

Soil saving is a way of life for Lancaster's Houseknecht

BY DONNA TOMMELLEO MILLERSVILLE — It takes 1,000 years for one inch of topsoil to form under natural conditions.

And it takes less than four years for erosion to destroy that inch.

If erosion throughout the nation were confined to one region, all of the topsoil from an area the size of Rhode Island would be gone in less than three months.

The somber facts, provided by

"Abner contributed more than any other individual in the county," notes Amos Funk, Lancaster Conservation District Vice Chairman.

Funk attributes Houseknecht's success in signing up hundreds of farmers for soil-saving practices to the conservationist's sensible approach to a problem.

"He made farmers realize what was needed," Funks adds. "It will

In 1951, 66 percent of Lancaster County was in close-growing crops, such as alfalfa and wheat. Today, less than 30 percent of the land offers these crops, which cause far less erosion than corn.

"Hay is a hard thing to grow," says Houseknecht of the labor-intensive crop. "But corn has been so easy. You just plant it and harvest."

However, somewhere in between the planting and harvesting of corn, farmers disturb the soil much more. Plowing, discing, and for some, cultivating all take their toll on the land. Lancaster County now has more than 200,000 acres in corn fields.

Abner points out that corn has become king because of its profitability over hay.

If used correctly, no-till cropping systems can slow down the erosion rate, he says. But just having a no-till planter does not constitute good practice.

"That's only half. There is a lot more," he notes. Abner stresses the importance of using rye or another cover crop in the system, killing it at the knee-high stage.

"By keeping some kind of cover on the ground we can control 80 percent of soil erosion," explains Houseknecht.

Although soil-conservation practices are something many folks are familiar with in the last 50 or 60 years, Houseknecht explains that terraces and contours date back before Christ.

Evidence of contour farming dating back to 4,000 B.C. was found in the Philippines on rice paddies in the mountains.

In parts of hilly Europe, modern farmers employ conservation practices because of the scarcity of good land. Southern France sports terraces believed to have been built by the Phoenicians about 2,500 years ago.

For Houseknecht, his love and knowledge of the land, which began as a boy, became useful tools during the great depression.

Growing up in rural Sullivan County, Houseknecht admits that part of his interest was spawned by others.

"My mother would know every weed, tree and bush in the county," he says. In addition, his high school principal placed a major emphasis on biology and botany.

As the country began digging itself out of the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps began. The high unemployment



rates of today paralleled the conditions in the early 1930s and the New Deal's CCC provided work for many.

Houseknecht worked on the CCC for four years, side by side with World War I veterans and young men just out of high school. Within those four years, the corps worked on woodland improvement, built

local, state and federal citations for his work, takes great care with his own three-acres of land in Millersville.

While his wife Ruth tends the many varieties of flowers that surround their Atglen Stone house, Abner manages their huge garden.

"There's enough garden there for four people," he says. In ad-

"About 75 percent of the world's children will go hungry tonight and every night of their life..."

the USDA, create the impetus for badly needed soil conservation programs, nationwide. The bottom line is quite simple — more erosion, less land, less food.

"About 75 percent of the world's children will go hungry tonight and every night of their life," states former Lancaster County soil conservationist Abner Houseknecht.

The tragedy borne by the world's hungry has been the driving force that kept Houseknecht on the heels of Lancaster County farmers from 1937 until his recent retirement this year.

be perhaps impossible to replace him. Hopefully, his replacement will grow into the same type of man Abner is."

But accolades aside, Houseknecht sees his past progress with county farmers slipping in the name of economics.

"More than one half of the contour strips I have helped to install are all gone," says Houseknecht.

The strips disappeared much like the Lancaster County hay crop, which over the years has given way to corn, corn and more corn.



"If any shall fail in this stewardship of the land, thy fruitful fields shall become sterile stony, ground and wasting gullies..."

fire and truck trails and managed woodland inventory, which included more than 10,000 acres of forest.

In 1937, he arrived in southern Lancaster County to assist in a demonstrational farm "to show farmers what could be done." What he saw was a great deal of sheet erosion and large gullies.

"There were gullies big enough to sit a car in," he recalls.

A year later, the Lancaster County Conservation District was formed and strips and contours began appearing on county farms.

"Most of the farmers we have worked with have been at the request of the farmers," Abner says. "Spring and fall were really busy, but it was up to the farmer when he wanted to do it. We'd lay out the work but insist the farmer would be right there with us."

Some farmers, Abner recalls, were soil conservation zealots from the start.

Houseknecht arrived at a farm, several years ago, which had gone to seed by its previous owner.

"The farm looked like a jungle," he notes. The new owner, a dairyman, was so anxious to begin conservation practices that he did everything at his own expense.

Whether or not farmers thought they needed to improve their land, was usually decided after a hard rain, remembers Houseknecht.

"After a heavy rain, the phone would be ringing all morning," he says.

The caretaker of Lancaster County, who has received several

condition, the Houseknecht home includes several trees, which seem to come alive with personality when Abner, an avowed "tree nut," speaks of them.

One particular tree is a distant relative to the California Redwoods. An oriental tree, whose gnarled trunk narrows like a pyramid from the base up, arrived as a handful of seeds from a friend, several years ago.

Several Pin Oak, standing tall and strong throughout the yard, were no more than an inch in diameter when Abner moved them from their forest home about 30 years ago.

As he moves among his trees, garden and as he moved around the county, Houseknecht is reminded of an "eleventh commandment" offered by W.C. Lowdermilk, former SCS assistant chief:

"Thou shalt inherit the Holy Earth as a faithful steward, conserving its resources and productivity from generation to generation. Thou shalt safeguard thy fields from soil erosion, thy living waters from drying up, thy forests from desolation, and protect thy hills from overgrazing by thy herds, that thy descendants may have abundance forever.

If any shall fail in this stewardship of the land thy fruitful fields shall become sterile stony ground and wasting gullies, and thy descendants shall decrease and live in poverty or perish from off the face of the earth."

SCS announces volunteer service

HARRISBURG — In these belt-tightening times when almost every day brings new cuts in programs and services, the Soil Conservation Service is responding to public need through a volunteer program.

"Thanks to the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981, the Soil Conservation Service now can accept the volunteer services of any person of any age or skill in helping with soil and water conservation programs," says Peter C. Myers, Chief of the USDA's Soil Conservation Service.

SCS volunteers are unpaid and will definitely not displace any USDA employee. According to Graham T. Munkittrick, State Conservationist in Pennsylvania, volunteers can help with field surveys and layout of conservation practices, help train students for soil and land judging contests and help with conservation education programs.

They can help construct outdoor

learning areas, help with public information campaigns or with routine paperwork.

"Freeing SCS employees to concentrate on priority work helps us give the public more for each tax dollar," Munkittrick said.

"Since we announced the program in mid-May," Myers said, "the response has been excellent. More people are signing up every day." One of those volunteers is a long-time friend of resource conservation, actor

Eddie Albert who recorded radio spots to help promote the volunteer program.

Many skills are needed and volunteers are permitted to perform a wide range of services on a part-time basis.

"With the help of volunteers, we can be more responsive to farmers, ranchers and other land users, and do a better job for less money in less time," Myers says.

PENNSYLVANIA AGRICULTURE



WE'RE GROWING BETTER