

A LESS CONSPICUOUS LANDSCAPE: A LOCAL STUDY OF SOIL
CONSERVATION, RURAL PROGRESS, AND PHOTOGRAPHY

by

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ABSTRACT

The nature of natural resource conservation can obscure the impact of the people and organizations behind such activities because it creates landscapes that seem “natural.” The impact of New Deal soil conservation in rural America is found in farm ponds, planned forests, and other seemingly natural landscape features. Cannon County, Tennessee and its local conservation district provide a case study to analyze the role of the SCS, local conservation districts, and farmers in modernizing local agricultural and transforming landscapes. Photographs documenting the evolution of the county’s landscape and farm culture during the middle of the twentieth century provide valuable points of departure for researching and interpreting this part of New Deal, agricultural, and local history. The photos also suggest the paradoxical nature of farmers’ participation in agricultural change, depicting them as progressive preservationists that changed in order to maintain their lifestyles which resulted in the coexistence of change and tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

Many often experience rural landscapes as scenic routes or even destinations and prized for their aesthetic qualities characteristic of nature undisturbed. Despite the presence of farming operations, people generally think of countrysides as free of human imprint. Perceived as natural, even virgin, places untainted by the economic drive behind urban development, rural areas' lack of sidewalks, high rises, and other conspicuous modifications to the landscape can be misleading. Man changed much of the "undeveloped," privately owned land in the United States. Ultimately, people have repaired and put to best use, or retired for restoration a large portion of the rural landscape. Uninterrupted by gullied hillsides, badly washed fields, and abandoned, barren farms, many of the intact landscapes of rural America are the products of a sweeping culture of conservation and land reform initiated by New Deal organizations and largely carried out by rural Americans thereafter.

During the Great Depression, federal concern for rural Americans produced a cadre of agencies created to aid farmers, improve agricultural practices, raise rural Americans' standard of living, and generally bring the rural population into the American mainstream. Congress created the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in 1935 to provide farmers access to technical expertise that enabled them to implement progressive, soil conservation measures on their farms. In 1937, the government encouraged the formation of

local districts through which assistance could be more effectively channeled. By 1969 rural Americans had voluntarily organized 3,017 local conservation districts nationwide.¹

The very nature of the SCS mission, to conserve the nation's natural resources, makes its impact elusive, but the number of people involved and the collective effect of their actions make these efforts nothing short of a movement. Successful intervention resulted in improved stewardship and lands' restoration to a more natural-looking and uninjured aesthetic. The SCS and the local conservation districts helped rural Americans reorient agricultural practices from traditional and exploitative to conservative and sustainable. Thus, the impact of the SCS, the local districts, and their relationships with individual farmers saturates the rural landscape in the form of kudzu cover, farm ponds, terraced fields, waterways, planned forests, stabilized stream banks, and unscarred landscapes. Easily overlooked because of their natural appearance, these features comprise a New Deal landscape especially shaped by rural Americans and largely ignored by scholars.

Over the last several decades, scholars have begun to recognize the relatively untapped potential of landscape study. Shunning any notions about landscapes' stoicism or their roles as backdrops of supposedly transformative historical events, scholars have begun to unpack the potency of these interactive vistas, portraying them as unsung historical actors and highlighting their value in

¹ D. Harper Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 81.

research and interpretation, not to mention their resilient relevance to current events. Assigning to the word landscape definitive parameters and interpretations is a task that eluded even J.B. Jackson. Jackson made a career out of emphasizing the importance of landscapes and attributed their ambiguity to their dynamic nature, perceiving them culturally and politically, reflections “of social values and cultural patterns.”² But most relevant to this study, he and others insisted upon the significance of *ordinary* landscapes to history and our understanding of events, past and present.

According to D.W. Meinig, the word landscape “is important because it is a common word which is increasingly used to encompass an ensemble of ordinary features which constitute an extraordinarily rich exhibit of the course and character of any society.”³ This thesis takes Meinig’s concept of an “ensemble of ordinary features” and applies it to a particular region of rural America to reveal New Deal landscapes that include such seemingly mundane things as ponds and forests. Seen together, as an “ensemble,” these landscape features become artifacts that, far from becoming antiquated and irrelevant, have the capacity to constantly record and reflect. Studying material culture for evidence of cognitive shifts and cultural change, such as those that prefaced and coincided with shifts

² Ervin H. Zube, “Foreword,” in *Landscapes: Selected Writings of J.B. Jackson*, ed. Ervin H. Zube (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970); J.B. Jackson, “The Order of a Landscape: Reason and Religion in Newtonian America,” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D.W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 153.

³ D.W. Meinig, “Introduction,” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D.W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 81.

to conservative agriculture, is a “Deetzian” exercise that transforms landscapes into legible primary sources.⁴

New Deal landscapes do not lack interpreters, yet much of the scholarly literature examines the seemingly more rousing New Deal agencies such as the Agriculture Adjustment Administration, Farm Security Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, and, in the South especially, the Tennessee Valley Authority dominates much of the region’s New Deal narrative. In *Tennessee’s New Deal Landscapes: A Guidebook*, Carroll Van West acknowledges that while the “landscape of Tennessee owes much to the TVA...many other agencies and individuals left their own marks and their own significant legacies.”⁵ Although West endorses soil conservation’s transformative effect on the land, his is a study that encompasses cities, as well as small towns, and focuses mainly on the “public infrastructure” that resulted in “a new public landscape of better roads, land, and municipal services.”⁶ West’s focus on Tennessee’s public New Deal infrastructure inadvertently highlights one of the possible reasons that scholars have shunned the SCS and local conservation districts for so long. He explains that, in Tennessee, “at the height of New Deal spending, over two-thirds of federal dollars were invested in public infrastructure.”⁷ New Dealers operated within a sense of urgency to extend to rural areas the necessities for leading

⁴ In *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), Deetz demonstrates how intangible such as cognition, mindset, and cultural change can be ascertained by studying patterns within material culture.

⁵ Carroll Van West, *Tennessee’s New Deal Landscapes: A Guidebook* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), xii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*

modern lives and even though science and technology was transforming farm culture on private land, these amenities were best and most widely exemplified in the courthouses, post offices, sports fields, and public housing projects West surveys. These public structures were demonstrations of and vehicles to modernity, the products of a transformative era, when “local control and traditions [were being exchanged] for federal money and expertise.”⁸ Most importantly, West’s work reminds us of the capability of a local landscape to tell a rendition of a national story.

Several scholars have politicized those landscapes beyond the major metropolises and small town city limits by studying soil conservation itself. R. Burnell Held and Marion Clawson published *Soil Conservation in Perspective* thirty years after the creation of the SCS. The book chronicles the evolution of soil conservation in social, political, and economic terms, and thus establishes the complexity and weight of the issue with a Malthusian wariness about a growing population living upon a fixed land mass.⁹ In *Governing the Soil: Thirty Years of the New Decentralization*, Robert J. Morgan, as the title might suggest, covers the political trajectory of soil conservation, namely through the SCS and local conservation districts.¹⁰ These works help highlight the malleable relevancy of agriculture and create the foundation of any future discourse regarding soil conservation, but they approach the topic with the “scarcity doctrine” in mind, or

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ R. Burnell Held and Marion Clawson, *Soil Conservation in Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press for Resources for the Future, Inc., 1965).

¹⁰ Robert J. Morgan, *Governing Soil Conservation: Thirty Years of the New Decentralization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press for Resources for the Future, Inc., 1965).

consider the past of soil conservation for its political currency, moments of failure and success, and potential prophecy.¹¹ These works substantiate soil conservation's potency as an idea and call to action, yet they do not consider soil conservation for what it was to the people and to the landscape they rearranged. If Morgan is correct, that New Deal agricultural agencies "profoundly altered...relations in agriculture," a landscape approach would contend that anything that profoundly alters the abstract reorders the physical.¹²

Historians have certainly begun to broaden scholarly understandings soil conservation. Mark Madison coined the phrase "agrarian conservation" and notes that it has long been a scientifically and socially motivated movement aimed not only at conserving the soil, but also at conserving a particular human system, that of "humans, their land, and their agricultural products."¹³ Joel Orth frames soil conservation in the Great Plains as an historically contentious topic that created friction within the United States Department of Agriculture and amongst farmers, professionals, and politicians, making the region's land reformation one that was shaped by political and social controversy. His study of the Great Plains' transformation depicts the area as a "socially-constructed" and "humanized place" whose "conservation landscape" is the product of "Americans' efforts to

¹¹ The "scarcity doctrine" Held and Clawson recall is that developed by Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill and discussed in Harold J. Barnett and Chandler Morse, *Scarcity and Growth: The Economics of Natural Resource Availability* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press for Resources for the Future, Inc., 1963).

¹² Morgan, *Governing Soil Conservation*, v.

¹³ Mark Glen Madison, "The Agrarian Conservation Movement in America, 1890-1990," (PhD diss, Harvard University, 1995), 3, accessed July 2, 2014, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

tweak, improve, and conserve the Great Plains.”¹⁴ Though the scope of their studies encompass far more than the New Deal, by analyzing soil conservation Madison and Orth pack these perceivably natural and largely uninhabited areas with as much significance and historicity as large cities and incorporated towns.

In *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement*, Neil Maher finds political and cultural lessons within soil conservation and insists that landscapes are the “nexus of interactions between society and the natural environment” and thus, present opportunities to more fully understand how abstract notions of politics and culture are intertwined with the physical terrain and people’s relationship to it.¹⁵ Using landscape as an “organizing principle,” he examines the role of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) projects in helping to democratize conservation, while simultaneously building political support for the Roosevelt administration.¹⁶ Building upon Maher’s examination, Jennifer Stabler studies CCC projects in Fort Hood, Texas and notes the role that “CCC soil conservation work on private property” played in “significantly shap[ing] the rural American landscape,” as well as regional attitudes toward federally initiated conservation.¹⁷

¹⁴ Joel Jason Orth, “The Conservation Landscape: Trees and Nature on the Great Plains” (PhD diss., Iowa State University, 2004), 322, accessed July 2, 2014, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

¹⁵ Neil Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press 2008), 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6, 215.

¹⁷ Jennifer Stabler, “Historic Conservation Landscapes on Fort Hood, Texas: The Civilian Conservation Corps and Cultural Landscape Change in Central Texas” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2010), 145, accessed July 10, 2014, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Considering the scholarship substantiating the historical significance of soil conservation and the attention heretofore given landscapes, and more specifically, ordinary landscapes, it is surprising that the SCS and thousands of soil conservation districts across the country have escaped scholarly scrutiny. Again, the nature of SCS and the local conservation districts' work obscures those organizations' significance and the prevalence of such soil conservation activity because the saturation of the landscape, does its part to numb receptivity. We literally cannot "see the forest for the trees." Jack Temple Kirby makes a relevant point about human manipulation and subsequent, altered perceptions of southern pine forests in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those with interests in southern forests believed that pines were the areas' natural arboreal climax and regarded interspersed hardwoods as an encroaching menace. However, a more varied forest with hardwoods *and* pines was the "natural succession"; the prevalence of pine was due to decades of intentional burning and the ability of the species to regenerate faster than others. Natural variety was perceived as alien, while the modified and largely homogenized forest had become the norm, beheld as natural because it was so prevalent.¹⁸

In his works *Landscapes and Images* and *Outside Lies Magic*, John Stilgoe eschews such mindless acceptance of environment and mourns the adulteration of our natural tendency to observe and derive meaning from our surroundings, noting that "people ignore landscape and its constituent

¹⁸ Jack Temple Kirby, *The Countercultural South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 50-51.

elements.”¹⁹ It is with a similar degree of dissatisfaction that I wish to assert the significance of the SCS and local conservation districts in rural America. Studying the landscape created by the SCS and local districts suggests a slightly different New Deal story than is told by the traditional narrative because success relied upon voluntary participation and implementation of conservation measures. In this context, and to borrow from Meinig, the landscape becomes artifact and terraces and carved waterways represent cognitive shifts among a sizeable portion of rural Americans in the 1930s.²⁰ Historical, political, and social meaning crowd the aesthetically pleasing and seemingly empty countryside and one begins to question the seemingly definitive implications of the word natural.

The purpose of this thesis is to study the impact of the SCS and local conservation districts on the rural American landscape in microcosm, using Cannon County, a predominantly rural area in middle Tennessee, as a case study. Residents formed the Cannon County Soil Conservation District in 1942 and thus began transforming the county under the auspices of natural resource conservation and rural progress. By all accounts, the district operated much like others across the nation, with the locally elected supervisors and cooperating landowners doing their part to modernize, conserve, and uplift their corner of the country. What makes Cannon County a prime place to study the activities of the

¹⁹ Stilgoe contributes the inattention to landscape to the lack of emphasis on visual acuity and geography in schools and the increasing prevalence of “mediated reality.” John R. Stilgoe, *Landscape and Images* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 1-3.

²⁰ D.W. Meinig, “The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene,” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D.W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 36-37. Meinig’s ten landscape frameworks include that of artifact in which man has impacted or altered nature, thus making “the shape of the land surface” a historical record.

SCS and local conservation district, is the meticulous documentation of W.L. Clement.

Each local conservation district was appointed a soil conservationist. W.L. Clement served Cannon County in this capacity from 1951 to 1974. Like his counterparts in districts across the country, Clement's duty included taking pictures of conservation practices that SCS technicians promoted, taught, and standardized and local farmers implemented. The federal agency wanted pictures of their progress, undoubtedly to justify the organization's existence and consistently increasing funding. Clement fulfilled his duty as an employee of the SCS; he took pictures of the local district's activity in Cannon County, documenting the organization's impact. He tired of sharing the camera with other conservationists in the region and purchased his own that enabled him to create a thorough documentation of the county's transformation during his tenure. I will use his photographs and careful notes to guide my study and to help illustrate the impact I wish to report.

The inconspicuous nature of this particular New Deal landscape obscures the significance of the SCS and the local districts' roles in helping to transform the countryside and make progressive agriculture a reality instead of a tenet of lofty reform rhetoric. The initial subtlety of it all makes the photographs a valuable tool and point of departure for both research and public interpretation. They help to reveal and communicate the prevalence of rural land reform, which associated with the soil conservation movement of the 1930s, is indicative of four things.

Similar to Jennifer Stabler's point that "cultural landscapes created by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s" are "significant because they represent a time period when the federal government began to intervene on a large scale into farming practices and planning on private land," the landscapes created by the interaction between the SCS, local districts, and individual farmers represent the theretofore unprecedented responsibility for the nation's rural residents and commitment to rural progress taken on by the Roosevelt administration.²¹ Secondly, these landscapes evidence rural self-help guided by an expertly informed government, a trend that predated the Great Depression and was not limited to agricultural endeavors, but gained momentum during the New Deal. Thirdly, they are products of rural Americans' willingness to accept guidance and aid from new interventionist government agencies. This point is deeply connected to the last, that these rural New Deal landscapes exist because farmers voluntarily cooperated with the SCS and formed local districts, and in doing so, paradoxically invited change that, at least in theory, would enable them to preserve their lifestyles.

Pictures of contour farming, terrace and trench silo construction, streambank stabilization, kudzu, pine planting, and crop rotation with legumes illustrate the pervasiveness of soil conservation in this rural county. Occasionally, Clement's lens meandered away from activities of the local district, making the collection a more holistic documentary of Cannon County's transformation during the middle of the twentieth century, while also depicting the coexistence of

²¹ Stabler, "Historic Conservation Landscapes," 1.

change and tradition. Photos of local businesses, construction projects, and damages wrought by natural disasters help narrate a landscape in flux, while photos of people making molasses, annual horse ride-a-thons, and hunting, all of which are still staples of rural recreation in the community today, suggest the enduring rural rhythms that coincided (and continue to coincide) with the march of modernization.

Much of New Deal historiography is a constant discourse about the extent of change and homogenization brought about by the New Deal versus the traditionalism it failed to affect. In *The South and the New Deal*, Roger Biles sets out to analyze the “interplay” between the seemingly impermeable South and the federal government during President Roosevelt’s administration, remembering from an earlier manuscript that “southernness” mattered.²² This thesis will contribute to that discourse of transformation and stasis. Clement’s photography illustrates that yes, considerable change began during the New Deal era, but it was not wholesale and completely transformative. The amount of intervention and change taking place in rural America during the middle third of the twentieth century and the persistence of certain rural lifeways today suggest that their preservation was purposeful and the change that was initiated by rural Americans was also mitigated by them.

