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Interviews with Chiefs of the Soil Conservation Service: Williams, Grant, Davis, and Berg

Edited by Steven E. Phillips and Douglas Helms

Cover contains photos of the four SCS chiefs interviewed in this volume:

Top left: Donald Williams

Top right: Kenneth Grant

Bottom left: Mel Davis

Bottom right: Norm Berg

Cover designed by Jimmy Todd, SCS

Photos: courtesy of the SCS Office of Public Affairs

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Soil Conservation Service:
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**Economics and Social Sciences Division
Soil Conservation Service
United States Department of Agriculture
Washington, D.C. 20013**

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Table of Contents

Introduction	i
Donald A. Williams	1
Kenneth E. Grant	41
R. M. (Mel) Davis	81
Norman A. Berg	121
Appendix One: Frequently Used Acronyms	195
Appendix Two: List of Chiefs and Administrators	197

NOTE: Detailed tables of contents for the interviews are placed at the beginning of each section.

Introduction

Here, with varying degrees of candor, is the story of the Soil Conservation Service, told by four men who ran the agency from the Eisenhower to the Reagan administrations, a period of about thirty years. First came the late Donald A. Williams, who had the formidable task of managing the long-term development of the Service after the tenure of its crusading founder, Hugh Hammond Bennett. Next Kenneth E. Grant led the agency as environmental concerns grew and urban or suburban citizens demanded more assistance. Under Mel Davis, the Service attempted to cope with the expansion of land in production agriculture (largely a consequence of large grain sales to the Soviet Union) even as budgetary pressures increased. Finally, Norman A. Berg steered the agency during a time of renewed interest in environmental concerns. He was also the last "career chief," that is, he worked his way up the ranks of the Service to the top position. (Note: the title for the top position in the Service has switched between "chief" and "administrator.")

We edited these interviews with a light hand so as to give the reader a feel for the conversational style of each man. We endeavored to transmit not only what they said but also how they said it.

Several themes tie their tenures together. From its initial emphasis on soil conservation on agricultural land, the Service has steadily expanded into areas like flood prevention and rural economic development. Each chief sought to accomplish these new tasks while maintaining the agency's traditional role of service to farmers. Perhaps the most contentious issue was, and is, the perceived conflict between economic development and environmental protection. This is clear in disputes over the use of structural measures for flood control, channelization, and agricultural chemicals. Other common issues include the organization of the Service and relations with Congress and the White House.

Readers seeking to learn more about specific issues or programs discussed in these interviews are advised to turn to *Readings in the History of the Soil Conservation Service* (Historical Notes Number 1, 1992) by National Historian Douglas Helms.

We would like to thank Messrs. Williams, Grant, Davis, and Berg. Each graciously gave of their time, both for the interviews and to review the transcripts. Barbara Cook and Sheree Gross of the Economics and Social Sciences Division (ECN) cheerfully helped with the tedious task of transcribing the interview tapes. Nancy Mathews and Anne Henderson of Strategic Planning Division, as well as Jennifer Harr and Leigh Ann Mays of ECN made valuable suggestions for improving the readability of the text. Finally, we greatly appreciate the efforts of Claudette Hayes of the Service's Publication and Printing Branch, who has managed the printing of this and earlier volumes in the Historical Notes series.

Steven Phillips
Historian

Douglas Helms
National Historian

R. M. (Mel) Davis

Contents

Biographical Sketch	83
July 20, 1993	
Growing up in North Dakota	85
Education and Interest in Conservation	85
Soil Conservationist in North Dakota	86
SCS Reorganization	88
Role of the State in Conservation Efforts	88
Erosion in North Dakota/Strip Mining	89
Relations with Farmers	90
Assistant State Conservationist in Pennsylvania	91
Small Watersheds in Pennsylvania	93
State Conservationist in Pennsylvania	93
Administrator's Field Representative	93
Urban and Suburban Concerns	94
Water Quality Issues	94
Resource Conservation and Development	95
Hurricane Agnes	95
Director of Technical Services Center	96
Assistant Administrator	96
Earl Butz	97
Administrator	98
Carter Administration	98
Environmental and Farm Groups	99
National Association of Conservation Districts	100
Great Plains Conservation Program	101
Reorganizing Top Staff	102
Budget	102
Government Accounting Office Report and Public Criticism	103
Expanding Roles for Women	104
EEO Efforts and 1890 Schools	105

Keeping Morale Up	106
Meetings with USDA Agency Heads	107
Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Water Act	107
Cooperation with Forest Service	108
Relations with Congress	109
Erosion Control Guidelines	111
Work with Highway Departments	111
Resource Conservation Act	112
Rural Abandoned Mine Program	112
New Roles for SCS	112
Prime and Unique Farmlands	113
Small Watershed Projects in the 1970s	113
Plant Materials Centers	114
Palouse Region	114
Windbreaks	115
Wetlands	116
International Assistance	116
Political Appointees in SCS	117
Assistant to the Secretary	118
SCS and the Food Security Act	119
Summary	119

Biographical Sketch

Mel Davis was born in Ambrose, North Dakota in 1927. After graduating from North Dakota State University he worked as a vocational-agricultural instructor. He served in the Navy in 1945 and 1946.

Upon joining the SCS in 1952 he was a soil conservationist in his native state. Following several promotions, he transferred to Pennsylvania in 1963 to serve as assistant state conservationist. From 1968 to 1972 he was state conservationist there. While in Pennsylvania, Davis became field representative for the northeastern United States in 1972, a position he held until his promotion to assistant administrator in 1974. He was also director of the SCS Technical Center in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania during this time.

Following the retirement of Kenneth Grant, Davis served as administrator from June of 1975 to September of 1979. During these four years, SCS responded to a variety of pressing problems and outside criticism while under tight budget constraints. He also led SCS when it took on three major new projects: the Rural Abandoned Mine Program, the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act, and the Rural Clean Water Program. In 1979 he moved into the newly created position of special assistant for international science and

education under Secretary of Agriculture Robert Bergland. Shortly thereafter, he retired from government service.



July 20, 1993

Interviewed by Steve Phillips,
Historian with the Economics and
Social Sciences Division of SCS, in
Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

PHILLIPS: I would like to start out by asking if you could talk a little about your family and educational background.

DAVIS: I'm a native of Ambrose, North Dakota. I was born and raised in the very northwest corner of that state, a point of entry into Canada about thirty miles from Montana. I grew up there during the drought and the Depression. You can say I was born in the 1920s and educated in the 1930s and 1940s because you must include everything from grade school, high school, military service in the Navy and going to North Dakota State University. My educational background is basically one of graduating from North Dakota State University in the field of agricultural education. That was where I started working. I graduated in 1949 and started out teaching vocational agriculture. At the time I enjoyed it very much but decided that I would like something more in the line of conservation or conservation education. At that point, I joined the Soil Conservation Service because it was active in southwestern North Dakota. I knew a little bit about it, having grown up under these droughts and depressions and dust storm

conditions. I thought I could make a contribution with my background, my educational training and desires for the future.

PHILLIPS: Was there anything in your education or studies directly connected to soil conservation or soil science?

DAVIS: Not especially. We all had to take soil science. We all knew about Dr. Charles Kellogg who headed the Soil Survey Division in Washington for a long time because he led the soil science activities at North Dakota State University. So you could say that there was an association, but nothing direct or planned on my part. It was one of those situations that just happened more than it was planned.

PHILLIPS: Your decision to make a career in SCS was based upon a growing interest in conservation in general?

DAVIS: Yes, and in production agriculture. I had seen enough of problems with agriculture, problems with those people trying to make a living from agriculture. I really thought, not only from my background but from the agency and organization of the Soil Conservation Service, that we could make a definite contribution to the American production of food and fiber and yet conserve the soil and water resources. So that was sort of my analysis when I started. When I started at the lowest rung of the SCS

professional ladder, of course, never did I dream of ending up at the highest rung of that same ladder some day.

PHILLIPS: What year did you join SCS?

DAVIS: I joined SCS in the summer of 1952.

PHILLIPS: And at what position?

DAVIS: As a soil conservationist in Mott, North Dakota.

PHILLIPS: What specific problems did you see in North Dakota? What specific soil erosion problems were present?

DAVIS: The big problem, of course, in northwest North Dakota was that of wind erosion. We would have liked to have had more water than we did. This related to drought conditions in my earlier times but later related to some of the tillage conditions and practices being used.

PHILLIPS: Could you tell us a little bit about an average work day?

DAVIS: Well, at that time, that area was all farming and ranching. Our average day was to work with farmers and ranchers in development of conservation plans and, perhaps more importantly, the application of conservation practices. Our day was as long as it took. I didn't come to work by the hour or the day or the week or the month. I took an annual

salary and I thought I had to work as many hours as it took, as many days as it took, year-round and that's what we did.

PHILLIPS: Was a lot of evening time taken up with conservation district meetings and such?

DAVIS: There were educational meetings, conservation district meetings, cooperating agency get-togethers, field days, and tours. There seemed to be no end to it and thus there was no lull in activities.

PHILLIPS: What was your next promotion?

DAVIS: I went from soil conservationist to what was then known as a work unit conservationist position and served in that position in two or three locations in southwestern North Dakota. It was the first line officer position that I held in the Soil Conservation Service. The line at that time was the administrator, the state conservationist, the area conservationist, and the work unit conservationist. Those were the four levels of line organization we had.

