

Interviews

Life Along the Kokosing

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## Interview with Lee Walker

Sara Sanders

Lee Walker

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Sara Sanders

Interview with Lee Walker-Knox County Soil and Water Conservation District

P.O. Box 270 Harcourt Road Mt. Vernon, Ohio

10/29/99

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SS-This interview is done by Sara Sanders with Lee Walker of the Knox County Soil and Water Conservation District, on Friday, October 29, 1999 (at the KCSWCD). Due to technical difficulties, the portions of the interview dealing with Mr. Walker's background were not recorded. He became interested in soil and water conservation as a result of classes he's taken and the experience of living in rural Knox County where he's been a resident for 48 years. He's been with the KCSWCD for the past 29 years. When the tape begins he is discussing the responsibilities of his job.

LW-...grass waterways, sub-surface drainage, ponds as far as, well look at it as far as what's needed out there, and design of it, draw up plans, supervise construction, and check it out when its done to see if it needs some specifications it needs.

SS-So would you say that those are the main, primary goals?

LW-Well that's the main, soil and water erosion control practices. Soil and water erosion control is the main focus. Of course there's other things like any job. There's paper work as far as keeping track of things. And field days, helping with those. Various things other than that.

SS-When you go out into the field, what do you do to check for erosion or prevent against it?

LW-Well it's I guess for instance on like a waterway or if somebody has a crop field where they've got an area that's developing into a ditch where they can't cross it or where it's actually can be grass in the middle and erode on both sides to where no they can't cross or they can't maintain it. Rather than going super wide with grass, a grassy moor, see what they need and how much erosion's there. And it somewhat depends on the landowner himself what he's wanting to do and how to do it. But, and part of that of what it needs depends on watershed, slope of the ground, and the types of soils as to size of the practice or width of the waterway to design it and for depth in order to get it shaped as such that the water stays in the waterway and slows it down. A safe velocity so it doesn't wash out what's there and at the same time put tile in. Look at that need in a sense too because if it stays wet its there ready to wash when you do get a rain so you get the free water out. Stabilizes it also that way.

SS-You mentioned landowners. Do work privately or would the county contract you out to go to a certain place?

LW-It's basically all Knox County working with landowners and tenants in a sense, you know maybe somebody is actually renting a place that wants to do some stuff, maybe work with them or directly with the landowner. We also work with township and county as to if they have some need we can help with, but mainly land owners.

SS-How as the KCSWCD changed during your tenure? Have your focuses changed since you started here?

LW-Well the main thing's been soil and water conservation. It did as far as the cropping end of it. It's went from, you know more worked up ground to mostly or a considerable amount no till and that's changed back a little bit to more minimal till, but there's still a fair amount of no till. As far as changes of figuring things, since well with the computer, it used to be part of designs was mainly out of a book and do some figuring. Now there's a program that you can use for a lot of stuff to actually enter the data and use the computer to figure it out, which saves time. It's

still hands on out there as what, that hasn't changed, of looking at it and see what's needed. Things have changed as far as there's less, some people less hay, there's more cropping, and some of that depends on where the money's at and what they can do, what their need is. So there's been more change from a general, a general farm where they have livestock and crop to more, it's either on or the other. Somebody's maybe just mainly livestock or mainly cropping. SS-Can you explain till to me? I'm not quite sure what that is, whenever you say no till or minimal till.

LW-Okay, no till as far as, well conventional till would be actually plowing, discing, or chiseling and discing and planting. To where minimum till can be mainly just discing it up to smooth it up some. And no till is actually using a no till planter where they spray ahead of time to kill the vegetation or some times afterwards. Actually go in with a type of planter where they just plant it right into the sod or into the corn stalks or in the beans, vegetation.

SS-How have you seen the Kokosing River change during your tenure? Have you noticed many differences?

LW-I think there's been more of a concern as far, I think it was actually left before, but things have been more of a concern of leaving trees and grass along. Course since it's become a scenic river I think there's more people looking at it that way. Maybe making sure of things, but I don't know as there...I think it's helped it as far as being less conventional till to mor minimum and no till, less soil erosion.

