Soil Surveys and Museum Exhibits: A Day in the Life of Maxine Levin

Susan Fisk

Maxine Levin spent a few years as a soil scientist working at Oakridge National Laboratories early in her career. “Though I love science and research, I knew that I preferred to spend my time writing, thinking, and talking more than lab work,” shares Levin. So, three years and a lot of broken glassware later, she moved on to soil surveys. “That has been my passion and avocation ever since.”

“I thoroughly enjoy the process of researching and investigating through literature searches and maps, discovering the state of the land. Then I correlate what I see in the land, so I can relate it back to farmers, ranchers, and conservationists.”

Through the years, Levin took on more leadership roles with the USDA-NRCS, where she has worked as a soil scientist for 34 years. Now she works more in strategic planning and databases with the agency, but she always tries to relate back to her time in the field. “How soil interacts with all the other resources is important. I try to make the information into a usable form that can be used for planning.”

One highlight early in Levin’s career was when she served as project leader for the 1985 soil survey in Baltimore. “This defined urban soils for me, and it was only the second urban soil survey to be done in the U.S. (Washington, DC, was the first). I got to reinvent the process, and it was a great learning experience.”

Her career in soil science wasn’t always clear. Levin grew up mostly as a city kid, but her family did own a small ranch in California, where they raised apples and cattle. “I worked the apples, I worked the cattle. It was part time, but those chores took all of my spare time!” Originally a psychology major, it was mostly luck that lead her to take a beginning course in soils to round out her course load. She also spent a fall and summer working on a farm in Maine and eventually changed her major to soils and plant nutrition.

Her dad was concerned that Maxine might not be able to make a career out of a soil science major. “He visited our local USDA district conservationist in Visa- lia, CA and asked if it could be a career for me,” Levin recalls. “I never knew this until 20 years later when I worked under the same USDA conservationist, and he told me of counseling my father that a career in soils was possible.”

Connecting with the Public

Levin likes interacting with the public and rarely turns down an opportunity for public speaking. Throughout her career, she liked talking about soils to all walks of life and age groups, including the K-12 student/teacher community. This eventually led to Levin’s work as the curator of the soil monoliths for the “Dig It! The Secrets of Soil” museum display, sponsored by Soil Science Society of America. “By the time I got involved with Dig It!, I’d had many opportunities over the years to give key ideas and make connections with the broad variety of people I know from work, and professional, academic, and field soil scientists.” All of