

Paul Joseph Zwerman

April 26, 1911 — December 24, 1985

Paul J. Zwerman, professor emeritus of soil conservation, suffered an aneurysm in the fall of 1985 and died on December 24. His wife, Sara, died in October 1984. They are survived by a son, William LeRoy; two grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

Paul was a graduate of a one-room country school. When he reached Ohio State University, as a graduate of Sandusky High School, he completed studies for his B.S. degree in agriculture in barely more than three years. Then came a change of pace: he chose to intermingle graduate study with service as a government employee. It was to be seven years before he received his M.S. degree from Ohio State University and eighteen years before he received his Ph.D. degree.

Paul began government service in 1934 as a junior soil scientist with the Soil Erosion Service of the Department of the Interior. As an assistant soil scientist, he was transferred into the Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service when it was created in 1935. He rose to the position of infiltrationist, in charge of that aspect of United States flood-control surveys, but in 1944 he entered the U.S. Navy for two years of service as a lieutenant (gunnery officer) during World War II (in the European theater). He then returned to government service but was given an educational leave to accept a two-year appointment as a research fellow at Ohio State University. He resumed active service as a senior soil scientist, this time in charge of drainage research in Ohio. He concluded this penultimate tour of duty with the government in 1950, when he resigned to join the faculty of Cornell University as an associate professor of soil conservation. In 1976, after twenty-six years at Cornell, he retired as professor emeritus only to re-enter government service for one last time, spending three years with the Bureau of Land Management of the Department of the Interior. In 1979 he and Sara returned to Ithaca, where they settled in a home built for them on Slaterville Road.

Although a soil scientist by profession, Paul was also a practical engineer. Most of his research and much of his teaching were joint ventures with his colleagues in the Department of Agricultural Engineering. His drainage experiment, established near Aurora, New York, was a model of planning and execution on the large scale that is necessary if the results are to carry weight.

His three sabbatical leaves were all spent in the Netherlands, where land drainage is a sine qua non. His lectures at the State Agricultural University at Wageningen were instrumental in attracting to Cornell a number of talented

students from the Netherlands who, along with his students from North and South America, have subsequently risen to positions of scientific leadership both in this country and abroad.

There is no record that Paul Zwerman had any formal instruction in German, but his proficiency in the language was such that, in the days when all Cornell graduate students were required to have a good reading knowledge of both German and French, he was one of the examiners appointed by the Graduate School to conduct the German examinations. He could, and did, lecture in Dutch when it was appropriate to do so.

Paul was not a reticent scholar. With a talent for being heard at a distance, he was at his peak when doing his rendition of an irascible professor asking the simple questions that demolish pedantry, while he saved face for all by clever use of his irrepressible sense of humor. Conventional wisdom had no place in his thoughts: to him, innovation was nothing more remarkable than uninhibited common sense. His patience with bureaucracy was minuscule. His patience with nature was infinite.

Paul Zwerman had a vital role in efforts to develop the unrealized potential of New York's north country. Farms on the heavy soils of that region are plagued by excess water and short growing seasons. Paul believed that successful agriculture in the north country depended upon development of proper systems of land drainage, specifically, including elimination of microrelief, which interfered with surface runoff. His experiments and his demonstrations of land smoothing and subtle, but systematic, shaping to promote surface drainage are cornerstones of the programs that have evolved and that have raised the expectations for those who live in the north country. Each year, more and more farmers are adopting the methods he developed. They have increased the productivity of their fields and broadened their management options. Agriculture in the north country owes much to the common sense innovations brought to the scene by Paul Zwerman.

Paul was a member of the Soil Science Society of America, the American Society of Agronomy, the American Society of Agricultural Engineers, and the Soil Conservation Society of America. In 1970 the New York State Conservation Council recognized his contributions with its Soil Conservationist Award. In 1975 he was named a fellow of the American Society of Agronomy. He served as the chairman of the Empire State chapter of the Soil Conservation Society and, in 1972, was a Fulbright fellow in the Netherlands.

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