The first chapter of this thesis will include a brief overview of southern agriculture and land use, the rise of scientific agriculture, the concern for rural

²² Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), xiii.

Americans before the Great Depression, and the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Soil Conservation Service. This will help contextualize the federal concern for rural America and agriculture that led to the creation of New Deal agencies designed to uplift half of the American population. Chapter two will focus on the rise of a culture of conservation, the SCS in Tennessee, and the formation and activity of the Cannon County Soil Conservation District. This will include a discussion about the district's impact on the landscape and its role in rural progress. The third chapter will cover W.L. Clement's career as the district's conservationist, his role as a federal employee and member of the community, and his photography. Chapter three will also consider his simultaneous documentation of tradition and change and the implications of this dichotomy. The final chapter will consider the use of photographs in interpreting significance to the public and include an examination of the ways in which public historians can engage their audiences by illuminating the familiar through photographic exhibition.

Chapter I: SOUTHERN AGRICULTURE BEFORE THE GREAT DEPRESSION

As scholars have noted, there was little difference in the immediate postbellum rural South and the one that greeted the Great Depression. The region's recovery from the Civil War's devastation to its landscape, population, and economy was tenuous and uneven. By the time the Great Depression hit, the majority of the South's people still lived in rural areas and half of them still worked on farms. Some farmers saw prosperity, but the economic depressions and surpluses of the late 1800s and early 1900s demonstrated the contingency of stability. Industrialization was swiftly transforming other areas of the country and the promises of the New South saw realization to different degrees in different areas, but the transformation it boasted was nonexistent beyond the city limits. In fact, many of the industries it did attract exacerbated the region's colonial characteristics. Economic recovery coincided with the rampant expansion of agriculture, the rise of scientific agriculture, and an increasing concern for rural America. It is little wonder that New Dealers directed so much energy toward uplifting rural Americans and especially farmers. To proponents of natural resource conservation, reorienting producers' relationship to the land was a fundamental component of rural progress and a necessity for rebuilding national stability.¹

¹ Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 2-5. Biles comments upon the "mixed blessing" of industries coming to the South. Migrating companies provided employment but they were motivated by the region's cheap labor and raw materials. Works that discuss the South's predominantly colonial economy after the Civil War include C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), Gavin Wright, *Old South,*

The March of Agriculture

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fluctuating farm commodity prices, the lack of cash, and the expansion of tenancy thwarted the potential benefits of simultaneous developments such as railroad expansion, the establishment of land-grant colleges, and increased access to agricultural fertilizers. Rising cash crop production and the sprawl of western agriculture undermined the self-sufficiency of rural southerners and created an increasingly dependent farming population. The combination of these developments left much of the South's agriculture developmentally stunted. Intermittent price rallies for farm commodities and wartime prosperity helped revive agrarian morale and planted seeds of hope for a more stable livelihood in the near future. The combination of enthusiasm during the good times and long-term desperation, tenancy, and credit loans led to the unchecked cultivation, and in most cases abuse, of more southern acreage than ever before. Farming more land proved a futile effort to get ahead; by 1930, the per capita income of southern farmers was less than half that of the region's nonfarmers.²

New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War (New York: Basic Books, 1986), and Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987). Edward L. Ayers suggests that the "New South era" began in the 1870s when Reconstruction ended and Democratic rule began. Editors such as Henry Grady of Atlanta made careers out of promoting the "profound and beneficial transformation" of the South in an effort to attract investors and industrial capitalists to their cities. Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3,7, 20-21.

² George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 111.

Despite promising developments after the Civil War, rural southerners' lack of cash started many of them on paths to hand-to-mouth living and cyclical debt for the next several decades. Producers both old and new were enthusiastic immediately after the war, and understandably so. Soaring cotton prices immediately after the war enticed those in and outside of the major cotton growing areas. All farmers within reach of a newly expanded railroad expected to benefit from more reliable paths to growing markets. Some saw the end of slavery as the beginning of a new, more equal ground on which to commercially compete, and thousands of freedpeople sought to begin farming on their own terms. Stores in the Upper and Deep South quickly sprang up to accommodate farmers' aspirations. As the South settled into its postwar economy, many southerners found that without cash, the necessity of credit framed their new horizons.³ As C. Vann Woodward noted, "the farmer had to have credit or starve."⁴

Store merchants offered farmers credit and access to a variety of goods including necessities and various luxury items. These stores and the credit systems they maintained were double-edged swords. They facilitated participation in the market but the particular process tainted the experience. Credit enabled farmers to continue, resume, or begin operating, but debts often had to be paid in cash crops not yet planted. This crop-lien system, "the use of unplanted crops as collateral for loans," and its concomitant interest rates

³ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 126.

⁴ Woodward, *Origins*, 180.

became the necessary bane of many farmers' existence.⁵ Creditors' loan policies and stores' selection of necessities also worked together to undermine self-sufficiency. Gilbert Fite recalls that "Many observers believed that the root of poverty on southern farms was the failure of farmers to grow their own food."⁶

Western products flooded the markets and offered southerners cheap alternatives to cultivating gardens and raising livestock. If farmers could buy what they could grow, they often forwent the effort of cultivation and inadvertently increased their dependence on creditors by purchasing basic necessities at stores and devoting more acres to crops that could settle their debts, not feed them. In this way, the market became parasitic to the farmers. They sold their products cheaply, paid high interest rates on otherwise reasonably priced necessities, and became accustomed to the availability of goods other than basic necessities. According to Edward Ayers, "the New South generation had higher expectations, expectations fed by the stores growing up in their midst."⁷ Unfortunately, the vulnerability of monoculture and the reality of depressed prices could not keep up with the increasingly consumer-oriented market.

For many producers, credit farming made diversification an unrealistic aspiration. Not only did they begin to devote more acres to cash crops, they began to cultivate new acres. In futile efforts to get ahead, many debt-laden farmers, encouraged by the increasing availability of fertilizers, began to increase

⁵ Ayers, *The Promise*, 13.

⁶ Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 9.

⁷ Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 125; Ayers, *The Promise*, 187.

output by expanding their operations, sometimes into areas unfit for farming. This expansion of agriculture produced record crops, and together with domestic and international competition, flooded markets, depressed prices, and exhausted the land.⁸ The lien system, agreed upon by some to have “been the main feature of southern agriculture” by 1897, quickly became the handmaiden to the region’s expanding tenancy.⁹

Between 1860 and 1880, the number of farms in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas more than doubled with over seventeen million acres of new land cultivated. As Woodward notes, many romantics noticed the increase in the number of small farms and celebrated the resurrection of the yeomanry, but that idea “represented everything that the Southern farmer was *not* and *had not*.”¹⁰ Landowners, freedmen, and laborers remedied the separation of land and labor brought about by the Civil War by settling into contracts that necessitated dividing up large tracts of land into smaller, individual farms worked by sharecroppers and tenants. This decentralization and land division “had a profound impact on the countryside,” especially when the landowner was absent.¹¹ In such cases, it often made little sense “to save a large part of the land in woodlands or pastures or orchards...better to clear the land to make space for another tenant.”¹² The

⁸ Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 125.

⁹ Woodward, *Origins*, 180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 175-8.

¹¹ Ayers, *The Promise*, 201.

¹² *Ibid.*

cultivation of more land was tightly bound up with tenancy and the credit systems that enabled it to thrive and expand.

The allure of the “agricultural ladder,” from farm laborer to sharecropper to renter to landowner, lay in its promise of upward mobility. This career path may have been more frequently trod had cash been more readily available. The details of arrangements between the landed and landless varied from farm to farm, but centered on the landless relying upon the landed to survive.¹³

Sharecroppers often had only their labor and that of their families to bring to the agreement and were paid with a share of the crop at the end of the season.

Tenants usually had some equipment and paid their landlords cash rent or a percentage of their crop. Many southerners were able to ascend to landowner, but for many more, each year was the same or worse. Increased production, low prices, and high interest rates prevented many from escaping the debt cycle. In some areas, landowners also functioned as their croppers’ or tenants’ merchants, in which case the landlord’s integrity became a factor. There were also incidents in which landed farmers mortgaged much of what they owned and, unable to pay their debts, were stripped of their implements, animals, and real

¹³ For a description of agricultural ladders, their roles in different types of societies, and factors affecting one’s movement “up” or “down” the ladder, see Shu-Ching Lee, “The Theory of the Agricultural Ladder,” *Agricultural History* 21, no. 1 (1947):53-61. One excellent example of a discussion of the ways in which the agricultural ladder operated in the postbellum South can be found in Lee J. Alston and Kyle D. Kauffman, “Up, Down, and Off the Agricultural Ladder: New Evidence and Implications of Agricultural Mobility for Blacks in the Postbellum South,” *Agricultural History*, 72, no.2 (Spring 1998):263-79.

estate.¹⁴ By 1880, the landless operated 36 percent of southern farms and by 1930, the number had risen to over 50 percent.¹⁵

The southern story of agricultural expansion due to credit farming, tenancy, and phantom opportunities was part of a national trend of increased cultivated acres. The Homestead Act of 1862 encouraged settlers to flock west and farm hard, while World War I demand inebriated farmers all over the country. The result, notes Tim Lehman, was that farmers put 748 million acres of land under cultivation between 1850 and 1930, in addition to the 239 million acres already being cultivated.¹⁶ According to Theodore Saloutos, the harm came not necessarily from the “massive increases in acreage” themselves, but from the “bad farming practices” that accompanied them.¹⁷ The benefits of better practices such as soil conservation could hardly be denied, but “it initially cost money that farmers did not have.”¹⁸

Despite the interdependent prevalence of monoculture, credit farming, and tenancy in the South, many of the region’s farmers were relatively self-sufficient, able to avoid endless debt, and became or remained landowners. These and other producers across the country who were able to gain or maintain their

¹⁴ Ayers, *The Promise*, 195-96; Biles, *The South*, 37; Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 5.

¹⁵ Tindall, *The Emergence*, 125.

¹⁶ Tim Lehman, *Public Values, Private Lands: Farmland Preservation Policy, 1933-1985* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 6-8.

¹⁷ Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982), 3.

¹⁸ Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 25.

footing were surely encouraged by the emerging network of progressive agriculture that crept across the nation seeking to modernize.¹⁹

Tackling the Problem Rationally: The Rise of Scientific Agriculture

The disparity between industry and agriculture was hard not to notice, especially in the South where farmers were generally slower to mechanize. The debilitating nature of monoculture and focus cash crops was evident. The majority of southern farmers were uneducated, inadequately housed, malnourished, and debt-ridden. They certainly did not fit into the New South imagination, much less American society. The remedy, thought some, was for agriculture to catch up with the other economic sectors. Progressive agriculturalists promoted soil conservation and diversification, and sought to apply the efficiency of business and industry to agriculture, to make it a “technically sophisticated enterprise.”²⁰ This transformation required educated farmers to adopt science, mechanize, and diversify. The rhetoric urged farmers “to join the ranks of efficient and profitable producers” like those that characterized “American economic and political life.”²¹ If enough of them did so, diversified agriculture and higher standards of living would supposedly result.²²

After the Civil War when southern states began to take advantage of the Morrill Land Grant College Act of 1862, the resulting institutions became the

¹⁹ Ibid., 37.

²⁰ Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 112-3.

²¹ Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 71.

²² Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 129-31.

unofficial clearinghouses for information regarding a particular region's progressive agriculture. Progressives designed the colleges to train farmers and workers to participate in the making of a modern world, one characterized by rationality and order. Promoters of scientific agriculture sought to replace tradition with "book farming." Several of the concepts regarding more efficient agriculture served as the building blocks of many New Deal programs and agencies, including the Soil Conservation Service.²³

Progressive agriculture was not new, but the deteriorating condition of the nation's land and the lifestyles of some of the people who depended upon it most made progressive agriculture a rallying cry. Nearly as far back as the European settlement of the continent, people decried what proved to be aggressive cultivation, Thomas Jefferson among them. As early as 1748 pamphlets and essays warned producers about the consequences of careless agriculture and promoted soil building crops, rotation, and diversification. Neil Sampson notes the enduring logic of these suggestions but remembers that such advice was not heeded, for within a century "the farmlands of the eastern United States were essentially worked to exhaustion."²⁴ Several factors discouraged producers from considering, much less applying such concepts. When producing a cash crop especially, it made little economic sense to allow fields to lie fallow or plant them in grasses and legumes for a season. The seemingly endless expanse of land

²³ Ibid., 113; Gilbert C. Fite, *American Farmers: The New Minority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 6.

²⁴ Neil Sampson, *Farmland or Wasteland, A Time to Choose: Overcoming the Threat to America's Farm and Food Future* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1981), 16.

that lay west helped maintain this attitude. Another problem with spreading the gospel of progressive agriculture, one that lived on until the middle of the twentieth century, was access to information. Had farmers been open to progressive agricultural methods, biding by the instructions of pamphlets and essays posed a problem. Isolation and illiteracy prevented much of the rural population from obtaining the latest agricultural research, substantiating the long-debated correlation between poor land and poor, uneducated people.²⁵

With the establishment of land-grant colleges, progressive agriculture gained permanent institutions through which methods could be tested and information dispersed to farmers. The colleges' agricultural experiment stations became their respective states' leaders in state-of-the-art agriculture and officials began to communicate research, experiment results, weather reports, and advice through bulletins, farmers' institutes, and meetings. Literature and lecturers promoted various methods of soil conservation and crop diversification, presented information on livestock raising and the application of fertilizer, and provided rural Americans with advice regarding home economics and health. These approaches to agricultural and rural uplift were indicative of an institutionalized rhetoric that aimed to help farmers through education, or "book farming" but distance and rural illiteracy necessitated a more pervasive method of outreach.²⁶

²⁵ Gilbert C. Fite, *Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: A Symposium*, ed. George L. Robson, Jr. & Roy V. Scott (Goleta, CA: Kimberly Press, Inc., 1979), 4-10.

²⁶ Fite, *American Farmers*, 7.

By the early 1900s, the outreach methods of some agricultural experiment stations intrigued Seaman Knapp, an educator and agriculturalist from Iowa. Knapp found one such case at Tuskegee Institute. The success of Tuskegee's farmers' institutes, conferences, and short courses led to the advent of movable schools that reached a large number of farmers away from campus and executed demonstration as a teaching method. In 1906, equipped with farm implements and experiment station personnel, the Jesup Agricultural Wagon reached over 2,000 people per month and worked with farmers along its path to demonstrate the use of new implements and cultivation methods to rural audiences.²⁷

Knapp soon became a champion of "learning by doing."²⁸ The Jesup Wagon and early demonstration work on behalf of the Bureau of Plant Industry emphasized to Knapp the value of "demonstrations carried on by farmers themselves on their own farms."²⁹ This grass-roots demonstration work operated within the assumption that farmers would observe their neighbors' implementation of progressive agricultural methods and be encouraged to follow suit. The threat of the boll weevil and demonstration's promising future enabled Knapp to launch a demonstration program from Texas in 1904. In that year, 7,000 farmers in Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas agreed to host demonstrations. Here, with early twentieth century demonstration work, we see a new way of

²⁷ Allen W. Jones, "Thomas M. Campbell: Black Agricultural Leader of the New South," in *Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: A Symposium* ed. George L. Robson, Jr. and Roy V. Scott (Washington, D.C.: Agricultural History Society, 1979), 44.

²⁸ Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 173.

