Conservation the Idaho Way
IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION
ISSUE EIGHTY-ONE MARCH 2020

JOAN CLOONAN TURNS 80

CHEMIST, ATTORNEY, TRAILBLAZER & CONSERVATION TREASURE CELEBRATES A GRAND LIFE

By Steve Stuebner

In early January, Joan Cloonan turned 80. A big party was held for the occasion at the Boise River Watershed Center at the Boise Wastewater Treatment Plant in west Boise. About 90 people came to the party.

"It was really fun," Cloonan says. "I wanted to celebrate that I've lived and remained active this long, and have the party in a place that's meaningful to me."

Our Treasure in front of The Treasury in Petra

Cloonan is perhaps best known as a long-time Vice President, Environmental and Regulatory Affairs, for the Simplot Company, from 1982 to 2002, when she retired. Currently, Cloonan is a supervisor on the Ada Soil and Water Conservation District board. She also served many years on the boards overseeing the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and Boise Public Works.

A native of upstate New York, Cloonan was a trailblazer in many ways as a smart and aspiring college student and female young professional at a time when few, if any women, were working as environmental lawyers or environmental professionals. The primary options for women who got a college degree in the 1960s was to become a school teacher, a nurse, a secretary or a mom. But Cloonan ended up getting a Ph.D. in chemistry from Cornell University and a law degree as well.

"I was a woman working in a man's world," Cloonan says with a warm smile.

"Joan is an amazing woman," adds Josie Erskine, district manager of the Ada SWCD. "She has been a leader in the environmental and social justice movements with her work starting back in Washington D.C. to her work with refugees here in Boise. She is brilliant, compassionate and always has a welcoming smile."

Lynn McKee, former administrator of the Idaho EPA office in Boise, has known Cloonan for years, and he recommended her for the Ada SWCD board about 4 years ago. "She's such an incredible person with so much experience and education," McKee says. "She's always willing to contribute and volunteer for things, including our education outreach events at the Legislature. She likes to share the work we do, and helps explain why it's important."

Joan and her sister, Mary Beth

In the Chemistry lab

Cloonan was born in Oswego, New York, the oldest of five children, on the southern shores of Lake Ontario. She remembers the big lake made a big impression on her. She played in the sand next to the lake, and went swimming in the lake.

"My parents said I used to eat a lot of dirt and flowers," she says, laughing. "I loved being next to the lake."

The Oswego River was very polluted, and the local health department posted signs, warning people to stay out of the river. "It was polluted with PCBs and many other things, but no one knew what PCBs were at the time. I remember you could see dark brown effluent going into the river from a chocolate plant," she said.

Cloonan was a top-notch student. She graduated at the top of her class in high school and at LeMoyne College, a Jesuit school with no women as professors. She was the first person from her family to earn a college degree, a bachelor's of science in chemistry.

"The first and probably most important influence in my life was my mother," Cloonan says. "She had only an eighth grade education and was intelligent, always young and open to new ideas and adventures and very curious. She and my father, who had only a high school education, valued education highly.

"I graduated from high school in the late 1950s when most girls were going on to become nurses or school teachers. My family had little money, but was supportive of my furthering my education, even in the esoteric field, for a girl at least, of chemistry. Both my mother and my father believed in me and made me believe that I could do whatever I set my mind to."

Cloonan earned a scholarship from Cornell to work on a Ph.D. in inorganic chemistry from 1961 to 1969. She married her first husband, who also studied chemistry, and they moved to Florida, where her husband landed a job as a professor at Florida State University. Nepotism rules prevented Cloonan from joining the chemistry department as a faculty member at Florida State, so she worked for two years as a post-doctoral fellow in solid state physics.

"I was overeducated for almost everything in Tallahassee, Florida, so I went to law school," she says.

She remembers that she was one of 11 women in the Florida State law school in a class of 208 students. She worked for a short time as a prosecutor for Daytona Beach and for the Florida Department of Natural Resources. In her spare time, she was getting more interested in the natural world, nature in particular, and photography. She still has some of the early coffee table books that she enjoyed in those days.

"I was taking a lot of pictures. If you look close to things, you can see so much beauty," she says.

In 1975, Cloonan landed a job with the U.S. Department of Justice in its pollution control section, and she and her first husband divorced. She was entering the legal field for DOJ at a time when the nation's environmental laws were just getting passed by Congress and implemented by the EPA when the agency was still in its infancy.

Air pollution, water pollution, toxic metals and toxic waste issues were widespread nationwide. Earth Day in 1970 signaled a sea-change in the nation's environmental priorities. Rivers were so polluted they caught fire in Ohio. Part of her job was setting effluent guidelines for point-source discharges from industrial factories and city wastewater treatment plants.

"That was a big job back in the day," she recalls. "The local communities were struggling with their wastewater systems, and the EPA, rather than fine a city, would provide government grants for the communities to clean up the problem. We were looking for compliance. But sometimes it took suing the cities to get some action."

She was the first woman to join her department at the DOJ.

While at the DOJ, she met her second husband, Bill Reetz, who was building sailboats in the Shenandoah Valley. Reetz

ended up getting a job with Trus Joist in Delaware, Ohio. They moved to Idaho in 1982, via the Trus Joist connection and the late Art Troutner. Cloonan landed a job almost immediately with the Simplot Company to help the company with environmental compliance issues.

"They gave me free reign," she says. "Jack Simplot would say, I'll comply with the environmental regulations as long as everybody else has to do it, too."

"I worked on many issues related to their food processing plants. This is where I learned so much about farming because Simplot always worked pretty closely with potato farmers."