PHILLIPS: One of the things all these oral histories have done is focus a bit on the states, since each person comes from a different background. You mentioned you went to southwest North Dakota. Was that different from what you said before about where you grew up?

DAVIS: Yes, I grew up in the northwest and when you went south of the Missouri River, there was a difference in soils and farming practices, but basically the same dry conditions existed. So there wasn't a lot of difference. In North Dakota, the eastern third of the state, the area east of the hundredth meridian, is mostly level farm land--Red River valley--flat country. That's quite different from where I was in the western third of the state, which is in the thirteen-inch total precipitation boundary, or in southwestern North Dakota, where I started with SCS.

PHILLIPS: You mentioned that you went from soil conservationist to work unit conservationist. What specific criteria did they have for deciding who moved up? What did you have that helped you advance in your field?

DAVIS: Well, of course, you never knew. You were selected and assigned and you went. In other words, my understanding of Soil Conservation Service then was that they wanted me to become a work unit conservationist, a line officer. That was the top individual working with these conservation districts or with a conservation district in a county. In other words, your paycheck was going to be sent there; you went there to happily receive it.

PHILLIPS: So it was more in the line of being ordered.

DAVIS: No, you weren't ordered but the selection process was such that it usually was advantageous for you to go.

PHILLIPS: How about comparing a work unit conservationist to your soil conservationist job? Can you give us a daily schedule?

DAVIS: Well, it really wasn't that much different. In other words, I sort of had a theory all through my career in the Soil Conservation Service that there were jobs to do. There were seasons in which to do them or times in which to do them and when that time was right, you did them. We did similar things as soil conservationists and as work unit conservationists because they needed to be done and that was the only time we could do them. It didn't make much difference if you were a professional or a technician or an aide or whatever they were called at that time. You did your job to help those farmers and ranchers in conservation districts apply conservation measures to the land. In North Dakota, the season when you could till fields, apply practices, and the like was short. We worked as a team more doing things on a seasonal basis than they did in other parts of the country where they could do the job twelve months in a year. You don't soil survey in North Dakota in January. By the way, that's no derogatory remark about North Dakota.

PHILLIPS: One of the big changes was the move from the regional system to the state office system.

DAVIS: The regional offices were in existence when I joined the Soil Conservation Service and there was one in Lincoln, Nebraska. As I said a bit ago the line officers were the administrators, state conservationists, area conservationists, and work unit conservationists. The regional office was headed by a line officer at that time as opposed to what it later became, a technical service center. When the Eisenhower Administration took over there were some thoughts of changing SCS from an organization that had been very active and very successful, to one of no existence at all. The regional offices were the casualty of that type of thinking and thus they were eliminated as a line office. You could ask what happened when they dispersed the regional offices. I was in the field working in conservation when that happened. I don't know all the ramifications of that but my observation would go like this: they moved the regional office and its functions and responsibilities down to the state office. They just shoved everything down the ladder one notch and kept a core of technical people at the regional level to later work in regional technical service centers. There were many arguments over whether that was good or bad and I expect it still could be debated.

PHILLIPS: Did SCS employees have any particular views on this change?

DAVIS: Every SCS employee had a view and those views were very different. You had to have an official view which was maybe this way but an unofficial opinion which was the other way. So there were lots of views--strong, good, bad, and indifferent. Some states loved the abandonment of the regional office. Some states and some employees were assigned to those states out of those regional offices, like it or not. It was more of being ordered than being selected, as I discussed a moment ago.

PHILLIPS: This is a broad question but some of the debates in the Service seem to be over what the state level should handle versus the headquarters level. Do you have any comment on that for the soil conservation work? What was the best division of labor?

DAVIS: First, I'm a firm believer in line organization and delegation of authority. The state conservationist, I believe, needs to have full say and full control within the broad national policy or guidelines handed down or developed jointly with Washington. When it comes to operations, I think the state conservationist has to be the man in the chair and the man who will accept the responsibility and make the decisions and carry out the program. When it comes to state agencies and organizations, that's another question. I believe strongly that you need to

have a strong national program of developing standards and specifications, as an example, for soil and water conservation practices. The Soil Conservation Service was created to be the technical arm of the United States Department of Agriculture in the field of soil and water conservation just as the Forest Service is in the field of forestry. In that setting then I believe it behooves the Soil Conservation Service to be the leader, to know more about soil and water conservation problems and solutions and developing standards and specifications than anybody else. That's the only way you can do it. The only way you're going to be top salesman in a private company is to know more about your product and perhaps your competitor's product than anybody else. I believe that the Soil Conservation Service needed to do that in order to carry out its responsibilities as delegated from the Department of Agriculture and the Secretary of Agriculture to the administrator, to the state conservationist, down to the area and field offices.

PHILLIPS: What role should the state governments fulfill?

DAVIS: I believe the state does have a responsibility, not only for the lands under their jurisdiction which they own, manage and operate, but also to assist or to be the local entity. Keep in mind, the Soil Conservation Service had no land under its control. I can qualify that a little bit; we used to have the old grazing land management

program back in the early 1930s and 1940s, but that's history. SCS was never designed to have nor did it ever have the sort of control over land that the Forest Service had. The only thing we could do then was have the standards and specifications, the knowledge, and the technical assistance in the planning and application of conservation practices to a point where we could sell our product based on the need. Congress, when they created the original soil conservation district law, declared that soil and water conservation was in the public interest. Therefore, the Congress, the United States government, the Secretary of the Agriculture, and the Soil Conservation Service had a direct responsibility. In that setting, I believe the states can do more. I believed during my tenure and in later years they have come into their justifiable role in carrying out conservation programs up to and including, if necessary, enforcement of land use requirements. I don't believe the Soil Conservation Service, then or now, should do that. I believe state and local governments are the ones that can do it. With our knowledge, background, advice and expertise they should carry that out.

PHILLIPS: You've already mentioned the lack of water and wind erosion. Is there anything else you would like to add about North Dakota?

DAVIS: Well, keep in mind that these things constantly changed as we went from the horses to the tractor to the big machinery. It constantly created new conservation problems. The problems we had in my tenure in North Dakota are not necessarily the problems of the 1970s or 1980s because of the change in tillage methods, the changes in farm machinery, the difference in size of farms, and the change from livestock to small grains. Our problems, as I have indicated earlier, were those of wind erosion; thus we worked on such things as stubble mulching, strip cropping, and one row tree planting to try to provide a barrier to stop the wind and hold the snow, because moisture conservation was a big single item. In range conservation, even before the laws were passed, we did such things as trying to reclaim some of the old spoil banks from strip mining in northwest North Dakota up to and including hauling a native plum seeder around and dropping seeds to see if we couldn't get trees to grow by accident. We had no authorities, we just did it. You had to do a certain amount of these things, I don't want to say illegally, but almost so in order to get them accepted. And we did some of that. I'm not saying we broke the law, but we stretched it a little bit.

PHILLIPS: So you took the initiative for some areas that had been strip mined?

DAVIS: We tried things because it was creating problems for farmers.

We did many things on what we called water spreading, just putting dikes in so that when the snow melted the water flowed slowly over the land and spread and soaked in rather than just ran off. Those things were forerunners. I was then and still am now a firm believer that conservation practices constantly need to be changed and adapted. I had no qualms with having people who had maybe been doing wind strip cropping--narrow strips in one direction to slow down the force of the wind--taking them out and putting them into contours. Once we got the wind erosion under control by other methods such as good stubble mulch then we moved to moisture conservation and contour farming. As long as you were going up the ladder with conservation practices I had no problem with even erasing a practice that at one time we thought was sacred but now could be replaced with something better.

PHILLIPS: Could you give us a little taste of your relationships with the farmers when you went out? How did you approach them? I know at times this is a very sensitive issue--convincing a farmer to try something.

DAVIS: We tried many things. Again I go back to North Dakota, but let me say this, North Dakota is different from the state we're sitting in now, and in which I worked, Pennsylvania. It was entirely different in North Dakota, where the farmer, the rancher, the land owner, or the

operator, because of their experiences with drought, Depression and all these other things were much more knowledgeable of the Soil Conservation Service. We worked together hand in glove to try to help them.

How did we approach them? We approached them any way we could, through educational meetings and group meetings. We had a program at one time called "finding Elmer." In "finding Elmer" we had group meetings to see who was the local leader--if he did something the rest would follow. It worked to a degree but never forget, when working with people, it's that individual who finally makes the decision and it's that individual who needs to be made to feel important in his role or he will not carry out or keep a practice. You can't go by and talk to a farmer and let him say, "Well, I don't have any erosion but my neighbors got a little." He maybe asked you to help him solve one little segment of his problem, such as a wash-out in the field. That really wasn't the problem; that was the result of the problem. Therefore, you had to then use that as your "in" to get him to plan and apply a total conservation program.

PHILLIPS: What years were you in North Dakota?

DAVIS: Well, I was there from the time I was born until 1963.

PHILLIPS: And went to Pennsylvania in what position?

DAVIS: I came to Pennsylvania as an assistant state conservationist.

PHILLIPS: Tell us about that position.