²⁹ Alfred Charles True, *A History of Agricultural Extension Work in the United States, 1785-1923* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1928), 59.

instruction and knowledge dissemination taking hold within the USDA. “Learning by doing” was the beginning of a new style of federal intervention and agricultural guidance that was useful to other agencies within the USDA, especially New Deal agricultural agencies. The Soil Conservation Service and the Tennessee Valley Authority both used demonstration as a method of outreach, education, and persuasion tool.³⁰

Despite these strides in rural outreach and agricultural transformation, farmers “characteristic reluctance to innovate” and rural poverty filtered the effects and the countryside remained much the same.³¹ Resistance to “book farming” still abounded and the changes progressive agriculturalists promoted were often only realistic to a small percentage of the farming population. Some progressive agriculturalists’ approach to remedying agriculture was too abstract and “superficially unrelated to the immediate needs of farmers.”³² Racism and unequal opportunity was rampant in the USDA, land grant colleges, and extension programs. The capital that diversification and soil conservation methods necessitated was scarce. Poor farmers, black and white, could often only afford to think about clothing and feeding their families in the near future. Lack of capital was not the only problem. Farmers who did not own the land they worked were often at the behest of their landlords regarding what crops to plant. In the South, many of the experiment stations, in addition to promoting

³⁰ Ibid., 60.

³¹ Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 173.

³² Lou Ferleger, “Uplifting American Agriculture: Experiment Station Scientists and the Office of Experiment Stations in the Early Years After the Hatch Act,” *Agricultural History* 64, no.2 The United States Department of Agriculture in Historical Perspective (Spring 1990):5.

diversification, focused on improving the cultivation of cash crops. These more efficient methods, together with fertilizers, only helped to increase production and thus depress prices.³³

The year 1862 was an ironical one for agriculture. The same year Congress passed the Morrill Land Grant College Act and created the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), it also passed the Homestead Act. If one of the purposes of the USDA and the Morrill Act was to sophisticate agriculture and extend to farmers the methods to do so, the federal government's insistence that rain would follow the plow seems ludacris but proved encouraging enough to entice homesteaders to head west and try their luck with 160 acres of land they had never seen. The extant, dire conditions of the rural South and its agriculture, chiefly characterized by unchecked expansion and monoculture, and the subpar standards of living that it caused, did not deter government officials from encouraging homesteaders to join the ranks of those living off the land. Owning the land one worked was not a remedy. Problems with agriculture and rural America were interrelated, systemic, and increasingly worrisome.

Concern for the Countryside

As was heretofore conveyed, concern for agriculture and rural America was substantiated. Simply put, farmers exploited natural resources or used them inefficiently. They cultivated more land, produced record crops, and, with the loss of international markets in the 1920s, all of this only depressed their incomes. As

³³ Ibid., 114; Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 82.

a result, many New Dealers pinned the brunt of the Great Depression on farmers' lack of purchasing power. Five years into the Depression, when the Dust Bowl greeted the East with soil particles carried by winds from the West, the connection between land abuse and poverty was surely substantiated. The director of the temporary Soil Erosion Service, Hugh H. Bennett, seized this opportunity to commit the federal government to permanent natural resource conservation planning on the nation's private lands by urging Congress to create the Soil Conservation Service as a permanent agency of the USDA. Bennett's compelling argument notwithstanding, this Congressional reaction was a culmination of concern for rural America that had been accumulating for the last several decades.

In 1908 President Theodore Roosevelt, aware of the "deficiencies which exist," created the Commission on Country Life "to make a preliminary investigation of the rural conditions in the United States."³⁴ The commission aimed to collect data on agriculture, rural education, public health, housing, labor problems, infrastructure, communication, and organizations of rural locales. The reconnaissance survey of rural America resulted in six broad categories of "deficiencies," one of which the commission entitled "Soil depletion and its effects." Though critics have lambasted the commission, questioned its intentions, and accused it of being an exercise in the "Progressive Era's manipulative technocratic social engineering," scholars have recently begun to recognize the commission as one of the first "high profile, comprehensive

³⁴ "The American Commission on Country Life," *The Economic Journal* 20, no.77 (March 1910):104.

attempts to outline a...vision of sustainability in American agriculture.”³⁵ The Country Life Commission was representative of federal acknowledgement of and concern about the issues plaguing rural America. The report’s call for a “system of self-sustaining agriculture” is indicative of the commission’s recognition of the need for intervention in the particular man-land relationship that characterized American agriculture.³⁶

The lack of self-sustaining agriculture meant that the people caught up in that system were also less likely to be able to sustain themselves. While farmers produced for a hostile market that barely provided sufficient income, they expanded cultivation into marginal land and decreased the productive capacity of fertile land, undermining the sustainability of their livelihood and lifestyle. The report of the Commission on Country Life made a connection between the unfortunate social predicaments prevalent in rural life and the deterioration of the soil, emphasizing the correlation between “agricultural inefficiency” that resulted in exhausted land and rural poverty. With the relatively recent closing of the frontier, such a message was urgent. In 1923, the report from the Committee on Land Utilization deplored the deterioration of natural resources, namely soil, and “spoke in terms of conserving natural resources for future generations.”³⁷ The report, Malthusian and compelling, blamed the government’s “let alone” policy concerning land use and unregulated markets. “Let alone” was, however, hardly

³⁵ Scott J. Peters and Paul A. Morgan, “The Country Life Commission: Reconsidering a Milestone in American Agricultural History,” *Agricultural History* 78, no.3 (Summer 2004), 289, 291.

³⁶ Peters and Morgan, “The Country Life Commission,” 292.

³⁷ Lehman, *Public Values*, 11.

the policy. “Men from the Humid East” enacted the Homestead Act that drove people westward to plow up the Great Plains and during World War I, the federal government gave civilians a patriotic project, planting “fence row to fence row.”³⁸

The wartime adjustments in American agriculture might have been the last proverbial straw for laissez-faire land use and agricultural expansion. As the Commission on Country Life’s report indicated, the situation in rural America was dire before the war and several federal moves of the postwar, pre-Depression years indicated the federal government’s decreasing willingness to reach out and intervene. According to David Danbom, “the most promising new means of disseminating knowledge was agricultural extension,” and by 1910, white and African American agents worked in every southern “taking the university to the people” using demonstration work and informative programs regarding many aspects of rural life for men and women.³⁹ In 1914, Congress passed legislation that underwrote these endeavors to “upgrade agriculture.”⁴⁰ The Smith-Lever Act created the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) that built upon extant agricultural extension networks and embodied a federal commitment to the idea of making land-grant institution research and knowledge “available to those not attending those institutions.”⁴¹ The Act created a formula in which federal, state, and local governments each invested money in the CES, which placed agents in

³⁸ Ladd Haystead and Gilbert C. Fite, *The Agricultural Regions of the United States* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 3.

³⁹ Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 173-74; Wayne D. Ramussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-Five Years of Cooperative Extension* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989).

⁴⁰ Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 173.

⁴¹ Ramussen, *Taking the University to the People*, 3.

every county who advised farm families on topics ranging from which fertilizer to use to recreational activities for farm children. Two years later, Congress passed legislation to address a broader predicament facing most farmers.

In response to the Commission on Country Life's report that cited limited credit availability as one of the major problems facing rural Americans, Congress passed the Federal Farm Loan Act of 1916 creating the Federal Farm Loan Bureau that approved the establishment of federal land banks in each of the twelve districts into which the Bureau divided the nation. Farm loan banks issued credit to farmers and each loan bought stock in the area farm loan associations. The Federal Farm Board approved the formation of these associations that issued long-term credit to farmers.⁴² The associations became liable for its members' loans from the federal farm loan banks. E.L. Butz found within this financial and bureaucratic infrastructure, shared responsibility among national, district, and local levels similar to the tripartite, multi-level government partnership similar that supported the CES.⁴³

The availability of credit was only one part of rural America's predicament. Selling farm commodities at prices that supported the increasingly modern lifestyle and consumerism born of the Industrial Revolution became more and more difficult. This farm crisis of the 1920s moved the federal government to contemplate market intervention. McNary-Haugenism was the idea that the U.S.

⁴² George E. Putnam, "The Federal Farm Loan Act," *The American Economic Review* 4 (1916): 775.

⁴³ E.L. Butz, "A Study of National Farm Loan Associations in the Fourth Federal Land Bank District," *Journal of Farm Economics* 19, no.4 (November 1937): 912.

government should intervene in the market on behalf of the nation's farmers in order to for agriculture to level with industry. The McNary-Haugen Bill of 1924 proposed to allow the government to enforce protective tariffs and dispose of surplus commodities overseas in order to stabilize domestic prices and thus farm income. Even after several attempts and alterations to this controversial subsidization of American agriculture, the bills never became law, but are indicative of the willingness of some government officials to initiate drastic interventions to help out farmers. According to George Tindall, McNary-Haugenism "did not fail." Instead it "made the farm problem into an issue of national policy" and the effects of this are seen in the passage of other farm aid acts such as the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929.⁴⁴ It embodied a diluted version of government market intervention. This legislation aimed to indirectly and directly affect market conditions for farmers. The Act created the Federal Farm Board that lent funds to cooperatives and also had the authority to buy commodities on the market to stabilize prices.⁴⁵

Rural land quality reflected the economic woes of rural America and while Congressmen were legislating informational and financial aid, scientists were using the enduring correlation between poverty and land abuse to develop new concepts that became fundamental to certain New Deal rural uplift strategies. Agriculturalists and economists developed methods and tools for repair and best use of land as the fields of scientific agriculture and land economics matured.

⁴⁴ Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*, 141.

⁴⁵ Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 110; Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 192.

Most significantly, experts within the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) began promoting intervention through agricultural reorientation on individual farms and land and soil classifications from the USDA Bureau of Soils became major stepping stones to reining in natural resource waste and achieving sustainability in agriculture.⁴⁶

Tim Lehman notes that government-backed land reform was “natural,” a response to a “pattern of soil exploitation” in the United States.⁴⁷ If the Great Depression was the catalyst for large-scale government intervention into nearly all realms of American life and society, the Dust Bowl tipped the scales in favor of government-guided agricultural reform and soil conservation. As the story goes, in 1935, as Hugh H. Bennett, head of the temporary Soil Erosion Service, was imploring Congress for a federal commitment to soil conservation and passage of the Soil Conservation Act, dust and dirt from the Great Plains’ Dust Bowl darkened the sky and settled on Washington. The bill passed, creating the Soil Conservation Service as a permanent agency of the USDA. The coincidental dirt fall from the West, insists D. Harper Simms, “undoubtedly helped crystallize support” for the bill.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 36-37.

⁴⁷ Lehman, *Public Values*, 6.

⁴⁸ D. Harper Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 16; R. Neil Sampson, *With One Voice: The National Association of Conservation Districts* (Tucson, AZ: Wheatmark, 2009), 2. The Soil Erosion Service preceded the Soil Conservation Service in form and function. In 1933, the SES began as a project within the Department of the Interior with a budget of five million dollars. The Service used Civilian Conservation Corps labor to install soil and water conservation methods on private land. Within a year and a half, the SES established 41 demonstration projects using 50 CCC camps.

Congress created the SCS for the “control and prevention of soil erosion and...to preserve natural resources.”⁴⁹ The agency would assist farmers implementing conservation measures on their land by supplying them free access to the services of agricultural engineers, agronomists, and soil scientists. SCS personnel helped farmers classify their land in order to facilitate best use of their resources. They promoted reforestation, planting wind breaks, streambank stabilization, farming on the contour, waterway improvement, terrace construction and crop rotation with legumes and cover crops. The role of this organization in rural uplift was implied within the more specific goal of soil conservation. While the SCS encouraged and sometimes facilitated relationships with New Deal agricultural agencies and programs, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and programs that paid farmers to let their land rest, it focused on educating farmers and placing scientists at their disposal, something arguably more valuable than paying cash for what they did not produce. That cooperation with the SCS was voluntary is also significant. Whether they built terraces, planted cover crops, or implemented any of the other conservation measures on their land, rural Americans exhibited a change of mind and, however warily, accepted the extended federal hand. This is not to say that all farmers implemented conservative land use practices. Many did not. Those who did created a New Deal landscape indicative of transformation, but riddled with the endurance of tradition, as Clement’s photography demonstrates. What follows is

⁴⁹ Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service*, 16.

a rendition of farmers' changing to maintain through the services of the SCS, and how this process affected the landscape of Cannon County.

CHAPTER II: THE IMPACT OF SOIL CONSERVATION

In the United States today, soil conservation is embedded within modern agricultural practices and technology. The concept and practice of soil conservation itself is taken for granted, as are the landscapes in which it played a central role in creating. While momentum for natural resource conservation was building during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the creation of the Soil Conservation Service that provided the real impetus behind the soil conservation movement. When the SCS realized it needed more pervasive methods of outreach, enthusiastic response met the federal government's request that communities form local soil conservation districts. Districts formed all over the country, providing farmers with technical services required for substantially altering their operations. A culture of conservation spread, as the stewardship of private land became a public issue and soil conservation became a major factor in shaping modern agriculture. By adopting soil conservation methods voluntarily, rural Americans modernized rural landscapes on their own terms and created a subtle record comingled with change and tradition.

Progressive agriculturalists constantly promoted, studied, and modified soil conservation practices before the advent of widespread government assistance in the 1930s. Experiment stations, extension agents, and farmers' bulletins were the main modes of knowledge dispersal. Said outreach notwithstanding, many farmers did not have the technical or financial capabilities

to implement the most up-to-date conservation measures. The outreach and cooperative possibilities afforded by New Deal agencies made conservation implementation more realistic. The SCS began its career of intervention using the same outreach tactics as its forerunner, the Soil Erosion Service. It facilitated soil conservation work on private land by establishing project demonstration areas, lending equipment to farmers, and occasionally supplying labor from nearby Civilian Conservation Corps camps. Before Congress created the SCS in 1935, the SES had established 41 demonstration projects. During its first year, SCS personnel and CCC men were worked nearly 50,000 farmers on five million acres of land, “with a backlog of applicants wanting assistance.”¹

Amid the initial success of the demonstrations, several problems thwarted the potential of the Soil Conservation Service’s capabilities. Despite belonging to the same region, or even community, farmers’ land varied, each needing his own personal plan to accommodate the soil type, landscape features, and production goals. This is where demonstration work fell short. Farmers could not always observe their neighbor’s changes and put them to work on their farms. In addition, working with a federal agency and having labor supplied also decreased feelings of responsibility and commitment to the new changes among farmers. The “backlog” of farmers awaiting assistance underscored the limitations of direct relationships between farmers and federal SCS personnel. And, despite the overwhelmingly positive response and the voluntary nature of participation,

¹ R. Neil Sampson, *With One Voice: The National Association of Conservation Districts* (Tucson, AZ: Wheatmark, 2009), 3.

federal personnel intervening on private land deterred “independent-minded farmers and ranchers.”² Family and friends of Bill Steenburg, a Wisconsin farmer and early participant in the first Soil Conservation Service erosion control demonstration project, reacted to his new inclinations by ostracizing him. They accused him of giving his farm “to the government.” The solution was to encourage landowners to form local districts through which the technical assistance could be channeled, a method much more politically savvy and palatable to rural Americans, especially in the South.³

The federal government encouraged the democratization of soil conservation through the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law. This law gave states an example to follow in implementing localized soil conservation efforts. It established a state association that approved the formation of local districts. A petition for the formation of a district could be put forth by landowners which had to be approved by residents in a public referendum, and its leaders put into place by popular election. The latitude given local districts reflected the leeway that Congress gave the SCS in implementing a broad program of soil conservation. Districts could cooperate within local, state, and federal contracts, conduct research, establish demonstrations, contract with individual farm owners,

² Ibid., 4.

³ Sampson, *With One Voice*, 4; National Association of Soil Conservation Districts, *Land, Water, and People: A History* (Saint Paul, MN: Webb Publishing Company, 1961), 7; D. Harper Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 74-75; Bill Steenburg interviewed by Jack Densmore for “Memories of the Coon Creek Project,” quoted in Natural Resource Conservation Service, *Wisconsin Conservation History* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010), 13; Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1994), 1.

cost share, and intervene in local land use planning.⁴ The districts' role in rural progress was not limited to agricultural endeavors. As W. L. Clement recalled, SCS employees and district supervisors had "other responsibilities" to "help the city or help the school or help the county" in any way they could, making the country a better place for people to be so they could remain and thrive.⁵

In 1937, twenty-two states passed acts enabling the formation of local districts. By 1945, all forty-eight states had done the same and by 1947, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Alaska, and Hawaii joined the ranks.⁶ Despite Bennett's preference for the organization of the "nation's landscape into 26 natural drainage basins" and his subsequent and diluted hope that districts would form along watersheds, not politically drawn boundaries, districts often formed along county lines. These "typically American" units of local government allowed rural communities across the country to address their particular concerns, prioritize them, implement solutions piecemeal with individual farm plans, and collectively with community projects. The formation of districts, the idea of which was to coordinate local, private efforts to achieve national objectives, and the creation of the SCS itself was indicative of the New Deal theory that private land, especially its misuse and abuse, was in the "national interest" and thus subject to public scrutiny. Individual motivations for cooperation with local conservations districts notwithstanding, it is notable that so many people, by 1969 over two million, decided to participate in the advancement toward sustainable agriculture.

