



7-15-1987

Shelterbelts Controlled Erosion

Richard Garrity

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

Recommended Citation

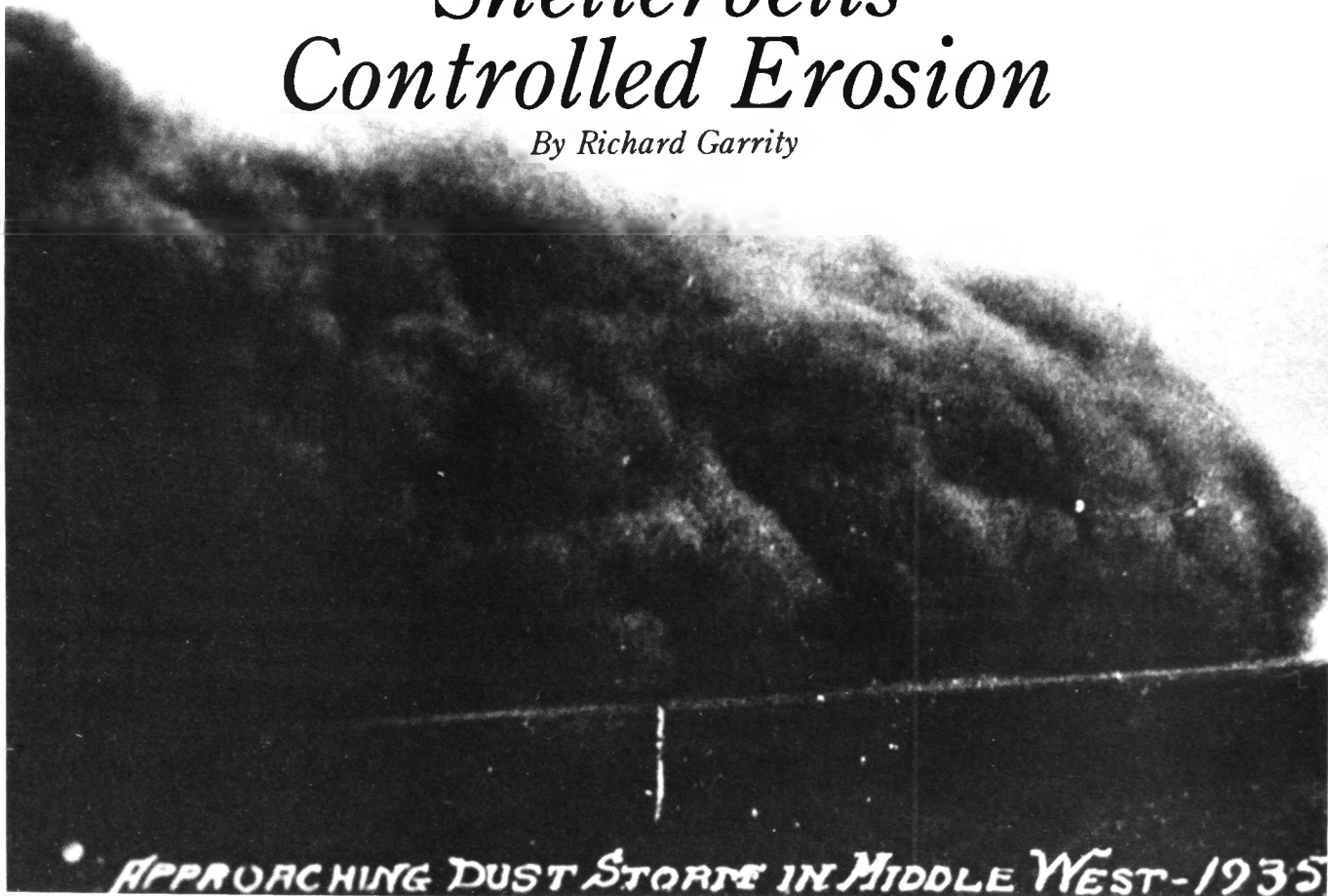
Garrity, Richard (1987) "Shelterbelts Controlled Erosion," *Westview*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol6/iss4/6>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.



Shelterbelts Controlled Erosion

By Richard Garrity



A rumbling, rolling black cloud towered on the western horizon. Another dust storm was approaching. Inhabitants sought a quick refuge in their homes to escape the sudden fury. Fine drifting sand filtered through the openings to film the furniture. Then the gloom of the storm was gone, leaving a dusty track in the wake.

This was the "Dirty Thirties" of the Great Plains. A wind-blown shifting pall raced across the parched fields. Tumbleweeds rolled to finally lodge against barbed wire fences. When halted, the constant dust piled until only the tips of the posts were visible. Sand dunes moved across the farmyard. As the wind changed directions, the house steps would be above or below the ground level. Silt blown from the apex of the dune entered the house or covered farm implements. Empty fuel drums, unless placed upright, would be blown away.

In the late 1930's Benjamin Denman, near Hooker, Oklahoma, farmed this unstable land with the help of itinerant laborers that drifted in seeking the

seasonal harvest.

