

Art and Jean Thicke “Landowner Success Story”

Location: SE Minnesota, Winona County near LaCrescent

Type of Operation: Grassland Farming (Converted Cropland)

(651)-602-7859 julie.macswain@mn.usda.gov

The Thicke family is widely known throughout the Midwest and across the country as strong advocates for controlled grazing. The Thicke farm has not been tilled for over 20 years and has not had any chemicals put on the land since 1976. Although the conservation treatments have changed over time, the conservation ethic and commitment of the Thicke family has not wavered. And the farming operation is profitable without any federal farm commodity subsidies received.

William Thicke (Art’s father) started the family operation in 1928 at 17 years of age. And in the early 30s William started working with the local Soil Conservation Service (SCS) to outline needed conservation cropping rotations while managing the crops and livestock to meet his economic needs; and at same time maintain soil productivity. Art and Jean have retained in their farm files a 1936 aerial photo map prepared by SCS that outlines crop rotations of the farm by field.



In 1950, William signed a ‘Farmer-District Cooperative Agreement’ with the Burns-Homer-Pleasant Soil Conservation District. The Burns-Homer-Pleasant SCD was the 2nd organized SCD in the country, the first in the Midwest and the first in the State of Minnesota. On September 9, 1950. W.T. Sillman, SCS Farm Planner, sent William his copy of a blue folder containing his newly developed Conservation Plan developed with SCS assistance. Art and Jean still have their original copy of this 57 year old plan.

This 1950 conservation plan that the Thicques followed contained detailed soils maps and information; outlined a ‘Soil Building Program’ that included manure management and the use of legumes as the cheapest source of nitrogen; outlined the use of sod waterways and made recommendations for continued conservation cropping rotations on all of the cropland; and finally the plan addressed all of the pasture, woodlands and wildlife areas with sound conservation recommendations. The most far reaching recommendation in terms on conserving soil came with the continued adoption and expansion of contour strip cropping. During these early years, SCS assisted with development of ponds, diversions and other structural practices. In 1979, a manure storage facility was added with SCS assistance to address manure concerns from the dairy operation.



The Thicke farm had become, and is today, a conservation farm role model for the Midwest. The January 1951 issue of the ‘Soil Conservation-Official Organ of the Soil Conservation Service’ under the leadership of Charles F. Brannan, Secretary of Agriculture, and Hugh H. Bennett, Chief of the Soil Conservation Service featured on the front cover the Thicke farm contour layout. The USDA 1957 Yearbook of Agriculture – “Soil”, depicted the Thicke farm contour layout on the back cover of this publication to be seen by farmers worldwide. In 1966, Dennis Riley, Head of Geography Department, Thornbridge School, Sheffield, England in the section ‘Mixed Farming, The United States Middle West, featured the Thicke farm layout complete with contour strips and conservation cropping rotations as laid out years earlier with SCS assistance in his World Agriculture text.

Today, the Thicke farm has gone through another conservation transformation. Art and Jean no longer have any row crops, the contour strips are gone and in their place is highly efficient total grassland certified organic dairy farm. Even though the conservation cropping rotations combined with contour strips was the way to go with row crop farming back then, there still were erosion problems on the steep areas of the farm. As a grassland farm, the Thickees are achieving the best erosion control possible. To help bolster the change to total grassland farming, in 1996 Art and Jean entered into an EQIP contract with NRCS and installed cattle lanes, heavy use protection areas, and clean water runoff protection from the building site through diversions and grassed waterways.

The grazing operation is a sound model for farmers seeking to make a good living without government subsidies and at the same time achieving sound environmental protections of their natural resources. The remarkable Thicke farm has been a source of environmental study by conservation partners such as: the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the US Fish & Wildlife Service working through Land Stewardship to conduct a wildlife monitoring study, while the USGS conducted a water quality study associated with wildlife in and adjacent to a small pond. In addition, Art worked with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the MN GLCI to organize and conduct cattle over wintering demonstrations on his farm. Art has conducted many pasture walks on this farm to educate farmers, MN legislators, and at least one MN Congressmen concerning the advantages of controlled grazing.

Art Thicke has been willing to share his grazing experience as an active member and Vice President of the MN GLCI. He has been a featured speaker outlining his grazing success and experiences at farm and grazing conferences in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Illinois, and Nebraska. The Thickees are valued examples of local farmers meeting their soil, water, air, plant, animal, and human resource concerns through partnering with SCS/NRCS since the 1930s.

Updated 11-01-07