⁴ Sampson, *With One Voice*, 4-5; Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service*, 74-75.

⁵ W. L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, September 23, 2009.

⁶ NASCD, *Land, Water, and People*, 7.

The cognitive shifts that resulted in the adoption of more sustainable agricultural measures were nonetheless radical, but surely helped along by the growing culture of conservation taking root.⁷

Generally, farmers had to be convinced to abandon exploitive, inefficient farming in favor of sustainable conservation practices. They were faced with the ironic predicament of accepting change in order to sustain their lifestyle; to stay on the land, they had to alter their utilization of it. Bill Steenburg, despite his friends' and family's disapproval, understood as much. During an interview regarding his cooperation with the SCS, he stated, "I knew I had to give up or change."⁸ Not all were as receptive and, in fact, many farmers never brought themselves to cooperate with the SCS or their local district at all. That many farmers did not implement soil conservation measures, and that many more took convincing, highlights the contingency of rural and agricultural transformation begat by local soil conservation districts and makes the subsequent reality of widespread participation that much more intriguing. Agricultural transformation in the twentieth century may or may not have been inevitable, but soil conservation and the districts that channeled and shaped its ideology did not have to be one of the main factors. If the demonstration work that characterized early federal soil conservation efforts was an "experiment", the audacity of relying on rural Americans to voluntarily participate and bear both a public and private

⁷ Tim Lehman, *Public Values, Private Land: Farmland Preservation Policy, 1933-1985* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 28-29; Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service*, 81.

⁸ Bill Steenburg, interview by Jack Densmore.

responsibility is significant.⁹ Following is a brief synopsis of the culture of conservation that began to sweep the country especially after the institutionalization of soil conservation in the 1930s.

A Culture of Conservation

Farmers' participation and the advent of the soil conservation movement was the result of several working factors. The creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps institutionalized federal conservation efforts and the Corps' projects throughout the nation exposed Americans to the benefits of conservation work. Government officials and agencies moved their agrarian audiences by equating land health with economic stability and defense capabilities, issues most important to stimulate morale during the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. Literature composed and circulated by the USDA educated farmers about soil erosion and encouraged and advised a number of conservation measures. Farmers and ranchers could tailor what they read to their own farms and, in ideal cases, were familiar with the research and reasoning behind certain measures before they sought out SCS assistance to implement them on their own property. The formation of local soil conservation districts lowered direction and aid from the federal level to the local level, coaxing more people into participation. In addition, conservation ideology began to emerge in other places and spheres that indicated a society's embrace of a new idea.

⁹ Sampson refers to early demonstration projects as an "experiment in applying science to the problem of reducing soil erosion." Sampson, *With One Voice*, 4.

All of these components engendered a culture of conservation and served to make conscientious cultivation a habit among many rural Americans, a change in behavior that branded the landscape. This idea of mindset and behavioral changes and the rise of a culture that accompanied landscape transformation derives from Donald Worster's proposal that cultures are "strategies that people develop in order to adjust to the natural world." He urges historians to think of culture as a "subset of nature." Here, the culture of conservation is defined as Americans' adoption of conservation as a concept that is embedded within society and scientific thought today. Conceptualizing "culture as a mental response to...pressures posed by the natural environment" highlights the interchange between abstract notions and tangible environments.¹⁰ From an interpretive standpoint, it allows the public to access these periods of transition that are taken for granted or all together ignored because of time's way of seamlessly assimilating certain concepts into society, making them commonplace and therefore rarely probed.

In *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement*, Neil Maher's analysis of CCC camps and projects reveal the abilities of New Deal programs to simultaneously impact the landscape while "rais[ing] popular support for Roosevelt's liberal welfare state."¹¹ Civilian Conservation Corps camps and enrollees were many

¹⁰ Donald Worster, "Point of Departure," *American Scholar* 79, no. 2: 120 *Book Review Digest Plus* (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost (accessed September 14, 2014).

¹¹ Neil Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.

Americans' first encounter with conservation ideology. With more than 5,000 camps nationwide, farmers near them observed conservation at work on public land and CCC enrollees "supplied the muscle needed to physically alter farmers' fields in ways that halted soil and water erosion."¹² That conservation was the central tenet of one of the New Deal's most popular programs is significant. CCC projects not only served to popularize conservation, they indoctrinated the three million young men that worked on them, exposing them to "conservation ideas and technologies."¹³ Many CCC enrollees ended up working for the SCS. In her study of CCC camps in Central Texas, Jennifer Stabler finds the origins of partnerships "between professional conservationists and the public" in CCC projects.¹⁴ She also directly correlates the prevalence of soil and water conservation measures on private land to the amount of CCC camps in a given area, substantiating Maher's assertion that CCC work promoted conservation ideology as it transformed the landscape.¹⁵ The popularity of the CCC program and its central role in early conservation work on private land, 23 million acres of it, helped lay the groundwork for the culture of conservation that facilitated landscape transformation.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., 124. By 1938, CCC labor impacted nearly 11.5 million acres of farmland across the country.

¹³ Maher, *Nature's New Deal*, 116; Sampson, *With One Voice*, 3.

¹⁴ Jennifer Stabler, "Historic Conservation Landscapes on Fort Hood, Texas: The Civilian Conservation Corps and Cultural Landscape Change in Central Texas" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2010), 91, accessed July 10, 2014, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

¹⁵ Ibid., 95.

¹⁶ Soil Conservation Service, *Hands to Save the Soil* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1939), "Foreword."

Throughout the country's most trying times, the stability of the nation's natural resources was increasingly conceptualized as foundational for resilience and stability. Conservation methods not only repaired the land on which the nation depended, they increased production and simultaneously preserved the country's ability to do so. As an emerging world leader, the country could not afford the metaphor of instability implied by the washing away of its land. Political leaders and conservationists alike demonized soil erosion. In 1928, Bennett titled USDA circular no.33 "Soil Erosion: A National Menace."¹⁷ In his letter to the governors encouraging them to support enabling legislation for the creation of local soil conservation districts, President Roosevelt referred to soil as "our basic asset." He continued, "the Nation that destroys its soil destroys itself."¹⁸

The conservation movement gleaned additional urgency with the advent of uncertainty and insecurity brought about by World War II. Agricultural propaganda during the Second World War was much like that of the first; the government still urged farmers to express their patriotism through increased production. However, this time, instead of planting "fence row to fence row," the government urged them to up their yields using soil conservation methods. Mirroring World War I poster utilization, during the Second World War, "the poster again became one of the indispensable media of communication [which] ...called for patriotism, for guarding national security, for participating in

¹⁷ United States Department of Agriculture Circular No. 33, "Soil Erosion: A National Menace," by H.H. Bennett and W.R. Chapline. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1928.

¹⁸ Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service*, 76.

production, and being on guard against the invader.”¹⁹ One such conservation poster had on it two images, one of eroded land and the other of a healthily cultivated field. Under the picture of erosion was the caption: “This land works for the enemy.” The sentence under the second photo read: “This land works for the United Nations.” A second poster implored, “Get your farm in the fight! Use conservation measures for bigger yields NOW!” while another boasted conservation’s effects on production (see Figure 1).



Figures 1. *World War II Posters*. Distributed by the Office of War Information and encouraged farmers to use conservation methods to support the war effort. *Source*: Records of the Office of Government Reports, 1932-1947, *World War II Posters, 1942-1945 Series*. Online Public Access, National Archives.

Books also portrayed conservation minded farmers as necessary components of a victorious and stable nation. In *This Land We Defend*, Hugh Bennett and William C. Pryor urged readers to “go all out” to save the soil,

¹⁹ Alain Weill, *The Poster: A Worldwide Survey and History* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), 287.

especially in such trying times, the book's first sentence stating, "This nation is at war." Published in 1942, the book portrays farmers as agents of change, "The farms, as well as the farmers, of America have...a tremendous responsibility." Identifying farmers as the foundation of economic stability and defense capabilities surely had its pull on the psyche of this previously marginalized group. Using pictures of severely eroded land and provocative rhetoric, "We may not be so rich and powerful very long, unless we keep our land...in place," the authors depict the farmers' "tremendous responsibility" as one that must be met with urgency.²⁰

Conservation literature also targeted school-aged children. The author of *Soil Savers: The Work of the Soil Conservation Service of the United States Department of Agriculture* wrote with the objective of making conservationists out of young people. The book, similar to WWII propaganda posters and literature like Bennett and Pryor's, used erosion photos to relay the seriousness of the issue, followed with aerial photos of land reshaped by farmers with the help of the Soil Conservation Service. Highlighting the scientific approach of the SCS, the author marries technological advancements and soil conservation, portraying conservative farmers as not only good stewards of the land, but pioneer consumers of new technology. With subtitles such as, "Good Conservationists Start Young" and "It's in Your Hands!" the author stayed true to the rhetoric of responsibility. "In your hands...rests the very future of our great land," the book

²⁰ Hugh H. Bennett and William C. Pryor, *This Land We Defend* (New York: Longman's, Green, & Co., 1942), vii, 4-5.

reminds young readers. Here we see the characteristically New Deal convergence of public and private interests Tim Lehman notes. Published during the Cold War, student readers themselves are placed in an international and defensive context, “Conservation of our soil and our water...is of paramount importance to our continued world leadership. Do not let them fail!”²¹

One of the main outreach methods and tools of knowledge diffusion used by the United States Department of Agriculture was, and still is, its *Farmers’ Bulletins*. Began in 1889 “originally to convey to the farmer the necessary information regarding animal and vegetable pests, etc. This work [was]...expanded so as to include pamphlets on almost every subject that relates to the farmer’s physical or material well-being.”²² Considering the scope of these publications, it was only natural that the Bulletins address soil and water conservation. The first to deal solely with soil erosion was *Farmers’ Bulletin* no. 20, “Washed Soils: How to Prevent and Reclaim Them” published in 1894. Soil conservation became an institutionalized phrase in 1910 with the series’ four hundred and sixth publication.

After the creation of the SCS, the new agency used *Farmers’ Bulletins* to disseminate education about different types of soil erosion, new developments, and the activities and accomplishments of the organization and local districts. Farmers interested in soil conservation methods could obtain region specific

²¹ C.B. Colby, *Soil Savers: The Work of the Soil Conservation Service of the United States Department of Agriculture* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1957), 47.

²² “Farmers’ Bulletins,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 55, no.7 (1910): 601; Repr., “JAMA 100 Years Ago” 304, no. 7 (2010): 804.

pamphlets that described in detail the logic behind and instructions for implementing particular measures in various regions. These included titles such as, “Soil Defense in the Piedmont,” “Conserving Corn Belt Soil,” “Soil Defense in the South,” “Soil Defense in the Northeast,” “Soil Defense in the Pacific Southwest,” “Toward Soil Security on the Northern Great Plains,” and “Soil and Water Conservation in the Pacific Northwest.”

Each of these publications prefaced recommendations with descriptions of the severity and seriousness of soil erosion, “Civilizations fought it [erosion], lost, and disappeared,” and causes of the respective regions’ tired land.²³ *Farmers’ Bulletin* no.1883 “Crops Against the Wind on the Southern Great Plains” cited increased production during WWI and the “extended plow-up” as “compulsions that are thoroughly American” but nevertheless, wrecked the “grass – nature’s protective mantle of vegetation.”²⁴ Regional analyses of area soil type, climate, rainfall, and staple crops followed the stories of erosion with recommendations of conservation measures designed to best accommodate particular conditions. These bulletins laid out step-by-step plans for implementation. The technical assistance afforded by SCS technicians surely built upon the foundation laid by these publications. Farmers already familiar with conservation methods designed for their region could more easily put them to use with professionals at their disposal.

²³ U.S. Department of Agriculture *Farmers’ Bulletin* no. 1767, “Soil Defense in the Piedmont,” by E.M. Rowalt. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1937, 19.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture *Farmers’ Bulletin* no. 1833, “Crops Against the Wind on the Southern Great Plains,” by Glenn K. Rule. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939, 5-6.

The proliferation of *Farmers' Bulletins* dedicated solely to soil conservation is indicative of the sophistication of the science behind it and its applicability to all areas of the country. The formation of local soil conservation districts allowed farmers to take advantage of the state-of-the-art science lauded in USDA publications. Continuing Seaman Knapp's legacy, the initial demonstration projects gave the SCS a successful start. These projects offered project area landowners the opportunity to enter a five-year agreement during which he or she carried out planned conservation practices under the guidance of SCS technicians. While successful, the pros and cons of demonstration work in the name of soil conservation were similar to those of earlier, more general demonstration work. Farmers were wary of land use and agricultural objectives set by government officials. In addition, methods that worked on one person's farm may not work on another's considering the variations in soil type, drainage, landscape features, and production goals of individual farms. The formation of local districts enabled SCS service to be distributed more widely. Through them, SCS objectives could be met, not through top-down initiatives and power structures in paternalistic, "we know best" tones characteristic of other New Deal agencies, but through the initiative of rural Americans. Local districts also served as readymade cooperatives. Like the establishment of a district itself, the selection of district supervisors relied on public opinion as well. As members of the community, these leaders were arguably more accountable because their constituency of neighbors, friends, and family was more immediate. Had all of these positions been appointed or filled from outside of the community, airs of

detachment and intrusion might have deterred farmers from cooperating with the district. Channeling federal intervention through local leadership, what Philip Selznick dubbed “grass-roots bureaucracy,” put to work extant community networks and provided many New Deal agencies and programs a leg on which to initially stand.²⁵

Aside from the rhetoric, the plethora of information on soil conservation, and aid stopping just short of approaching farmers at their doorstep, encouragement to adopt conservation practices was found elsewhere, such as in the Farmersville Post Office in Collin County, Texas. In 1933, a friend of President Roosevelt, artist George Biddle, urged the President to create a program that would employ artists and simultaneously “beautify the walls of public buildings” and “support New Deal objectives by bringing...messages of hope to the people.” Out of this grew the Public Works of Art Program, parent to the Section of Painting and Sculpture. The Section’s goal was to place quality, original art in places as to reach “as many people as possible across the country.” The mural in the Farmersville Post Office is titled “Soil Conservation in Collin County.” Since the Section had substantial pull in the selection of content for the murals, author Phillip Parisi considers this specific mural a nudge from the

²⁵ I borrow Selznick’s term only to convey the more likely success of an interventionist program when it builds upon extant community networks. Selznick’s analysis of Tennessee Valley Authority doctrine, implementation, and reality indicates that the grassroots approach enabled the agency’s survival but severely undermined the reformative potential of TVA projects and programs. Philip Selznick, *TVA and the Grass Roots: A Study in the Sociology of Formal Organization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). Nancy L. Grant explores how this affected African Americans in *TVA and Black Americans: Planning for the Status Quo* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

federal government that “farmers practice soil conservation techniques by strip cropping, terracing, and contour plowing.”²⁶



Figure 2. *Soil Conservation in Collin County*. Post Office Mural in Farmersville Post Office in Farmersville, TX. Painting by Jerry Bywaters. Source: *The Texas Post Office Murals: Art for the People* by Phillip Parisi.

