



Miss Dorothy Neel . . .

“Accident” Became Lifes Work For This Lady

By Sally Bair
Feature Writer

The person who has all the answers about federal farm programs in Lancaster County is Dorothy Neel, County executive director of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service.

Dot Neel is an attractive, outgoing woman who has been unraveling the intricacies of federal farm programs for Lancaster County farmers for 35 years. She has the ability to make all the programs and their endless variations sound understandable.

She began working for the agency “quite by accident” when she learned about the job through a family friend. She intended it to be part time just after high school graduation, but she is now in her 35th year. Her first job was working with aerial photographs, which she said got “boring after a while.” After 15 years in the office she was chosen to be County Executive Director.

While it is not unusual to find a woman in an executive capacity in these days of women’s lib, 20 years ago it was not so common. However, Dot said at least half of the office managers, as they were then known, were women. The number is dwindling as the original workers are retiring or moving on, and applicants for the position now must be graduates of a college of agriculture.

Miss Neel said she has found that farmers have “no hesitancy” in dealing with a woman.

Dot said, “The basic purpose of the farm programs is to stabilize and improve farm income and contribute to the overall prosperity of the county.”

While some counties in the state have well over 50 percent of their farmers participating in ASCS programs, only about 600 to

800 Lancaster Countians are involved annually, out of a total of 6,000 farmers. Dot attributes this both to religious beliefs and to the general conservatism of farmers in the county.

She stresses that “all programs are voluntary,” so those who participate do so willingly.

One of the most basic of the ASCS-administered programs has been in the news recently because President Nixon cut off all funds for it. It is the Rural Environmental Assistance Program (REAP), which, according to Miss Neel, has been in operation under various names since 1936 when it began as the Agricultural Conservation Program.

Dot describes the REAP program as “our basic one for farmers, with more lasting benefits than any other program. It has received the least criticism of all programs.” She explained it as an “incentive program which will pay up to 50 percent of the cost for farmers to build animal waste storage facilities, establish waterways, terraces and other practices for the good of the environment.”

In Lancaster County approximately 300 to 400 farmers have taken advantage of the program annually. There is a \$2,500 limit on payments to any one person, and technical assistance for these conservation practices is provided by the Soil Conservation Service.

The future of the REAP program is still up in the air, but Dot says a measure is now before Congress to reinstate it. However, no more funds are currently available.

The sign-up period has just ended for another large ASCS program, the wheat and feed grain set-aside program. This has been in existence under different names since 1957, and it



Miss Dorothy Neel, County ASCS Executive Director, confers with her county committee (l. to r.): Fred G. Seldomridge,

Gap RD, chairman; B. Snavely Garber, Willow Street RD 2, vice-chairman; and Paul Kline, 1400 Brunnerville Road, Lititz.



There are many questions to be answered during a sign-up period for ASCS programs. Miss Neel (center) assists office worker Janet Schaefer in answering an applicant's questions.

is designed to increase the income of wheat, corn, barley grain and sorghum to participating farmers, Dot says. In 1971, 612 farmers enrolled in the program and set aside 1,839 acres to earn payments of \$193,313. In the feed grain program (corn and grain sorghum), 451 farmers set aside 1,744 acres to earn \$116,055.

This program is being carried out under the 1970 Agricultural Act, and new enabling legislation must be passed this year. Miss Neel said, “Farmers must let Congressmen know their feelings (about farm programs), because the farm vote itself doesn’t mean anything anymore. Writing to Congressmen is the only way to get favorable legislation passed.”

It is the County ASC Committee that “determines policies and makes decisions,” according to

Dot. She simply works for them in carrying out their wishes.

The County Committee is elected by Community Committeemen who in turn have been elected by farmers. All county farmers are eligible to vote in their communities. In Lancaster County there are sixteen communities established as voting areas, and committeemen are elected to three-year terms, Dot explained.

The County Committee consists of Fred G. Seldomridge, Gap, chairman; B. Snavely Garber, Willow Street, vice-chairman, and Paul B. Kline, Lititz, regular member. They are under the general supervision of the State ASC Committee which is appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.

Dot talked about some of the changes in programs over the 35

years she has been associated with the agency. She said most programs remain basically the same, with variations. But she said she would never want to live through another year like 1954 when wheat marketing quotas were in effect. “Every farmer needed a card to sell wheat,” she recalls, “And when it came time to sell, impatient farmers waited in long lines in the hottest weather of the summer. We felt guilty taking 15 minutes for lunch.”

Another program that was “never very popular,” Miss Neel said was the soil bank, and its successor, the cropland adjustment program, in which soil had to be taken out of production. Neither program is in existence today.

The office moved eight times in her 35 years, but Dot says they’re very pleased with their present facilities at the Farm and Home Center.

Dot just laughs when you ask how in the world she remembers all the details of the complicated-sounding programs. She says she gets explanations from Washington and the state office, and even up to the day sign-up begins, she sometimes gets phone calls with last minute procedural changes. She and her staff really un-complicate the process for the farmers involved. To keep all farmers up-to-date on programs and policies, the office mails a regular newsletter and holds informational meetings on new programs.

Dot says her work keeps her mostly in the office, but she goes “in the field for spot checking” of participating farmers.

As part of her role as ASCS

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During sign-up periods, the ASCS office is busy with farmers wanting to know details of programs. Here Miss Neel (center) answers a questions while office employee Leona Geist locates the farm on an aerial photograph.