

Former "city girl" finds career in agronomy

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This summer a new face was added to the Berks County Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service office, whom many countians may have met already that of Mercedes Seman. Mercedes joined the local staff in mid-July, coming from Westmoreland County, located directly across the state in western Pennsylvania.

Now a very enthusiastic soil conservationist, Mercedes would never have dreamed just four or five short years ago that she would be holding such a position. Raised in central Pennsylvania, in New Cumberland a town located near Harrisburg, this young lady admitted that she never even knew that such services as ASCS existed until she entered college.

"I was never on a farm until I went to college," she said in all honesty. Continuing, the soil conservationist also admitted that she didn't even know anyone who was from a farm while growing up. However, not to stop determination, this "city girl," planning to pursue a career in business switched gears and decided to follow her instincts instead.

"I knew I really wanted to be in agriculture," she explained, "and found agronomy the most interesting."

The crop aspects of agriculture drew her attention when reviewing the various agriculture majors at Penn State University. So after being enrolled in business as a freshman, this student switched majors — a decision she has never regretted.

"While I was studying business courses, I had friends enrolled in forestry," she explained. "I realized that they were studying subjects and doing something that was more like what I really wanted to do — even if the job market wouldn't be as strong."

Mercedes graduated in May 1981 and went to work as a full time soil conservationist. She had only completed one soil course when she was hired as a summer trainee with the ASCS between her sophomore and junior years of

college. Placed in Westmoreland County, this young lady didn't even know what the job would be like or involve until she started. But she soon discovered that having a job in her chosen major and doing and learning something she really enjoyed was one of the greatest things she could imagine.

During the next two summers she was taught a little about everything at the ASCS office. This included working on farm plans, conservation strips, diversions, waterways, and stripmine work. Here she helped those farmers that were interested in protecting and reclaiming the land.

All of these experiences involving many different aspects and types of farming have been new to this soil conservationist. She is always trying to learn more about different type of farming and admits there's so much she still needs to learn.

"I've learned a lot from books while at college, but experience is what teaches," she said. "A person can learn just so much from a book, but experience is what backs it up."

Mercedes noted that this first hand education, she is obtaining about the different aspects involved in farm operations is one of the features of her job that she likes best.

"I also like the fact that the ASCS is an advisory organization and not a service that is directly costing farmers anything," she said earnestly.

Another aspect enjoyed most by this soil conservationist is being able to meet different people. After having grown up in the middle of the state, Mercedes has enjoyed being placed in both western and eastern Pennsylvania. People from different areas have different customs and even speak differently, she related. They also have different problems because they are farming in different types of areas.

Having the opportunity to move to different offices across the state provides more experience and broadens knowledge of various conservation practices too, she



Mercedes Seman, Berks County's new soil reviews some conservation practices. Mercedes joined the staff in mid-July, coming from Stabilization and Conservation Service, Westmoreland County.

said. "First hand experience is the best way to learn."

Mercedes also noted that she feels it is very important to get to know the people in the county.

Presently she is usually working with an experienced member of the ASCS staff while she is perfecting her own skills.

She has enjoyed Berks County and especially likes to be outside on assignments where she can see the beautiful countryside.

"Berks looks like a busy county," she stated. It is very interesting and there always seems to be something going on with farming or industry," she said.

Mercedes also noted that the volume of agriculture seems much greater here than in her previous location. The ASCS office is larger too, because the county's agriculture is greater.

In Westmoreland County the topography is much more mountainous, the hills are much steeper and run-off is more of a problem. In Berks County however, with the flatter, rolling hills, Mercedes has learned different conservation practices more appropriate to the terrain.

Here she has learned how to build terraces, something she never had the opportunity to do in the steeper farmland. She has also been exposed to many more animal waste holding facilities, but noted that they are increasing in popularity in all areas of the State.

While in Westmoreland County, Mercedes helped to design many more diversions; especially near

the strip mines. A diversion, Mercedes explained is deeper than a terrace, having a greater water-carrying capacity while terraces are broader and in many instances can be farmed over.

"With terraces, not as much farmground is being lost to production and run-off water is being returned to the ground and not carried away as it is in diversions," she explained.

Because the stripmining in western Pennsylvania is usually done on steep slopes many diversions are being employed to ease run-off. Much of the land is being refilled after mining but is very unstable, loose and susceptible to washing. It is usually replanted into grass, Mercedes explained, and used for pasture. Some, however, has been mowed for hay.

Mercedes explained that it takes quite a few years to reclaim the refilled mine areas and get them back into production. She has seen oats grown on reclaimed land but believes that it would take perhaps as much as fifty years to get the soil into suitable corn production. "The land needs to be stabilized first," she explained.

This new but very knowledgeable soil conservationist also explained that she has worked with sewage sludge by applying it to the reclaimed land. She quickly admitted that it wasn't very popular with the people of the area but did prove to be of value to the soil.

"The reclaimed land can use all the fertilizer and organic matter it can get," she explained.

Another aspect of the sludge not appreciated by the people of the area was that the sludge was coming from Philadelphia where treatment plants are equipped to handle the sewage in the needed form. "They (the area residents) felt that if sludge was going to be used it could at least be local sludge," Mercedes noted lightly.

Mercedes is presently going over the more than 3,000 conservation plans in the Berks County files to bring them up to date. Some of

which date back to the 1940's. She is especially interested in contacting the owners of the land to see if they are interested in revising their plans or updating them. This gives her another opportunity to meet new people and see different farming operations.

She would also like to sign up new people and feels it is important that land owners become aware of the conservation practices available to them and what would be practical for their operation and farmland.

"Every little bit of conservation helps," she stressed. Mercedes had previously expressed her desire of being able to produce the best possible crops from what soil was available as being another major reason for studying agronomy.

This twenty-two-year-old conservationist also enjoys other things besides her job. She is presently engrossed in decorating her newly found apartment, the first she has ever had. Mercedes also enjoys many different crafts. She has been crocheting since third grade. She also knits, enjoys drawing, and refinishing furniture.

At this time she is trying to catch up on her "loose-ends" before starting another project. She hopes to start making a quilt soon though. Most of her craft skills have been picked up as she grew, noting that she wasn't involved in 4-H even though she wishes there was a club in her area while she was younger.

Mercedes feels quite lucky to have found a career in her chosen field so quickly. "Before I switched my major while in college, I didn't believe a girl from the city could possibly get a foothold in agriculture," she explained seriously. "I even worked as a bank teller before working for the ASCS," she continued.

Mercedes expects to be in Berks County for approximately one year. "It could be shorter or longer however," she explained, depending on the needs of different areas and the ASCS positions available."



Mercedes travels on field visits in her faithful truck. She says field experience is just one of the enjoyable aspects of her job. "I've learned a lot from books while at college, but experience is what teaches."

Homestead Notes