SS-Do you see the move from just a regular river to a scenic river as a problem fr some farmers?

LW-Not really a problem, I think it just puts a little more detail to it. If the want to do some fixing they've got to look at more things.

SS-How has the movement towards commercialization, especially in Mt. Vernon changed the character of the county's environment. Do you see more problems now that, like with the growth of Coshocton Road?

LW-Well you get more quicker, you get a quicker run-off when it goes...Well, for instance, like if it's a hayfield and it's a crop field you get twice the run-off as cause you don't have infiltration. To where yeah if you go to blacktop and roads your getting just most of it running off and it comes quicker. Which seems like if you get any substantial rain at all, like on Coshocton Road it gone run on the parking lots out there, they get muddy and from quick run-off out there. As far as overall, yeah there's more houses, more run-off in a sense, quicker run-off. Unless there is provisions made that kind of help contain that for a short time and slow it back down.

SS-Is the Conservation District taking steps prevent against more erosion because of that?

LW-Well, we have an urban specialist which is working with township, city, as to try to do more and more, so them what can be done and assist them with erosion control on house sites and commercial sites.

SS-What do think the continual development of the county will...What effects do you think it will have on the county's resources, like the watershed and quality of soil?

LW- Well I think if things kind of get in check as to where they have some guidelines to go by so it's not a free road to do whatever, to where they actually put in some control measures. It could be checked from the standpoint of debris basins, silt fence, to actually keep the erosion or the...to keep things on site at the same time with a basin to slow the water down so it don't just rush off, but actually contains it for a little bit and slowly goes out. It can be kept in check that way.

SS-How do you view agriculture's impact on the environment?

LW-Well we need agriculture for people to eat so it's...

SS-Beyond that, the physical landscape of the county?

LW-Say that question again.

SS-The impact of agriculture, like you were speaking of no till, soil erosion, pesticides, things in the watershed that could...

LW-Well as long as, well, follow labels and use the amount of as far as pesticides and herbicides that need to be used. At the same time manage it such that they're keeping soil in place cause most of it attaches itself to the soil. So if the keep the soil in place, your keeping it in check and keeping it out of ditches. Well if there's erosion from considerable tillage, that things move downhill or it goes off site and fills up road ditches and ditches to where it needs to be cleaned out or has a problem that way. And at the same time a farmer wants to keep as much as they can. From the standpoint if they're losing it they're losing some till which is losing ability there to produce a better crop.

SS-On the other hand, how do view the trend towards urban development as opposed to agricultural development?

LW-Well it's as there's more and more houses, of course it takes away crop ground to produce and therefore some that they lose some of the better ground to houses they're going to be farming more marginal ground. The Conservation Reserve Program is actually some of the marginal ground is in that program which the farmer gets paid for. But yet as that hits a certain length of time, there's more houses and there can be less of that because a farmer needs ground to farm. If there's more in houses...And some from the standpoint that the houses as far as application of pesticides and herbicides and being careful next to houses. Being more careful not to spray on windy days. Of course part of it is just more people on the road to where a farmer moving equipment has to be more careful. And as far as individual sites, typically erosion-wise it is bad unless there's well, I wouldn't call it bad or not, but there's less erosion on individual sites because there's smaller areas to stir, but yet even those on the bigger development if they watch as to, as far as the erosion end of it, use some silt fence and seed things down as quick as possible. And do a good job of doing what needs to be done.

SS-Have you seen an increase in pollution in the last few years, possibly as a result?

LW-Well, I guess considering the Kokosing is scenic now and that has to meet certain criteria I guess I don't really see it as being more. Like you know, it's something I think a lot of people's become more aware off, public awareness to be more careful. And as practices are used, I don't see that there's more pollution I guess.

SS-I've read that right now Knox County's land use is 86% agriculture. Do you think that in the future there's going to be a significant move away from that percentage to more residential land or commercial land uses?

LW-Well as there get's to be more people, whether they travel to Columbus or whether more business comes here it takes up ground to put business in at the same there's more houses as we're getting more urban sprawl of more or more cities growing they've taken in more ground, more houses being built. Yeah the percentage of farm is gonna go down some depending on. These other counties it's been faster than what it has here, but yeah there's considerable numbers of more houses going up.