DAVIS: The time I came into that position, it was a new position in Pennsylvania. I came in there as an assistant state conservationist for special programs. That position was created primarily because the state conservationist, the late Ivan McKeever, was appointed the U.S. Department of Agriculture representative on the Susquehanna River Basin Study and other things. So Don Williams authorized an additional position here to handle a lot of the special programs. I don't even remember what some of them were but it had to do with relations with the college and Extension Service, the state's own soil and water conservation commission, and the reclamation laws that Pennsylvania had. We were trying to assist them. When you work for an organization you really work for a man. I guess you can say whenever I was given an assignment I did my best.

PHILLIPS: Could you give us a quick sketch or a comparison of Pennsylvania's conservation efforts and North Dakota's?

DAVIS: You're comparing apples and oranges. It was entirely different. Let me say Pennsylvania had a good conservation program in those areas where they had one. The history of conservation districts and the problems between various agencies and the Soil Conservation Service in Pennsylvania, I'm sure is quite well known, and I don't choose to get into that. We had to do a lot of work in the creation of soil conservation districts even after I came here thirty years ago because the Extension Service in Pennsylvania had fought the creation of districts for some good and valid reasons. There had to be a lot of work done in what I call general relations with cooperating agencies and county commissioners who, under Pennsylvania law, created the conservation districts as opposed to North Dakota where they were created by a vote of the general public. You had to work with county commissioners and those sorts of people to get conservation districts created and then we were quite successful. We got districts created in just about every county by the time I left in 1972.

PHILLIPS: Can you give us some idea of where the districts weren't set up when you arrived? Was there any particular part of the state?

DAVIS: There was no rhyme or reason; there would be a small district covering eight townships of one county until Pennsylvania passed Act

217 that required districts to be created on a county-wide basis.

PHILLIPS: What were some of the specific erosion problems in Pennsylvania?

DAVIS: Well, in Pennsylvania, there were erosion problems because of the high moisture--rainfall--as compared to North Dakota and many other places. Pennsylvania was farming country where erosion was a big problem from water, not from wind. Soil conserving and soil building were important. You can go to northeastern Pennsylvania; the old rock fences were there. When the snow melted and the water ran, it followed these fences down and just eroded the heck out of it. Historically some of them should have been kept. We were into programs cost shared by our sister agency, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), to remove these rock walls and eliminate that sort of problem. I would say it was geared more toward conservation, crop rotation, and erosion water than perhaps it was ever in the Midwest and western United States, except for the Rocky Mountain area.

PHILLIPS: Were you more involved in certain types of work due to strip mining in Pennsylvania?

DAVIS: Yes, we became more and more involved with the strip mining work in Pennsylvania as the years went on. They had more money and more serious problems as a result of

mining, particularly deep open pit mines, to say nothing about sink holes and a whole group of other things.

PHILLIPS: What about Public Law 566, the Small Watershed Program, in Pennsylvania?

DAVIS: It was an excellent program nation-wide, and could be adapted almost anywhere. Pennsylvania had a good program of public law 566 watersheds in planning and development at the time I came to the state. We carried it out vigorously and we did one thing in Pennsylvania, I think, that was highly beneficial. Not that it wasn't done elsewhere, but we did incorporate multiple use of the water-retarding structures wherever possible. I'm talking about municipal water supply, recreation, and all those sorts of things.

PHILLIPS: Do you have any comments on relations with the Corps of Engineers? Did they have many objections to the watershed projects?

DAVIS: Well, the Corps of Engineers and the Soil Conservation Service had many areas of conflict. In my personal experience in Pennsylvania, the Corps of Army Engineers, whether it be the Baltimore district, the Pittsburgh district, or the Cincinnati district, was generally good. We understood each other. We got together and called a spade a spade. Two hundred and fifty thousand acres or less, we took a look at. Over two hundred and fifty, we

said to the Corps, "You take a look at it." We communicated, which perhaps was the most important thing. There were areas of conflict and areas of concern but no real problems.

PHILLIPS: Where did you go after the assistant state conservationist position?

DAVIS: I became state conservationist for Pennsylvania in 1968, upon the retirement of Ivan McKeever. I served in that position for four years. In 1972, I left the position of state conservationist and went to Upper Darby to head up our technical service center. I directed the technical staff that provided support to the thirteen northeastern states and the Caribbean area at that time. I was also the administrator's field representative. It was not a line officer position but you were sort of called the administrator's eyes and ears to the various states. The administrator, even though he had fifty state conservationists reporting to him, couldn't possibly keep a finger on all of them. So he worked with and through the field representatives to see what was going on and why.

PHILLIPS: Was it unusual for a field representative to have the other post that you held concurrently?

DAVIS: No, they all were set up that way. From the time they were created, which was an evolution after the abolishment of the regional offices back in 1954, it evolved so that all of

the technical service centers were headed by a director who was also the administrator's field representative.

PHILLIPS: How did you come to be selected for the state conservationist position?

DAVIS: It's like everything else, you never really know, I guess. I was selected to become a state conservationist in Pennsylvania by Don Williams. Mr. Williams, a fine administrator and a fine gentleman, never really talked to me about the position. I was in a training center at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy out on Long Island, New York, when I got a phone call about my becoming state conservationist. Actually, my wife and kids knew it before I did. Mr. Grant was administrator then and I'm assuming they went through a panel process where the personnel office and other people at the national level made a list of qualified people for the job. The administrator made a decision on who he would like to serve in that position. Anything above a grade thirteen at that time had to be approved by the Department. That was the way it went.

PHILLIPS: Just to back up a bit, I have a couple of broad questions. Could you address the shifting emphasis in SCS? During the 1960s and 1970s, the trend was first toward more environmental concerns and second more toward urban and suburban concerns, correct?

DAVIS: I would like to separate out environmental. I'll get into that a little later. The first shifting of emphasis, I think, was toward the urban areas. When I say that I don't mean that was bad. They had soil and water resources, they had soil and water conservation problems, just as the farmer and rancher did. I don't think the original legislation or any interpretation of it thereafter really said farmers and ranchers. Now some people wanted that and, true, we worked mostly with those people because they controlled the large areas of land. But I had no qualms with providing technical assistance to urbanites, to conservation groups, and organizations that were trying to solve problems that were not strictly related to agricultural land. True, we were a part of the Department of Agriculture but that didn't limit us to them. Again, local conservation districts and others needed to set the priorities and we, the agency providing technical assistance in the field of soil and water conservation, needed to help carry out those priorities.

PHILLIPS: Wasn't there growing concern over water pollution, pesticide use, run-off, and such?

DAVIS: Yes, they become more and more concerned about water quality and water pollution, primarily because of erosion. Due to erosion, soil particles, silt, and sediment carrying nitrogen, phosphorus, and potash flowed off the farm fields and caused algae to grow on the ponds. True,

there was a greater concern. The problem was always there but the more you urbanize the country the worse it became. Keep in mind now, I came from North Dakota, the most rural state in the union yet. I came to the east coast where the most urban states in the union were. You can say the problem was different, but had you had blacktop over half of a county in North Dakota, you would have a similar problem. It was the change in land use from producing crops to producing houses that caused many of these problems. The Soil Conservation Service didn't cause it. Many times people said the developer caused them or the planning commission caused them or somebody else caused them. Well, this thing had to go on, you had to change land use. We, the Soil Conservation Service, should have been trying to advise, to counsel people well enough so that changes in land use were well-planned, well-managed, well-intentioned and not using up the best farmlands of this country. We had several alternatives in some places. There were places where you didn't have much of an alternative but that's another story.

PHILLIPS: What about Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) in Pennsylvania?

DAVIS: Pennsylvania, in fact, before I became state conservationist and afterwards, was sort of a leader in RC&D. Mr. McKeever, with his staff, took the initiative to see that we

assisted local people in developing RC&D applications, and, once approved, in getting things to happen within the RC&D. The Resource Conservation and Development program was really developed out of one line of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1962 and it was expanded considerably. I think maybe Pennsylvania and some other places were leaders in causing that to take place in Resource Conservation and Development areas. I'm not saying it should be applied all over.

PHILLIPS: I know this is almost thirty years ago, but do any specific projects stand out that you were particularly proud of?

DAVIS: You hate to single anything out, just like you hate to single out one of your kids over another one. I suppose that one is the RC&D in northwestern Pennsylvania in Mercer, Crawford and Erie counties, because it was the first one, and a place where I put in a lot of time and effort. In fact, my wife thought for a while that I had a second home at Mercer because we went out there so often to assist with the application and planning. That would be the one that stands out. In my experience and tenure here, it was the one in which there were the most accomplishments because it was the first one developed.

PHILLIPS: What about Hurricane Agnes? Did SCS play a major role in helping in the aftermath of that?

DAVIS: Yes, Hurricane Agnes, of course, came on in 1972. At that time, I was just leaving the state conservation job in Pennsylvania and going to the technical service center in Upper Darby. We played what I would call a major role in the emergency work that was needed. It was not all to prevent the flooding, because the flooding had already occurred, but to reclaim the lands that were damaged by the flooding situation. It included everything up to and including debris removal so that if we got another storm, the next day or the next year, it wouldn't recreate itself. So the Soil Conservation Service and the Department of Agriculture, using primarily the authorities of section 216 of the Flood Control Act of 1950, played a major role. We did a good job and we got a good amount of credit for what we did, not only in Pennsylvania, but also all up and down the Hurricane Agnes trail which covered many states.

PHILLIPS: As director of the technical service center in Upper Darby, can you give us an idea of your job? What did you do on a day-to-day basis there?

