

# Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame



**Mel Cohee**  
Inducted 2006



*“If timber and heavy sod are so important in maintaining the very soil itself, why are clearing of land and overgrazing of pastures and woodlands continued?”*

— Cohee

## Facts About Mel Cohee

Soil erosion control pioneer in Coon Valley Project

Led SCS project planning throughout US from 1939-45

Among early leaders of Soil and Water Conservation Society

Traveled throughout state, nation and world for the cause of soil conservation

## Mel Cohee 1909-2001

Mel Cohee was among a handful of visionaries who established the soil conservation movement in America in the 1930s and who spearheaded the nation’s first erosion control pilot project at Coon Valley in Wisconsin.

Cohee joined other soil erosion pioneers, including Hall of Fame inductees and UW-Madison professors Aldo Leopold and George Wehrwein, in development of the Coon Valley Watershed Demonstration Project in southwest Wisconsin in 1933. The first of its kind in the nation, the project was chosen by the fledgling Soil Erosion Service under the leadership of Hugh Hammond Bennett. The Coon Valley project involved a 92,589-acre drainage basin in the hilly driftless region of southwestern Wisconsin, mostly in Vernon County.

The project proved to be a major success story in the effort to obtain watershed-scale erosion control. The strategy devised by the SES for demonstration work in the Coon Creek watershed was based on close personal contacts with cooperating farmers on their own land. This principle underlies private lands conservation work across America to this day. Federal

and state programs delivered through local conservation districts with technical support from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, rely heavily on trust built with local landowners.

Author Leonard C. Johnson summarized Cohee’s contributions and connections to other key conservation figures this way: “Under the direction of Professors George S. Wehrwein and Noble Clark, Cohee analyzed the distribution of five categories of agricultural land use or cropping (woodland, cleared permanent pasture, hay, small grains, and corn) in relation to steepness of

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**About Wisconsin's  
Conservation Hall of Fame**  
www.wchf.org

**Location:**

Schmeckle Reserve  
Stevens Point, Wis.

**Attractions:**

Displays, information on Wisconsin's conservation history and leaders. Schmeckle Reserve, owned by the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, provides hiking and wildlife viewing opportunities.

**Purpose:**

To educate and inspire people with information about how resource conservation has shaped our environment and our lives.

**Hours:**

M-F, 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.  
Sat: Noon - 4 p.m.  
Sun: Noon - 4 p.m.

**Support:**

The Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame is funded solely by contributions. Donations are tax deductible and may be sent to:

WCHF Foundation Inc.  
Schmeckle Reserve  
UW-Stevens Point  
Stevens Point, WI 54481  
715-346-4992

**Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame**  
Honoring our state's rich conservation history

**Mel Cohee**

*(continued)*

slope..."

Cohee's work led him to ask this question: "If timber and heavy sod are so important in maintaining the very soil itself, why are clearing of land and overgrazing of pastures and woodlands continued?" The answer, he found, was in the economic demands faced by farmers and how that led them to treat the land. Commodity prices were driving land use decisions. That the situation continues to vex conservationists to this day doesn't diminish the importance of Cohee's work.

Cohee moved from the Coon Valley project to a lifetime of work in soil conservation, land use and agricultural economics. He was among the early leaders of the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS). With a slim staff in the new organization, Cohee handled much of the organizations' capacity-building and administrative work.

After a stint at a regional Soil Conservation Service (formerly SES) office in La Crosse, he was assigned to the Erosion Control Practices Division of the SCS in Washington, D.C. He traveled throughout the country to watershed demonstration projects, working to assure that erosion control practices and treatments for farms were coordinated and had economic quality and that farm conservation plans were properly made and applied.

From 1939-45, Cohee was chief of the Program Procedures and Project Plans Division of SCS. This put Cohee in charge of SCS project planning for the entire U.S.

He also conducted research study in seven countries of Central Europe to determine how European governments had worked with local organizations and people to carry out natural resource conservation.

Cohee continued his work with the SCS until retiring in 1965. He continued to do consulting work for Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources after his retirement.