SS-And would that go along with what you were saying with erosion and pollution into the water with the movement of industry?

LW-Yeah. There can be more of that, unless there careful and do what they need to do in order

to contain things on site.

SS-Kind of moving in a different direction, do you view the Del-Co decision as a representative of urban sprawl in the county?

LW-Not necessarily urban sprawl. I think they see it as a potential of a good amount of water they can make use of. Granted houses need water but, there's a great amount of water there they can make money on. Course they put that in check to where they can only do some much out of the county as compared to in the county. But you know, granted there's gonna be water for people and some of it as far as whether its better to individual well or whether it's better, you know some of the developments it just doesn't get feasible to have individual well, when you got houses on top of each other compared to having the water lines for them to work with.

SS-Do you see any major effects impending from their entrance into Know County on say the county water or for future...

LW-That's something that's hard to say as far as depends on where they go and....Some of that depends on growth I think as to what the need is for amount of water. And if they keep it in check as to what they agreed to the amount of water. You know they've done tests but the real proof is really how it really ends up with what's there to work with after a period of time.

SS-How do you think that their business will affect the Kokosing watershed? Do think that it will have a negative or possibly a positive effect?

LW-That's hard to say as far as...I guess I don't really know how it's gonna end up. Yeah there's gonna be some effect but how much I don't know.

SS-What about the county water resources, such as the drinking water or waste water aside from just the actual ground water-well that's part of the ground water but-

LW-Well you mean as far as individual wells?

SS-Right. Do you think that will-We've heard about some people who their wells have gone dry whenever De-CO is pumping or...

LW-Well some of that can be depending on what their depth of well-some it's a shallow well, and there's some areas whether it be the county or other counties as to where it was as dry as it was this summer they have problems with water, not enough to where typically they have enough, but where it's dry enough they didn't have this year...Maybe, well you get in an area where there's more and more houses you maybe at one level water and having wells there and when new wells go in they go a little deeper to get into more water. What's really busy at pulling it out whether it's from them pulling it in an area or whether it's along a road where you get more and more houses at a certain level and then the newer ones houses come in and drill a little deeper it pulls things down a little more.

SS-You mentioned the drought. What kind of effect did that have on agriculture, or the river, or the watershed this summer?

LW-Well as far most end up with an inadequate amount of hay. Some as far as less cuttings because they didn't have the water or rain when they needed it. At the same time here we fared better than they did in Southern Ohio where it's so dry they just didn't end up with much of a crop. It seemed like some of it, like most years, depending on how the rains hit in a given area and planting time for some they replanted because it just didn't come up in a dry time and they replanted. Fortunately well it's frosted some but not a....some needed a little longer which we've got some of that, a longer growing season in a sense to help it along.

SS-What do think the biggest problems facing the county are from perspective of the conservation district, in the near future or long-term or both?

LW-Well the urban thing depending, urban as far as, well still the main thing is soil and water

erosion, whether it's on the farming end of it if the farmer whether it be no till, minimal till, using tools as such to keep the soil in place. At the same time with development, using practices to keep the soil there and using at the same time basins to contain the run-off so they can slowly get it off instead of it just, like I said before, when you get more blacktop, more roads, you get quicker run-off so you need to contain it so it don't go to their neighbor faster in a sense and wash on them to where if they slow it down to start with and let it go out slower you can keep things more in check. It depends on how, basically how people do things. If they're willing to cooperate...that's gonna vary.

SS-Can you talk a little bit about what would happen or what the consequences would be if soil erosion wasn't kept in check?

LW-Well as far as a farming field you lose the topsoil which you're losing the area where the plants need the topsoil, need the organic matter. Since you lose topsoil, that's where the fertilizer is, the lime, the pH in the soil for it to grow right and for the chemicals for the pesticides to work right. And of course it fills in areas and in turn, in one rain it may fill in an area, in the next rain because it don't have a grass area to go, it can wash in a tilled area and actually end up more erosion or ditches. At the same time, that moving down fills up road ditches and creeks, and just fills other things up.