Government agencies were not the only ones promoting conservation ideology. In 1946, *Outdoor Life*, a sportsman magazine, unveiled its original conservation pledge which read, “I give my pledge as an American to save and faithfully defend from waste the natural resources of my country – Its soils and minerals, its forests, waters, and wildlife.” The pledge, presented to President Truman in the same year, seemed to take on a life of its own. Soon, various

²⁶ Phillip Parisi, *The Texas Post Office Murals: Art for the People* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 4.

organizations were requesting copies of the pledge, with “assurances of prompt adoption.” Even the “United States Office of Education...recommended that children in classrooms and assemblies, throughout the nation, after reciting the pledge of allegiance, follow with the conservation pledge.”²⁷

Tennessee’s Case

From the time of the area’s settlement until well into the twentieth century, agriculture was a major component of the state’s economy. The first Tennesseans of European descent transformed the area from “wilderness into a cluster of mature agricultural regions producing a wide variety of commodities.”²⁸ Large and small landowners alike farmed to supply their households and the market. The three crops cultivated most were corn, cotton, and tobacco. Corn played a major role in farmers’ self-sufficiency and cotton and tobacco were mainly produced for the market. Tennessee farmers hunted game, raised poultry, and kept orchards and vegetables gardens to supplement their diet. Similar to other agricultural regions, Tennessee’s large farmers were more likely to channel their land and labor into producing for the market rather than the household.²⁹ Most farmers owned medium-sized tracts of fifty to one hundred cultivated acres. Generally farms were smaller in the mountainous east. The ridges, valleys, and rocky soil supported subsistence farm that almost always had, at least, corn and

²⁷ Vin T. Sparano, “Outdoor Life Presents its Conservation Pledge to the Nation,” *Outdoor Life* 192 (1993):8.

²⁸ Donald L. Winters, *Tennessee Farming, Tennessee Farmers: Antebellum Agriculture in the Upper South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), xi.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

hogs. More plantations appeared in the Central Basin and Highland Rim of middle Tennessee. This region was conducive to both commercial production and subsistence farming. Farmers in the area cultivated cotton and tobacco for the market and raised corn and livestock for household consumption. West Tennessee's agricultural economy was much like that of the Deep South's because of its alluvial coastal plains. By 1860, enslaved people, with a substantial presence in all three Grand Divisions, made up a quarter of the state's population and over 80 percent of farmers owned the land they worked.³⁰

The Civil War devastated much of Tennessee's landscape and capital accumulation. Tennesseans lost over 185 million dollars of property and their real estate was left in disarray from lack of maintenance, battles and skirmishes, and marauding troops from both sides. The material consequences of the War cannot be overstated, but despite their prohibitive nature, Tennessee's farmers continued to cultivate "some of the richest land in the South."³¹ Joseph B. Killebrew, Tennessee's first commissioner of agriculture gave farmers confidence about their roles in the emerging New South. He promoted scientific agriculture and touted "a happy marriage between idyllic country life" and industrialization.³² In theory, farmers could use progressive agricultural methods to feed the New South's cities. However, the state's agriculture recovered slowly. By 1890, farm

³⁰ Ibid., 108, 135.

³¹ Connie L. Lester, *Up From the Mudsills of Hell: The Farmers' Alliance, Populism, and Progressive Agriculture in Tennessee, 1870-1915* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 2.

³² Ibid., 10.

value still had not caught up with antebellum numbers and it took cotton and corn production fifteen years to exceed the yields of 1860.³³

The developments that encouraged farmers in other areas of the country to begin producing for the market were also at work in Tennessee. Rail lines reliable and fast transport to market and fertilizer increased yields and facilitated the cultivation of submarginal land. Falling prices and high interest rates made returning to “safety-first” agriculture difficult. Because of the state’s “natural advantages of soil and climate” producing for the market in Tennessee did not necessarily imply monoculture as it did in the Deep South.³⁴ In addition to cotton and tobacco, Tennesseans also grew other crops and raised livestock for the markets. Many farmers grew peanuts, hay, and grains. The advent of refrigerated railcars encouraged farmers, especially in west Tennessee, to plant strawberries. In 1874, Tennesseans supplied the market with over 15 million pounds of beef. Portions of west and middle Tennessee contained the most commercially-oriented farmers while those counties in the Great Valley of east Tennessee were the least with less than two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars’ worth of farm products in 1889.³⁵ That diversification was substantially established in Tennessee before the agricultural transformations of the twentieth century is significant because it helped lay the foundation for the progressive agriculture push that came from New Deal farm agencies.

³³ Ibid., 16-7.

³⁴ J.B. Killebrew, *Introduction to the Natural Resources of Tennessee* (Nashville: Tavel, Eastman, & Howell, 1874), 126.

³⁵ Lester, *Up From the Mudsills*, 22-25; Killebrew, *Introduction*, 125.

Unfortunately relative diversification did not differentiate Tennessee from other states regarding farm size and tenancy rates. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the average farm size in Tennessee declined as the rate of landownership increased from 62.8 percent in 1880 to nearly 70 percent in 1890. At a glance, this might suggest the proper functioning of the agricultural ladder and the revitalization of the yeoman ideal to which farmers aspired but in a rapidly commercializing sector, there were consequences. This became apparent as markets fluctuated, credit farming expanded, interest rates more than doubled. The number of farms increased, yet landownership in Tennessee decreased to below 60 percent in 1910 with the highest tenancy rates found in west Tennessee.³⁶

It took almost a year before the Great Depression dismembered Tennessee's financial structure. Banks failed, businesses failed, and all levels of government were ill-equipped to deal with the approximately 25 to 30 percent unemployment rate and the devastation dealt to the state's farmers. Two years after the Great Depression began, the value of Tennessee farm products was half of what they were in 1929.³⁷ John Minton notes that the "cash income plus the value of the products consumed in farm households" was also halved.³⁸ Despite the rural outmigration to cities during the late nineteenth and early

³⁶ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Report of the Statistics of Agriculture in 1890*, 117-118; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Agriculture, 1909 and 1910*, vol. 5, 126.

³⁷ Carroll Van West, *Tennessee's New Deal Landscapes: A Guidebook* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 2.

³⁸ John Dean Minton, "The New Deal in Tennessee, 1932-1938," (PhD, diss. Vanderbilt University, 1959) 159.

twentieth centuries, the state's urbanites made up only 34 percent of the population in 1930, meaning 1.7 million Tennesseans experienced the Great Depression living outside of cities where tradition held strong and government presence was minimal.³⁹

The state's land was also tired and in some places, completely disappearing. An 1874 Bureau of Agriculture report on the state's natural resources referred to "our waste and worn out lands" and encouraged the development of pastures out of old crop land.⁴⁰ In 1912, Tennessee's state geologist, A.H. Purdue, commented upon the erosion issues he observed while conducting a geological survey. He unofficially stated that the greatest conservation problem was "that of reducing hillside wash to a minimum," but also reported "disastrous wash" on flatter terrain.⁴¹

By the time of the creation of the SCS in 1935, some Tennessee farmers were already working with government agencies to implement conservation measures on private land. The inextricability of poverty and poor land use habits were exemplified in the Tennessee Valley where the soil was poor, the erosion rampant, and, especially after the Great Depression, the lifestyles and well-being of its residents were declining. As part of the TVA's regional planning objective, agricultural specialists and CCC enrollees worked with area farmers to establish

³⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *United States Summary, 1930*, 15.

⁴⁰ Killebrew, *Introduction to the Natural Resources of Tennessee*, 126.

⁴¹ A.H. Purdue, *Resources of Tennessee; 1st Series*, Volume II, No. 6 1912, quoted in State Soil Conservation Committee of Tennessee, *Handbook for Supervisors of Soil Conservation Districts*, 2013, 7.

watersheds and incorporate soil conservation measures into their operations.⁴²

After 1935, several CCC camps were set up solely for SCS demonstration projects. These counties include Shelby, Gibson, Carroll, Madison, Fayette, McNairy, Rutherford, Hardeman, Haywood, Tipton, Putnam, and Sumner.⁴³

These efforts are notable, but hardly made a dent in the three million acres that had been ruined by gully erosion and another eleven million that had been damaged by sheet erosion. The Tennessee General Assembly passed an act enabling the formation of local soil conservation districts in 1939. The first counties to form soil conservation districts were Sumner in northern middle Tennessee and Lauderdale in west Tennessee in the summer of 1940. Early formation of local districts was limited to the counties in the extreme western and Upper Cumberland regions with the exception of Sumner, Rutherford, and Robertson County. East Tennessee had already been heavily infiltrated by agricultural specialists with the TVA and the regions farmers had, for years, been cooperating with the University of Tennessee, its experiment station, and agents. The first county to form a district east of the Upper Cumberland was Pickett County in 1945. By 1959, all 95 counties had formed their own districts.⁴⁴

⁴² Federal Writers Project. *Tennessee: A Guide to the State* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 24; Robert H. White, *Tennessee: Its Growth and Progress* (Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press, Inc., 1947), 290; Biles, *The South*, 71; W.H. Droze, "TVA and the Ordinary Farmer," *Agricultural History* 53, no.1 Southern Agriculture since the Civil War: A Symposium (January 1979): 195.

⁴³ "CCC Camps in Tennessee," Civilian Conservation Corps Legacy, last modified 2014, accessed September 4, 2014, http://www.ccclegacy.org/CCC_Camps_Tennessee.html.

⁴⁴ State Soil Conservation Committee of Tennessee, *Handbook for Supervisors of Soil Conservation Districts*, 2014, 10; Thomas Cochran Mathews, James H. Robinson, Cecil E. Carter, Jr., and Robert S. Dotson, "A Research Summary of a Graduate Study: The Soil Conservation District Movement in Tennessee" Agricultural Extension Service of the University of Tennessee(1972), 3, 12.

The Cannon County Soil Conservation District

Cannon County is located in middle Tennessee in the Upper Cumberland region. With portions lying in the Central Basin and Eastern Highland Rim, the landscape includes gently sloping hills, ridges, and valleys. The East Fork of the Stones River and its tributaries flow through the county and provide fertile bottomland. The variation was conducive to diversified farming, encouraging one observer to note that “almost anything except tropical crops can be grown in Cannon County.”⁴⁵ Farmers grew tobacco, corn, hay and grains, and maintained livestock. In 1939, over 95 percent of the county’s land area was in farms. Out of the county’s 2,102 farms, 1,500 were engaged in subsistence agriculture, a characteristic it shared with other counties in the region. The average farm size was 78 acres.⁴⁶

On July 10, 1942, the county agent’s routine “Farm Notes” section in *The Cannon Courier*, the county’s local newspaper, mentioned a new “opportunity” for farmers. Said opportunity was for them “to obtain full time free service of a trained soil specialist by petitioning” the Soil Conservation Service.⁴⁷ The same article announced a meeting to be held at the courthouse the next Saturday. Apparently, the meeting went well and landowners in Cannon County filed a petition to create the Cannon County Soil Conservation District one day later. The State Committee approved the petition in September and to generate the

⁴⁵ Sterling Spurlock Brown, *History of Woodbury and Cannon County Tennessee* (Manchester, TN: Doak Printing Company, 1936), 22.

⁴⁶ J.S. McMahan, “News Notes for Cannon Farmers,” *The Cannon Courier*, February 2, 1943.

⁴⁷ J.S. McMahan, “Farm Notes,” *The Cannon Courier*, July 10, 1942.

most response, farmers decided to hold a public referendum on Election Day in November. The vast majority of voters favored the county taking advantage of this free federal assistance, with 296 votes for and 10 votes against forming a district.⁴⁸ The Secretary of State issued a Certificate of Organization in February of the next year and the *Courier* encouraged “all farmers and their wives...to vote in the Soil Conservation election” to elect supervisors to lead the district (Figure 3).⁴⁹



Figure 3. *District supervisors for soil conservation*, 04-20-1950. Photographer's note: "Cannon board of Soil Conservation District Supervisors." Photographed by H.E. Holman. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

⁴⁸ J.S. McMahan, "Farm Notes," *The Cannon Courier*, September 25, 1942.

⁴⁹ J.S. McMahan, "News Notes for Cannon Farmers," *The Cannon Courier*, February 26, 1943.

In March 1943, the SCS sent personnel to the county to investigate whether or not the agency should appoint the district its own conservationist. In the meantime, the chairman and elected supervisors created a work plan and outlined the mission of the district. It was “responsible for developing and carrying out programs for the conservation, protection, and development of soil, water, and related plant and animal resources within the district.”⁵⁰ Surveyors and elected supervisors created a work plan outlining agricultural land use problems in the county and district objectives and a memorandum of agreement was signed between the new district and the USDA. The memorandum established the authority of the USDA to assist the district in its soil conservation objectives, essentially creating a contract with the people of Cannon County to effect agricultural progression and land use planning.⁵¹

In order for the local district to begin its “action program” of conserving natural resources and, by doing so, “contribut[e] both to the...welfare of farm families and...the neighborhoods and communities in which they live,” agricultural specialists needed to survey the land and diagnose the issues.⁵² One of the first products of the county’s relationship with the SCS was a reconnaissance survey of the agricultural land areas. The survey resulted in SCS personnel dividing the county into three “distinct agricultural land areas.”

⁵⁰ Supplemental Memorandum of Understanding between the Cannon County Soil Conservation District, State of Tennessee and the Soil Conservation Service, 1943,1.

⁵¹ Memorandum of Understanding between the Cannon County Soil Conservation District, State of Tennessee, and the United States Department of Agriculture, 1943, 1; untitled document regarding the establishment of the CCSCD located at the Tennessee Natural Resource Conservation Service; J.S. McMahan, “News Notes for Cannon Farmers,” *The Cannon Courier*, March 19, 1943.

⁵² Cannon County Soil Conservation District Office of District Supervisors, “Program,” March 27, 1943.

Surveyors found that farmers residing in Area I, the western part of the county characterized by ridges and valleys, devoted much of this land to sheep, hogs, and cattle. They reported on the stony appearance of the pastures and noted that cropping was minimal and that farmers cultivated corn, hay, and grains to feed their livestock. Most importantly, they commented that the particular types of soil together with the prevalent “slopes” caused “quite severe erosion.”⁵³

The Eastern Highland Rim and numerous streams comprise Area II. The valleys in this area were “continuously cropped” with corn, tobacco, other “requirements for livestock feed, fuel, and family food.” The reporters indicated that farmers practiced crop rotation and produced high yields of corn, but that the soil was seriously deteriorating. Area III is located in the easternmost part of the county and also consists of the Highland Rim. The reporters found the greatest percentage of cropped farmland in this area, yet farms “provide[d] a bare subsistence for the farm families,” and erosion was extensive.⁵⁴ Although the report’s detailed technical and scientific analysis is beyond this thesis, its findings are relevant. Soil classifications played a major role in land use planning by determining how different land areas should be treated and cultivated, if at all. By this time, soil conservation professionals had been surveying, testing, and mapping soil types for several years and farmers in Cannon County had access to progressive agriculture through the county agent but according to this report the room for improvement was vast.

⁵³ Cal L. Roark and R.E. Paso, “Reconnaissance Report: Agricultural Land Areas, Cannon County, Tennessee,” February 5, 1943, 1.

⁵⁴ Roark and Paso, “Reconnaissance Report,” 1-2.

Instead of gathering information for the compilation of larger surveys of the region or state for federal knowledge sake, the soil surveys conducted by SCS personnel in Cannon County in 1943 were to be of immediate use to the people. Personnel from the SCS and farmers used them to determine the sources of the specific agricultural problems plaguing the area and the information itself could be easily obtained. One newspaper piece regarding soil mapping in the Ivy Bluff community stated personnel would be “glad to present [the information] to groups that wish to see the slides and discuss the value of the practices.”⁵⁵ With the formation of the soil conservation district, scientific agriculture became truly accessible and therefore began infiltrating Cannon County farm culture. The agricultural land areas report is also significant because it describes a landscape that does not exist anymore (Figure 4). The erosion reported in 1943 cannot be found today because of the action taken by farmers in the county several decades ago. By repairing the land and putting it to best use, rural Americans that cooperated with their local soil conservation district inadvertently obscured their legacy and role in helping to modernize American agriculture.

⁵⁵ J.S. McMahan, “News Notes for Cannon County Farmers,” *The Cannon Courier*, June 11, 1943.

