Clay County Conservation District (No. 08)

History from 1969 publication:

Clay County is one of the earliest settled areas of the state in an area of fertile soils and the highest rainfall section of the state. The topography is from level to undulating with deep and fertile soils well suited to the production of corn, small grains and grasses. The area all drains to the south into the Missouri River through the Clay Creek and Vermillion River and their tributaries. There is an abundant source of water from the streams, springs, and wells.

The northwest part of the county is undulating with well drained soils that do have a tendency to erode during heavy rains. The Missouri and Vermillion bottom lands are quite flat and poorly drained in some areas, and the soil varies from clay to a silty clay, but is very productive where drainage is not a problem. The east part of the county is quite level with productive silty clay and clay loams. This Conservation District contains some of the most productive soils in the state and produces excellent crops of corn and soybeans.

Like many other areas in the state that had been farmed for many years, erosion was taking place; wind erosion on the more level lands and water erosion on all soils and especially where there was some slope. The water erosion was especially noticeable where the top soil was washed off the hills and serious gullies were developing.

The people became concerned and wanted to do something to protect their land before the problem became serious. They heard about the C.C.C. Camp at Alcester and the conservation work they were doing. From time to time farmers visited the Alcester areas and observed the conservation being done there. Some of the local operators had conservation practices set up on their farms as demonstrations and showed that something could be accomplished.

In 1939 the County planning board became interested and started discussing the matter. They conducted a tour of the Alcester area with 75 farmers in attendance. Some meetings were held and petitions signed and a hearing held in November, 1939. The referendum was held in February, 1940, and carried by a large majority, and they were ready to start operating.

The first supervisors were Edwin Landeen, Beresford; Henry Abild, Wakonda; Garlin Jensen, Wakonda; Elmer Gronland, Volin; and Albert Paulson, Wakonda. Others who were instrumental in getting the Conservation District started were John Nielsen, Beresford; Virgil Anderson, Centerville; Fred Slattery, Wakonda; Joseph Ellison, Wakonda; R.A. Collins, Wakonda; Ben Olson, Wakonda; Herman Nelson, Vermillion; O.H. Grandgaard, Centerville; and Martin Swedling, Beresford.

The supervisors were aware of their problems and stated them in their program of work as:

- Spring floods and drought;
- Wind and water erosion;
- Water erosion most serious, especially on slopes;
- Wind erosion on smooth fields without cover;
- Land continuously cropped since broken out – now hills are bare, gravel is exposed and gullies have developed;
- Removal of plant residues has depleted soil texture and loss of humus;
- Silting and flooding of bottom lands;
- Damage from drought and grasshoppers.

The supervisors proposed to solve their problems by using: contour and terrace farming; shaping and grassing gullies; and provide grassed waterways and diversion dams.

The conservation program is a continuing and a long time one. Clay County was no different than other counties. It, too, went through a period of exploitation where the people paid little attention to the soil except to get out of it what they could and only returning the very least. After 75 years or so of such use, the soil began to break down and become subject to erosion. This condition occurred about the same time as the prolonged drought came. That condition reduced the production of crops and livestock for several years. That was a terrific economic drain resulting in financial ruin to many farm operators, as well as to businesses in the towns.

Many operators feel fortunate that the soil conservation district movement came along when it did. It surely has been instrumental in putting them back on their feet.

Other early supervisors were: Glenn Knutson, Centerville; Wayne Merrigan, Vermillion; Carl Olson, Meckling; Ray E. Johnson, Centerville; and M. Paul Johnson, Volin.

The 1969 supervisors were: Ray H. Schulz, Vermillion, chairman; Harold Engstrom, Centerville, vice chairman; Carl Olson, Meckling, treasurer; Cameron Nelson, Centerville, supervisor; Don Jorgenson, Vermillion, supervisor; and Robert Schurrer, Vermillion, secretary (county agent).

Updated information provided in 2012:

With freedom comes responsibility. The Clay County Conservation District believes in the voluntary approach to conservation on private lands. The Conservation District strongly encourages landowners to use conservation practices to protect their land and maintain its productivity and profitability.

