

Hall of fame recognizes scientists for digging in the dirt

RECOLLECTIONS & REFLECTIONS



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Saskatchewan soils are the foundation of agriculture, and this province has been fortunate to have soil scientists like Saskatchewan Agriculture Hall of Fame inductees Les Henry (2004) and Bob McKercher (2017) involved with the understanding and sharing of soil science data vital to sustainable production for our farmers.

Les (James Leslie) Henry, on his education and subsequent career, says, “there was no grand plan, just a desire to succeed and a work ethic to make it happen.”

Known for his work with saline soils, his extensive work on the cause of soil salinity provided a major breakthrough in the management of this issue. Henry, after his 50 years at the University of Saskatchewan, remains active on the farm, and shares information through writing and consulting.

His book, *Henry's Handbook of Soil and Water*, mixes the basics and practical aspects of soil, fertilizer and farming, while his book on Eaton houses constructed on the Prairies provides the reader with insight on the people of the Prairies.

McKercher pioneered work on soil tests for fertilizer recommendations and soil-applied pesticides, providing provincial farmers with solid information for their production systems.



John Mitchell's career was focused on better understanding Saskatchewan's soil types. |

SASKATCHEWAN AGRICULTURE HALL OF FAME PHOTOS

He helped plan the new College of Agriculture building at the University of Saskatchewan and later in his career returned to assist with the creation of the sixth floor addition to the building.

McKercher was also recognized as an innovative teacher within the college. He co-authored the book *The Sodbusters Vision: An Agriculture Building for the University of Saskatchewan*, and continues to be a strong supporter of the college and the Saskatchewan Agriculture Grads Association.

These two led and continue to lead by example, building credibility and respect for being genuine, principled and consistent.

Henry identifies the two hot topics in agriculture today as soil salinity and soil moisture. Both are actually water issues, and he maintains that farmers now have better tools to understand the problem and adapt their production practices to manage these situations.



Bob McKercher pioneered work on soil tests for fertilizer recommendations.

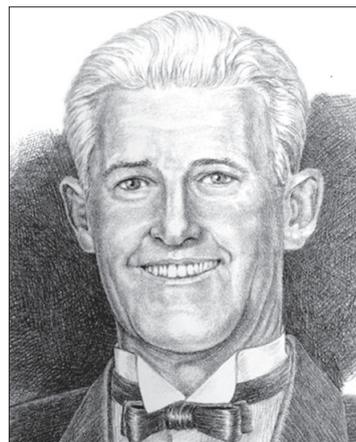


Don Rennie helped change attitudes about summerfallow.

Through research and collaboration, farmers continue to be provided with up-to-date information, which allows them to make timely decisions for their farms.

Although McKercher has been away from agriculture since his retirement, he still is confident in today's farmers.

“The young farmers, for the most



Larry Gramiak was noted for his extension work in promoting soil and water conservation.



Les Henry is known for his work with saline soil.

part, forward thinking, keep updated on new practices, more aware of their impact on the environment and well-educated in their particular areas.”

Hall of fame inductees who are no longer with us, but contributed greatly to the sustainability of farming, include Don Rennie (1983). In 1973, he said that “the

hallowed practice of summerfallow is the highest singular mismanagement practice to degrade our prairie soils since they were first cultivated.”

This was controversial at a time when Saskatchewan had 18.5 million acres of summerfallow. The suggestion caused farmers to investigate the merits of minimum tillage and continuous cropping, significantly changing the face of agriculture. Henry describes him as a scientist, agronomist, administrator and motivator.

Larry Gramiak (2004), noted for his outstanding extension work in promoting soil and water conservation, began his career as assistant agricultural representative for the province, then served as a farm development specialist before his secondment to the University of Saskatchewan.

While there, Gramiak worked with Henry on soil salinity in west-central Saskatchewan. Programs and organizations such as Save Our Soils, 4-H and Ducks Unlimited benefitted from his dedication and drive.

John Mitchell (1973) dedicated his career to the better understanding of Saskatchewan soil types. He was involved with the Saskatchewan soil survey set up in 1924 and headed the Department of Soils from 1935 until the end of his career. The survey led to vast changes and improvements in land use and brought international attention to Mitchell and his team.

Thanks to these dedicated people, the public is reminded that “land is not merely soil, it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals.” — Aldo Leopold

Linda Braun is president of Food Focus Saskatoon.