DAVIS: Well, that's pretty difficult to answer. When you're in that kind of a job, the things you did changed every minute and sometimes every phone call. In other words, if the administrator called and wanted something done, you gave it a pretty high priority. I suppose I spent half or more of my time visiting the state

conservationists and their staffs in reference to soil and water conservation problems, pushing development, and even the selection of people for everything from going to graduate school to heading up an EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) program, which was coming into its own at that time. I spent about half of my time directing the technical people and the staff there and the rest of it being with the state conservationists and their staff on various problems.

PHILLIPS: I have the impression that you think it's very important to get into the field.

DAVIS: Oh, you have to get into the field, you can't do anything from behind the desk. If you are helping a farmer plan a practice or if you're helping an SCS person develop a plan, you have got to have some front-line involvement and knowledge. You must get out of the office and move around.

PHILLIPS: Did you enjoy that position in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania?

DAVIS: Yes, I did. I was in that position two years, from 1972 to 1974. In the spring of 1974, I was selected to become an assistant administrator under Ken Grant. The same process was used, but the Department got more involved as you got into the positions in Washington. I went to Washington in April of 1974.

PHILLIPS: Well, what were your duties as assistant administrator?

DAVIS: Well, as an assistant administrator, I did much of what I'm going to call not directing people in programs, but rather assisting in carrying out programs. Anything from having a successful meeting of the state conservationists, which at that time was held annually--and I helped develop and plan and organize and execute those--to doing special assignments for the administrator or for the Department. I'm sure the Soil Conservation Service still does a lot of special studies, almost assignments, for the Department of Agriculture. So it was, as Ken Grant operated it, a rather broad-brush approach. Again, you work for the man and not for the organization, so I did those things he assigned me to do and it involved all aspects of the program.

There were many interesting things happening during that time. When I went into Washington, a fellow of the name Richard Nixon was President of the United States. One day the Secretary called us all over to the then Secretary's theater and announced that Nixon was resigning and that Gerald Ford would be President at three o'clock. Well, those were interesting times. They were unfortunate times, perhaps, for the country, but interesting times to be around Washington.

PHILLIPS: Did difficulties among the top leadership trickle down and

cause difficulties for SCS in carrying out its mission?

DAVIS: I would say not. Truly, any time there's a change of administration, whether it be the President or the secretary or assistant secretary or whoever, it's going to have some effect. At that time, the Soil Conservation Service had a good, stable, professional organization. The Department of Agriculture had a good, stable organization headed by Dr. Earl Butz and they kept things on an even keel and thus it didn't really affect us, the Soil Conservation Service, or the people we served to any significant degree. Above all, we at the national level always attempted to keep these things from affecting field operations.

PHILLIPS: During your tenure as assistant administrator one of the controversies was Earl Butz and the encouragement of increasing the amount of land under cultivation. Do you have any comment on SCS's reaction to that?

DAVIS: Well, Dr. Butz was a fine Secretary of Agriculture but he would say things, in public speaking or otherwise, that would get both him and the agencies he directed in trouble, whether it be SCS or somebody else. Of course, he made a statement one day, "food production top notch, plow fence row to fence row." This type of thing caused the agencies and organizations a lot of problems--not only to comply with Dr. Butz's wishes, but also to try and

keep the programs that we had in soil conservation on track. When the boss, Butz, said something, you didn't run around the country and contradict him. You maybe had to run around the country and try to pick up after him but you didn't run around and contradict him.

PHILLIPS: Could you give us some background to your selection as administrator in 1975?

DAVIS: I can't give much background on that. Assistant Secretary Bob Long was in the chair over in the Department at that time. He went through the SCS career people and made the selection and that was it.

PHILLIPS: Shortly thereafter the Carter administrator came on the scene. Was there a change in priorities or the way things were done?

DAVIS: When I became administrator Dr. Butz was the head of the Department of Agriculture and Gerald Ford was the President of the United States. The election, of course, changed all of that and thus we had the Carter Administration as you referred to. Did it bring about any change? Now, we'll come back to that question you alluded to a bit ago about environmental issues. We should never forget this--maybe I should have woven it in earlier--in 1972 we had an energy crisis in this country. I was in Upper Darby at that

time. Simultaneous with that and continuing on to this day with the energy crisis was the environmental surge. The Carter Administration happened to come in then because of the desire of the American electorate. With it came a group of the environmental types. So when you ask did it have any influence or change priorities or SCS policies, an accumulation of those things, including a new administration, caused changes.

PHILLIPS: Can give us any specific areas where you saw those changes?

DAVIS: Environmentalists were more and more calling the shots and I did not necessarily call them environmentalists. Some were true preservationists. In any case, perhaps the first impact of this had been years before Carter and his people came to town in the channelization argument on watersheds under the Soil Conservation Service and the Small Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act. Whether we should clean out stream channels and all those sorts of things would be one example. At the time of the change in administrations, the more environmentally inclined people came to Washington, including President Carter. There were more and more demands and pressures to change our rules and regulations under which we carried out a program. These, of course, were developed by the Soil Conservation Service in cooperation with others and carried out by us

because we were expending the dollars through local sponsors. There became more and more pressure to change these things, to quit doing this or do this another way. On the other side of the coin was still the same group of land owners and operators out there having the same problems of flooding or drainage. I maintained then and I maintain now that the two can live together. As long as you have private ownership of land in the United States, you cannot just stop something that has been going on, farming, for example, in certain areas for hundreds of years and do something else. I hope forever that we have private ownership of land and those who own and control it will have the largest say about the use of it, while not disregarding laws, not disregarding rules, not disregarding regulations, and not disregarding the environment, but rather working together so that agriculture, food production, and fiber production can prosper. Floods cannot necessarily be stopped. You can't design everything to stop everything. Floods can be minimized and everybody can live together along with the birds and bees and other things.

PHILLIPS: How did you try to reconcile these two groups? Did you find yourself meeting with environmental groups' representatives a lot?

DAVIS: Yes, you had to meet with the environmental group representatives. Let me say this of

those people who were most critical of the Soil Conservation Service and its activities: Those environmental groups, and I can take the National Wildlife Federation as a specific example, gave me hell up one side and down the other, yet they never came to my office to sit down and talk to me about these problems. They would leave it up to you to come over there because they thought that they were in the driver's seat now. They were, to a degree, because they had people in power. Congress, the president, the secretary, and the assistant secretary were much more lenient toward environmental preservation. Don't misunderstand me, I think conservation, planning, application, development, food production, and fiber production can go on in a very environmentally sound setting, but you just can't ignore everything for one particular mission.

PHILLIPS: I see you received pressure from the other side then, from farmers' groups.

DAVIS: Oh yes, you were sued and got pressure from farmers' groups. I kept one sign when I retired and it said this, "I consider the day a total loss if I don't catch hell about something."

PHILLIPS: I assume that happened just about every day.

DAVIS: I never lost a day!

PHILLIPS: Other than those two groups, who else did you deal with as an interest group involved with this? What about ranchers?

DAVIS: Oh yes, ranchers. I include farmers and ranchers right together. The farmer, rancher, and agriculturist basically have the same interests. They weren't the only ones. Cities that wanted to channel through towns to prevent flooding were in some of the same categories as the farmers and ranchers who wanted to get drainage on their land. So who were the other groups? It was the same groups we had worked with for years. I would have to say in all honesty and candor that I believe the Soil Conservation Service, the Department of Agriculture, and local soil and water conservation districts have contributed more to the environment and quality of life from the standpoint of food and fiber production and conservation of natural resources than was realized or recognized.

PHILLIPS: As long as we're talking about other groups, what about relations with the National Association of Conservation Districts? Do you have any comment to make on that?

DAVIS: The National Association of Conservation Districts was an organization made up of the state and local conservation districts. The Soil Conservation Service, based on the original soil and water conservation law or Soil Conservation District Act,

made them very close partners in all of this. They were close partners and I expect still are in carrying out conservation programs. Our relations with the National Association of Conservation Districts at that time were very good. We had no particular problem. Certainly, we had to agree to disagree on certain issues. If a law was passed and the policy of the Department was to do this or do that and the Soil Conservation Service was assigned to carry out that policy, you had to do it, it was the law of the land. Many times conservation districts and organizations didn't fully understand or appreciate that. Keep in mind that that's democracy and you're always going to have that. My tenure as administrator, and my work with the National Association of Conservation Districts was generally good. I have no qualms or regrets about it.

PHILLIPS: Were there any specific conflicts with the National Association of Conservation Districts? Over environmental issues, for example?

DAVIS: We had conflicts over the environment. It depended upon who controlled the board of directors of the National Association of Conservation Districts. They would have different thoughts. The people from Kansas on that board had different thoughts than the people from Massachusetts, and I had to work and live with all of them. So yes, there were conflicts but not unresolvable ones. We had a generally harmonious relationship

with them at the national level, and I believed that carried over to the states. Keep in mind that state by state there was always some little fracas going on.

PHILLIPS: What is an example of a state level conflict?

DAVIS: In a state level conflict they may want the Soil Conservation Service to do nothing with urban people. The Soil Conservation Service and its mandates under the law were to help all people, but there were states that said, "We don't want anything to do with those folks. You spend all your time with farmers and ranchers." Well, to answer that, we had an obligation to all the people, they were all citizens and all taxpayers. We had conflicts and that's just a "for instance."

PHILLIPS: Were you satisfied with progress in the soil survey under your leadership?

DAVIS: Yes, I would say so.

