

Lehmans Win Regional Conservation Award

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When Rolla Lehman installed his first farm conservation measures, the move stirred some skepticism among his neighbors.

It was nearly 50 years ago that the northern York County farmer began converting from the block-style fields, then common, to planting in strips. Since then, the kinds of practices he instituted on the rich, rolling farmground near Dillsburg have become recognized as backbone programs of soil conservation.

Recently, Rolla and his wife, Esther were recognized for their half-decade of dedication to preserving the soil when they were named winners of the Pennsylvania Chesapeake Bay Clean Water Farm Award. The York County Conservation District nominated the Lehmans for the honor, awarded by the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts, in conjunction with the Pennsylvania Bay Education office.

"The District felt Rolla should be recognized for his outstanding work over the years. He's been a sort of conservation torchbearer in the community," said York County Conservation District manager Mark Kimmel. "Rolla always says and shows by example his belief that 'conservation doesn't cost, it pays'."

The Lehmans' award was presented during the state Association of Conservation Districts' July executive council meeting in Altoona. Also honored as regional winners for their soil conservation efforts were Mark and Sue Mapes, Mifflinburg, and Karen and Randy Hunstman, Martinsburg.

For having been selected as clean water award winners, Rolla and Esther were hosted recently on a tour of the Clagett Farm in Upper Marlboro, Md. The 285-acre Clagett Farm is owned and operated by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation as a educational showcase for sustainable agriculture practices. They were also given a bay tour on an oyster-dredging skipjack.

In 1991, the county district named him its conservation farmer of the year. He was also selected a Goodyear Award winner, a national conservation award sponsored by the Goodyear company and the National Association of Conservation Districts.

Rolla's interest in soil-saving agriculture techniques was spurred by a government program set up to train veterans returning home from service in World War II.

"My brother came back from service and decided he wanted to farm. The government had a program to provide schooling for veterans, and the one for agriculture education was held one night each week at Dillsburg High School," Rolla said. "I attended a lot of those meetings with him and it was there that the seed of conservation was planted in my mind."

Planting in strips and contours, use of sod waterways, and installation of tile drainage were in their infancy as agriculture practices. Rolla initially planted just part of the couple's 97-acre farm in simple strip, which he laid off himself since no technical assistance was then available.

"The only thing I would have done differently, looking back is to have gone to contour strips right

away," he said.

In the ensuing years, nearly two miles of tile drainage have been installed in the fields to handle the plentiful "winter springs" scattered across the Lehmans' acreage. A sod waterway slows runoff on one of the steeper slopes.

Much of the tile installed in the early 1950s was put in with the help of Thomasville farmer Albert Bentz. Bentz owned a specialized piece of equipment which operated from a Ford tractor and both cut a trench and laid the clay tile pipe.

"Most of the tiling is still the original clay," said Lehman. "Only on occasion has a section needed replacement with plastic."

One of the tiled drain fields empties at the edge of the farm property and is used by adjoining neighbors as a partial feeder source for their attractive, backyard pond. The water draining out from beneath the contours of hay and corn, even after fairly abundant summer rains, is crystal clear.

An early user of minimum tillage, Lehman first tried the new practice to renovate a section of pasture. Some 15 or more years before minimum tillage became popular, he borrowed an early-type chisel plow, a piece of equipment that originated in the Midwest.

"This farm has lots of ironstone and was always hard on plows," he said. Lehman was so pleased with the results that he later purchased his own chisel plow.

"For a full 10 years, we never put a moldboard in the ground," Lehman said. "Now, we do use a



