Professor Donald “Don” Patterson passed away July 25, 2009. He was a soil scientist, colleague, mentor, teacher, and, most importantly, our friend. We met Don when we were graduate students or young staff members at North Dakota State University (NDSU) in Fargo in the 1970s and 80s. He shared his knowledge and skills in pedology and soil survey in ways that fundamentally influenced our understanding of soil science and soil interpretations. Although our individual career paths have led us in different directions, our appreciation for the knowledge he imparted to us and our respect for his work ethic remain strong.

Don grew up on the Patterson family farm in west-central Iowa. After graduating from high school, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He completed his tour of duty, was honorably discharged, and returned home to work with his father on the farm. In 1947 he enrolled at Iowa State College, now Iowa State University, Ames, and graduated in 1951 with a bachelor of science in agronomy. Upon graduation, Don worked in the Polk County, Iowa Assessor’s Office as a soils specialist and personal property assessor. In 1953, he began working for the Agricultural Experiment Station at NDSU, then known as North Dakota Agricultural College. One of Don’s professional interests was the application of soil science to land valuation, and in 1964 he completed a master of science in economics at South Dakota State College, now South Dakota State University, Brookings. While working at NDSU he continued coursework toward a doctorate in soil science. After a distinguished career, Don retired in 1991 as a Professor in the Soil Science Department.

Don had a major influence on the soil survey program in North Dakota during his tenure at NDSU. Initially, he was involved in the state-wide reconnaissance survey. This was an intense and demanding effort in the 1950s to map North Dakota at a scale of 1 inch = 1 mile. In later years, when a soil scientist on a field crew would complain about the probe truck they were using, Don went into his office and pulled out a stack of feed receipts signed by Kellogg for the horses used by the original survey crew in McKenzie County. The mapper did not complain again. Don strove to impress on us what he was doing, Don replied that he was reviewing the soil survey for that area 25 years earlier and thought the line should be moved a bit to the south! Most of us don’t remember what they mapped decades earlier.

progressive county soil surveys with the annual acreage goal, Don laughed and said “try mapping a township (about 23,000 acres) a day.” Don spoke of long work weeks that started on Sunday and led him to the train out of Fargo to central North Dakota. There was no mere 40-hour work week in those days!

The reconnaissance survey, first published in the mid 1960s, contained a soil revision and description of the major soils in North Dakota, the first thorough soil survey soils in the state. Throughout his career, Don strove to improve and update this document with information from detailed individual county surveys as they were published. He spent an entire project. Once, coming into the department late at night, we found Don working at a light table examining the soil survey of a remote area in the northwest corner of the state. Asking what he was doing, Don replied, “I’m working the soil survey for that area 20 years prior to this day.” Most of us don’t remember what we mapped decades earlier.

Don was the last of the “old time” soil scientists in the Northern Great Plains. He was educated and influenced through such individuals as Jack Johnson, Andy Aandahl, Clinton Johnson, and Charles Kellogg. One time on the light table examining the soil survey of a remote area in the northwest corner of the state. As asking what he was doing, Don replied, “I’m working the soil survey for that area 20 years prior to this day.” Most of us don’t remember what we mapped decades earlier.

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