

Harry A. Kerr

September 4, 1914 — January 11, 1989

Harry A. Kerr was a member of the College of Agriculture faculty from 1946 to his retirement as professor of soil conservation emeritus, November 12, 1972. He occupied a unique position in his early years as extension conservationist in Extension Administration, 1946 to 1954, with joint financial support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the College. Thereafter, he became a member of the Department of Agronomy until his retirement.

Born in 1914 on a dairy farm near Franklinville, Cattaraugus County, New York, Harry entered Cornell as a freshman in agricultural economics in 1938. He received his B.S. degree in 1942 and M.S. degree in 1953. After high school graduation he was first employed with the Civilian Conservation Corps and then with the Soil Conservation Service in New York State, New Hampshire, and Vermont. As a faculty member in the Department of Agronomy, Professor Kerr served as executive secretary of the New York State Soil and Water Conservation Committee, and as extension soil conservationist. After 26 years with Cornell University, he retired with the well deserved title of professor emeritus.

According to former department chairman, Nyle C. Brady, "Professor Kerr was better informed on water conservation, utilization and management than any man on the Cornell staff. He used his knowledge and experience in water conservation to help not only the farmers of New York State, but other groups such as industries, municipalities, and those concerned with recreation. In his work in extension, he demonstrated remarkable ability in dealing with adult as well as younger groups."

Professor Kerr brought a wealth of practical "hands-on" experience in conservation farm planning and actual conservation construction. For this work he was recognized as "man-of-the-year" in 1970 by the New York Soil and Water Districts Association, Inc. At that time Kerr was honored for "... his contributions to the development of conservation districts within the state."

Harry's life-long concern for others led to his being elected to the Tompkins County Board of Legislators, later to become its chairman. In this capacity he was instrumental in establishing a new Tompkins County Hospital on West Hill.

Harry Kerr was instrumental in establishing most of the county conservation districts in New York. He wrote the original legislation which provided matching state funds for hiring conservation field managers and technicians. In 1989, fifty-seven New York counties employed 250 people who contributed to conservation/agriculture, planting hundreds of thousands of trees and shrubs; constructing thousands of farm ponds and marshes; improving hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural land by installation of underground tiles and ditches for drainage of excess water; irrigation of farm lands; the protection of soil from erosion by engineering and vegetative means, and mapping the soils of many counties. Those activities are testimony to Harry's efforts.

Professor Kerr drafted the legislation that authorized state financial aid for the soil survey, the use of county and state highway equipment to do conservation work on private property, and the preservation of the State Barge Canal for flood control purposes. He also wrote extension bulletins and popular articles on soil and water conservation.

Harry was active in national conservation: a charter member, vice president and secretary/treasurer of the National Association of Executive Directors for State Conservation Committees; vice president of the Soil Conservation Society of America; and member of the Agronomy Society of America. Professor Kerr received numerous awards from these and other organizations including the New York Soil and Water Conservation Districts' Association, the National Association of Conservation Districts, and the State Forest Practice Board.

For many years, he was editor of a monthly conservation publication titled "Down to Earth", the oldest conservation magazine in the nation, published continuously since 1941. He also authored a Conservation Handbook for county legislators which was used for many years as a management tool.

Harry organized a state consortium of conservation agencies and boards that met annually to provide leadership to the governor on conservation matters.

Working with the State Fish and Wildlife Management Board and Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs, he was instrumental in building Cornell's Arnot Forest Educational Center for training of youth-4H and teachers in the skills of conservation.

Professor Kerr played the violin—as a young man he specialized in western and bluegrass music. He was a pilot and an early member and officer of the East Hill Flying Club. He was a wine-maker of consequence, an ardent walleye fisherman, and enjoyed "woods work" in his forestry holding on Bull Hill Road, Newfield. With his sons, Mike and Neal, he built his retirement home in these woods.

Harry was most sensitive to others. His unmistakable opinions were always presented in a gentle manner. Harry loved children, and he also devoted time to visiting and caring for many elderly friends. But for the people of New York, his legacy is one of clean water, green fields, and forests.

Harry is survived by his wife, Marguerite Hunt; two sons, Neal and Mike Kerr, and four grandchildren.

Willard Crony, Reeshon Feuer, Thomas W. Scott