



Noble W. Clark
1891-1988

‘The ravages of erosion are not confined to destruction of farm land. Human lives, as well as property, are often endangered for hundreds of miles along river valleys by the floods that start with the uncontrollable runoff of drainage water. Hundreds of thousands of tons of silt are annually carried from our farms and dropped in the rivers – there to obstruct navigation and thus make expensive dredging necessary.’

--Noble Clark

Noble Clark spent much of his career in research administration for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

First as assistant director and then as associate director, he participated in the vast growth of the college's research program. It grew from 80 scientists when he arrived in 1927 to 250 scientists by the time he retired in 1962.

His duties as administrator are well documented by UW-Madison, as evidenced by the accompanying biographical information. This narrative will recount some of that. It will also explore another aspect of Clark's professional career. He was an early pioneer in the area of soil erosion and flood control. He was also an early advocate of wise land use, especially in rural areas, where he focused his attention.

Clark led efforts to garner funds to research soil erosion and then oversaw those research efforts. Among those early findings about erosion are practices that are being encouraged today in major federal and state conservation programs.

Often in his administrative position, but also in speeches, writing and political advocacy outside of university circles, he championed wise land use and soil conservation.

He worked extensively with soil conservation groups and agencies.

These activities are most germane to the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame, and they will receive more detailed treatment in this narrative.

Clark was born in South Dakota and grew up on a farm in Minnesota. He obtained his bachelor's degree in agriculture at UW-Madison in 1915, then went off to Michigan State University, where he taught for two years. He worked as a farm manager, agricultural advisor and agriculture agent before joining UW-Madison. He completed his master's degree at UW-Madison.

He wasn't a scientist, but his staff of scientists credited him for using wise administrative policies to foster successful research. This is documented in a memorial resolution passed by the faculty at the time of his death.

In addition to encouraging research efforts to help farmers keep pace with technological change, Clark had intense concern for worldwide problems of food supply.

UW-Madison records show that immediately after World War II, he served as deputy director of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization. He also served from 1943-48 as chairman of the Committee on Postwar Agricultural Policy of the Association of Land Grant Colleges and Universities.

His interest in land tenure and land use planning is also noted by the university, including his service as regional director of the Land Policy Section of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1934, while on leave from UW-Madison.

His involvement in this area began even before then. Information provided by the Wisconsin Chapter Soil and Water Conservation Society notes that in 1932, Clark and UW-Madison Agriculture Economics Professor George Wehrwein programmed and supervised the first land use and wind erosion project in Wisconsin. Clark and Wehrwein undertook a similar research program in 1933.

Wehrwein was an early advocate of rural land use controls and worked with the likes of Aldo Leopold to fashion Wisconsin's rural zoning program. This program is credited for playing a major role in the effort to reforest the cutover region of northern Wisconsin by giving counties authority to establish and encourage forestlands. Clark championed it in outreach efforts across the state.

There are other examples of Clark's interest in land use and erosion control.

From 1929-31, Clark represented UW-Madison in efforts to establish Upper Mississippi Valley Erosion Experiment Station, accomplished on July 1, 1931.

From mid-1933 to early 1935, he served as administrative director of an early Civilian Conservation Corps camp conservation program for agricultural lands. Work included constructing engineering structures for flood control, primarily through gully control measures.

In 1933, Clark cooperated with Soil Erosion Service, U.S. Department of Interior, in advising on a program for soil erosion and flood control for Coon Creek Watershed Demonstration Project, Coon Valley, Wis. The program covered all land use and known conservation practices.

Clark was also a strong supporter of Wisconsin's first Soil Conservation District Law. It was enacted by state Legislature and became effect July 1, 1937. The law

provided for a State Soil Conservation Committee that handled organization of districts and gave them general guidance.

Named first chairman of State Soil Conservation Committee and serving from 1937-50, he led efforts to bring all Wisconsin counties into conservation districts, helping to reduce or prevent soil erosion on thousands of acres of agricultural lands. Clark also initiated efforts to make several revisions to Wisconsin Soil Conservation District Law.

His work on land use and erosion control was likely better known outside of the university environment. Soil conservation activities took place at the local level, in county offices and in direct interaction with farmers.

In nominating Clark for the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in 1995, John A. Kruger of the Wisconsin Chapter Soil and Water Conservation Society noted, "Mr. Clark was a pioneer and key leader in the history of Wisconsin soil and water conservation programs."

UW-Madison records include a document titled "Farming of Tomorrow," written by Clark. It underscores his concerns about conservation issues.

The document was actually a collection of a series of broadcasts that Clark made over state public radio stations. They proved so popular among listeners that UW-Madison collected them into a single document.

Some relevant excerpts follow:

"Erosion is a most serious menace because it steals from us our most precious and most fundamental resource, the soil. Thousands of acres of good Wisconsin land have been cut by gullies to such an extent that they are all but ruined. Many more thousands have had their fertility sapped by the less spectacular, but almost as damaging, sheet erosion."

