Dick Arnold has lots of stories to tell. All of them are interesting. He’s taught at a prestigious university and led a major division of a government agency. Yet, he remains humble, preferring to talk about the people he met and what they taught him, rather than what he may have taught them.

Arnold had a wonderful career and made many contributions to the field of soil science. He’s been an SSSA and ASA Fellow since 1985. He was recently awarded the Lomonosov Gold Medal by the Russian Academy of Sciences for his “outstanding contribution to the development of theoretical and applied soil science and modeling the behavior of soils in different landscapes of the world.”

After growing up in a small town in Iowa and a short stint in the Navy, Arnold’s career took him to Europe, Asia, parts of Africa, and South America. Most of the early journeys were with USAID. “In 1977, I worked with the Cornell TROP- SOIL program,” Arnold says. “Our goal was to transfer our knowledge of soil management to the tropics.” The month-long course attracted 24 students to the Philippines from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. “It was teaching this course and interacting with the students that helped me realize that I wanted to spend most of my life helping people understand soils. The enthusiasm of the students made everything worthwhile.” Most of his co-teachers were from Cornell, Hawaii, or the Philippines.

Arnold emphasizes the need to do soil surveys as research projects. “Soil surveys are science and research. It’s just that the “experiments” have already been run over the course of time! How has the geography changed, how did the erosion happen…these things we record afterward in a soil survey. We were recording the research results of those experiments and making guesswork about how the landscape had evolved. Are there new layers on top or severe erosion? All of science deals with uncertainty. We can only talk in probabilities.”

As an academic, Arnold taught courses in soil survey, soil genesis, regional studies, as well as various special topics (soil statistics, anyone?). He mentored numerous graduate students. His first sabbatical was in Venezuela in 1972. If you ask Arnold where he has travelled, you get a shorter answer than if you ask “where have you not been?”

Because he was gifted in communication, Arnold spent much of his career in science administration, building international bridges among scientists, practitioners, and governments. “I often observed how various programs fit together. My job was to help soil scientists around the world better understand and interpret their soil resources.” In late 1979, Arnold and his wife moved to Washington, DC where Arnold worked with the Soil Conservation Service as director of Soil Correlation and Classification. In 1980, he became director of the Soil Survey Division and held that position until 1996. For four additional years, he served as a special assistant, working mainly with international interests and global change. After retirement, he was a Fulbright Scholar to Russia among many other tasks.

Interpersonal Finesse
Arnold used not only his scientific knowledge, but a certain well-honed interpersonal finesse when working in government and abroad. While he was on assignment in China in 1982, he spent four weeks in Beijing, teaching soil classification and genesis and leading discussions in the field. The government monitored everything he did.