the infant organization. Mrs. Cobb moved to Millbrook and lived in a rented house which served both as her home and the office of the National Association of Soil Conservation Districts. With the organization on a better footing, Mrs. Cobb resigned in June 1948 and returned to Spartanburg.

Although most of the women in SCS during the 1930s and 1940s were in the secretarial and clerical fields, there were some women in the sciences and technical specialties. At the urging of the Science Advisory Board, the Soil Erosion Service set up a Climatic and Physiographic Division to do research in climate, ecology, geomorphology, and erosion history. Within the division Lois Olson

headed the Erosion History Section, whose staff researched maps, documents, and records to determine the character of the natural landscape. This information could be used to establish datum points for studies in climatic change, the extent and rate of soil erosion, and changes in plant cover. Olson had B.S. and M. S. degrees in geography from the University of Chicago. She had studied at the London School of Economics and had worked with the American Geographical Society before taking the job with the Soil Erosion Service. In addition to supervising the work of the section, Olson published articles from the research work in *Agricultural History*, *Geographical Review*, *Nature*, and *Soil Conservation*.

Due to the need for geographers to help with the war effort during World War II, Olson left SCS to work for the Office of Strategic Services; later she worked with the Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency. During the period September 1942 through October 1943, SCS lost about 23 percent of its employees, many of whom went into military service or transferred to other government agencies. During that year 32 female employees joined the military services. In the civilian labor force "Rosie the Riveter" had come to symbolize women's contributions to the war effort by working in jobs usually reserved for men. It seems SCS did not use this method a great deal, although there were some exceptions. Mary C. Baltz, a graduate of Cornell University, joined SCS as a "Junior Soil Surveyor" during the war labor shortage and continued with the agency as a soil surveyor until the early 1960s when she resigned.

Another person in technical and informational work in the early history of the Soil Conservation Service was Charlotte Whiteford, later Charlotte Colton. Whiteford was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and then earned an M. S. degree in botany at Ohio State University before taking a job as a secretary with the soil science staff at the SCS office in Zanesville, Ohio in the mid 1930s. Her scientific training served her well in working with the staff. J. Gordon Steele, a soil scientist who had been in a plant ecology class with her at Ohio State, found his former classmate at the Zanesville office. In the late 1930s Steele was involved in publishing SCS reports entitled "Erosion and Related Land Use Condition," concerning the various SCS project areas. He recruited Whiteford to come to Washington as an assistant soil technologist to work on the reports. The job required both knowledge in soil science and editing. Whiteford took courses in editing and soil science in the USDA graduate school. At least one of the reports, *Physical Land Conditions on the Leatherwood Creek Demonstration Project, Lawrence County, Indiana*, included her as an author. Charlotte Colton continued to work as an editor, especially on soil surveys, and eventually became head of the publications staff of the Soil Conservation Service. She retired in the 1980s.

A few women worked as public information specialists and editors during the early history of SCS; more joined in the 1960s through the 1980s. Phoebe Harrison regularly wrote and compiled the book review section of the early issues of Soil Conservation. Later she worked on the international aspects of soil and water conservation before retirement. Ruth Nordin headed the editing shop and from there helped women such as Georgie Keller, Catherine Blakely, and Juanita Grasty move up from lower grades to be publications editors. Nordin also taught editing in the USDA Graduate School and gave workshops on clear writing to SCS managers. Kay Mergen worked in the area of conservation education in the 1960s and 1970s.

The work of SCS in farm planning, soil surveys, and other activities has relied in part on expertise in cartography, use of aerial photography, and remote sensing. Some women found employment in the cartographic center at the regional offices and later the technical centers, although often in the lower paid jobs of cartographic aid and cartographic technician. Probably the best known of the women who worked in the Soil Conservation Service in the late 1940s up into the 1960s was Verna C. Mohagen, director of the Personnel Division. A native of North Dakota, Mohagen went to work for the Veterans Bureau as a clerk-stenographer in 1927. In 1929 she moved to Washington, DC, to work for the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils. Like many another young person who came to the capital to work for the federal government, she soon found the local colleges and universities to be an opportunity to gain an education and to improve job prospects. By attending George Washington University at night over eight years while working full-time, she earned a B. A. degree (1934) and an M. A. degree (1937) in economics. She also took courses in public administration at American University. Miss Mohagen joined the Soil Conservation Service in 1935 and progressed until she was director of the Personnel Division in 1946.

Mohagen advanced the career development concept in SCS. It was derived from the notion that leaders in the Soil Conservation Service, especially the state conservationists and the national headquarters leaders, should have work experience in more than one state and in a variety of programs. Previously, most of the people who advanced to state conservationists had long experience in one state. The concept that state conservationists should have experience in other states was regarded as revolutionary. Also, the Personnel section often identified young conservationists who should be given opportunities to get the experience needed to advance to national headquarters or to a state conservationist's position.