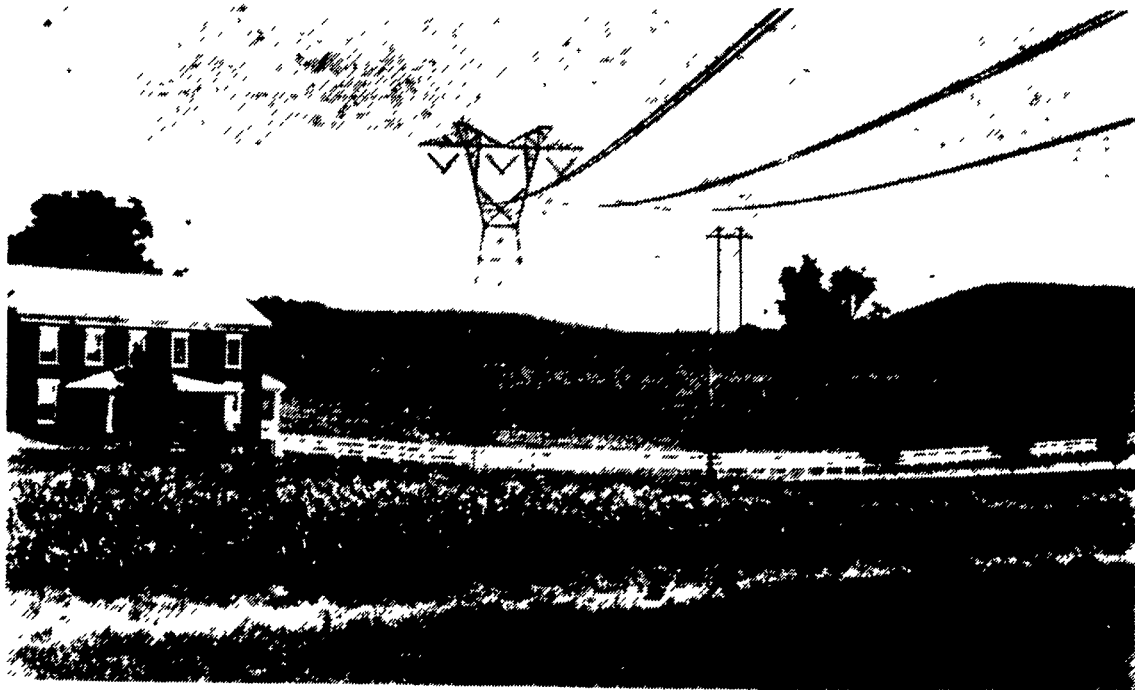
Rolla and Esther Lehman review a pamphlet explaining the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Clagett Farm, which they toured recently as regional winners of the Clean Water Award.



One of the Lehmans' underground tile drainfields feeds crystal-clear water to the park-like backyard pond of a neighbor's adjoining property. Esther and Rolla admire the waterfall setting from the picturesque bridge.



The Lehmans check the growth of the Acer Rubin maples recently planted along their road frontage. Behind the new trees is the area of fields Rolla first put into alternating strip crops nearly a half-century ago.



A sod waterway runs above the first contoured corn strip to slow runoff on one of the Lehmans' steeper slopes.

plow to turn the ground to start alfalfa, maybe three to eight acres a year. It can cut the roots of the mulberry bushes that take root in the fields better than minimum tillage."

Rolla and Esther moved on to his home farm just a few months after their marriage. His father purchased the farm in 1922, four years before Rolla was born. The couple raised five children, all of whom have gone onto careers other than agriculture.

Even before Lehman began implementing conservation measures, the farm had another early innovation.

"We had running water in the house," he said of his childhood. "It was gravity flowed to the house and barn. We still have a spring in the basement."

For some years, Lehman continued the five-year crop rotation used by his father, planting two years of corn, then oats, wheat, and hay of timothy-clover mix.

"But I could never raise good oats," he said of the crop's difficulty in the heavy soil that can rarely be worked in the early, cool weather favored by the grain crop. As the couple's dairy herd grew, Lehman eliminated the oats and later the wheat, concentrating on herd feed of corn and hay.

While the Lehmans never looked back once they started adopting conservation improvements, Mother Nature once handed them a rather dramatic setback. In 1972, when Hurricane Agnes dumped some 15 inches of rain across the

region, they had just finished installing a new section of tile drainage. With the soil still loose and not settled, the three-day downpour completely washed out the completed work.

"A neighbor told me I was crazy," he said. "But we got a dozer and high-lift back in and repaired the damage. These conservation measures are some of the best things I've ever done."

It was for Lehman's lifelong commitment to conservation and ongoing implementation of practices that earned him the District's recommendation for the state award. Lehman served the York County Conservation District as a director from 1957-1981. In that time, he has seen consistent strides being made in the move to conserve the nation's soils.

"Nutrient management has probably been the biggest change in that period of time," he said. "Minimum tillage is another."

On nutrient management, Lehman believes that the philosophy has come somewhat "full circle." He relates that when he was growing up, stacking manure until it could be spread at optimum times, spring and fall planting, was a common practice.

"Then the dairy regulations made it necessary for us to move manure out every day, to not hold it. Now, we're going back to the concept I grew up with."

Two years ago, the Lehmans took an additional improvement step on their land of grading and

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