

Hugh M. Wilson

December 13, 1903 — January 29, 1984

Hugh Wilson will be remembered by his colleagues and friends throughout the state for his outstanding ability as a teacher. He could season a complicated, sometimes boring, soil-and-water-related subject with appropriate humor and demonstrations and thereby make the subject interesting and informative. He was born near Hancock, New York. Shortly thereafter the Wilson family moved to Steuben County, where Hugh worked on the farm and later managed the two-hundred-acre dairy operation. He was educated in the public school system of Steuben County and graduated in 1924 from the New York School of Agriculture at Alfred University.

His recognition of the need for erosion control and better land use stemmed from his early farm experiences and continued to his last days. The lean years of the Great Depression induced him to leave the farm in 1935 and enter the recently organized U. S. Soil Conservation Service as a trainee.

In six years he was promoted through various levels of responsibility to district soil conservationist, in charge of organizing and directing the work in Wyoming, Erie, and Livingston soil conservation districts.

Hugh's area of influence expanded when, in 1943, he was invited to join the New York State College of Agriculture as extension soil conservationist. During the next ten years he was instrumental in organizing more than thirty soil conservation districts throughout the state and in establishing the fundamental principles upon which they operate today.

Later in his academic career Hugh was appointed associate professor of conservation in the Department of Agronomy. In that capacity he further demonstrated his ability as an effective communicator, seizing every opportunity to work with other specialists in related fields, with county agricultural agents, with students and skeptics. If the door seemed to be ajar, Hugh Wilson was there to open it to the conservation cause.

A few examples illustrate the scope of his efforts and the techniques that he used as a teacher:

Hugh organized and conducted land-judging demonstrations for youth groups to give them a hands-on experience in identifying soil differences.

Sometimes referred to as "the gadgeteer with a purpose," Hugh built a portable "rain maker," which he set up for field demonstrations to simulate the effects of rainfall on erosion under various soil, slope, and cover conditions.

Oversized dice (possibly loaded) were used to illustrate the daily gamble farmers take with respect to weather conditions. Another gadget, dubbed the “one-armed bandit” was a cross between a slot machine and a roulette wheel. It was “programmed” to demonstrate land-use capabilities and “safe” cropping practices. Two pieces of equipment that were usually demonstrated together were the soil penetrometer and the infiltrometer. The penetrometer measured and recorded the force required to push a probe into the soil to a depth of twelve inches or more. The infiltrometer measured the rate at which a known depth of water was absorbed into various soil layers. Together they were an effective demonstration of how tillage practices affect soil physical characteristics.

Hugh Wilson authored several agricultural extension bulletins on erosion control, tillage, and drainage. He was a regular contributor to the County Extension News Service. He is also remembered as “the old curmudgeon” in the *American Agriculturalist*. In 1959 the honorary extension fraternity, Epsilon Sigma Phi, cited Hugh for “excellence in written materials—for his able manner in creating clear work pictures, based on proven practices in the field of soil conservation, and especially the work with county agricultural agents in creating and promoting agronomy workshops in New York State.”

While in retirement he wrote several books: one was titled *Hard Facts and Soft Sell, A Little Nonsense Now and Then is Welcomed by the Best of Men* and another, *Living Long Ago—No Runs, No Hits, Some Errors*. These and other publications reveal a philosophy and dedication that will be remembered by his many friends as well as his family.

Surviving family members include his wife, Margaret, of Bath, New York; two daughters, Lois Wilson of Albany, New York, and Mrs. James Klepeis (Elizabeth) of Reading, Massachusetts; and a son, Edward, of Brentwood, Missouri.

Paul Zwerman, Harry Kerr, Carl Winkelblech