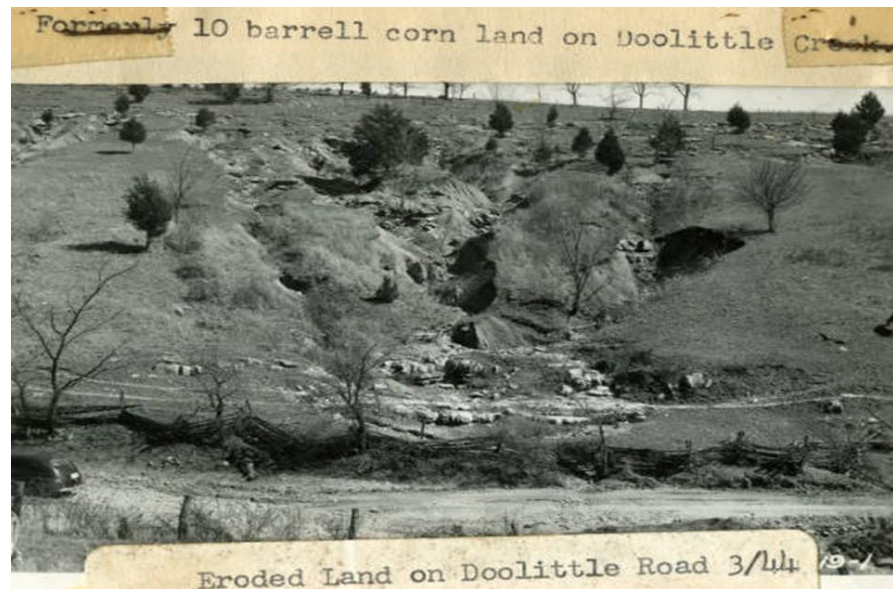


Figure 4. *Erosion on Doolittle Creek, 03-31-1944*. Photographer's note: "Hillside eroded and stones piled in horizontal rows to be planted to kudzu." Photographed by Cal L. Roark. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

This is why photographs are invaluable. Fortunately, the soil conservation work to be done in Cannon County warranted the appointment and permanent placement of a district conservationist. One of the responsibilities of this SCS employee was to document the work of the district by taking pictures of the land and work. By doing so, he created a record of a major transition in mindset and of landscape. The photographs remind us that the landscape we see now has not always been and encourage us to inquire why that is. As indicated by the newspaper excerpt, the utilization of soil conservation photography played a similar role during this time in that it encouraged understanding. It not only played a role in promoting soil conservation and the benefits of federal intervention to

the public, it helped locals understand their environment, a prerequisite of them transitioning to more sustainable ways of relating to it.

Farmers Take Action

Out of the surveys and reports came several specific objectives and recommendations. These were the catalysts that set landscape change into motion because they gave farmers “broad recommendations” within which specific plans for their individual farms fit. The three uses of agricultural land found in Cannon County were rotation cropland, pasture and meadowland, and woodland. The broad objectives adopted by the district supervisors included maintaining woodlands, retiring and establishing woodland in areas that were severely eroded or otherwise unfit for cultivation, developing pastures on other land, and applying “the fertility and special practices necessary to maintain or improve the land and its cover in its desired use.”⁵⁶ It is important to note, as indicated by the phrase “desired use,” that intervention was not aimed at natural resource conservation at the expense of the farmer. The idea behind agricultural conservation was to alter operations in a way that preserved farmers’ livelihood, as well as the resources that supported it.⁵⁷ By doing this, as Tim Lehman’s title *Private Land, Public Values* suggests, conservationists and progressive farmers served a private purpose, by preserving their own livelihood, and a public one, by

⁵⁶ Cannon County Soil Conservation District Office of District Supervisors, “Work Plan,” March 27, 1943.

⁵⁷ This derives from Mark Glen Madison’s assertion that soil conservation was meant to preserve both human systems and natural systems. Mark Glen Madison, “The Agrarian Conservation Movement in America, 1890-1990,” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1995), 3, accessed July 2, 2014, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

using the nation's natural resources conservatively in order to enable future generations to sustain themselves.

Similar to national conservation objectives being met piecemeal by the activities of local soil conservation districts, the broad objectives of the Cannon County's district would be met by "effecting conservation on the individual farms."⁵⁸ If farmers wanted to obtain assistance from SCS technicians to implement "a constructive soil program on the farm," they could find the CCSCD conservationist in his office at the courthouse or approach one of the district supervisors.⁵⁹ The county conservationist and SCS technicians surveyed a farmer's land with him and conducted soil and erosion analyses that enabled them to draw up a farm plan to determine and bring about the "best use" of the property and to "build up [its] producing ability" (Figure 5).⁶⁰ According to W.L. Clement, "best use" meant "the most profitable use."⁶¹ The cooperating land owner agreed to manage his land "within its capability and [treat] it according to its needs." The district provided a soil and capability map of the property and technical assistance to ensure the proper implementation of conservation measures.⁶² When technical needs exceeded what the SCS could provide, the district's memorandum of understanding allowed SCS staff to call upon the assistance of other federal agents. For example, some images in the photograph

⁵⁸ CCSCD Office of District Supervisors, "Work Plan," 2.

⁵⁹ J.S. McMahan, "News Notes for Cannon Farmers," *The Cannon Courier*, June 4, 1943.

⁶⁰ United States Soil Conservation Service, *A Conservation Farm Plan*, 1947, 1. HathiTrust Digital Library, accessed September 10, 2014.

⁶¹ Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service*, 82; W. L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, September 23, 2009.

⁶² Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service*, 83.

collection show personnel from the Forest Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service helping locals (see Figure 6). In this way, the local districts not only facilitated more ready access to the SCS, but also to other agencies within the USDA.⁶³



Figure 5. *Studying the conservation plan*, 12-03-1964. Photographer's note: "Bob Mullins, son of Robert, and Bill Clement, Soil Conservation Service, stands in natural draw to be shaped into waterway as shown on conservation plan. Located ten miles south of Woodbury." Photographed by Hiram J. Young. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

⁶³ Memorandum of Understanding between the Cannon County Soil Conservation District, State of Tennessee, and the United States Department of Agriculture, 1943,2.



Figure 6. *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service making deliveries*, 06-07-1962. Photographer's notes: "District Cooperator C.C. Smith is receiving from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fish to stock his farm pond." Photographed by: W.L. Clement. Source: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

SCS farm plans were written in first person because the farmer had the primary responsibility of carrying out and maintaining the suggested conservation measures. Similar to the way in which the creation of the SCS was indicative of the federal government's commitment to natural resource conservation, a signed farm plan was an expression of a landowner's pledge to alter his operations "in accordance with the conservation plan" and to the national objective of overhauling the exploitative nature of American agriculture. The plans included a map of land use before interventions, as well as land use capability maps that categorized soil types. They identified seven classes of soils, Class I being the most fertile and least susceptible to erosion, and Class VII being entirely unsuited

for cultivation and requiring careful management. The farm plan detailed conservation measures and outlined “anticipated effects” of the plan when implemented.⁶⁴

The most prevalent interventions on Cannon County’s farmland, and the subject of many photographs in the collection, were contour farming, crop rotation, planting kudzu, planting cover crops, stabilizing waterways, creating safe field drainage, building farm ponds, reforestation, strip cropping, woodland improvement, pasture development, and terracing fields.⁶⁵ As components of successful soil conservation farm plans, these mechanical and vegetative methods reoriented farmers’ operations. Collectively, these farms created Cannon County’s new landscape, one riddled with farmer initiative, federal intervention, and scientific expertise. However, as terraces and crop rotation were only components of a larger plan, the landscape is only one component of the soil conservation movement. On the local level, the districts played a large role in the culture that grew up around the movement and its embedded objective of rural progress.

Aside from directly affecting the spread of soil conservation by implementing measures on their own land, area farmers and the district promoted conservation and rural progress ideals in the community generally. SCS personnel and district supervisors promoted the district’s activity at county fairs and in the courthouse with photographs. Articles in *The Cannon Courier*

⁶⁴ United States Soil Conservation Service, *A Conservation Farm Plan*.

⁶⁵ W.L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch.

publicized participation and informed readers about the conservation successes of cooperating farmers. One such article named seven farmers who had recently worked out farm plans, as well as the specific measures their respective plans entailed. The same article reported that a local farmer's "terraces that had been built two years ago...have practically stopped all washing on that area."⁶⁶ These articles simultaneously gave participating farmers recognition and demonstrated to prospective conservationists the growing movement among their peers, while relaying to readers the desirability of implementing soil conservation measures.

Cannon County farmer R.L. Cooper remembers demonstration days held by the districts that allowed farmers to observe soil conservation methods being implemented, such as the construction of terraces. One such demonstration of "the first terraces ever built in this area" showed them being constructed with a tractor and disc plow.⁶⁷ The district worked with the Boy Scouts of America and area students on pine tree planting projects on school grounds and other public land. It also exposed youth to conservation by working with local schools to help "teachers integrate conservation concepts into the curriculum."⁶⁸ It helped establish the county's fire control program. The ponds that farmers dug under district supervision were not only for farm income, they were for rural recreation (Figure 7). The district also facilitated cooperative purchase of heavy farm

⁶⁶ C.M. Henninger, "Conservation District News," *The Cannon Courier*, February 7, 1947, 1.

⁶⁷ C.M. Henninger, "Conservation District News," *The Cannon Courier*, May 3, 1946, 2.

⁶⁸ C.M. Henninger, "Conservation District News," *The Cannon Courier*, April 12, 1946, 3.

equipment, provided plant materials at reduced cost, and printed and distributed newsletters.⁶⁹



Figure 7. *Man-made pond*, 10-01-59. Photographer's notes: "Pond constructed in the spring of 1959 under Soil Bank program. Pit-type pond 150 feet square and 6 feet deep, with 4:1 side slopes. Pond is constructed on Dickson soil. Located eight miles south of Woodbury." Photographed by: W.L. Clement. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

Letters written to Senator Al Gore, Sr. in response to a proposal by the Budget Bureau in 1965 to force conservation districts to charge for technical service demonstrate the importance of free technical assistance to Tennessee's rural communities. Loudon County Soil Conservation District commissioners were concerned that, if approved, the proposal would "destroy conservation of

⁶⁹ R.L. Cooper, interview by author. Morrison, Tennessee. April 15, 2013; W.L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch.

land and water when it is needed badly.”⁷⁰ District commissioners from Dyer County reminded Gore, “conservation work is most needed in areas where people are less able to bear the cost.”⁷¹ “Farmers are participating more and more and realizing the importance of this service,” informed members of the local district in Sumner County.⁷² A Wartburg resident wrote to the Senator of the predicament of the poverty stricken Appalachian area where “a large number of farmers who need this type of technical assistance... are unable to provide it on their own.”⁷³ Sequatchie County Soil Conservation District members summed it up best, “the selling of soil and water conservation to the people has been greatly assisted by the fact that the federal government considered soil and water conservation so important that the technical assistance has been provided without charge.”⁷⁴ The expertise provided by the SCS and channeled through the districts not only persuaded farmers to adopt conservation agriculture, it enabled them to do so.

⁷⁰ Loudon County, TN Soil Conservation District to Senator Albert Gore, Sr., February 17, 1965, Albert Gore Sr., Senate Papers, Issue Mail, Albert Gore Research Center, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN.

⁷¹ Dyer County, TN Soil Conservation District to Senator Albert Gore, Sr., February 17, 1965, Albert Gore Sr., Senate Papers, Issue Mail, Albert Gore Research Center, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN.

⁷² Sumner County, TN Soil Conservation District to Senator Albert Gore, Sr., February 17, 1965, Albert Gore Sr., Senate Papers, Issue Mail, Albert Gore Research Center, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN.

⁷³ Ray Schubert to Senator Albert Gore, Sr., February 17, 1965, Albert Gore Sr., Senate Papers, Issue Mail, Albert Gore Research Center, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN.

⁷⁴ Sequatchie County, TN Soil Conservation District to Senator Albert Gore, Sr., February 17, 1965, Albert Gore Sr., Senate Papers, Issue Mail, Albert Gore Research Center, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN.

The broad generalization that the New Deal created the path for the massive agricultural transformations that followed World War II obscures the fact that transformation did not happen in a vacuum and uplift did not mean wholesale assimilation into the ideal of modernity. As W.L. Clement's photography shows, rural lifeways continued alongside dramatic and sometimes confusing change. Farmers used government assistance and scientific expertise to help them participate in the modern, industrial world but shaped it in such a way that allowed them to remain on the periphery of society. According to David Danbom, by the early twentieth century, "farmers had become peculiar."⁷⁵ They did not participate in agricultural modernization to become more relevant to the rest of society, but to help maintain a lifestyle with which more and more familiars would become unfamiliar, especially after the New Deal and World War II. This seeming dichotomy of change and tradition is exemplified by the formation of local soil conservation districts and Clement's photography depicts this dynamic of transition and purposeful preservation in action.

⁷⁵ Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 175.

CHAPTER III: W.L. CLEMENT'S PHOTOGRAPHY

“They don’t have any particular value, other than its something in the past,” replied W.L. Clement when asked how he felt about the photo collection that he is largely responsible for comprising.¹ Clement was the soil conservationist for the Cannon County Soil Conservation District (CCSCD) from 1951 to 1974. The SCS placed conservationists in local districts to help facilitate technical assistance, supervise projects, and document the practices that SCS promoted, taught, and standardized and local farmers implemented. After purchasing his own camera, Clement began documenting his work and everyday life in Cannon County. Photographing traditional rural lifeways alongside changes promoted by the federal government, he not only captured SCS impact and that of local farmers, he placed them within a context of rural traditions and lifestyles. The photographs depict farmers simultaneously as progressives and preservationists. The W.L. Clement collection shows farmers inviting change into their community and adopting progressive practices in order to preserve their traditional lifeways, enabling the coexistence of change and tradition. Clement could not have been more incorrect in his assessment of the photographs’ value. This chapter analyzes Clement’s role as an employee of the SCS, a progressive agriculturalist, a photographer, and a member of the community. These roles allowed him to document the otherwise hidden impact of local farmers and soil

¹ W. L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, September 23, 2009.

conservation, as well as the coexistence of change and tradition that resulted from it.

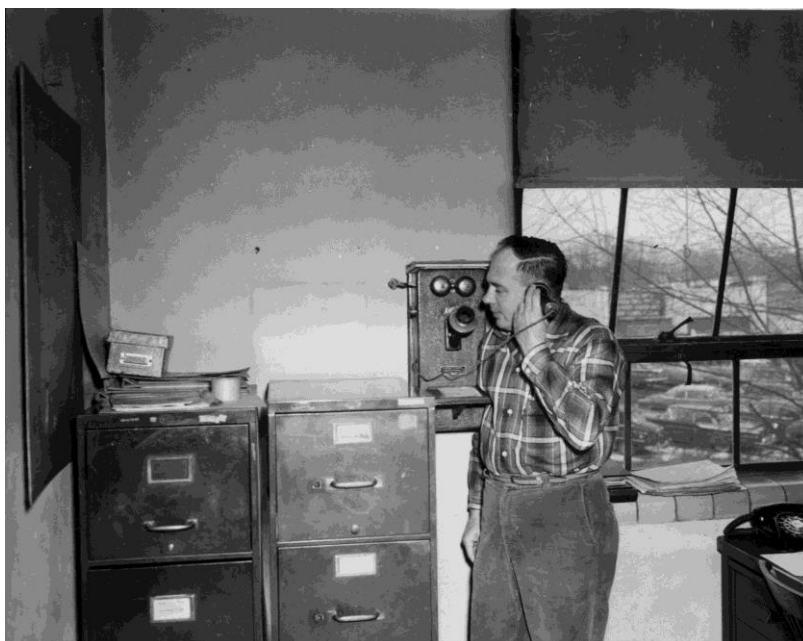


Figure 8. *Mr. Clement remembers the old phones*, 03-10-1960. Photographer's notes: "W.L. Clement, WUC of Cannon SCD, shown with old-type telephone used in the SCS office at Woodbury from the time the District was organized in 1943 to 1960, when the DeKalb County Telephone Cooperative installed dial-type telephones in the county." Photographed by J.V. Webb. Source: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

Clement's humble opinion of the collection's value in 2009 is not surprising. Clement "planned on being a teacher in agriculture."² After serving in the Army during World War II, he received a bachelor's degree in agriculture from the University of Tennessee. Shortly afterward, he began employment with the SCS as a manual laborer on a soil conservation project in Hardeman County, Tennessee. After serving one year in the Air Force during the Korean War, the

² W.L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch.

