

Otto R. Zeasman

From the start of his career as County Agriculture Agent in Green Lake County, Otto R. "Zeas" Zeasman was a pioneer. As County Agent, he organized a cow-testing association and developed alfalfa production methods later broadly employed with Wisconsin's sandy soils. He was to spend the next 42 years "actively" helping Wisconsin farmers improve their soils, and followed this with an additional 15 years in very active "retirement".

Ten years before the start of the Soil Conservation Service, Zeas started extensive erosion control work. His initial efforts addressed the 20-50 foot deep gullies in parts of Wisconsin. His projects attracted national attention, and his structural designs were subsequently adopted widely throughout the United States.

When the Civilian Conservation Corps camps were started in 1933, Professor Zeasman helped to supervise the works of nine of them. And the Soil Conservation Service, created a year later, was to promote as standard practice his terracing, diversions and crop rotations for the control of soil erosion. His novel "whole farm" and watershed approach in Coon Valley was later designated as USDA Watershed Demonstration Project Number 1 for the Nation.

The uniqueness of his demonstration methods continued throughout his career, and included some pioneering aerial tours in 1951 to help landowners get a different perspective of erosion and potential control practices to minimize damage. He was known as "Mr. Soil Conservation in Wisconsin". Serving as a close personal friend and wise counsellor to many farm families, his love of the land and dedication to preserving it served as an inspiration to all he met.

Early Years
1886-1898

Born April 6, 1885 in Kiev, Russia.

Spent his second birthday on the ocean with his parents enroute to the United States, then soon settled in eastern Marathon County, Wisconsin.

Father died when Otto was 5 years old.

By age 12 he was spending his summers working on a lumber mill and on a strawberry farm. He was to earn his own way for the rest of his life.

School Years
1898-1914

Though he almost quit school to work full time, he was encouraged by his ninth grade teacher to continue, with an interest in debate and continuing education.

He transferred to the Wayland Academy in Beaver Dam, earning his way by gaining a full-time janitorial position there. He also received a scholarship from the University of Chicago.

Started college at the University of Rochester in New York.

He completed his B.S.A. in 1914 from the University of Wisconsin, after only 3 1/2 years. One semester he carried 24 credits, held down a job, and dated his wife-to-be.

Early
Professional
Career
1914-1941

For three years he served as an Instructor in Soils and an Extension specialist in land drainage. His first of many publications was on tile drainage for farms, and later earned the nickname of "Otto the Tiler".

Married the former Gladys Andrews in 1916, they had five children.

Became County Agriculture Agent for Green Lake County where he developed alfalfa growing methods especially suited for Wisconsin sandy soils.

Returned to the University as Agricultural Engineering Instructor, then Assistant Professor. Added responsibilities of Soils in 1921.

Pioneered gully control and soil conservation in 1922.

Gully control work spreads to six other counties in Western Wisconsin. Supervised the construction of gully control dams on more than 50 farms and terracing for about 200.

Appointed Associate Professor of Soils and Agricultural Engineering in 1930, and became Assistant State Drainage Engineer in that same year. He served as the State Drainage Engineer from 1937 until his retirement in 1956.

Two years before the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and four years before the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), Zeasman published bulletins focused on the local and national problem of soil erosion and control methods such as terraces and dams.

He and E.R. Jones supervised nine Western Wisconsin Civilian Conservation Corps camps for two years.

Became joint SCS and University Extension soil conservationist in 1936, and continued in that position for 20 years.

Later
Professional
Career
1941-1956

Appointed full professor of Soils and Agricultural Engineering in 1941, served there for 15 years.

Promoted additional soil erosion control methods such as strip farming and grassed waterways through circulars published in 1941. These same methods are still strongly promoted through Extension today.

Initiated Soil Conservation Air Tours, which over 5 years provided over 5000 participants with a broad view of the problems and their potential solutions.

Retirement
Years
1956-1976

Appointed Professor Emeritus of Soils from his retirement in 1956.

From 1961 to 1965, he served as the technical consultant to the legislative Committee rewriting Wisconsin's drainage statutes.

Continued to work vigorously in defense of the farmer and soil conservation practices. Helped publish additional bulletins on Soil Erosion Control and reviewed other publications.

From interview with Mrs. Zeasman (93 years old), 11/22/85.

Zeas was actually born "Adolph", but in early school years his teacher could not understand his accented pronunciation very well - thinking he said "Otto" - and this ended up as his name.

Zeas really loved Wisconsin. When offered a job in Minnesota for a better salary, he turned it down because he wanted his children to attend the University of Wisconsin. When he suffered his first blood clot, he traveled to Minnesota for some medical care. Upon crossing the Mississippi in return to Wisconsin, his wife noticed a broad boyish grin of happiness upon his return to the state.

He was dedicated to Wisconsin and its farmers, and made friends throughout the state. He worked very hard, seldom ever taking a vacation. He never earned a Masters Degree - "never had the time".

OTTO REINHART ZEASMAN

1886-1976

"Soil conservation is important enough to deserve attention in its own sphere as of growing importance for permanent agriculture. It is a farm problem intimately associated with general welfare, and ought to be treated as such."

Zeasman, 1975

BIRTH: April 6, 1886, Kiev, Ukraine.

DEATH: September 30, 1976, Madison, Wisconsin.

FAMILY: Son of John Zeasman and Marie Rosensky.
Married Gladys Andrews, 1916.
Children: Mary, Ira, Helen, Donald, James.

