

Staff Schools, Conferences and Training

The first known staff school of the old Soil Conservation Board took place in Kurrajong House, 175 Collins Street, Melbourne in December 1946. The school was attended by all eight technical staff and professional officers. The “technical staff” included Mac Wood, Tim Tame, Charlie Drmla and Deane Runge. The “professional officers” were George Thompson, Eric Thomas (described as the “Father of the Field Division”, Tom Terrell (Assistant Engineer) and Maisie Fawcett (Research Officer)

Deane Runge had the task of preparing model material to enable the creation of a variety of forms of topography onto which could be shown farms, roads, erosion etc. The staff apparently sat around the model and debated various alternatives with great enthusiasm.

This assembly of eight people was the first of a series of annual staff schools which took place for week in December, at or near Head Office, and finished with a Christmas party.

These early meetings and greetings played an important part in establishing an espri-de-corp within the ranks and it still exists today, many years after the end of the SCA.

Other venues for early schools included the Methodist Church Hall at the corner of Burke and Barkers Roads, a marquee in the Heroncourt gardens, the Nissan Hut in the backyard of Head Office and the Deepdene Hall.

As staff numbers began to increase, two rough groupings evolved – junior and senior staff. The junior staff continued to attend a week’s annual school and they were joined in the second week by the senior staff when the program became more conference like in nature, although quite a number of senior staff were involved in the first week as tutors.

The early staff were virtually self-taught soil conservationists and played a significant role in the moulding of policy and philosophy in the development and application of a soil conservation service in Victoria.

There was never such a thing as a ready-made soil conservationist, the best material had to be recruited and knocked into shape.

Soil Conservationists became a special breed, evolved out of a fine blending of many disciplines plus a lot of faith in the cause. The Public Service Board in the early days had great difficulty in placing soil conservationists in the public service hierarchy. One senior Public Service Board inspector is reported to have said that the only qualification you need to be a soil conservationist was an ability to get through a barbed wire fence.

For many years, whilst known by farmers and other clients as Conservation Officers, the Public Service identified them as Field Officers Technical and General (Temp).

As the young SCA set about establishing its staff team, it became clear that an arrangement for staff recruitment, training and classification had to be developed for approval by the Public Service Board (PSB). The Board seemed totally unable to accept that it was possible for Graduates and Diplomates to work in harness together.

In 1950 an in-service training program and examination system which aimed to iron out the academic and technology difference between graduates and diplomats, educate staff in soil conservation and provide a professional career range was approved by the PSB.

Subjects included in the training program included Conservation Science, Engineering, Surveying, Principles and Practice. A Preliminary Examination had to be passed by diplomats after not less than 12 months in-service training.

The 1950 SCA Training School held at Dookie was the first such school geared to the new examination system. The then Deputy Chairman, Geoff Downes commented that the school put more mental stress on him than any other five days he could recall. The reason being that he was the chief lecturer for a wide range of subjects, the very names of which were new to most of the pupils.

The attendees at the 1950 Training School were as follows:

Field Officers: Ken Terry, Vin Mansfield, Mac Wood, Harold Dickinson, Gerry Coghlan, Colin Paul, Peter McNaught, Bill Gleeson, Tony Rae, Deane Runge

Engineer – Keith Turner

Draughtsman – Geoff Stevens

P&I Officer- Ian Forbes

Surveyor – Charlie Drmla

Research Officer - Ian Leslie

Executive Officer – Eric Thomas

Deputy Chairman – Geoff Downes



Front Row L-R: Forbes, McNaught, Gleeson, Downes, Drmla, Leslie, Rae, Runge

Back Row L-R: Terry, Mansfield, Wood, Dickinson, Coghlan, Turner, Stevens, Paul

For some years the schools/conferences were very much geared to the examination system related to qualifications and numbers of staff intake (which was always unpredictable and erratic). Gradually the initiative to study was placed more directly with the individual to undertake in their own time and during the 1960's the classroom atmosphere gave way to a more conference style of assembly.

Hence the Annual Staff Conference was born which was a combination of training and socialising for staff from across all sections of the Authority.

The first fully live-in Staff Conference was at Healesville in 1963. Two features that were included in the program for that conference remained until the final conference in 1984 – the Staff Church Service and the Staff Dinner.

Those in attendance at the 1963 Staff Conference included:

Doug Seacombe, Tony Rae, Leith Gillespie, Frank Garden, Vern Viertmann, Bruce Ellwood, Fred Hall, Harold Allen, Allan Newton, Ian McAlpin, Alec Wallis, Jim Wood, Digby Huffam, Alistair Stirling, Bill Jeffers, Deane Runge, Bruce Osborn, Bob Rothols, Ken Terry, Mal O'Meara, Col Paul, Bernie Ebbs, Rod Gallagher, Jim Lawrence, Bruce Nicholson, Bryan O'Brien, Dick Aukema, Ian Hughes, John Knudsen, John Langford, Andy Beveridge, David Elvery, Peter Buxton, Keith Knights, Geoff O'Meara, David Sanders, Ken White, Gary Le Get, Ray Kelly, Jim Allinson and David Luke.