PHILLIPS: Anything you would have liked to have done differently other than devote more resources to it or another program?

DAVIS: There are always things you would have liked to have seen differently. As you look back you see things differently than when you sat up there looking forward. Sure, I suppose we would have liked to have seen more emphasis on the Great

Plains Conservation Program, a program designed for an area of the country to solve a specific problem, wind erosion. I'm still a believer that you can't have one design in one program administered the same way all over the United States. Otherwise we'd only have one dam design that would fit the Grand Canyon and a little tributary of the Yellow Breeches Creek near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Therefore, you have to have local adaptation. I still believe that that's a good approach to soil and water conservation problems and solutions in this country. It's going to have to be designed much closer to the problem. I don't know the answer, maybe it should be designed more on the basis of rainfall belts or something of that sort rather than on a general broad brush--Maine to California, Hawaii to Alaska and everything in between--including the Caribbean area.

PHILLIPS: So you see the creation of programs like the Great Plains program as very good, based on specific problem areas and regions of the country?

DAVIS: That's right, but I also think you also have to have a national program. You have to have a national leadership. I believe that's important. For example, I believe the Boy Scouts of America would have failed fifty years ago if it hadn't been for national leadership, because you saw local councils go up and down. Leaders come and leaders go. To a degree, the

same thing is true of the Department of Agriculture and the Soil Conservation Service. Leaders come and leaders go but you have got to have a national program and a national focus and a national direction of those programs with flexibility to allow things to be done and done right. Timeliness, the right people at the right time at the local level, is a very difficult problem for an administrator or any of his staff.

PHILLIPS: The other administrative question I have concerns your reorganization in 1976. You ended up with three deputy administrators serving under you. What was your reasoning behind this change?

DAVIS: My reasoning was this; it started with the administrator of the Soil Conservation Service way back in 1954 when they eliminated the regional offices. The span of control of the administrator just got to be too great; there was no way he could put his arms around everything. I thought it advisable back then in 1975 and 1976 to take a look at the organization. That study was looked after by former deputy administrator for water resources, Bill Davey, and he made the recommendation to me. I, with the Department, because you had to have departmental approval to make these changes, decided to go with the three deputy administrators: for administration, for technical services and for programs.

PHILLIPS: You had to check with the assistant secretary?

DAVIS: Oh yes, the assistant secretary and other people in the Department had to sign off on any of these reorganizations. Don't think that the Soil Conservation Service administrator can do these things unilaterally, he can't.

PHILLIPS: But they placed enough trust in you and they were receptive, correct?

DAVIS: They were receptive and did, in fact, approve my proposal. Thus we reorganized into the three deputy areas. It was done primarily to try to achieve more harmony between the common functions there. In other words, we had a deputy administrator for soil survey and a deputy administrator for watersheds but there was much more involved. The soil surveys were just one part of the program needed to carry out a soil and water conservation program, so when we reorganized we tried to put like functions under a single head. We tried to put them together, and I still think it was a pretty good grouping. How has it worked out since then? I don't know the present organization, I'll admit.

PHILLIPS: One of the other big issues, not only today, but certainly during your tenure as well, was budgetary pressures.

DAVIS: Of course, we suffered budgetary pressures back at the time I was administrator, there was no secret about it. The Soil Conservation Service at that time had some fifteen thousand people. The big change that came in my direct experience as administrator was when the Carter Administration came into being. We were told to tighten our belts and I tried to do this: tighten the belt but keep the focus of the program. I tried to instill in our people that we could perhaps do more with less by improving our efficiency of service. All of the other things that were cost cutting complied with the wishes of the administration and of Congress.

My basic push as administrator was to do what some people would later tag as "getting back to basics." We couldn't do everything for everybody. We should have never tried, but in some cases, local conservation districts and SCS people would try to do everything for everyone. You just can't make everyone happy doing everything for everyone all the time. So I said, okay, we will carry out the rules and regulations for which we are responsible and we'll cooperate with agencies which work with us. To the best of our ability, we'll set some priorities. We can't do all things but we'll get back to our basic job, the planning and application of conservation practices to protect the natural resources of this country.

PHILLIPS: Another problem connected to budget issues was the Government Accounting Office (GAO) reports on the Soil Conservation Service, as well as some rather hostile press reports about the Department of Agriculture employees and their productivity in general. What are your views on those reports?

DAVIS: GAO made many studies. They made a study of the Great Plains Conservation Program as I recall. They made a study of conservation operations. Let me say right off the bat that when they made those studies, the people making them and the agency they work for, GAO, will readily admit that they didn't make them for the purpose of being complimentary. They didn't make them for the purpose of helping an agency. They made them for the purpose of trying to find problem areas in government--problem areas with programs that the agency itself was so close to that they overlooked. I never expected those agencies and organizations to make a flowery report or to issue a clean bill of health to any agency or organization, let alone the Soil Conservation Service. Now unfortunately, some of those studies were done by people who knew little or nothing about agriculture and the organization and they didn't really bother to do too much listening. In some cases they jumped to conclusions. I vigorously defended the organization. At the same time I had to agree that we needed and could make some changes in the Great

Plains program or in the conservation operations program or whichever one they were looking at. I never refused to sit down with them and discuss the details of why they came to this conclusion and why was I doing it this way. We could generally find a common ground. Not always, but generally.

PHILLIPS: Can you detail any specific changes that came out of their comments or criticism?

DAVIS: Are you asking me a question that I maybe shouldn't answer? There were some subtle changes that took place with the approval of the Department. There weren't big changes that came about even when these reports were transmitted to Congress. We answered a lot of mail from congressmen and others about those reports and press articles but they never really caused any big change, in my judgment, during my tenure.

PHILLIPS: Every two or three years another article comes out saying, "There are so many farmers in the United States and so many more USDA employees. Why aren't we cutting the programs like the Soil Conservation Service of USDA?"

DAVIS: You can't respond and make everybody happy. Keep in mind that some of these are new reporters and young thirsty news editors and other people who are doing this. True, there are many employees at the

Department of Agriculture. If you get right down the basis of all of this we still have so many acres of land in this United States and we have to feed many more people each year. The soil and water resource problems are the same or worse now than they were back then. When I say "back then," don't ask me when that was, it's sometime in the past. So when they say we have too many employees at the Department of Agriculture doing the wrong thing, I can't agree with them. We may have a few too many or may be a few short in some agencies and organizations. I can't defend, of course, every agency in the Department of Agriculture. I did then and I still believe now that I can defend the agency of the Soil Conservation Service and its many thousands of employees. I hope that there's reason and justification in the national interest to keep this thing going.

PHILLIPS: One of the figures that several people have mentioned is Verna Mohagen and her role in systematizing career advancement in SCS. Do you have any recollection of her in that capacity?

DAVIS: Well, yes, I have recollections of Verna Mohagen. First, she was a North Dakota woman. She came from Grafton, North Dakota, and started work for the SCS in the old project days there. I never knew Verna Mohagen in those days. I first learned of Verna Mohagen at one of our training centers in the old Fort

Robinson Center in Crawford, Nebraska. That's where I met her. Verna Mohagen made an impression of various kinds on anybody she met, worked or talked with. She was truly the director of personnel and perhaps the individual closest to the administrator and state conservationist in the selection of and the development of SCS people, from my perspective. At that time, there weren't many women in those types of positions in the Soil Conservation Service. When you went to a meeting, you really didn't see any women except for the waitress at the restaurant you ate in. They weren't involved in the organization to any degree.

PHILLIPS: I read that on at least one occasion you met with the Federal Women's Program coordinators and were involved in efforts toward what is today called work force diversity. Could you comment on that a little bit for us?

DAVIS: I commented back in the beginning about Verna Mohagen, one of the few women you'd see in the Soil Conservation Service during my tenure. During my tenure as administrator of the Soil Conservation Service, the Department and outside people, women's organizations, were pushing for more and more people to get involved in what they heretofore considered a man's occupation. I never thought that a woman couldn't do some of these jobs. I guess I was involved in the appointment of the first woman work unit or district

conservationist of the United States, a woman who happens to still work in that capacity in the county in which I now live in Yuma, Arizona. We tried to do what we could to carry out equal rights for women's programs and we made special emphasis to try to train them, to bring them up, if that's a good word, in our organization. But keep in mind that we were basically professional and what I call technically professional. They may not have had a BS degree from Penn State but they had a heck of a lot experience that was needed in the planning and application of conservation practices. The colleges and universities weren't providing us with the fodder. They weren't providing us with women graduates. So they blame it on the organization for not hiring them, but how can you hire them when they're not available? Well, we put special emphasis on colleges and universities. We made a special emphasis with the black institutions. I went to Tuskegee.

PHILLIPS: Would this be the 1890 schools?

DAVIS: Yes, 1890 colleges. I went to Tuskegee University myself and met with the Dean of Agriculture and the President of the college to try to spur on more and more graduates of that school, in this case blacks, to become interested in work with the Soil Conservation Service. I met with federal women's groups and coordinators and, I believe that at the meeting you referred to, I was the

only administrator there. The rest of them sent somebody else from their agency or organization, but I was there as an administrator of an agency because I felt that strongly that there ought to be equal opportunity regardless of race, creed, color or sex. In that setting, I tried to promote these programs. I'm not saying people before me didn't, but in some cases they simply couldn't do much. There could be a woman graduate in business administration, but the technical standards and technical qualifications set up by the Civil Service Commission into which the Department and SCS had input were such that she wasn't available on the registers of employment because she hadn't had a college degree in agronomy or soils or something. Those who were available were highly sought after when the big push came to increase the number of minorities, be they women, blacks, or Hispanics.