Erosion, he wrote, isn't confined to destruction of farmland. "Human lives, as well as property, are often endangered for hundreds of miles along river valley by the floods that start with the uncontrollable runoff of drainage water. Hundreds of thousands of tons of silt are annually carried from our farms and dropped in the rivers – there to obstruct navigation and thus make expensive drainage necessary."

In the same document, he wrote about work at the erosion control station in La Crosse that he had been instrumental in establishing:

“At this branch station, we have learned erosion can effectively be reduced by planting the steeper slopes and ridges to forest, by growing only hay and pasture on the medium slopes and by confining cultivation crops to the nearly level fields.”

Some of these same principles underlie Department of Agriculture efforts today, in the year 2000, including the National Buffer Initiative, which seeks to plant 2 million miles of riparian and grass buffers across the country to prevent soil erosion into sensitive waterways.

“You will note,” Clark wrote, “that at the outset, erosion is not primarily an engineering problem, but rather one of wise land use.” His message was that it’s better to prevent erosion rather than trying to control it later.

His work with Wehrwein and other land use advocates is obvious in the same document, in which he writes that not all of Wisconsin’s rural land is suited to farming:

“Much of northern Wisconsin is well adapted to forestry. Those regions having lakes and streams have large recreational possibilities.”

Wise use of rural lands was necessary, he wrote, for the good of society.

“An individual family may be content to exist in some remote, barren locality – forcing the state, county and township to maintain a road to their door, a school to educate their children, and perhaps if they go onto public relief, to furnish the necessities of life at governmental expense as well – but the rest of us may object to footing the bill. It is in the interests of all of us that only land that is capable of yielding an American standard of living be farmed.”

He also championed zoning laws that gave counties the authority to designate land uses, again emphasizing the need to prevent farming in unproductive areas that would be costly to both individuals and society as a whole.

It’s noteworthy that those words came from a man whose professional life was dedicated to agricultural causes.

“Farming of Tomorrow” included this caveat, “Mr. Clark makes no claim as a prophet, but he does believe the results of present day research will exert far-reaching influence on the agriculture of the coming generation.”

Clark may not have been a prophet, but his views on matters like erosion and land use control were surely ahead of their time.

NOBLE W. CLARK
1891-1988

BIRTH: Sept. 18, 1891, Lake Preston, S.D.

DEATH: May 6, 1988

EDUCATION: Bachelor's Degree in agriculture, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1915

Master's Degree in animal husbandry, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1930

Graduate studies at University of Minnesota and Northwestern University in economics

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Instructor at Michigan State University, 1915-17.

Farm Manager, Cook County, Ill., 1917.

Agricultural Adviser, Wisconsin Colonization Co., Sawyer County, Wis., 1918-22.

County Agriculture Agent, Michigan State University Extension Service, 1922-27.

University of Wisconsin-Madison Agricultural Experiment Station, 1927-62
Professor, Assistant Director, Associate Director

Assistant to University of Wisconsin Dean of Agriculture, 1927-30.

Led United Nations Mission to Poland.

Took five-month leave from UW-Madison duties to serve as regional director, policy section, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Took six month leave from UW-Madison to serve as deputy director, FAO of United Nations, 1948.

In 1932, with UW-Madison Agriculture Economics Professor George Wehrwein, programmed and supervised the first land use and wind erosion project. Clark and Wehrwein undertook similar research program in 1933.

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Supporter of Wisconsin's first Soil Conservation District Law, enacted by state Legislature, becoming effective July 1, 1937. The law provided for a State Soil Conservation Committee that handled organization of districts and gave them general guidance.

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Initiated efforts to make several revisions to Wisconsin Soil Conservation District Law.

In 1960s, Clark gave many talks urging the expansion of nonagricultural vocational education for farm youths so that they might compete for jobs if not on the farm.

Administrative Adviser to North Central Region Land Grant Colleges on research activities. He served as adviser to regional committees focusing on Land Tenure Research, Economics, Rural Economic Development, Dairy Marketing, Mass Communications and Land Tenure Adjustments.

Author of numerous reports and bulletins from the Wisconsin Agricultural Experimental Station. These include "Science, The Steward of Agriculture and the State," and "Relations of Federal Activities to State and Local Programs of Land Use."

Co-author of "Agriculture," a handbook for secondary school teachers.

Member, President Truman's Commission on Migratory Labor, 1950-51.

Chairman, Land Grant College Committee on Overseas Distribution of Agricultural and Home Economics Publications, 1959-61.

Chairman, Land Grant College Committee on Postwar Agricultural Policy, 1943-47.

Member, American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Member, American Farm Economics Association.

Member, Soil and Water Conservation Society.

Member, Alpha Beta.