We believe the potential of private landowners to be the most effective force in resource conservation and protection. Clay County Conservation District has continuously supported conservation through local initiative and self-government since organizing in 1940.

Today's board of supervisors is: Landowner/Occupier #1- Bob Fallan, Landowner/Occupier #2- Roger Hansen, Landowner/Occupier #3-Mike Lynch, Taxpayer of Real Property-Terry Taggart, Chairman, and Urban Supervisor-Clark Christensen.

In the last forty years the following supervisors have also contributed their time and talents to the community by serving on the board. Lyman Mollet, Jimmie Thomas, Ken Bezdicek, Marvin Walz, Vern Smith, Robert Woodward, Frank Orr, Clarence Pederson, George Ballard, Greg Erickson, Terry Jacobsen, Gary Iverson, Bruce Noll, Ron Carlson, Daryl Henriksen, Paul Putz, John H Davidson, Gail Hamman, Mike Bottolfson, Judy Knutson, Arden Abild, Patrick Gross, Roger Strom, and Martin Weeks.

In the late 80s, the Conservation District Board (Ron Carlson, Daryl Henriksen, Gary Iverson, Bruce Noll, and Paul Putz) foresaw the need for a conservation district manager as demands for conservation district technology, and coordinating administration and projects with other government entities grew. They hired Connie Wulff, their first (and only) Conservation District Manager, in October of 1990.

In 1991, we implemented the Over the Fence Program. Over the fence was a self-guided tour that allowed farmers and other interested persons to learn about conservation practices on their own. Guide books and fact sheets that explain the practices were available at the Conservation

District office and were distributed to ag businesses. Five local farmers were chosen to showcase their best conservation practice. Signs were placed along the road in front of the conservation practice telling what the practice was, naming the farmer, and giving contact information so interested parties could find out how to implement the same practice for themselves. The Conservation District kept detailed notes on costs and accomplishments of the practices and would then invite those interested to talk with the farmers directly to get their input on the practices and how they worked for them. Funding for this project was made possible by a non-point source pollution control development grant from the South Dakota Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

Mapping for the new soil survey started in 1991. SCS Soil Scientists, Kent Cooley, unit leader and Dan Brady, were here for 4-5 years mapping the soils of Clay County and compiling results. In 2000, the results were printed and the Conservation District held a soil survey day to distribute the surveys to local farmers and give them the opportunity to talk with Kent Cooley and Bruce Kunze, NRCS area soil scientist. The soil survey is also digitized and part of the web soil survey available on the internet.

The Conservation District participated in a multi-county federal grant initiated and headed by the USFWS starting in 1993. The Partners Pond Project brought together USFWS, FEMA, SDGFP, Vermillion Basin Water Development District, along with Ducks Unlimited, North American Wetlands Conservation Council and local landowners for a 6 year project to build small multi-purpose embankment ponds. Over the six years a total of 15 ponds were created or restored holding back over 131 acre feet of water. In addition to flood damage reduction, the new ponds also provided water for livestock and wildlife and will help keep sediments from downstream waters. These water retention projects are excellent examples of how federal, state and local government agencies, private and nonprofit organizations and local citizens can work together to meet common goals and needs. The project totaled over $100,000.

In 1994, the SD Game Fish and Parks implemented a new program aimed at recognizing landowners for their efforts in supporting South Dakota's wildlife resources. The Wildlife Cooperator of the Year was a cooperative program among the SDGFP, SDACD, and the SD Conservation Commission. Fourteen Conservation Districts sent in nominations for the first-ever State Wildlife Cooperator of the Year Award. The first State Wildlife Cooperator of the Year award was given to Jim, Joan, and Jeff Olson of Clay County. The Olson farm is positive proof that wildlife management can be a successful and integral part of a profitable farming operation. Their nomination was submitted by the Clay County Conservation District, and Dave Walz, GFP Conservation Officer for Clay County.

