Temporary Duty in Saudi Arabia

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I served in Saudi Arabia for about 90 days on assignment with the Ministry of Agriculture, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Ministry is assisted by several specialists staffed, administered, and recruited by the Foreign Agriculture Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. It operates jointly with the Saudi government and is funded through the Joint Commission Economic Affairs Riyadh (JECOR). On the soils end two other SCS’ers were on the job, Ted Miller, soil classification and IvaI Persinger, landsat program. IvaI was bitten by a snake and died before adequate medical attention could be obtained.

The Saudi government is deeply committed to the expansion and full utilization of its agricultural resources and plans to develop the irrigation potential of desert lands. It is spending a great deal of money to do so. The Wadi Dawasir Project consists of ground water exploration to further develop, chart, and explore ground water reserves. The ministry wants a modern soil survey to show what lands can be irrigated and where they occur. It requested a brief report with soils map, soil descriptions, and potential for crop suitability.

The Wadi Dawasir area lies about 360 miles southwest of Riyadh, the capital. It consists mainly of old terraces dissected by wadis (intermittent streams) that have been reworked by sandy aeolian deposits. Rainfall is three inches per year, winters are cool, and summers are hot with temperatures up to 120°F, and the humidity is low. The country is largely uninhabited with one or two small villages. A new road to Yemen is being built through the survey area. A few nomads graze sheep, camels, and goats.

The field work was hard, difficult, and hazardous. All field work was done in pairs and with two vehicles. Our promised backhoe never arrived during my sojourn amongst the “Bedu.” The power auger was a dismal failure. It was mounted on a trailer and kept getting stuck in the sand when pulled by GMC 4 wheel drive pickup with sand tires. The auger bits were inadequate for the dry soil. The soils were so dry and hard that we had to chop out the first 12 or 16 inches with a soil spade and then try to auger in them best we could. We found a stalwart Somali man and he dug our pits by pick and shovel and really earned his money. Ted Miller and I put in 12-hour days. We cooked our own meals, loaded and unloaded the pickups, sacked soil bags, constantly dug ourselves out of the sand, changed flat tires, and negotiated and palavered with wandering Arabs.