SCS offered Clement the district conservationist position in Cannon County. He and his wife moved to the area and he began work as the local district's soil conservationist in 1951. A successful soil conservation district required its conservationist to be "a technical expert, a skilled administrator, and an effective public relations man."³ Conservationists facilitated access to technical assistance for state-of-the-art land use planning, maintained a working relationship with the governing body of the district, worked with local organizations, and developed relationships with individual landowners, or "cooperators," who implemented conservation plans on their farms.



Figure 9. *Bowman family in pasture*, 06-13-1963. Photographer's note: "Keith Bowman and sons in field seeded five years ago to mixture of fescue, orchardgrass and ladino clover. Field will be used for pasture when land comes out of soil bank next year. Located ten miles south of Woodbury." Photographed by W.L. Clement. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

³ D. Harper Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 66.

Even though Clement was not originally from the area, building a home and raising a family in the community undoubtedly strengthened his ability to guide Cannon County's conservation efforts. Living amongst those with whom he worked enabled him to build rapport within the community and develop relationships with several generations of farm families. His personal relationships with community members buttressed his professional relationships, blending his public and private spheres. Considering his professed love for "soil and conservation work," Clement's dedication to every aspect of his job as district conservationist seems natural. His responsibility to promote soil conservation became an integral part of his life, so much so that he embellished upon his duty to document the changes he was helping bring to the community and the land. Although Clement never taught in a classroom setting as he planned, his time as district conservationist surely satisfied his desire to educate and promote scientific and progressive agriculture. Clement admitted he witnessed "a big change in farming during that period," but saw his photography as "trying to do what [he] felt was right."⁴ He snapped the shutter with the future in mind, a preoccupation that accompanies any conservation work, and in doing so documented of preservative progression in hopes that it might "mean something to somebody sometime."⁵

⁴ W.L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch; W.L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch and Mickey Vincent, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, October 14, 2009.

⁵ W.L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch.

This statement foreshadowed much. Over four hundred photos documenting the activities of the CCSCD were found in boxes at Cannon County's University of Tennessee Extension Office. Along with the boxes was a note instructing persons concerned to "do what you wish with these – give to person involved or discard."⁶ The Arts Center of Cannon County, particularly its former folklorist Evan Hatch, took interest in the photos and, understanding their significance, donated them to the Albert Gore, Sr. Research Center (AGRC) at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). Many of them are accessible online through MTSU's Walker Library website as part of its Digital Collections. Hatch, with the encouragement of interested members of the community, took on the collection as a project. In 2009, he recorded interviews with Clement and his wife, which resulted in a two-part oral history where Clement elaborated on his role as conservationist, changes in local farm culture and methodology, the role of the district in the community's development, and his photography. Because of the dearth in scholarly literature on the SCS, local districts, and cooperators, and because of the elusive nature of SCS impact, the photograph collection and the oral history present the opportunity to assert the significance of the soil conservation movement to the rural American landscape and the local districts that sustained the movement. The collection offers Cannon County as a study of this impact, presenting a local thread of a national story. The photographs show the significance of soil conservation and depict rural Americans as catalysts, not

⁶ Handwritten note housed at the Albert Gore Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, held as part of the unprocessed soil conservation photo collection.

just in the conservation of natural resources, but within the broader themes of rural uplift and lifeways preservation.

Clement, of course, was not the county's first conservationist and several photos in the collection predate his appointment, suggesting a federally appointed man with a camera had been among Cannon County residents for nearly a decade beforehand. The photos that predate Clements employment in the county are fewer, presumably because the preceding conservationists circulated the camera in the same way which encouraged Clement to buy his own. According to Clement, conservationists of the surrounding counties passed around one government-issued camera, allowing each conservationist only occasional use and documentation of his respective district. This motivated him to buy a camera of his own to use as much as he wanted.⁷ His purchase and initiative afford us today a documentary of rural Americans defying notions of backwardness and satisfactory isolation by initiating change and articulating it in a paradoxically preservative fashion.

The oral history and the notes that are printed on the verso of each photograph help contextualize the photos singularly and as a collection. The collection includes images of the landscape, damaged and healthy, crops significant to the local economy, increased mechanization on farms, but the majority of the pictures are of typical conservation methods promoted by the SCS and the local district. These include streambank stabilization, kudzu, farm ponds,

⁷ W.L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch.

terrace construction, fallowed fields, strip cropping, crop rotation, and contour farming. Individually, these photos depict individuals voluntarily making changes on their land. When studied as a collection, the photographs depict a micro movement among rural residents. Each individual action and shift in agricultural method from exploitative to scientifically developed and resource conservative make up a collective effort to change farming to make it sustainable, contributing to the longevity of their chosen livelihood and accompanying lifestyle. Clement also captured scenes that seemed untouched by technology, traditions that were purposefully perpetuated. These particular photos help convey the potency of rural tradition in the midst of change.

Hatch commented that “early images” show rural people who were “uncomfortable being photographed, perhaps questioning the purpose of the new methods.”⁸ While participation in conservation and cooperation with the local district certainly had purposeful and conscious ends, Hatch might be correct in his assessment of their comfort with a camera that had federal strings. Cannon County residents surely thought it was strange to be photographed going about their daily chores and lives. Even though the advent of increasing federal presence, the formation of the local district, and the transitions in farm culture substantially changed agriculture in Cannon County, to its residents it probably did not warrant such consistent photographic documentation. Our perspectives of these past events allow us to place them within a broader narrative and connect

⁸ Evan Hatch, “What William Lloyd Clement Captured,” in Savannah Grandey, Evan Hatch, and Carroll Van West, *W.L. Clement: Reformer, Educator, Photographer: Essays on Soil Conservation in Middle Tennessee* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, 2013), 3.

them with larger ideas and themes.⁹ It is likely that some of them were uncomfortable being photographed. Some of the photos that predate Clement's appointment show farmers with a downward gaze and awkward body, such as the one taken in 1949 of farmer Sam Barrett and a dog in the middle of a cornfield seeded to fescue (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. *Planting grass after corn*. Photographer's note: "1948 cornfield in which twelve pounds of Ky.31 fescue and two pounds of ladino clover, per acre, were broadcast. Seeded for rotation pasture - classes two and three land." Photographed by D.H. Estry. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

⁹ I owe this concept of historical characters' and historians' different perceptions to Glenda Gilmore's *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1886-1920*, in which she states, "Since historians enter a story at its end, they sometimes forget what is past to them is future to their subjects" (1).

Similarly, a photo taken the same day on a different farm shows the owner looking at an unidentified tractor driver with whom the photographer's note said he was talking, yet the farmer's body is turned away from both the camera and the driver, and the driver's gaze seems haphazardly caught by the shutter (see Figure 11). The scene appears staged, as many government photos of the time were, and neither character seems to welcome the documentation. The same aversion can be observed of Ellis George who is standing with his body angled away from the camera and eyes to his gullied field in which he stands (see Figure 12).



Figure 11. *Working with an old Ford tractor*. Photographer's notes: "Mr. Melton talking with tractor driver about building of the terrace. Located on Route 4 in Smithville, TN." Photographed by D.H. Estry. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.



Figure 12. *Reclaiming abandoned land*, 02-07-1949. Photographer's notes: "Gullied, abandoned land to be made into permanent pasture." Photographed by D.H. Estry. Source: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

One can imagine Clement's predecessors having to cajole the people in the photograph or sneakily snapping the shutter in order to fulfill their duty to document. Whether the photographs' subjects ever became more comfortable with being photographed, as Hatch asserts, is hard to ascertain. However, what is more readily substantiated is this collection's documentation of a community's self-guided change. Cooperators participated in activities they perceived as preserving, maintaining, and even improving their lifestyle.¹⁰ They invited change with the formation of the district and voluntarily participated in its activities, but they did not accept federally encouraged change passively. The prevalence of the pictures of farmers on their land, in their fields, or operating machinery portrays them as active participants willing to adapt in order to preserve (Figure

¹⁰ Connie L. Lester, *Up From the Mudsills of Hell: The Farmers' Alliance, Populism, and Progressive Agriculture in Tennessee, 1870-1915* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 2.

13). While progressive agriculturalists and industrialists likely that many farmers across the nation were finally minding their advice when they adopted more efficient and scientific practices, the farmers themselves likely saw this adaptation as self-preservative. As one Wisconsin farmer noted of his decision to work with the SCS to implement conservation on his farm, "I knew I had to give up or change."¹¹ It was not top-down obedience, it was a collective decision of farmers and landowners. According to Jack Temple Kirby, during the Great Depression and afterward, once question faced farmers: would they align themselves more equivocally with the modern world by adopting scientific agriculture, "or would they perish?"¹² The man with the camera may have been seen as a necessary nuisance.

¹¹ Bill Steenburg interviewed by Jack Densmore for "Memories of the Coon Creek Project," quoted in Natural Resource Conservation Service, Wisconsin Conservation History (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010),13.

¹² Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), xvi.



Figure 13. *Harvesting corn and sorghum for silage*, 10-06-1958. Photographer's note: "Paul Todd operating tractor and pulling silage chopper. Silage being made from a mixture of corn and sorghum then stored in trench silo with concrete sides and bottom. Chopper and wagons owned jointly by four farmers and two other newly constructed concrete trench silos have been tilled this year with the equipment. Excellent crop of silage on Huntington and Mimosa soil. Located two miles south of Woodbury. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

The authorial intentions of Clement are also hard to prove, but he was aware of at least some of the significance of the change he was facilitating and documenting. The very formation of local soil conservation districts constituted a shift on several fronts. They were the byproducts of the government's approach to rural uplift through natural resource planning, which in and of itself represented a theretofore unprecedented commitment to rural progress by a presidential administration. Also, the voluntary formation of the CCSCD evidenced self-help initiated by landowners. They built and maintained the necessary channels from which to obtain technical expertise. Finally, the fact that farmers, often steeped in agricultural tradition, were accepting guidance and implementing

recommendations from government officials constituted a shift. This is not to say that cooperative and progressive agricultural efforts did not precede the formation of the district, but that farmers pursued district organization and federal technical assistance suggests their desire to change, or continue to change their approach to production.

The photos taken by conservationists across the country served to shape Americans' perceptions of soil erosion and natural resource conservation. In his institutional history of the SCS, D. Harper Simms notes the important role that photographs and film played in portraying the "damages wrought" by careless stewardship and the heroic nature of natural resource conservation. For example, during World War II, soil conservation stretched the opportunity to defend and contribute to national stability from the battlefield to the cornfield. When conservationists photographed men participating in soil conservation efforts, they also documented a different kind of defense initiative. These photos document and archive farmers' commitment not only to their nation but more immediately to their rural communities and their traditional ways of life. Clement used the photos in much the same ways as his predecessors and counterparts across the country, in newspapers, at fairs, in agricultural offices. Clement's identity, which was closely tied to his employment by the SCS and his commitment to soil conservation on a personal level, along with this understanding of the photograph's purpose to show "some of the work...that was being done" enables

us to understand authorial intention and how it is manifested in the photos and their public use.¹³

Clement's meticulous notes on the back of the majority of the photographs identify the people in the photo, the farm owner, describe the activity or scene, and tell of the soil conservation methods previously implemented on shown land or those that planned to be. Pictures of a man standing on a mound of "4,500 bales of hay," several images of men and boys in the midst of harvesting Burley tobacco, and scenes that show a farmer with an "outstanding corn crop" due to fertilizer, planting on the contour, and strip cropping, all three of which were practices promoted by the SCS, equate soil conservation and scientific agriculture with success (Figures 14 & 15). His notes informing each photo enable identification of the farmer and his abundant crop, correlate soil conservation methods with successful agriculture, and speak to the increasingly professional and scientific rhetoric taken on by agriculture.¹⁴ More importantly, these photos of men alongside bountiful produce and the notes that explain the production depict farmers as progressive, incorporating state-of-the-art advancements into their traditional livelihoods.

¹³ W.L. Clement, interview by Evan Hatch; Sarah Farmer, "Going Visual: Holocaust Representation and Historical Method," *The American Historical Review* 115 (2010):119. In this article, Farmer considers authorial intention by considering "shifting identity" of the photographer and probing the photographer's understanding of his or her photos.

¹⁴ Many of the photos in the collection specify the class of land that is shown in the picture, categories used in land use planning, as well as the type of soil and/or fertilizer with which a crop was grown.



Figure 14. *4,500 bales of hay*, 12-03-1963. Photographer's notes: "Vernon Cook shown on pile of baled hay covered with plastic and canvas. Forty-five hundred bales of soybean hay are in the pile. Located ten miles south of Woodbury." Photograph by W.L. Clement. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.



Figure 15. *Outstanding corn crop*, 09-09-1963. Photographer's notes: "Odell Powell is shown with outstanding corn crop on Dickson soil fertilized at the rate of six hundred pounds per acre of 6-12-12 fertilizer and two hundred pounds of ammonium nitrate. Corn was planted on contour and stripcropped. Located eight miles southeast of Woodbury." Photographed by W.L. Clement. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

The photograph collection is particularly significant when considering the changes brought to Cannon County's landscape by the New Deal and the soil conservation district activities. Photos show gullied hillsides, crops ruined by unchecked water flow, cracked land, flooded fields, and houses damaged by flood water (Figure 16). Many of these photos correspond with the landscape constructed by the agricultural land reconnaissance survey completed in 1943 by SCS personnel. These stark scenes suggest the more intimate connection that farmers and rural people in general have with nature. They live closer to it and are more affected by it than suburban and urban residents. The photos of damaged landscapes seem to necessitate human intervention to repair the land and prevent further damage. Some of these pictures, such as one in which Clement and a farmer are inspecting crop damage after a hard rainfall and an image of a soil scientist taking a sample of soil from a cracked field, seem to suggest urgency for intervention and reformation of land use practices. Surely such damaged landscapes encouraged those who formed, led, and participated in conservation activities of the district to initiate change in order to save the land around which their lives revolved.



Figure 16. *Farm fields ruined by flooding*, 03-21-1963. Photographer's note: "Mr. Paschall shown in twenty-two acre field of pasture on Class I land which was covered with silt following heavy rains. About five acres was covered with a depth of two to six inches. Located five miles southeast of Woodbury. He holds a soil probe in his hand." Photographed by W.L. Clement. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

Photos of intact, healthy land are also prevalent in the collection and Clement's notes inform us that they are the direct result of a shift in agricultural practices. These photos of seemingly untouched land, or land that is assumed to have been traditionally cultivated, are deceiving without Clement's notes. Just as unsuspecting observers would assume of a rural landscape today, many of these landscapes, which the photos and their notes can attest to, seem natural, but in reality they are the intended end of conservation efforts. For example, images of hillsides seeded to grass, or allowed to rest are noted. Because of what was being planted, "fescue, orchard grass, and clover," by the fall this same field will look wholly untouched, uncultivated, and healthy, even though such a result is purposeful. An example of inconspicuous modification of the landscape is a

photo entitled “Bruce Elrod’s hay field” which Clement noted had been “seeded to sericea lespedeza for hay,” a legume heavily encouraged by the SCS that enriches the soil, yet looks a lot like weeds (see Figure 17). This repair and maintenance of landscapes are inconspicuous and can elude those trying to understand the impact of the soil conservation efforts on the landscape, burying the agency of the locals who took on change to preserve the aesthetic and productivity of the land.