In 1996, the Conservation District received a grant directly from the Environmental Protection Agency to evaluate and publish results on flood management in the Vermillion River watershed. Supervisor John H Davidson (1991-1998) wrote the grant. It was a huge success and was requested by many agencies throughout the United States as a teaching tool and example and is still as relevant today as the day it was published.

Destructive flooding occurs when too much water arrives at the same spot at the same time. Once a flood pulse travels down ditches and tributaries to the main stem river, flood control is costly and often impossible. Furthermore, it is not possible to drain water into the Vermillion River and then use levees and channelization to reduce upstream flooding, without worsening flooding elsewhere.

Preventing destructive flooding requires slowing water delivery to all parts of the river. No one acceptable and cost-effective technique is likely to stop flooding along the Vermillion River. However, holistic watershed management using a combination of nonstructural flood control techniques can reduce flooding damage.

Rather than constructing earthen dams or levees, nonstructural flood control involves restoring elements of the natural ecosystem that allow the watershed to store and deliver water to the Vermillion River at a natural rate. Nonstructural flood control also requires adapting to some degree of flooding by reducing the potential for economic damage on the floodplain. Nonstructural flood control methods include: restoring natural wetlands, creating stock dams high in the watershed, restoring perennial grasslands, and restoring the floodplain and adopting appropriate floodplain land use.

Roger Strom (1998-2000) along with friend Paul Shubeck, a fellow Conservation District Supervisor in Turner County, conceived the notion and helped frame national legislation in 1998 for the Farmable Wetlands Program, now a practice in the USDA Continuous Conservation Reserve Program. We are extremely proud to have such a perfect example of grass roots conservation to come out of Clay County.

By 2001, the Conservation District found itself in need of a new native grass drill; however, the Conservation District budget constraints limited what they could do. We realized the only workable solution would be collective and committed teamwork within our community. The Conservation District looked to its partners in conservation and with generous contributions from the Vermillion Basin Water Development District, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Clay County, USFWS, SDGFP, and the SESD Pheasant Association was able to purchase a 12' Truax native grass drill.

Early in 2002, members of the Conservation District Board met with Janet Oertly, SD NRCS State Conservationist, and presented a proposal requesting Clay County have their very own District Conservationist. We needed to re-establish, increase and strengthen our personal, one-on-one contact with farmers. Offering quality assistance in conservation planning along with an earnest desire to establish sustainable agriculture in balance with the environment in Clay County would be our strength in building and maintaining customer trust. The USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service accepted our proposal and by May, Deron Ruesch had been hired as District Conservationist for Clay County. Currently the Conservation District is without a District Conservationist and once again the Conservation District Board of Supervisors will be active in petitioning for a full time District Conservationist.

In 2005, Martin Weeks (2001-2007) took on the task of revising the Conservation District's soil erosion and sedimentation ordinance. Clay County's ordinance is now up to date and has greater continuity.

Tree planting is an important part of the Conservation District since it was organized; however, when land is expensive and crop prices high and farmers are looking to bring more ground into row crop production, tree planting becomes a low priority for landowners wishing to maximize income. This is where we are today but as we all know, change is inevitable. Since Clay County Conservation District put its first tree in the ground, we have planted over 1 million trees.

Field windbreaks	64.6 miles	168.6 acres
Farmstead and Feedlot		1,349.5 acres
Renovation		81.7 acres
Wildlife		140.0 acres

Other	334.6 acres
For a total of	2,074.4 acres of trees on 1,595 farms

In September of 2011 the Conservation District held its annual local work group meeting to prioritize resource concerns within the county.

1. Water Quantity — excessive runoff, flooding, or ponding
2. Water Quality — excessive suspended sediment and turbidity in surface water
3. Water Quality — excess nutrients and organics
4. Soil Erosion — sheet and rill
5. Plant Condition — productivity, health and vigor

Looking back to when the Conservation District was first organized; today's resource concerns mirror those of 70 years ago. Conservation has come a long way with improved technology and advances in science but yet we must keep a vigilant eye towards the future and protecting, conserving and restoring our natural resources for generations to come.

Spirit Mound located in Clay County as it looks today.