

Soil Defense Day 1949: Then and now

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Most Weakley County residents would be surprised to learn that an event on a small farm between Dresden and Martin drew a crowd of up to an estimated 40,000 people. And, it happened 70 years ago this spring. For perspective, the population of Weakley County is currently about 33,000; this event captured the attention of more than the number of residents in the entire county.

What would it take today to draw such a crowd – a college football game? A college concert? This event was centered around an issue that was critical in the 1940s in western Tennessee and in fact, the whole nation – soil erosion. It was important enough that Gov. Gordon Browning issued a State-wide Proclamation declaring Tuesday, April 19, 1949, as “Soil Defense Day.” Gov. Browning himself saw fit to attend the event, along with the “Father of Soil Conservation” Dr. Hugh Hammond Bennett. Dr. Bennett was responsible for leading a nationwide campaign to combat soil erosion and became the first Chief of USDA’s Soil Conservation Service. Tennessee Commissioner of Agriculture and future congressman Ed Jones were there that day too, and the event was covered live on the air by WSM radio’s Farm program director John McDonald.

The event was front page news in the Weakley County Press, with one quote reading, “Leaders say that the most important event ever to take place in Weakley County in one day is Soil Defense Day.”

The time was 1949, just a few years after World War II ended. Many veterans returning from the war were returning to their farms after being gone and needed training in modern farming techniques and building trades. Using the GI Bill, they enrolled in classes at UT Martin to learn these skills under the Veterans Farm Training Program. Instructors in this program apparently included vocational agriculture teachers from many local high schools, as well as from the University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service.

According to The Press, 500 local veterans were trained through this program. Some of the skills learned by the veterans were construction trades such as carpentry and electrical wiring (unknown prior to the 1940s), barn building, and soil conservation techniques such as terrace building, tree planting



ABOVE: WSM Radio broadcast from the Soil Defense Day Site and from the front yard of Wayne Parham’s home. Among those interviewed by John McDonald were (left to right) Wayne Parham, District Supervisor; Ed Jones, State Commissioner of Agriculture; Gov. Gordon Browning and Dr. Hugh H. Bennett, Chief of the Soil Conservation Service. Dr. Bennett is also considered the father of the Soil Conservation movement.

BELOW: The Soil Defense Farm as it appears today with its protective blanket of grass preventing erosion and the large pond that was built with donated labor.



and principles of conservation planning. As hard as it is to comprehend that there would be 500 men returning to the farm in that era, for perspective, there were 200 dairies in the county at that time and small family farms were abundant.

Dr. Bennett has been famously quoted in an address to Congress as declaring soil erosion a “National Menace,” and in fact, wrote a USDA booklet in 1928 with the same title. During the period from the 1930s until the 1970s and 1980s, western Tennessee had some of the highest erosion rates in the nation. Only by looking at old aerial photographs and still photos of the massive gullied areas can one appreciate how serious the problem was.

In partnership with the newly-formed Soil Conservation Service, local Soil Conservation Districts were formed in virtually every county in the nation. These Soil Conservation Districts consisted of local farmers and landowners who took the leadership role in helping their neighbors combat soil erosion and educating the citizens on methods to prevent it.

Wise land use through conservation planning on each farm was promoted, and the Weakley County Soil Conservation District

decided on a proactive approach by implementing what must have been a radical idea at the time – they bought a farm for demonstration purposes. The farm was average in size for the time, about 75 acres located between Dresden and Martin. According to The Press, the “farm belongs to all the people of Weakley County, with the title being held by the Soil Conservation District.” The farm was purchased in 1948 and then sold to a private individual around 1963. The farm was operated under a five-year rental agreement by Veteran Farm Program trainee Frank Campbell. Based on a conservation plan map of the land on the front page of the Press April 15, 1949, there were grain crops, pasture, hay fields, and wildlife areas on the farm at that time.

No records can be found to document where the vision for Soil Defense Day came from, but we do have some clues. Surely Dr. Bennett was a major influence, as well as Governor Browning. The Soil Conservation District Board, led by

Chairman Wayne Parham, undoubtedly was involved in the planning. As a side note, Parham has passed on the conservation tradition; his grandson Gerald Parham is the current chairman of the Weakley SCD.

The idea was brilliant – don’t just tell people how to manage the land properly, show them. Soil Defense Day was a “hands-on” demonstration. Newspaper pictures and firsthand accounts of the few people still around today who attended as children recall bulldozers being on-site that day actually building terraces, a large pond and grass waterways. Veteran training Program trainees built fences to manage the livestock as well as a large barn and a Grade A dairy milking parlor. The idea was to show the public how they can take care of their own land by preventing erosion and make their own farms healthy and profitable.

And what a demonstration it was! The newspaper reported that 20,000 people were expected but as many as 40,000 may have actually been there. Wayne Parham

hosted a lunch at his nearby farm. Governor Browning, Commissioner Jones and Dr. Bennett all gave “stump speeches” broadcast live on Nashville’s radio station. Newspaper reporters were there taking pictures. The Press ran stories about the event for multiple days, including the winning essay from a countywide school, “Farming the Conservation Way.” Also in the paper was a list of hundreds of donors from all over the state that provided goods and services for the project. One can imagine the excitement of the young children watching scores of men working together and seeing bulldozers run, probably for the first time in their lives.

“Where are they now?” is a question often asked about an old friend; so what has happened to the old farm that drew so much attention 70 years ago? There are no crowds lining up to see the demonstrations or take notes on the conservation practices installed that day. Today there are so many conservation practices installed on the farmland in Weakley County

that an observant driver on any country road can see numerous Grade Stabilization Structures, Water and Sediment Control Basins, and Grass Waterways along the way. Just look for the small dams with drain pipes in crop fields and streaks of grass in amongst the crop stubble and you’ll recognize the farm that is practicing “Soil Defense.”

Gone are the massive gullies that so many have forgotten about; many of these areas that would hide a person, or even a house, have been repaired using proper conservation treatment over the years. Most farmers don’t plow their fields any more; no-till farming and winter cover crops are preventing even small gullies from forming these days. As for the Soil Defense farm – it’s still there, with a protective cover of grass blanketing it, assuring it will never need a massive project to help it recover from serious erosion. Some of the fields were planted in pines trees in years since the big day. The large pond built with donated labor is still alive and well, and if careful observation is made, the old terraces and waterways dimly come into view. The effect is comparable to an old house; if one looks closely enough, the original beauty still shines through. And the good news is, thanks to the care of some forward-thinking people with sincere motives and a strong conservation ethic 70 years ago, the old farm is not a wasteland of eroded soil, but a valuable piece of Weakley County history.

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