Figure 17. *Bruce Elrod’s hayfield*, 04-21-1965. Photographer’s notes: “Bruce Elrod in six acre field planned to be seeded to sericea lespedeza for hay. Located twelve miles northwest of Woodbury.” Photographed by W.L. Clement. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

Another major activity of the soil conservation district that impacted the landscape, but is easily overlooked is the planting of pine trees on land unfit for

cultivation. The photo collection reveals concerted conservation efforts as the impetus behind this evolving landscape. Fourteen photos in the collection attest to this. Several of the photos show Boy Scouts of America and their leaders planting several hundred pines at Short Mountain Youth Camp. Pine tree planting changed the landscape, and also served as a project on which the SCS and district could work with other organizations to promote rural uplift. The SCS and the local district encouraged pine tree planting after classifying land as either eroded beyond cultivation or wholly unfit for cultivation by nature. Planting trees provided root systems that prevented further erosion and helped to restore lost soil, while the pine trees themselves either beautified recreation areas, created wildlife habitats, and could potentially become a source of income after maturation. As seen in the photos of the Boy Scouts of America, pine tree planting projects on private and public land often presented rural residents and the local district opportunities to collaborate with other organizations. A photo entitled "Delivering pines" shows "Employees of the Tennessee Division of Forestry delivering [a] truck load of pine tree seedlings for distribution to Cannon County landowners" (see Figure 18). Similar to the photo of the US Fish and Wildlife Service delivering stock fish for farm ponds, these photos the soil conservation district's cooperation with outside organizations in their efforts at rural improvement.



Figure 18. *Delivering pines*, 03-15-1965. Photographer's notes: "Employees of the Tennessee Division of Forestry delivering truck load of pine tree seedlings for distribution to Cannon County landowners." Photographed by W.L. Clement. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

Remaining true to his mission to document "typical practices," Clement captured several scenes in which farmers are present, actively taking part in the shift to more conservation conscious farming practices. One of the most evident, and arguably radical, conservation methods adopted by farmers was the construction of terraces. Terracing is a mechanical conservation method that functions by channeling excess rainwater to safe outlets. The construction of terraces is labor intensive. They require maintenance, and once they are built, remain on the land, affecting tillage processes. Because of the amount and importance of preliminary survey work necessitated by terrace construction, their

implementation was the epitome of farmer initiative and the district's relationship with the SCS and its agricultural technicians. When they built terraces, farmers literally reformed their land with the help of the government in order to obtain better yields and simultaneously conserve the soil. Terracing was one of the most demanding of the measures, especially in regard to labor. Although some built terraces without machinery, photos of terraces being built show men using large equipment on the farm, the advent of which Clement captured (Figure 19).¹⁵



Figure 19. *Making a terrace*, 04-15-1964. Photographer's note: "Terraces being constructed with crawler tractor." Photographed by W.L. Clement. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

¹⁵ R.L. Cooper, interview by author. Morrison, Tennessee. April 15, 2013

The agricultural scenes Clement captured document individual farmers' progressiveness, concern for conservation, and initiative. They invited change by voluntarily cooperating with the soil conservation district to educate themselves, obtain expert assistance, and alter land use habits in order to maintain their traditional relationship with the land. Whether they used fertilizer, planted on the contour, strip cropped, built terraces, planted new crops, or let fields lie fallow, they altered their land use habits and engendered a shift in local agriculture. The individual photographs and the photographers' notes on each convey individual decisions, while the collection brings these together to depict a grassroots alteration to farm culture. They invited change and articulated it in such a way as to make it paradoxically preservative. Change and tradition ceased to be solely one another's impediments, but began to be mutually dependent and cohabitate.

When Clement ventured to photograph tradition untouched by the very science and progressiveness he represented, he clearly delineated the parallel courses of change and tradition. In *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960*, Jack Temple Kirby finds that the inevitability of modern agriculture obliterated much rural culture in the South but Clement's photos show that remnants remain. The "cash nexus, machines, paved roads, and supermarkets" helped bring rural Americans into the mainstream and massive rural outmigration occurred throughout the twentieth century but these changes that comprised "modernization" of rural America, roads, supermarkets, cash, have also allowed

many people to remain in rural areas.¹⁶ While rural Americans have been and often still are thought of as unfortunately isolated on the fringes of mainstream society, their purposeful perpetuation of certain traditions redefines their separation as something that is chosen, instead of put upon by others. As the farmers in Clement's photographs show, they accepted change, but articulated it in such a way that it was preservative. Photos of sorghum production, mule cultivation, and horseback riding are timeless in regards to Cannon County, Tennessee (Figure 20). Aside from the occasional automobile in the background of the horseback riding images, these photos could have been taken a hundred years ago or yesterday, as all three of them are thriving cultural traditions (Figures 21 & 22). There are, and have been for many years, alternative incomes to sorghum production, mechanized alternatives to mule cultivation, and recreational alternatives to horseback riding. The prevalence of alternatives makes the perpetuation of these traditions all the more stark. While this community accepted change in certain parts of its members' lives, it filtered the transformative potential, and stopped it from wholly contaminating particular parts of its cultural heritage.

¹⁶ Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 118.

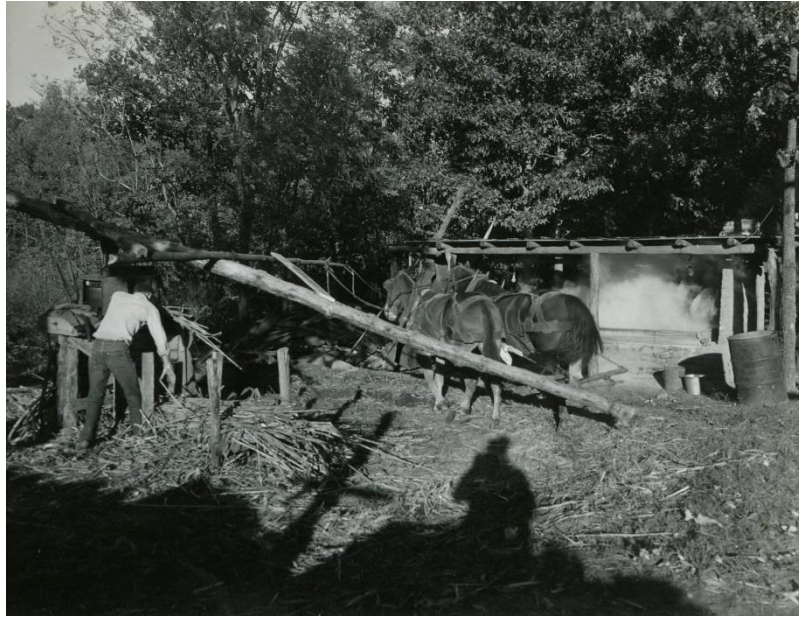


Figure 20. *Grinding sorghum with a horse and mule, 10-30-1962.* Photographer's note: "Sweet sorghum cane being ground to be made into syrup on mill located on farm. Located ten miles northeast of Woodbury. Sorghum is cooking in the shed." Photographed by W.L. Clement. *Source:* Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.



Figure 21. *A mule grinds sorghum in the Short Mountain community of Cannon County.* Taken 10-18-2014. Photographed by author.



Figure 22. A man cooking sorghum in the Short Mountain community of Cannon County. Taken 10-18-2014. Photographed by author.

Conclusion

The reparative and preventative nature of natural resource conservation through the Soil Conservation Service and local districts, in their success, obscures the impact of such activity, especially vis-a-vis other New Deal agencies whose legacy is embraced, preserved, and interpreted by the built environment. As the SCS matured and districts and assistance spread to suburban and urban areas, the playing field of soil conservation expanded beyond agriculture, technically making commercial and residential development found in these areas indicative of the pervasiveness of natural resource conservation.¹ However, the primary arena of federally-backed soil conservation activity was initially rural America and the number of rural Americans indoctrinated with soil conservation ideology during and after the New Deal constitutes a movement that deserves research, analysis, and public interpretation.

Those who formed, led, and cooperated with local soil conservation districts changed to maintain. Farmers and landowners became consumers of state-of-the-art agricultural conservation and land use planning in order to make their rural lives sustainable. They heeded the insistence that private land was of public concern, reoriented their operations, and reformed the land on which they depended, making conservation an integral component of modern agriculture. Technology that marries soil conservation and agricultural production embody their legacy but the landscapes that local district cooperators created are more

¹ D. Harper Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 27.

direct and potent products. The landscapes indicate community-initiated rural progress, paradoxical cohabitation of change and tradition, and, when used as an interpretive medium, tap into communities' sense of place. They are important because they convey a slightly different New Deal narrative, one that perforates the distinctly American division between public interest and private property and one that was almost entirely enabled and articulated by rural Americans. Whether cooperators built farm ponds for recreation or livestock, began incorporating vegetative measures such as crop rotation and planting legumes, or built terraces and planted trees, they took advantage of a new type of federal concern for rural America that employed the order and exactness of science. The effects of farmer initiative, these New Deal landscapes on private land, saturate rural America today and have become so commonplace they are sometimes overlooked.

W.L. Clement and the CCSCD conservationists before him help illustrate this impact with their photography. The sporadic documentation that preceded Clement's tenure complements his meticulous attention and the resulting collection is more than sufficient in depicting a dramatic landscape transformation at the hands of local farmers. The collection shows people participating in their own uplift, becoming consumers of state-of-the-art agricultural science, and in doing so, transforming the rural landscape into what residents are familiar with today. That the photograph collection is now part of a public archive, technically making it accessible to the public, is an important component of its utility but was

unsatisfactory considering the thorough documentation, agricultural transformation, and rural lifeways conveyed by the images. The James Walker Library at MTSU scanned the majority of the photos into their digital archive and they became part of the institution's Digital Collections under the title *Farms of Cannon County, Tennessee*. In 2012, the Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) at MTSU collaborated with the Arts Center of Cannon County's Evan Hatch to produce a six-panel exhibit and booklet that displayed over forty representative photographs from the collection and interpreted their significance to the local landscape and the county's part in the national story of soil conservation and agricultural transformation. Carroll Van West, the director of the CHP and Tennessee state historian, aptly named both pieces of the project *W.L. Clement: Reformer, Educator, Photographer*.

The exhibit displayed forty-seven photos in six categories: (1) the SCS, local districts, and Clement, (2) the county's landscape, crops, and waste issues, (3) activities and methods promoted by the district, (4) increased mechanization on farms, (5) cooperation with other agencies, and (6) Clement's documentation of enduring rural lifeways. The text on each panel is minimal; each containing no more than four sentences. Clement's notes on the verso of each photo provide each image with a caption. The accompanying booklet expands upon the exhibit text, further contextualizing Clement's documentation "of how this innovative federal partnership was reshaping the landscape of Cannon County."² Clement's

² Carroll Van West, "W.L. Clement and Agricultural Reform in Cannon County, Tennessee, 1951-1974," in Savannah Grandey, Evan Hatch, and Carroll Van West, *W.L. Clement: Reformer, Educator, Photographer*:

family also contributed to the piece, noting that, “He wanted future generations to have a better understanding of life in Cannon County before them.”³

The “W.L. Clement: Reformer, Educator, Photographer” exhibit opened at the Arts Center of Cannon County in September 2013. Several members of the community attended, including people who had known and worked with Clement, as well as Clement’s family. This exhibit project exemplifies the public historian’s role as facilitator and the community’s role in meaning-making. According to John Falk and Lynn Dierking, “Too many exhibitions are designed with the assumption that the museum, rather than the visitor, controls the experience.”⁴ The minimal interpretive text found on the panels enables shared authority. The photos needed little explaining; audience members began to incorporate their prior knowledge, memories, and interests to fill in the “gaps” left open by the lack of text. Relying so heavily on the photographs to interpret in the exhibit replicates the ways in which photos were used to develop the points put forth in this paper. According to Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen, “we have become accustomed to photographs as decorations instead of learning to appreciate the photograph itself as a source of information about the subject at hand.”⁵

Essays on Soil Conservation in Middle Tennessee (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, 2013), 2.

³ Kevin Clement, Kelly Clement, Regina Wright in Savannah Grandey, Evan Hatch, and Carroll Van West, *W.L. Clement: Reformer, Educator, Photographer: Essays on Soil Conservation in Middle Tennessee* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, 2013), 1.

⁴ John J. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2013), 105.

⁵ Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen, “Doing the Rest’: The Uses of Photography in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 29, no.3 (1977): 280.

The popularity of photography and its use as an historical source, instead of just a supplement, enables the audience to participate in meaning making and the creation of the archive. The exhibition of the photos in this manner enabled the audience to draw upon its own memories and experiences to create various renditions of one particular era in Cannon County's history. Attendees recognized land forms, fence rows, loved ones, friends, and themselves in the pictures and images without people allow "the viewer to respond to both the photographer's perspective and to any personal associations with the land."⁶ For those less familiar with the CCSCD and the eroded landscape that predated its formation, the photos may help narrate the evolution of a landscape riddled with gullies and damaged by floods, cultivation, and sheet erosion to the intact landscape enjoyed today. The photos also contextualize the origins and formative years of the local district, an institution that is now entrenched in the county's agriculture.

Despite such an open-ended exhibition, Lisa Robert's point that "exhibition is by its very nature an interpretive act" flies in the face of any claims to complete objectivity.⁷ Choosing forty-seven "representative" photos from a collection of over four hundred necessitates interpretive priorities and objectives. The exhibit is not intended to represent the whole of Cannon County's story throughout the middle of the twentieth century, the entirety of its agricultural history, or suggest that the collection is all-encompassing in regards to documentation of a rural

⁶ "Exhibit Notes: In View of Home: Alabama Landscape Photographs," *History News* 44, no.4 (July/August 1989):15.

⁷ Lisa C. Roberts, quoted in James W. Volkert, "Monologue to Dialogue," *Museum News* 70, no.2 (March-April 1991): 46.

corner of America. Clement chose and sometimes crafted the scenes he captured, women seldom appear, and the only images of African Americans are those meant to document flood damaged homes within the city limits (see Figure 23). However, the dearth in the scholarly literature regarding local soil conservation districts, voluntary grassroots organizations whose backs on which the soil conservation movement rode into modern agricultural technology, presents these photographs and others across the country that document SCS activity in rural America as points of departure for analyzing the organizations' role in rural progress, agricultural and landscape transformation, and natural resource conservation.



Figure 23. *Home destroyed in flood*, 03-13-1963. Photographer's notes: "One of several homes flooded in city limits of Woodbury from floodwater of Stones River. Water got about three feet deep in this house. Contents damaged and some destroyed." Photographed by W.L. Clement. *Source*: Cannon County, Tennessee Farms, Walker Library at MTSU, Digital Collections.

As the primary curator of the exhibit, I strove to select images that depicted local farmers' central role in these processes. Presenting a photograph exhibit in the same community in which they were taken encourages "a celebration of local experiences, resources, and perspectives" during the creation of collective and individual narratives.⁸ By doing so, it communicates the extraordinary significance of ordinary places and crowds seemingly empty landscapes with compelling idiosyncrasies. Photo collections enable public historians to use landscapes as mediums through which they can not only convey particular, specific content but reveal to the public a transferable and widely applicable concept that rewards observation of the seemingly mundane. The public historian can illuminate the significance of commonly trod ground and engage the public with that with which it is already familiar, "encountering landscape involves little more than glancing around."⁹

The local soil conservation districts that propelled conservation intervention onto private land still exist today. Their continuity is significant because, much like soil conservation itself, they have become a "given," integral parts of communities' farm cultures and significant, grassroots liaisons to the USDA. As normalized parts of the community, the conditions surrounding their origins and their restorative effect on the landscape are not necessarily lost on the residents but the familiarity subdues the innovative and revolutionary atmosphere in which local soil conservation districts began. In addition, the rural

⁸ "Exhibit Notes," 16.

⁹ Stilgoe, *Landscape and Images*, ix.

landscape, or in this case artifact, falls under Peirce F. Lewis's "common vernacular scene" that he notes most Americans ignore.¹⁰ Clement's photographs and notes help interpreters and the public assess and derive meaning from rural landscape transformation as a result of community-concerted soil conservation efforts. These landscapes and the districts that created and continue to maintain them are remnants of the transition to large-scale federal intervention into rural America and long-term commitment to rural progress, the march of science into the agricultural sector, and the willingness of farmers to subscribe to these new developments in order to perpetuate their lifestyles and proximity to the land. If Peirce is correct that, "Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography," then learning to observe landscapes, such as the rural and agricultural one of Cannon County, Tennessee can result in rewarding insight and understanding.

¹⁰ Peirce F. Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene," in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D.W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 11.

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