As the SCA was largely a country based organisation, the staff conference was of great importance in giving city and country staff the opportunity to live together for a brief period and discuss issues which affect the SCA as a whole. Often the staff conference would be the only time that staff from the remote parts of the State saw each other.

Another objective of staff conferences was to try and help overcome the tendency for the organisation to separate into discrete divisions or sections.

The officers required to attend the entire Conference were the permanent professional staff of all Divisions and Works/Engineering Assistants and Regional Clerks from one region on a rotating basis.

Typists and Work/Engineering Assistants from other Regions and Typists and Laboratory Staff at Head Office were invited to attend the Staff Dinner. However, no financial assistance was available to assist these officers in meeting travelling or accommodation costs to attend the Dinner.

Each Staff Conference had a Conference Director appointed by the Authority and together with an organising committee, the programme was prepared, often with a common theme. Conferences were usually conducted in the latter part of the year (November/December) and in the later years ran from two to four days.

However, during the period mid 1950's to 1962, Field Staff Schools were of a fortnight's duration, with officers in training present for the whole time and more senior officers attending for the second week.

The first morning of the conference normally saw a keynote speaker address the whole staff group and from there staff would break into smaller groups for the training component of the conference.

On the first or second night of the conference, the annual Staff Dinner was held at which was a formal affair with officers attending reminded that the Authority invites distinguished guests to the dinner and dress should be appropriate for the occasion. For the males, coats were optional, but a collar and tie was expected. There was no mention of what was considered appropriate female attire.

The Staff Dinner usually featured a guest speaker of some renown and for the most part the speakers were well received. However, on some occasions the *Thank You to the Guest Speaker*, speech turned out to be the highlight of the night.



Staff Conference - Dookie (early 1980's)

Dustbowl Competition

In 1960 when the Soil Conservation Authority Staff Association (SCASA) was formed, the Authority enthusiastically adopted the suggestion that provision be made in the Staff Conference programme for a sporting competition and so the Dust Bowl Trophy (designed to hold one quart or 1.13636 litres of whatever liquid was to the taste of the victor) was to be presented to the winner of a sporting competition between Country and City staff.

The competition continued annually for six years; being won by the Country in the first four years and the City in the last two/

In the early years the results could be argued to be reasonably honest, but even in those days there was always spirited debate at the presentation as to whether the rules of the game had been adhered to.

The main sports in the early days were cricket, tennis and bowls. Golf was included on one occasion and the "Disputes Committee" had to meet on another occasion to determine if fishing was an admissible sport.

The Dust Bowl competition went into recess between 1966 -1971 before being resurrected for the 1972 Staff Conference, with teams from the Eastern and Western parts of the State competing against each other.

In 1981, because of reduced numbers attending the Conference, the teams had to be shuffled and lined up as follows:

North-East, Alpine, Head Office and Box Hill formed the East Team

Mallee, Northern, Central, Glenelg, Barwon, Bairnsdale and Warragul formed the West Team.

Participation was not compulsory and there was a wide range of activities designed to encourage as many as possible to participate. Rivalry was often intense, so there were always roles for the non-participants to act as judges and referees.

In the later years, activities such as cricket, tennis, volleyball, golf, quoits, hookey, lawn bowls, rifle shooting, table tennis, carpet bowls, snooker, football kick, swimming, long distance running, volleyball and gum boot throw formed the program. Points were awarded for each event, with the result being announced at the Staff Dinner.

The current day location of the actual Dust Bowl trophy remains a mystery and no photos of it have been found.

As well as the Dustbowl, SCASA also organised the social programme at Staff Conferences which provided an opportunity for new and old staff to meet and greet over a cool drink.