Some of the Simplot plants treated wastewater by irrigating it on farmers' crops, Cloonan says. "It was farming in a highly monitored technical environment. The purpose being to use up the nutrients in the wastewater by crop take-up, avoid runoff and protect groundwater from pollution. This is what we're trying to do with conservation – efficient use of water and nutrients, whether natural or chemical."

With second husband, Bill Reetz

Besides Simplot's food-processing plants, Cloonan remembers that community wastewater treatment plants struggled with compliance on the Snake River and Boise River back in those days, and cattle feedlots grappled with those issues as well.

Ranchers referred to the manure they produced in feedlots as a natural material. "It's all natural stuff, you know!" she says, laughing, quoting the producers. "Yes, but we can't just release it directly into the river."

The Simplot Company always had a strong business and environmental ethic of re-using and recycling waste materials in all of its plants, she said. "I learned a lot."

Cloonan remembers filming a 30-second commercial about "How we use the whole potato." The ad spot showed how the company used bits and pieces of potatoes to make hash browns, fed cattle with potato waste, made ethanol for fuel, grew crops with wastewater, and generated biogas for fuel.

"I had to walk and talk while they filmed the commercial. We did lots of takes and retakes. It took all day," she says.

Cattle producers and dairy producers began doing land-application with manure waste to take advantage of the fertilizing quality of manure, but care had to be taken so as not to overload the soil with too much manure, Cloonan said. The Simplot Company also built anaerobic digesters by some of its potato-processing plants to process potato waste and sometimes make power out of the waste.

Cloonan worked with the Idaho Legislature at many junctures on water quality (surface and ground water) legislation, nutrient management and much more. She advised Simplot executives that the company would be well-served by being actively involved in regulatory and legislative issues.

"It's been so interesting to see how all of those issues have evolved over time," she said.

She also remembers touring a food-processing plant with the late former Gov. Cecil Andrus and several business leaders. "Whatever you do, make sure you don't kill my fish," Andrus told Cloonan.

The Simplot Company abides by an ethical Code of Conduct that was established by JR Simplot himself. The Code says, "Work hard, be good partners and treat the Earth as a precious resource to be respected and protected every day," according to an excerpt on Simplot.com.

Law school at Florida State

Cloonan enjoys her work with Ada SWCD. "It's all connected. I grew up eating dirt. And now I'm trying to keep dirt out of the river," she says with a smile.

As someone who worked on environmental compliance issues for decades, Cloonan feels that it's always been appropriate to encourage farmers to reduce

sediment and phosphorous from farms on a voluntary basis.

"I love the voluntary programs," she says. "Farmers know they have to manage their lands so it's sustainable because they depend on the land for their livelihood."

The Ada SWCD is one of the more active conservation districts in the state. Some of the biggest issues to face farmers in Idaho typically surface first next to the state's largest population center and state Capitol, issues such as subdivisions overtaking farmland with good-quality soil, water quality issues and soil health.

Cloonan is proud that the Ada SWCD has two no-till drills that they rent out to interested farmers on an ongoing basis. "It helps them try out a no-till drill without making the investment of buying their own," she notes. "We have a big one, and a little one. That's a success for us."

Cloonan also likes Ada SWCD's educational program called the "Innovation Farm."

"The Ada Soil & Water Conservation District is launching a new educational curriculum to help farmers and gardeners explore innovative practices that they can incorporate on their farms and in their yards," Erskine says. "This program will transport Ada County residents to farms all over the Treasure Valley for the purpose of education and enjoyment."

"Our goal is to educate about natural resource conservation practices, show niche markets for farmers that are growing because of population growth, urban farming techniques, deliver classes that help the public grow and preserve their own food, get the public on farms and help create a path to farmland preservation in the valley through valuing farmland and its products."

Nonpoint Source Management §319 Grant Application Period for 2021 Funding Cycle

The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality announces the start of the 2020 nonpoint source management §319 grants funding cycle.

Applications accepted from April 15, 2020 through July 15, 2020.

For more information, visit our website at www.deq.idaho.gov/nps-319-subgrants.

In the 2021 grant funding cycle DEQ will prioritize applications that emphasize water pollution cleanup and protection, with strong consideration given to projects that:

- Involve multiple partners and leverage other funding sources.
- Include in their application detailed work plans, budgets, and schedules to complete work in 3 years or less.
- Are located on water bodies with established total maximum daily loads (TMDL) and implementation plans.
- Improve water quality and are cost efficient.

The grant guidance document can be found at http://www2.deq.idaho.gov/water/319g2017/2020AppGuide.docx.

The program is run out of Erskine's 5-acre farm and others in the valley. "It lets people try experimental things," Cloonan says. "And it provides education for city folks. We're urban people in Boise. Education about farms and farm issues is really important."

Cloonan also likes the idea of developing pollinator gardens in urban gardens. More pollinator plants are needed for butterflies and songbirds. "We need more pollinator gardens," she says. "Our district can show folks how to do that."

She also thinks that Idaho DEQ and the Lower Boise Watershed Council are making progress on reducing sediment and phosphorous in the lower Boise River. She likes the concept of pollution-trading related to the Dixie Drain project in Canyon County and resulting reductions in sediment and phosphorous.

Looking back at her career and many accomplishments, Cloonan says she hopes she made a difference in a positive way. "Combining the technical and the legal in the environmental area has served me well as I moved from government to industry, with some government participation through the Idaho DEQ Board and City of Boise Public Works Commission," she says. "It's an area that I very much enjoy to use my talents, education and background to preserve and enhance our environment."

"I have always wanted to do interesting work that is of value to society."

From an agriculture perspective, "we still want to conserve our resources – use our resources but use them wisely," she says.

Steve Stuebner is a regular contributor to Conservation the Idaho Way.

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