PHILLIPS: Did you run into any resistance within the Department or at the state level, or was it more a matter of simply educating people?

DAVIS: You ran into resistance, no question about it. There were people in organizations, local conservation districts, who didn't want a black work unit conservationist. They didn't want a woman soil conservationist. They didn't believe a woman had any place out there in the dirt doing this, that and the other thing. It was more old-line thinking than it was any problem with the technical ability of those

people. You had to work to overcome this. We've overcome it, I hope. The government of the United States has overcome it but I was a little bit leery then and now that people were sought, considered, and put into jobs that they weren't qualified to do either from training or experience background. They might have had a degree in it, but they were put into a job that maybe did more harm to the movement than it did good. I tried as an administrator to keep a balance in this whole thing.

PHILLIPS: What was the best way that you found to keep morale up, was it traveling? You mentioned you traveled a hundred thousand miles in your first year.

DAVIS: Yes, I think the boss must be seen. I think the boss must be a working boss, not a chair boss. I believe it was Dr. Hugh Hammond Bennett who said that he was sure that the local conservationist, then called a district or work unit conservationist, didn't need a chair and doubted that he needed a desk. In other words, he should be out working. Well, how do you achieve morale? I think you have got to achieve morale by keeping programs interesting. You have to be involved and you have to stimulate people. You have to stimulate the organization and you have to be willing to go to the Department and fight for the organization. You could ask me how certain programs--rural, urban, mining or otherwise--got assigned at the Department of

Agriculture. When the laws were passed by the Congress, they didn't specifically say SCS. In most cases, they said the Department of Agriculture. You immediately recognized what was going on. You set up a group working to develop an assignment of responsibilities or a delegation of authority and get that over to your assistant secretary so he understands. Then, when the Secretary gets a signed law that he wants to implement quickly for political reasons, he has somebody right there ready, willing and able to get the job done. These are the types of things you have to do and it's not easy. It's not easy to talk about and in most cases it's harder to do.

PHILLIPS: Did the heads of the agencies within USDA get together and meet on a regular basis? What were these meetings like?

DAVIS: Well, it varied considerably. The Secretary had a staff meeting, usually weekly, but sometimes only monthly. I served under various secretaries, Butz, Bergland, and others. The assistant secretary would get his agency heads together usually on a weekly basis. Unfortunately, about half of the time the secretary and assistant secretary were gone. The agency heads were traveling so it was only about half of the full voice there.

PHILLIPS: So were these meetings, when you held them, contentious?

DAVIS: It varied from meeting to meeting. Surely you tried to have a calm meeting. If I had a bone to pick with the Forest Service, I would go see John McGuire, the chief of the Forest Service, and hopefully he and I would have it ironed out before we got to the assistant secretary. Normally, we would; but it was a matter of give and take. I respected all of the other agencies and their missions. I respected the administrators that they had at the time I was there. Most of them were professionals as was the head of SCS. I respected them in their fields and their organizations. I knew that we couldn't have everything and that we shouldn't. There was no way we could do it all as an agency. I respected that and tried to work with them on all of the assignments from the Department of Agriculture that had to be delegated to an agency: SCS, Forest Service, Agricultural Marketing Service, Economic Research Service, Farmers Home Administration, or Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service.

PHILLIPS: Let's talk about relations with some other agencies, specifically the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Clean Water Act, during your tenure.

DAVIS: EPA come into being before I became administrator. They were still developing when I came. The

Environmental Protection Agency was given many varied and wide responsibilities and the Clean Water Act was one of them. We had a direct involvement in and had a direct input into clean water all through the years. That's part of soil and water conservation and you cannot separate them. I generally had a good relationship with EPA. EPA was a new young organization. Many qualified people were trying to decide what direction or which way to go and they were settling into things. At the same time, I was maintaining that we in the Department of Agriculture, the Soil Conservation Service specifically, could make a major contribution to the mission assignment of that agency. They had a responsibility much broader than soil and water conservation, while we had one little segment.

PHILLIPS: In what specific ways did SCS support EPA?

DAVIS: EPA was involved in many things including stream cleanup, cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay, and studies like that. We made a major contribution in the erosion and sediment control facets and nonpoint source pollution. That was a new term that came into being while I was there. In other words, point erosion was coming out of this stream for this purpose while nonpoint was coming off a feed-lot or a farmer's field. Sometimes people didn't realize the difference between the two so we came up with "nonpoint."

PHILLIPS: Where did the impetus come from for the examination of nonpoint source pollution, SCS, EPA or environmental groups, or a combination of these groups?

DAVIS: I think it came from a combination. I think the conservation districts of some states were important. Maryland was one of the early leaders in taking a look at nonpoint source pollution. Having said that, the Department of Agriculture was maintaining that farmers and ranchers were getting blamed for certain things. We in the Soil Conservation Service and the Department of Agriculture had to come to their defense on these things.

PHILLIPS: I remember reading that you signed a memorandum of understanding with the head of the Forest Service, John McGuire. Could you describe the conflict and what was resolved?

DAVIS: I can't recite it chapter and verse but we signed it and it was very amicable. The biggest deal about signing a memorandum of understanding is that before you ever sign it as an administrator or an assistant secretary or secretary, lots and lots of hours and hours and reams and reams of paper and staff work have got to go on to achieve the understanding. The memorandum of understanding doesn't do a thing except formalize it with a photographer. All of the work, all of

the committees, and all of the studies that go to develop a memorandum of understanding are really where the benefits come.

In our case with the Forest Service, this memorandum of understanding had to do with lots of things. We agreed in the memorandum of understanding who would do what in the Small Watershed Program. The appropriations were made to the Soil Conservation Service but we actually transferred money to the Forest Service for them to use either themselves or with their cooperative state agency, such as the state forester, to carry out certain studies of runoff in the wooded areas for the Small Watershed Program. It was just having the best available technicians at the time do the work necessary to solve the problem. That was the purpose.

PHILLIPS: How about relations with Congress? You testified frequently on the Hill I assume?

DAVIS: I testified on the Hill many times. I would have to classify the relations between Congress and the Soil Conservation Service before my time and during my tenure as good, excellent as a matter of fact. Sometimes the Department of Agriculture didn't like the relationship we had with Congress because we could respond. We had an organization that if somebody wanted to know something out of Congressman Whitten's district in Mississippi, with a phone call or two we could have it because

we had an organization out there to get and supply the information and respond to Congress. Congress knew that and the Congress liked that. I'm not saying the Department of Agriculture always liked it because we could respond so much quicker than they could. Our relations with the Congress were good because they not only liked our program but knew what our program did and why we were doing it. We kept them informed.

PHILLIPS: Others have mentioned Congressman Jamie Whitten, would you care to elaborate on his role in soil and water conservation efforts?

DAVIS: Jamie Whitten was called the "permanent Secretary of Agriculture," but nobody new in town knew that, particularly, the new Secretaries and administrators. Jamie came into office in 1941. Jamie Whitten was involved in many things and he never let anybody forget his influence. We never forgot the influence that he had on dollars, principles, and on programs.

In reference to my relations with Congress, I kept them informed but I never let the political process control the organization. In other words, I kept my workers away from that and Jamie Whitten and others respected that. They did not get involved in my appointments, jobs or positions but I kept them informed of actions I had taken and actions I was going to take. They understood and respected us for it.

PHILLIPS: Other than Whitten, are there any other Congressmen who come to mind as major supporters of SCS or USDA?

DAVIS: Well, there were a lot of them we could talk about. Of course, being a native of North Dakota, we had a man known as Mr. Wheat, Senator Milton Young, an excellent supporter who served on the Agriculture Appropriations Committee in the Senate. Mark Andrews, a Congressman from North Dakota, likewise. He was a Republican but his office was right next to a Democrat, Jamie Whitten. These people had quite an influence really on what was going to happen. Because in the Congress, there are a few people in each specialty--agriculture, defense, you name it--who are the ones the rest of the Congress looks up to. If Jamie did or said something, very seldom did the rest of the Congress or the rest of the committee ever go against him. You had to have the right relations with these people. There's maybe too many of them to mention that were friends of the Soil Conservation Service. You could go to Ed Jones of Tennessee and William Natcher of Kentucky and the list goes on and on.

PHILLIPS: Are there any generalizations you could make about what Congressmen wanted to see SCS doing?

DAVIS: Most of your strong supporters in the Congress wanted SCS to keep doing more of the same.

I'm not saying they weren't broad minded and weren't concerned about the environment or doing some things important to environmental issues, but generally you found that your supporters were from the old-line agriculture from the standpoint of production of fiber and food, and then conservation. It's in that setting that they supported you.

PHILLIPS: Was there much opposition from any Congressmen?

DAVIS: You always had opposition. There were Congressmen, I don't want to get into naming them, who "took us on."

PHILLIPS: Did they have any particular explanation for disliking SCS?