Staff School/Conference List

Year	Location	Theme	Director
1946	Kurrajong House		
1947	Kurrajong House		
1948	Dookie		
1949	Dookie		
1950	Dookie		
1951	Dookie		
1952	Head Office Kew		
1953	Head Office Kew		
1954	Head Office Kew		
1956	Head Office Kew		
1957	Head Office Kew		
1958	Deepdene Scout Hall		
1959	Deepdene Scout Hall		
1960	Deepdene Scout Hall		
1961	Deepdene Scout Hall	General	Deane Runge

1962	Kew City Hall	General	Deane Runge
1963	Dennis Hotel, Healesville	General	Deane Runge
1964	Marybrooke Guest House, Sherbrooke	Projects	Deane Runge
1965	Deakin Hall, Monash Uni	Water Supply	Andrew Fisher
1966	Farrer Hall, Monash Uni	General	Don Paterson
1967	Farrer Hall, Monash Uni	The Encouragement and Development of Staff	David Elvery
1968	Queens College, Melbourne Uni	Extension	Tony Rae
1969	Queens College, Melbourne Uni	Critical Path	Dennis Cahill
1970	Glenn College, La Trobe Uni	Management by Objectives	Phil McCallum
1971	Trinity College, Melbourne Uni	General	Ken Terry
1972	Ormond College, Melbourne Uni	Environmental Conservation	Bernie Ebbs
1973	Menzies College, LaTrobe Uni	Education for Conservation	Harold Allen
1974	Menzies College, LaTrobe Uni	General Work Responsibilities	Jim Allinson
1975	Menzies College, LaTrobe Uni	Motivation	Graydon Findlay
1976	Menzies College, LaTrobe Uni	Training for Future Change	Ken Nelson
1977	Menzies College, LaTrobe Uni	Conservation and the Community	Ian Leslie
1978	Erskine House, Lorne	Coastal and Catchments	Ian Hamer
1979	Bendigo College of Advanced Education	Basics of Soil Erosion	Garry Le Get
1980	Dookie Agricultural College	Teamwork and Technology for Soil Conservation	Doug Seacombe
1981	Dookie Agricultural College	The Learning Cycle	David Luke
1982	Dookie Agricultural College	The Soil	Tom Speedie
1983	Dookie Agricultural College	A Soil Conservation Service in the Changing Times	Deane Runge

1984	Ballarat College of Advanced Education	General	David Hill
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Formal Staff Training

Staff training was an important part of the Authority's work. An example of the program for the first half of 1980 is listed below:

- Cropping Workshop
- Effective Presentation
- Supervision
- Geomorphology/Soils
- Land Capability/Photo Interpretation
- Interviewing
- Letter Writing
- Report Writing
- Salting Workshop
- Conference/Meeting Leadership
- Middle Management
- Slope Failure Workshop
- Applied Research Methods
- Publicity/Public Relations

While training for field officers and research officers was a priority, the training needs of the district based typists seemed to be neglected. This issue was raised in a memo to the Deputy Chairman in June 1980 from a district based typist which stated *"The present training of typists is, in the main, confined to on the job training and relies heavily on previous experience in other industries. The 1979 Staff Conference was the first attempt to my knowledge to recognise the in-service training needs of Field Division typists."*

As you are no doubt aware, the Field Division typists are involved in various tasks not often encountered in private enterprise and therefore further training is needed.

The role of the secretary, typist and clerk is at the present time experiencing a rapid change with the possible introduction of word processing machines and related computers. Typists could provide a better service to Field Officers and clients if training needs were met by either short courses throughout the year or at future staff conferences."

The Authority established a Training Committee headed up by the Deputy Chairman, with other members of the Committee being the Secretary, Chief Conservation Officer, Principal Research Officer, Senior Extension Officer and the Training Officer.

The Authority was also very supportive of staff who wished to further their educational qualifications. As an example, in 1979, four officers were on full time study leave, with a further seven officers undertaking part time study.

However, things changed in 1980, with the Authority determining “that with the deficiency of staff in relation to work load, no full time study leave should be approved for Field Operations Division officers, except where the terms and conditions of study for an officer currently studying part time make it imperative that they complete full time study during 1980 in order to graduate.”

Soil Conservation Authority Staff Association (SCASA)

SCASA was formed in 1960 with the objectives of:

- fostering good relations amongst members, their families and friends and between them and the Authority
- promotion of social activities
- provision of amenities and recreational facilities.

SCASA organised social activities for city and country staff including farewells for long serving staff. The provision of amenities and recreation facilities such as table tennis equipment was another role for SCASA.

One such early social activity was a staff social at the Holeproof Hall in Whitehorse Road, Deepdene. Cost was five shillings per head, supper provided, casual dancing and an experimental film titled “Sunday in Melbourne” was to be screened.

At Head Office, SCASA provided a refrigerator in the staff room and seating in the grounds for those who like to enjoy their lunch in the sun. In the early years SCASA also provided cigarette, chocolate and coke machines at Head Office, but these did not receive much patronage so were discontinued.

All this initially for a membership fee of \$1 per year.

At the 25th Annual General Meeting of SCASA held in Ballarat in December 1984, the then President John Grimes wrote in his report the “*the winding up of a 25 year old association is a sad and unrewarding task for a president and his committee. However, the absorption of the Soil Conservation Authority into the Department of Conservation Forests and Lands makes the existence of SCASA untenable*”.