At the maize harvest, the John Deere tractor labored across the field as it towed the header, elevator, and barge. Front steel wheels of the tractor were encased in old tires. They were secured

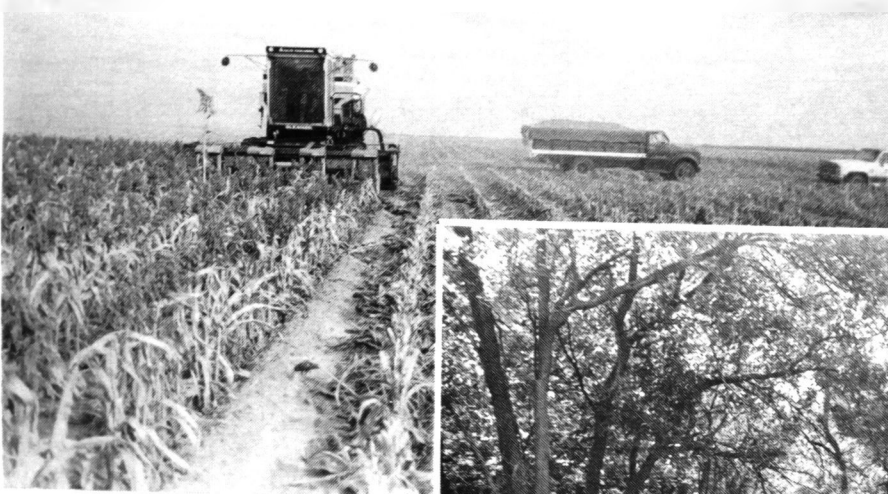


with baling wire. The deep sand or wind-cleared ground taxed the driver and "Poppin' Johnny." Elevators became clogged, slats were broken, the canvas torn, babbitt bearings failed, or the tractor bogged down in the deep sand. It was impossible to relax. All repairs were made in the field.

Broomcorn was the next crop. Each individual head had to be hand cut from stalks which ranged from two to five feet tall. Once topped, the heads were placed in small stands beside the rows. Busy gophers had pitted the field with burrows to trap the unwary.

After the broomcorn was cut and gathered, a custom threshing crew arrived. This group worked through the area to process the farmer's crops. Seeds were separated from the heads and the cleaned product baled. There's little good to be said about threshing broomcorn. Seeds and dust made a mighty itch. The noon meal was a memory.

At that time the ladies arrived with a bountiful dinner. It seemed as if they were attempting to surpass one another



Combine heading maize.



Shelter Belt at the farm of H. E. Curtis, Mangum, OK

with their farm cuisine. The harvest hands were the beneficiaries.

At the end of a long, dusty day, the threshing crew left. Dirty farm hands returned to the barnyard for a quick wash in the stock tank. Above, the wooden windmill protested as it turned.

Sudan was the final crop of the season. As the bundles were dropped from the binder, impatient sand hastened to cover them. Downwind from the feed, a lister raised a ridge to check the blast.

When all the crops were gathered, the migratory labor left for another harvest, taking with them recollections of wind, dust, and unending labor.

These were the problems which confronted the farmers in Western Oklahoma when Franklin Delano Roosevelt became President in 1934. On June 18, 1934, he proposed a plan: "...for the permanent benefit and protection of the Great Plains Belt, but also as an immediate drouth relief." It was recommended that tree strips one hundred feet wide and not more than a

mile apart be planted in a hundred-mile area from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico. From this recommendation the shelterbelt program was developed. It encountered difficulties.

Some members of Congress opposed it. They argued that tree planting would not provide relief for several years. Critics doubted that the trees would survive. Tree farms objected to government nurseries. Despite the lack of stock to supply the demand, they didn't want federal management.

Others, though skeptical, were willing to endorse the program. The Shelterbelt Headquarters was established at Lincoln, Nebraska, on August 8, 1934. The first shelterbelt was planted near Mangum, Oklahoma, on the H. E.

Curtis farm. This was March 18, 1935. It was to be the test of the undertaking.

In the fall of 1986, I visited Benjamin Denman's farm in order to see a contrast in crop production. Ben was comfortable in the air-conditioned cab of a combine which headed, cleaned, and dumped the maize into a contained hopper. His harvest, dry-farmed, was about double. At the end of the round trip, the grain was power-unloaded into a waiting truck and transported to a nearby elevator. The hobo farm hands were absent.

Steve York, Jr., District Conservationist from the Soil Conservation Service in Mangum, provided a field tour to explain the value and results of the shelterbelts.



The trip started at the H. E. Curtis farm. This installation was a half mile long, 170 feet wide with 15 rows 12 feet apart. It contained a mixture of Austrian pine, cottonwood, Siberian elm, honey locust, black locust, cedar, and mulberry. It was a test that worked. Between the tree strips, protected crops were produced.

During the years, conservationists learned that five or six rows were sufficient. Intermediate installations were sometimes planted between the original rows. The government provided the trees free of charge. During the early stages of the project, CCC and WPA labor was used.

Once the program was started, it

quickly proved its worth. It protected the soil from water and wind erosion. Farmsteads within the zone were sheltered. Farming was stable and scarce wildlife returned.

York said that dead trees were removed for firewood and young trees were planted in their place. Brush was piled to provide shelter for deer, quail, rabbits, turkeys, and other game. Unfortunately, some of the earlier plantings had been removed.

In 1985, the Fiftieth Anniversary of the first planting of a shelterbelt was held on the H. E. Curtis farm. During that time, a marker was placed on the highway commemorating the historical event. Descendants of the Curtis family

attending the celebration stated that the trees would never be removed. They know why.

CREDITS: Steve York, Jr., Soil Conservation Service, Mangum, OK; F. Dwain Phillips, Soil Conservation Service, Stillwater, OK; SOIL AND WATER NEWS, publication of the Soil Conservation Service, Washington, D.C.; excerpts from the bulletin THE GREAT PLAINS SHELTERBELT PROJECT, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE; Benjamin Denman, farmer near Hooker, OK.

Richard Garrity of Oklahoma City enjoys free-lance writing and photography, but he has enough additional interests to fill two lifetimes. He's a special WESTVIEW supporter and friend. ♡

Southwest

122 E Main 393-4367

STATE BANK

SENTINEL, OKLAHOMA