DAVIS: Sure, they had two reasons. One, an environmental group got a hold of them. They were fed the wrong information. They were not willing to open their ears to the total thing. There are two sides to every story. We had our friends and we had our foes. On balance, we had many more friends than we did foes. The same thing is true in the Secretary's shop. There were many people in the Secretary's shop other than the Secretary. I'm talking about career type people, such as the director of budget and personnel, whom we had to work with and through to get our budgets approved. We had our friends and we had our foes there, too. We had people in the White House in the

Office of Management and Budget who were examiners of the Department of Agriculture. Specifically some of them were assigned to the Soil Conservation Service. We had our friends and our foes there. Part of it, of course, was simply created because there are only so many federal dollars available and when you're administering a program, there's got to be give and take. Various budget people, various examiners, and various congressmen just simply picked up on one, two or three issues and that was what they pushed either directly or indirectly through their staffs. They would oppose others and that's the way it was. That was the ball game.

PHILLIPS: We'll move on now to initiatives, new responsibilities, and specific programs such as erosion control guidelines. What was your role in the development of those and what's your feeling about them?

DAVIS: Erosion control guidelines were nothing more or less than putting down in black and white for everybody to use and understand, not just the Soil Conservation Service employees, a set of rules or guidelines. I don't mean to call them rules because they aren't rules until they are adopted by some local authority who has authority to adopt an ordinance or a rule or a regulation. These erosion control guidelines were developed with the idea in mind that we provide them to anybody and everybody to use in developing their

local ordinances for local land use, zoning or planning if that was what they wanted. That was the purpose or design behind it. That was my hope when we started them, and it would be my hope today that they're still being used that way.

PHILLIPS: Was that a major thrust of your tenure?

DAVIS: Yes, I would say that it was a major thrust of the times to keep up with the environmental push and to keep up with demands when the Soil Conservation Service couldn't do everything for everybody as we were expected to do and we had sort of done in the first twenty-five to thirty years of our existence. Now, we couldn't do that anymore so we had to do things like the guidelines and make them available to others to use and implement.

PHILLIPS: Did that include state highway departments, did you work with them much?

DAVIS: We worked with highway departments. We spent considerable time, in fact, with them. Some state highway departments had a man who was a specialist in erosion control who worked with us very closely. We developed and helped them develop standards and specifications for erosion control on new highways. The type of soil sometimes determined the slope of the road bank and the type of vegetation that went on the bank.

PHILLIPS: Such as crown vetch?

DAVIS: Crown vetch is an excellent example and we did a lot of work with it. The Soil Conservation Service administered the plant materials centers, not research centers. That was done by another agency, ARS (Agricultural Research Service), and the states. We had plant materials centers which strictly took local seeds, seeds developed by colleges and universities, and tested, reproduced, and increased them for use on specific erosion problems.

PHILLIPS: Now we move on to RCA (Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act), a huge topic. I wonder if you can first tell me, did SCS have any specific role or any input into what came out in the RCA? Was RCA something SCS had been pushing for?

DAVIS: Well, to a degree we, the Soil Conservation Service, then the Department had been pushing for a resource assessment. That's really what RCA is. We had a role in pushing for and causing the original work, the original language that caused the appropriation or an allotment of money to make a resource conservation study. It was a very complicated and difficult thing. We tried to do it by soil types and by soil phases on a nationwide basis--a difficult thing to do--and put it all together in one package. If there was going to be an assessment of resources the Soil Conservation Service should

have been involved and we were involved.

Much of the implementation of the RCA came after my time. It passed in 1977 but by the time we got everything up and running and funds to carry it out, time had slipped away. This administrator was about gone when the first reports were coming out.

PHILLIPS: What about the Rural Abandoned Mine Program (RAMP). We can talk about it in Pennsylvania or Appalachia in general.

DAVIS: Well, the Rural Abandoned Mine Program was another program passed by Congress to reclaim mined areas. It happened that Pennsylvania, West Virginia and some of the states in which I worked had a lot of these areas. The Soil Conservation Service had a lot of expertise that could come to bear on reclaiming these areas, so therefore we were and should have been involved in the reclamation of abandoned mines. We had a lot of information on erosion and sediment and it was no use for some other agency or organization to go out and recreate the wheel. We were involved and we got funds from the Department of the Interior and others to do this particular job. I think we had a role, we have a role, and it will be an ongoing role.

PHILLIPS: We've been talking about things other than conservation work on the farm. Were farmers and

agricultural groups unhappy over this apparent broadening of responsibilities during a time of budget constraints?

DAVIS: In a particular county or conservation district, they were not necessarily unhappy because it was the biggest problem in that county or conservation district. But as an administrator, if you start pulling resources out of a strictly agricultural area of North Dakota or Ohio and putting them into an Appalachian coal mine area in the hill country of Kentucky, the answer there is completely different because those people were not happy that they were losing. That's what you have administrators for, to make those hard decisions.

PHILLIPS: In particular, was the National Association of Conservation Districts unhappy?

DAVIS: Not necessarily, it might be the National Association of Conservation Districts, it might be the local farm bureau. It might be representatives of the Farmers Union if you were taking a man out of the strong Farmers Union area of Kansas. You never knew who these groups were. You had friends and foes in all organizations and during my tenure as an administrator, I tried to maintain relations with all of the groups. I never refused to go face any of them on any issue at any time and any place.

PHILLIPS: Did you attend some fairly hostile meetings?

DAVIS: Oh sure, you like to go into a meeting and know how you're going to come out, but during those times you were never sure. You couldn't plan because you didn't know what was coming up. You had "warm" meetings and I was perturbed, disturbed, and all of the other "turbs" that you can mention, but I never left one of those meetings without gaining some knowledge and some insight into what both our organization, the Soil Conservation Service, and theirs should or should not be doing or changes that could or could not be considered.

PHILLIPS: What about prime and unique farmlands?

DAVIS: Associate administrator Norm Berg was deeply involved in this program to try and identify prime and unique farmlands around the country. It was a good program, but we pretty much knew where they were. What destiny they would have, due to such things as urban pressure, was another issue. The identification of them was one thing--how they were going to be handled after properly identified or delineated was quite another. We had to use our influence on local people to adopt the rules, regulations or whatever they might want to do to protect some of these prime and unique lands.

PHILLIPS: Did the scope of P.L. 566 work expand during your tenure?

DAVIS: Yes, P.L. 566, the Small Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, was considered to be a program--and this is an over-simplification--of dams and dikes and channels and these sorts of things. During my tenure, we attempted to expand and did expand into land treatment type approaches to solve problems. In fact, we added a couple of strictly land treatment type watersheds. There were no structures, we just took the money and treated the land in these areas to keep the erosion water and floods from coming down. It works but there is room for both structural and nonstructural. I maintained that then and I maintain it now.

PHILLIPS: Could you tell us a bit about the plant materials center in Colorado?

DAVIS: The plant materials center in Colorado was out in the western part of the state. It was designed for the study of plant materials in relation to strip mines and mine reclamation and using native adaptation. That's why it was created out there--to fit the area we were trying to serve. We had one plant materials center in New York. We also had one in Cape May, New Jersey to fit erosion on the shore, and yet another one to fit erosion in Appalachia. We tried to gear our plant materials centers and what they did to the problems of each area.

That's what I alluded to earlier. Trying to take one program and administer it in the same way nationwide doesn't work in many cases.

PHILLIPS: One topic that comes up time and time again in these oral histories is the Palouse region of the Pacific northwest. Could you comment on your experience?

DAVIS: My Palouse experience goes about like this; it was the same as Don Williams, Dr. Bennett, Dr. Salter, and Ken Grant. I would guess the present chief has the same problem with the Palouse, a tremendously productive and highly erosive agricultural area. I don't think you're ever going to solve what some people perceive as a problem there. I think we have to recognize that it's going to continue to be used for agricultural purposes, primarily the production of wheat, as long as it is in private ownership. In that process there is going to be erosion; however, I believed then and I believe now that there are many ways to minimize that. I don't know if it's stubble mulch. I don't know if it's no-till. I don't know if it's chemical farming. I don't know the full answer, but alternative practices to just planting wheat, summer fallow, then wheat or whatever are important. I think we have got a similar problem, in some cases, where they're planting corn on corn on corn on corn. Something has to be done or that soil is going to be depleted for one or more reasons--lack of organic matter,

erosion, you name it. All of these things are not going to be solved by any one administrator or any one program. It's going to take a combination of several things over time. When I say time, in some cases that means new ownership. Time in some cases means what the farm machinery manufacturers are doing now. I still go to a machinery showroom or two. They have done a tremendous job in changing their machinery design to try and achieve better soil and water conservation, in my opinion. In my days in the field, they sold a tandem disk and tractor with road gears and that created a problem. Now they are doing other things and doing a lot of research to help solve that same problem.

PHILLIPS: Could you give a short overview of the preservation of windbreaks? Especially given your background as a native of North Dakota.

DAVIS: Windbreaks were established back in FDR's days. He was going to have a row of trees from the Canadian border to Mexico. The purpose was to solve wind erosion problems, and protect farmsteads and feedlots. The Soil Conservation Service and soil conservation districts were deeply involved in this. It was a good effort, but it's an effort that should maybe be a constant part of a changing landscape. What I mean is this: before certain technology was available or before certain farm equipment was available maybe we

had to plant windbreaks every twenty rods to keep wind erosion at a minimum on sandy soils or to hold snow and put moisture there. Unfortunately, some of those windbreaks were planted using the wrong species or on the wrong line. By that I mean they should have been on a contour rather than up and down the slope. As technology changed and times changed, those windbreaks served a purpose. They're still serving a purpose but the time has come when many of them maybe should be removed and replaced with a better practice. I simply say, as long as they're going up the conservation ladder--protecting the soil, water, land and air quality of this country--to take out a windbreak and use good crop rotations or good erosion control practices for wind and water is no sin. But a lot of people say it is.