Mohagen had the support of the Administrator, Donald A. Williams, in this area. Thus, the young people in SCS throughout the field, especially those interested in progressing upward in the organization, knew of Miss Mohagen and the fact that they needed to be mobile and to acquire the

experience needed to advance. Mohagen also pioneered in using the student trainee program and in using trainee programs to develop professionals in certain areas. SCS developed an administrative trainee program to develop administrative professional staff for SCS offices.

Black women were limited in opportunities not only by gender but also by race. Juanita Grasty was one of the few black women, if not the only one in fact, in the national office of SCS prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Due to administration policy, SCS had begun efforts to hire more minorities in the 1960s. This effort was greatly strengthened by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Ermine F. Bates became the first black female hired in North Carolina when she joined the state office staff in Raleigh in 1964. She remained until her retirement in 1984. Martha Marbury joined SCS in 1967 and through her career became the first black personnel officer and the first black branch chief in the personnel division in the national headquarters. Maxine Barron joined SCS as the first GS-14 black female in SCS as a program analyst in 1980. Jackie Sutton moved from the USDA administration to become associate deputy for administration in 1983, and was the first female to occupy a Senior Executive Service job in SCS.

Legal changes in the 1960s and 1970s began to open more opportunities for women. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited sex discrimination in employment in the federal government. Executive orders 11246 (1966) and 11478 (1969) required federal agencies to develop affirmative action plans. The Equal Employment Act of 1972 (P. L. 92-261) required agencies to write EEO plans with "provision for the establishment of training and education programs designed to provide maximum opportunity for employees to advance so as to perform at their highest potential." The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 further stated that the policy of the federal government was to provide a federal work force reflecting the nation's diversity.

In 1973, about a year after the passage of the Equal Employment Act, women occupied approximately 11 percent of the permanent full-time positions in the Soil Conservation Service. Eighty-nine percent of the women were in clerical fields, 5.3 percent in administrative and technical fields, and a scant 0.2 percent in professional fields. The average grade was 4.86. At that time women comprised about 20 percent of USDA's work force and 40 percent of the work force of the federal government.

Agencies were required to develop Upward Mobility Programs to give greater opportunities for women to move into professional ranks. SCS's plan had been approved by October 1974. Between 1970 and 1975, three years after the passage of the Equal Employment Act, the agency had made some progress in improving employment in the middle grades. Those in grades GS-7 and above

increased from 24 to 44. The average grade for women moved from 4.72 to 5.24. There were 123 women in professional and student trainee positions.

Currently about 24 percent of the permanent full-time and part-time employees of SCS are women. Thus the percentage has more than doubled. Of greater significance is the fact that women have opportunities in a wider variety of jobs. The Upward Mobility Program afforded some women the possibility of using a mixture of formal and on-the-job training to move into professional positions. In November 1975 there were 64 upward mobility positions filled and another 31 advertised. Greater emphasis on hiring allowed women to move into the technical specialties or to become soil conservationists. SCS had nearly 3,000 field offices working closely with soil and water conservation districts. Work in the field offices gave women an opportunity to work with the agency's primary clientele, the rural landowners. This experience was traditionally the route of advancement in SCS to management positions at the state offices and national level. Roberta Stevenson became the first woman district conservationist on October 12, 1975 at Welton, Arizona. As of July 1991 there were 185 female district conservationists out of a total of 2,478 for the agency. Four women have been state conservationists and the director of the Pacific Basin area is a female.

Various professionals in staff positions support the field operations of SCS. The changes brought on by the Equal Employment Act gave women who are interested in agriculture and natural resources opportunities to seek these positions. Among some of the professional categories, the number of female employees as of February 1992 were 85 soil scientists, 59 civil engineers, 30 range conservationists, 30 biologists, 21 agricultural engineers, 12 cartographers, 11 agronomists, eight geologists, 4 foresters, two hydrologists, one wildlife biologist, and one botanist. Just to take one example of the changes, prior to 1984 there were no female professionals on the staff of the plant materials centers. There are now seven professionals on the staffs nationwide.

At the national headquarters several women have been national specialists in their disciplines. Only one woman has been a division director, while three women have been associate deputy chiefs.

Listed below are the numbers and job categories for women in SCS. Only job series with over 50 people are included:

Number	Job Classification
595	soil conservationist
517	secretary
262	soil conservation technician

Number	Job Classification
220	clerk
145	student trainee
139	computer specialist
137	clerk typist
85	soil scientist
77	personnel clerk
73	personnel management spec.
67	public affairs specialist
61	budget analyst
59	civil engineer
56	computer clerk
53	computer specialist

Women numbered 3,153 of the 12,825 permanent full-time and permanent part-time employees, or 24 percent, in 1992. The continuation and expansion of equal opportunities for women constitute not only the just and legal path to take, but also the one most beneficial to the agency. For a natural resources agency such as SCS to continue with a well-trained, dedicated work force, it will need to make even greater efforts to recruit the best of those available of whatever gender, race, or ethnic group.

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