



# 100 Years of Soil Science Society in the U.S.

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In the early 1900s, there was a diverse group of soil surveyors across the country. Many had a geological background, and some had basic soils training and gained experience by mapping soils all year long. Soil survey and mapping was conducted at the national and state level by the Bureau of Soils and by soil researchers from land grant colleges and agricultural experimental stations in most states. There was a need for comparison and consensus on methods and approaches. Soil survey did not have an independent professional organization like the agronomists and geologists. In 1907, the American Society of Agronomy (ASA) was established. ASA had several soils members, including Merritt Miller, Edward Voorhees, and Cyril Hopkins. George Coffey

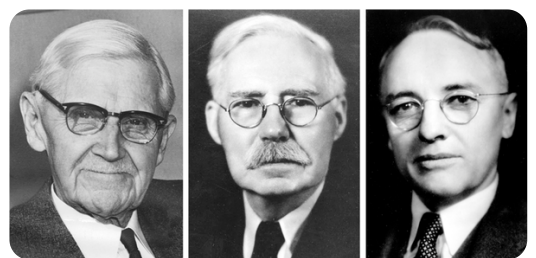
was president in 1909, and Jacob Lipman was the vice-president.

## **Soils in ASA**

In **1908**, ASA had established a committee on soil classification and mapping that was led by George Coffey. The committee had 15 members including Curtis Marbut and Andrew Whitson from Wisconsin. The purpose of the committee was to bring greater uniformity in soil classification and nomenclature (ASA, **1908**). It produced its first report in 1914 (Coffey, **1914**), and several committee members differed in opinion on various aspects. There was little agreement among the members, and no further meetings of the committee were held.

A new committee was formed a year later with Curtis Marbut as chair, and it solely focused on soil classification. The committee emphasized physical examination of soils in the field and laboratory, chemical examination, climatic variation, geologic origin and structure, and physiography of the region of occurrence (Marbut, **1916**). The 1916 report was the last of the committee on soil classification for the American Society of Agronomy. An impasse had been reached—there was too much disagreement and lack of a proper theoretical framework.

## **1920—American Association of Soil Survey Workers**



*Soils men that were instrumental in the establishment of the American Association of Soil Survey Workers in 1920, which formed the basis for establishment of the Soil Science*

The American Association of Soil Survey Workers was formed in early 1920 by Andrew Whitson, who directed the Wisconsin soil survey, and Merritt Miller of Missouri, with the goal of establishing closer cooperation between state and federal soil surveys. The Association consisted of state soil surveyors,

some of whom were opposed to the ideas of Curtis Marbut that had been promulgated through the ASA committee and continued to spread through his work at the Bureau of Soils. They disagreed with the increasing influence of the Russian principles of soil science that Curtis Marbut slowly advocated beginning about 1914. Although it was formed to counter the dominance of the ideas from Curtis Marbut, he attended the meetings and ultimately came to dominate the Association (Gardner, 1957).

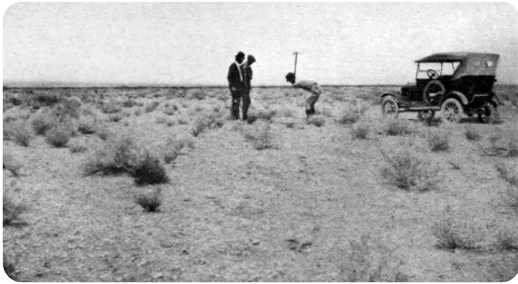
*Society of America in 1936. Left to right: Merritt Miller from Missouri and Andrew Whitson and Emil Truog from Wisconsin. Photo credits: M.F. Miller from Senator Mark Miller and A.R Whitson and E. Truog, Department of Soil, University of Wisconsin–Madison.*

The Association held its first two-day meeting in the Geology Building at the University of Chicago in November 1920—similar to the foundational meeting of ASA in 1907. By that time, the Association had 55 members. The meeting was opened by the president of the Association, Andrew Whitson. At the business meeting of the Association, three committees were established: Color Standardization, Information and Publicity, and a committee to prepare a statement for use of all states interested in soil survey. Merritt Miller was elected the new president, and the next meeting was planned for November 1921 in East Lansing, MI.

### **The Bulletin—Predecessor of SSSAJ**

The American Association of Soil Survey Workers published a bulletin of the first meeting, and more than 5,000 copies were printed and sent in bulk to 36 soil workers

for distribution. Complimentary copies went to numerous others and overseas, and some 2,150 copies were sold. In 1921, there were 136 members in 34 states, 8 Canadian Provinces, and the Philippine Islands. The Association then held annual meetings in Urbana, IL in 1922 and in Chicago in 1923 where 85 people attended including for the first time, Milton Whitney. It was at this meeting that the Association changed its name to the American Soil Survey Association.



*Soil survey work from 1923. Source: from a USDA Bureau of Soils report, 1923*

The Association had been instrumental in forming a bridge between the soil survey work at the state and at the Bureau of Soils. It created some agreements on common terminology and sought harmonization of methods and soil survey approaches across a very wide range of topics. In the beginning years, it dealt with soil variation, laboratory

methods, soil acidity and its measurement, and the possible use of airplanes in soil survey. It contributed to the developments of soil science, and in particular, of soil survey in the USA. Its bulletin, of which there are 17 volumes, published a considerable number of original papers.

## **From the Association to SSSA**

In 1935, shortly after Curtis Marbut died, plans were made for the union of all soil scientists into one organization, uniting the members of the American Soil Survey Association with the Soils Section of ASA. Some were concerned about duplication of efforts, and it yielded much difficulty merging the two organizations. The Association largely consisted of field men, and there was strong bond between them. Not many were interested in being part of an agronomy society (Miller, [1950](#)). The Soils Section

was chaired by William Albrecht of Missouri, and he suggested that Richard Bradfield and Charles Shaw draft a constitution of this new organization. Emil Truog recommended that the new organization be called the Soil Science Society of America. In 1936, the Soil Science Society of America was established (Tandarich et al., 2002), and Richard Bradfield was elected as the first president. He had just left Missouri and had joined his alma mater, the Ohio State University. SSSA was officially formed in 1936, but its foundational organization was established in 1920—100 years ago!

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