

Conservationists say saving soil is farmer's duty

BY SHEILA MILLER
MILLERSVILLE — "As a Christian, it's my duty to take care of the land," commented 27-year-old Jim Charles, who, along with his father Roy H. Charles, accepted the Outstanding Conservation Cooperator award presented by the Lancaster County Conservation District on Thursday evening.

In an on-the-farm interview, the Charles team shared with Lancaster Farming their views on conservation and how it made the difference on their farm.

In its second decade, the 104 acre operation was first purchased in 1962 by Roy's father. Then, a few years later, Roy said, he and his wife, Alice (Brackbill), bought the farm.

Until 1977, Roy explained, the farm was "more-or-less" laid out in strips. But over the years, there seemed to be more acres planted to corn with less small grain strips in between.

"We had some problems with washing," Roy remembered, "and with every big rain we had gutters."

Roy confessed he was concerned about the Clean Streams Law which required all farms to have conservation plans by 1977. So, he got in touch with the Lancaster County Conservation District that year.

Both Roy and Jim praised the work of District Technician Abner Houseknecht who planned the conservation work needed to control water and erosion on the farm and who laid out, designed and engineered the practices, and saw to it they were installed properly.

Since 1977, the Charles farm has gotten a face lift, with 8650 feet of cropland terraces safeguarding its Class I and Class II Conestoga silt loam soil. The terraces allow the operation to farm the maximum acreage of corn on sloping farmland (8 percent slope) while holding soil losses to a minimum.

Since hay is not necessary feed for the farm's 100 steers, 1200 hogs and 60,000 laying chickens, the traditional conservation practice of contour strips wasn't an economical solution to their erosion problem, said Roy and Jim.

"Contour strips are okay for dairy farmers who need the hay," said Roy, "but for our livestock, we don't need it."

So, both Roy and Jim traveled with Abner Houseknecht, visiting farms throughout the area where cropland terraces had been installed. After seeing them work on other corn fields, they decided terracing was the way to go.

The first terrace was installed so the intercepted surface water was outletted in a grassed waterway. But, said Roy, that "wasted" a lot of land by keeping it in permanent



Roy H. Charles, left, and son Jim were presented with the Lancaster County Conservation District's Outstanding Conservationist award on Thursday evening. During an on-the-farm interview, the farming duo look over their conservation plan. The last of their scheduled practices will be installed this Spring.

grass. Now, almost the entire farm has been terraced, with the remainder of the systems designed with tile outlets.

"That first terrace was so high," recalled Jim, "I felt it was ridiculous. But last winter when

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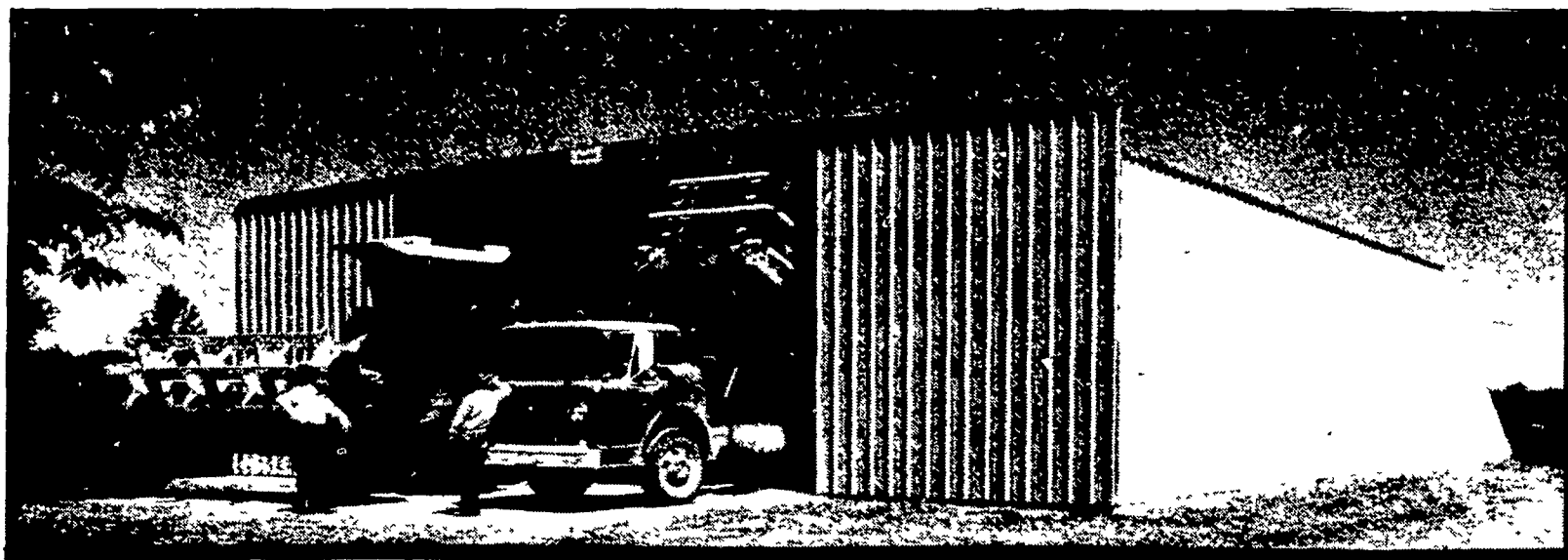
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Since 1977, the Charleses have installed 8650 feet of cropland terraces which allow them to put more of their cropland in corn without the danger of losing valuable topsoil through erosion. Here, they look over a cover crop seeding of winter rye, planted to protect corn ground harvested for silage last Fall.

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