EDUCATION: Grade School, Marathon County, WI.
Wayland Academy, Beaver Dam, WI.
University of Rochester, NY.
B.S. from University of Wisconsin, 1914

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY:

1888 Arrived in America with family and settled in Eastern Marathon County.

1914 Assistant and Instructor in Soils, UW. Employed by the University of WI as a Specialist in land drainage to help farmers install tile drainage systems.

1917-1918 Green Lake County Agricultural Agent; developed a cow testing association and an alfalfa production method that was later widely adapted on Wisconsin's sandy soils.

1919 Assistant Professor of Agricultural Engineering, UW.

1921 Assistant Professor of Agricultural Engineering (half time) and Soils (half time), UW.

1922 With few guidelines to follow as few others recognized the seriousness of

erosion problems, began work on gully control and soil conservation in Buffalo County where gullies 20 to 50 feet in depth were common. The projects attracted national attention; his structural designs were widely adopted. Conceived the idea of a "whole farm" erosion control system including a diversion terrace. "Whole farm" approach developed into watershed approach. His ideas on gully control, terracing, diversions, and crop rotations for controlling soil erosion were incorporated into standard practices adopted by the Soil Conservation Service.

- 1930-1934 Assistant State Drainage Engineer, WI; Associate Professor of Soils and Agricultural Engineering, UW. Coon Valley watershed project, La Crosse County, WI, begun (1934). Was a site of extensive pioneer work by Zeasman; site later designated as USDA Watershed Demonstration Project Number 1 for the nation.
- 1933-1935 Supervised soil conservation projects of nine Civilian Conservation Corps camps in Western Wisconsin.
- 1936-1956 Held joint appointment for USDA-Soil Conservation Service and University Extension, WI; provided leadership to all 71 soil and water conservation districts in Wisconsin.
- 1937-1956 WI State Drainage Engineer. Became known as "Mr. Soil Conservation in Wisconsin".
- 1951 Introduced concept of landowner air tours as a means of gathering useful information for determining extent of erosion damages.
- 1956 At the time of his retirement, considered a true pioneer in convincing farmers of the need for conservation farming.
- 1961-1965 Served as technical consultant to the legislative committee rewriting Wisconsin's drainage statutes.

PUBLICATIONS:

Bulletins:

- 284 - "Tile Drainage on the Farm",
with E.R. Jones, 1917.
392 - "Fertilizers and Crops for Marsh
Soils", with A.R. Whitson, and
A.R. Albert, 1927.
99 - "Soil Erosion--A Local and
National Problem", with C.G. Bates,
1930.
"Soil Erosion Survey of Wisconsin",
with R. Muckenhirn, 1941

Circulars:

- 249 - "Control Soil Erosion by Crops,
Terraces and Dams", 1931.
317 - "Strip Cropping to Control
Erosion", 1941.
320 - "Grass Waterways Control and
Prevent Gullies", 1941.
360 - "We Can All Help Save Our Soil",
with J.W. Clark, 1945.
386 - "Terraces to Control Runoff",
with A.J. Wojta, 1950.

Leaflet:

- "Round the Hill Farming--Saves Soil--
Increases Yields", with
Marvin Schweers, 1942.

OTTO REINHART ZEASMAN

Born April 6, 1886 near Warsaw (Russia), now Poland.

Parents: Father - John Zeasman; Mother - Marie Rosensky

Education: Graded School - Marathon County
Wayland Academy, Beaver Dam - 1905-1909
University of Rochester, Rochester, New York 1909-1910
University of Wisconsin 1911-1914. B.S.A. - 1914.

When in school gave Norrie, Wisconsin as home address.

Married Gladys Andrews of Richland Center, June 21, 1916.

5 Children: Mary, Ira, Helen, Donald, James.

(Soils record) - July 1914-June 1917 - Assistant and Instructor in Soils

(Extension ") - Aug. 1, 1914-March 31, 1917 - Extension specialist in land drainage.

June 1917-December, 1918 - County Agricultural Agent in Green Lake County

December 1918 - Instructor in Agr. Engineering

July 1919 - appointed Assistant Professor of Agr. Engr.

July 1921 - appointed Assistant Professor Agr. Engr. 1/2 and Soils 1/2

July 1930 - appointed Associate Professor (Soils and Agr. Engr.)

July 1, 1941 to date - Professor of Soils and Agr. Engineering.

Publications:

Bul. 284 - Tile Drainage on the Farm - E. R. Jones and O. R. Zeasman - - - - 1917

Bul. 392 - Fertilizers and Crops for Marsh Soils - A. R. Whitson,
A. R. Albert, O. R. Zeasman- - - - - 1927

Res. Bul. 99 - Soil Erosion--A Local and National Problem,
C. G. Bates and O. R. Zeasman- - - - - 1930

Cir. 249 - Control Soil Erosion by Crops, Terraces and Dams,
O. R. Zeasman- - - - - 1931

Cir. 317 - Strip Cropping to Control Erosion - O. R. Zeasman - - - - - 1941

Cir. 320 - Grass Waterways Control and Prevent Gullies - O. R. Zeasman - - - 1941

Cir. 360 - We Can All Help Save Our Soil - O. R. Zeasman and J. W. Clark - - 1945

Cir. 386 - Terraces to Control Runoff - O. R. Zeasman and A. J. Wojta- - - - 1950

Leaflet - 'Round the Hill Farming--saves soil--increases yields,
Marvin Schweers and O. R. Zeasman- - - - - 1942

Spec. Bul. - Soil Erosion Survey of Wisconsin - R. J. Muckenhirn and
O. R. Zeasman- - - - - 1941