



Melville H. Cohee
1909-2001

“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?”

–Mel Cohee

The Soil and Water Conservation Society took note of conservationist Mel Cohee's death on Jan. 14, 2001:

"Cohee was the last living pioneer conservationist of the seven who started the conservation movement in 1933. This led to the establishment of the Soil Conservation Service, and to the founding of what is the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS) in November 1941 by Dr. Hugh Hammond Bennett and 15 other leaders.

"At that time, there was no executive vice-president, there were no chapters to coordinate the local planning; Mel Cohee did it all."

That snapshot provides a glimpse into Cohee's conservation career and puts him in the company of some of the country's major soil conservation figures.

Melville H. Cohee was born April 17, 1909, and grew up on a north central Indiana crop and livestock farm. He pursued higher education with his own agricultural background in mind, earning bachelor's and master's degrees at Purdue University, then working toward his Ph.D. at UW-Madison in Agricultural Economics in 1932-33. His obituary notice in The Capital Times of Madison noted, "he was research assistant in the UW Agricultural Economics Department, carrying out the first-ever land use, water and wind and soil erosion economic field studies."

Also during his Ph.D. work, Cohee was among those who helped to formulate the Soil Erosion Control Program for the Coon Creek Watershed Demonstration Project. This was the nation's first-ever watershed soil erosion and flood control program, in Coon Valley, Wisconsin.

This project proved to be a major success story and an asset in the effort to obtain watershed-scale erosion control. The steep hills and valleys of the driftless region in southwest Wisconsin provided both challenge and opportunity. Hammond, first chief of the SCS, who spearheaded the soil erosion control effort nationally, had carefully chosen Coon Creek. As author Leonard C. Johnson notes in "Soil Conservation In Wisconsin:

Birth to Rebirth,” the Coon Creek proposal “involving a 92,589-acre drainage basin lying mostly in Vernon County and including small portions of Monroe and La Crosse counties, was the only one of the initial demonstration project applications fortified with a definite plan of action... (and) was the first one to accord with Bennett’s concept of a comprehensive, well-balanced erosion control program.”

The author continued: “The strategy devised by the SES (Soil Erosion Service, predecessor to the SCS) 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, the modern-day equivalent of SCS, rely heavily on trust built with local landowners.

Cohee was among the key field workers on the project, serving as a farm management specialist.

Johnson, in his 1991 book, summarized Cohee’s contributions and connections to other key conservation figures this way: “Under the direction of Professors George S. Wehrwein (Conservation Hall of Fame inductee) 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 slope, which is a good indicator of the relative inherent susceptibility of different land use areas to erosion by surface runoff. What Cohee found has important implications for agricultural land use and conservation policies, but apparently has not risen above a subliminal level of awareness in the minds of policy makers.”

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.

It should be noted, too, that private lands conservation programs offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and by some state governments today address this

economic reality. Programs that retire land for conservation purposes seek to match local rental rates for agricultural land in an effort to convince farmers and ranchers that programs work environmentally and economically. The latter is still a major consideration for those who work the land.

Cohee moved from the Coon Valley project to a lifetime of work in soil conservation and agricultural economics. In late 1934, he moved to an SCS Regional office in La Crosse, which served Wisconsin and Minnesota. There were three watershed demonstration projects in each of those states. In late 1935, he was assigned to the Erosion Control Practices Division of the Soil Conservation Service in Washington, D.C. He traveled throughout the country to all watershed demonstration projects to help 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, according to his obituary in *The Capital Times*, put Cohee in charge of SCS project planning for the entire U.S.

In 1937, Cohee spent the fall semester on the Harvard University staff as a Junior Consultant in helping to establish the Litter School for Public Administration. While at Harvard, he also prepared for his forthcoming research study in seven countries of Central Europe. He was to determine how European governments had worked with local organizations and people to carry out natural resource conservation. He returned to the U.S. in early summer of 1939. Cohee continued his work with the SCS until retiring in 1965. His work focused on agricultural economics, and he served nine Midwestern states in planning for flood prevention and watershed protection, including river basin planning.

He took less than a year off, then spent parts of the next 10 years as a technical consultant with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, doing economic research for state and privately owned recreational enterprises. In 1970, he was a senior economic consultant for the United Nations, doing economic evaluations of two large plains area projects designed to improve land use and irrigation facilities. His work took him to Iran, Italy and Russia. His economic evaluation report was considered a model for future UN projects. Cohee was still at it as late as 1998, returning to Russia to evaluate a

USA Foundation-sponsored agricultural project. By this time, he had settled on his 150-acre Green Vista Farm near Madison, where he practiced conservation.

In his later years, Cohee donated time and expertise to many conservation groups and projects around the state.

MELVILLE H. COHEE
1909-2001

BIRTH: April 17, 1902. Frankfort, Indiana.

DEATH: Jan. 14. 2001, Madison, Wisconsin.

EDUCATION: Graduate of Frankford High School.

Earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Purdue University School of Agriculture.

Earned Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics and Land Use at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1933.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

Longtime employee of the Soil Conservation Society.

Chief of Program Procedures and Project Plans Division, SDS, 1939-45.

Agricultural Economist, SCS.

Consult economics work with Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Senior economist consultant with FAO of United Nations.

AUTHOR

Cohee authored about 50 technical publications and articles. Some Library of Congress titles include:

“Impact of State Land Ownership on Local Economy in Wisconsin,” 1974.

“Private Outdoor Recreation Business,” a series of publications including “Boat Rentals,” 1971, “Camping Enterprises,” 1871, “Picnicking Enterprises,” 1970, “Pond Fishing Enterprises,” 1970, and “Swimming Enterprises,” 1970.

“Recreation and Their Uses: An Evaluation of Wisconsin’s Public and Private Campgrounds, Swimming Beaches, Picnic Areas and Boat Accesses,” 1972.

ORGANIZATIONS, ACTIVITIES, AWARDS

Lifetime and Fellow Award Status Member with Soil and Water Conservation Society.

Cohee was the first elected National Secretary of SWCS, in 1941, and chairman of the group’s first Annual Meeting in Chicago, Illinois.

Member, Izaak Walton League of America.

Mason.

Honorary Kentucky Colonel.

Honorary Societies: Alpha Zeta, Purdue Ceres and Kappi Delta Pi.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Forthcoming as an addendum.