SS-Do you spend any time thinking about the wildlife of the county? I'm not sure if that question would really apply.

LW-Well it seems like there's more than there used to be, it seems like you see more pheasants, quail we just don't have the habitat for, seeing more turkeys, more deer. Some of that is a combination of the amount of corn and beans and hay out there for them to eat, along with the Conservation River Reserve Program, leaving grass, of course hayfields and fence rows and woods, there's just a lot of area for a varied amount of wildlife. So with good management of crop fields and hayfields comes a lot of wildlife of course, I guess. For the future, in terms of the future, what steps are the conservation district taking to ensure the preservation and survival of the county's resources?

LW-Well I don't know if you want to term it as preservation, it's there to use but there has to be a conservation standpoint of use it, use it wisely, you know some things may be preserve it, yet it's actually there to be used. But it's important to use it wisely as far as take care of the soil and it will take care of you as far as keeping it in place, fertilizer cover. As far as future of well I think it's just gonna be a continuing thing of educating people as far as what needs to be done. As far as the urban end of it there's going to be more and more, well there seems to be more and more houses as the fact that they you know, do what needs to be done to keep soil in place, or put in a practice system to keep things in check.

SS-You mentioned education. Do you provide programs for the county or--

LW-Well we have field days, and well we had horseshoe field day this year, a pond clinic, as far for people to educate that way. And Debbie \_\_\_\_, the educational specialist, she goes into schools and works the different grades, working with the teachers, a sharing program with working with different classes as an education resource to the kids. And we also have a tree program this spring where it's 4th&5th graders as far we hand out a tree and explain it which is about 1500 seedlings each spring.

SS-What would happen on a normal field day? Or just a field day?

LW-A field day depends on of course it's a site depending on what you're wanting to show people, having whether it be speakers, or showing them practices with somebody telling about it, hand outs as to some information, and some of them asking questions for what they're wanting

to get out of it.

SS-How do you feel personally about the urban sprawl?

LW-Well people have to have a place to live. It varies, it's just some of you see somebody don't want to be...well they're living in a city, they want to move out cause they don't want somebody else telling them what to do. But at the same time they don't really understand out in the county things are different. As far as snow removal, to mowing to just everything's totally different. Some of that is the individual moving needs to educate themselves as to what's out there and realize they're moving into that area rather than that area moving into them to where granted they've got their right of say in a lot of it and things have been as such and they go out there and totally want to change everything. I think they need to be aware of what's out there first instead of wanting all changes to suit them.

SS-Does the Conservation District work with the local government in terms of legislation for the county? Like farming practices or-

LW-Well legislation, as far as some of the urban, they're trying to working with to get some rules and regulations, or can work with that as far as they want as some guidelines to go by so everybody on the same page of things instead of one person getting can do this and somebody else can't do this. Some guidelines to go by so everybody's getting treated fairly.

SS-Do you ever run into problems with farmers or businessmen or women in terms of like if you'd like a farmer to change his soil practice to prevent against erosion. Do you ever run into difficulties?

LW-you work with them a little bit, you may be working with them on one project and you can see other things they really need to change but you gotta kind of develop a rapport wit them in showing them some things and giving them some information and it has to be their, most it's gotta be their decision of what their doing and there's some that's gonna do what their gonna do regardless. So it's...some it's working with them what you can, giving them information and some are seeing what their neighbors and others to make some changes.

SS-Just on a more personal note, how do you view the Kokosing River as a part of the county personally?

LW-Well I guess it's the main drainage area of the county. As far as keeping soil in place protects it. And business practicing sound measures to keep things out of the river protects it. I guess I just view it as a river for people to enjoy as far as some canoe on it, some fish in it...

The tape ended with one sentence to go:

"I just see it as a source of recreation, wit the path and wildlife, for people in the county to enjoy I guess."

After this question I thanked Mr. Walker for his time and he invited me to call him if I have further questions or if I would like to speak with anyone else in the office. He also invited the class to go on a field visit with the District Technicians.