PHILLIPS: Did the number of windbreaks decline during the 1970s due to increased agricultural production?

DAVIS: Yes, they started tearing out primarily the old ones that had served their purpose. Again it's very difficult to generalize, but some of them hadn't been removed, some of them perhaps should have been removed, and some of them were designed wrong. If you plant fifteen rows of trees side by side, you get a snow bank there that didn't thaw out until the middle of June and that wasn't what the farmer could cope with. Then he had a drainage problem because of the snow

melt laying there. So they were taken out, some of them were replaced with one row belts, a great improvement over the multi-row belts, and so it goes. This was a change in time, a change in technology, and a change in thinking.

PHILLIPS: Today wetlands have become a very controversial issue at the Department. During your tenure was it an issue, was it talked about?

DAVIS: Yes, and it was just as hot among the same groups of people who are still there. We developed wetland guidelines with the Corps of Engineers, the Department of the Interior, and the Fish and Wildlife Service. All of those guidelines helped achieve an understanding but did not solve the problem. The wetlands problem in the United States has been and always will be here. How it's going to be resolved finally I'm not one to sit as the final judge and juror. Yes, I had my share. Perhaps wetlands caused me more problems with the environmentalists and with the Department--Assistant Secretary Rupert M. Cutler as an example--than any other single issue.

PHILLIPS: Did you have any progress on the criteria of defining wetlands, which seems to be one of the major problems now?

DAVIS: We had problems with that then and I'm sure they have them now. There were people who, if they discovered a cattail growing forty feet

above a marsh, said the whole thing should have been classified as a wetland. There were people who said that wetlands were undefinable.

There were people who said all of this area should be classified as wetlands. You go plug that drain up and see what happens. The issue of definition is still going on. I predict it is never going to be resolved to everyone's satisfaction, particularly at the national level. They may get it resolved in some states but it's not just a state problem; it's across state lines, and it's across international lines like the United States and Canada. The issue of wetlands, their definition, how they're going to be handled, and how much should be preserved will go on forever.

PHILLIPS: Sort of changing track a little bit, I know both Ken Grant and Don Williams were involved in international work. Did you devote any resources to that or have an opportunity to spend much time in that line of work?

DAVIS: Yes, I devoted resources and went on many trips overseas myself both as assistant administrator and as administrator. I was one for proposing or seeing to it that as much as possible, the Department of Agriculture took its expertise and spread it to those countries. I went to Afghanistan two or three different times. To send wheat to Afghanistan didn't do much good because there wasn't a seaport and there wasn't a railroad. By the time the donkey

hauled it over the mountains to the people who might need it, the donkey had been hungry and he had eaten it. So therefore, the results of some of the programs weren't good. I was a believer and still am that we need to provide technical assistance to developing nations, old and new, to help them solve their problems on their soil under their conditions. Truly, we in the United States will always have to help feed and clothe the world.

PHILLIPS: Other than Afghanistan, can you remember other trips?

DAVIS: I was in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and perhaps the poorest country I was ever in was Haiti. I was in Argentina, Venezuela, and Egypt. After I left SCS, I spent a lot of time between Egypt and Israel. I guess I've been in a couple of dozen foreign countries.

PHILLIPS: Were many of these arranged by AID (Agency for International Development)?

DAVIS: AID was involved always because they were the ones who had the leadership responsibility. They needed those departments that had the technical skills and they would come to us for technical people.

PHILLIPS: Today, the head of SCS is a political appointee. Was there any talk of that when you were moving up the ranks or when you were there?

DAVIS: The two administrators of the Soil Conservation Service before me, Ken Grant and Don Williams, were Schedule C appointees; that is, they served at the pleasure of the Secretary. They were career people, but in those jobs it was a different type of appointment. At the time I became administrator, I met with Dr. Butz on two or three different occasions and he asked whether I wanted to become administrator of the Soil Conservation Service. He asked if I wanted to do it on a career basis, a GS-18 basis, not a Schedule C or a political implication type of appointment. He got the Civil Service Commission, which later became the OPM, the Office of Personnel Management, to change the system and I became a career GS-18 head of the agency and not a Schedule C.

I was also the only administrator of SCS to have served at all levels that the Service had then--district conservationist, area conservationist, state conservationist, field representative and director of a technical service center (TSC), and administrator.

During the time I was administrator, government was changing. The Carter Administration was in power most of the time and the major change was the creation of the Office of Personnel Management. Part of that change was the Senior Executive Service system. I was never a proponent of the Senior Executive Service system. It merely meant that above certain levels in the

organization, people could be reassigned at will. Most of the people who had the authority to do that, of course, were political appointees. I was serving as a career head of the organization, then I was switched over under the Senior Executive Service system. They gave you a choice, either you switch or go. Now that's an exaggeration, but really that's how it turned out, so I went over and became a part of the Senior Executive system.

Now you asked about implications. The assistant secretary at that time, Dr. Cutler, was basically of the environmental branch. He and I did not have a long love relationship. We understood each other but stood back from each other. I carried out the mission of the organization. Well, to make a long story short, under the Senior Executive Service rules, he made a proposal to reassign Norman Berg, who was my associate, to the head of Soil Conservation Service and me into his position. I met with the Secretary of Agriculture, Bob Bergland, and his deputy. I went into another position in the Department outside of SCS.

PHILLIPS: Was this 1979?

DAVIS: This was 1979 but let me add that my replacement, Norman Berg, was my associate in my four years there, and before that, an associate administrator to Ken Grant. I wouldn't categorize him as strictly in the career ranks because there were many political movements going on at

that time. I knew about these things, but I would not put the agency in jeopardy. Dr. Cutler and I did not see eye to eye on these things. He wouldn't yield and I wouldn't yield. I think as time goes on, if you made a study of what happened among the heads of SCS you could say that the transition of SCS out of a career professional group started at the time the Senior Executive Service came into being. It started at the time they moved Norm Berg into the position and shortly thereafter resulted in a political head of SCS, which is still there today.

PHILLIPS: Just to wrap up a few questions, are there any other issues or problems you wish you could have addressed while administrator?

DAVIS: In hindsight there's always something, but at the time I was there, with reorganization of the Soil Conservation Service and new responsibilities assigned to us from the Department with the limited people and budgets we had available, I thought we had about as good a program--as good an esprit de corps among our people, good relations with cooperating agencies and organizations outside of the Department and at the state and local level--as we could develop. There were problem areas, yes, but that's why administrators have jobs.

PHILLIPS: You already briefly discussed changing jobs in 1979. What specifically was the job in the Secretary's office?

DAVIS: Well, I became an assistant to the secretary for international science and education and in that capacity, of course, I did quite a bit of foreign work for him. As a matter of fact, I was involved, very interestingly, in going to Egypt and Israel several times. That had to do primarily with the peacekeeping mission and the agreement between Carter and the heads of those two countries. They had several committees or assignments and I was on the agriculture group. At that time, I'd go to Israel and talk to the agriculture people. I couldn't fly directly to Egypt because they didn't have relations. I had to go to the island of Cyprus and become "neutralized" and then fly back to the other country. So I had a lot of interesting experiences along that line.

PHILLIPS: I don't know how much you have kept up with the 1985 FSA (Farm Security Act) and what some people feel is a shift in SCS from a voluntary to more regulatory approach. I was wondering if you have any comments on that?

DAVIS: Yes, my comment on that is that I still don't believe that the Soil Conservation Service should be involved in regulatory programs. I think we should be the technical arm. We should develop the standards and

specifications, write the specifications, and do all of those things, but I don't believe that the same fellow who arrests the man should serve as the judge and jury for the man. I think that there needs to be a clear division. I don't believe that the Soil Conservation Service should be involved in what I'm going to call enforcement. They maybe should be involved with cross compliance between programs to see that if there is a requirement under one program it is being followed under another. But I don't believe the Soil Conservation Service ought to be the one who goes out and does the police work, and I use that term respectfully.

PHILLIPS: In conclusion, do you have any general comments on your career with SCS?

DAVIS: I would only say this; I think I had a good career with SCS. I think myself looking at it and anybody else looking at it would say that. I suppose like any other type of a job, position or profession, I was at the right place at the right time. That's what happened to me in the Soil Conservation Service. I had no regrets at all about the time I put in or the accomplishments I had in a local conservation district or nationally. Certainly, you can always find areas where you might have done something differently but that's all hindsight. I liken it to driving a car down a road. You got a big windshield to see where you're going and little rear view mirrors to check on once in a while

where you've been. I shouldn't be looking back, I look forward. I left the organization, but I'm not disgruntled with the organization at all. I still have a tremendous respect and love for the agency and always will have. For what happened or is happening to the agency, I have some questions and some grave doubts but somebody else will worry about them.

PHILLIPS: Have you been involved in soil conservation since your retirement?

DAVIS: Not really. I haven't done many things and I have refused to do more because I don't think I should be involved. It's sometimes embarrassing to a local group to have a former administrator included. I have done such things as emceeding the 50th Anniversary Banquet of the Soil Conservation Service in Washington. I've done things of that sort but I'm not involved and do not desire to be involved further.

