In Memoriam:  
J. Douglas Helms, June 29, 1945–September 5, 2018  

Anne Effland 1

John Douglas Helms, Fellow and former President of the Agricultural History Society and long-time historian of the US Department of Agriculture’s Soil Conservation Service and later Natural Resources Conservation Service, died on September 5, 2018. Doug or Douglas, as he was known to friends and colleagues, was widely considered the foremost historian of soil conservation, an ambassador for agricultural and rural history, a valued mentor to generations of young scholars, a sharp mind to engage in intellectual discussion, and a comfortable companion with whom to share a beer or a baseball game.

Helms became an agricultural historian far earlier in his career than many others who find their way into the field. Born and raised in rural Union County, North Carolina, he remained attached to his home, close to his extended family, and deeply interested in the history of southern agriculture. He began his studies of the boll weevil and cotton in the South during his undergraduate years at the University of North Carolina, where he received a BA in history in 1967. After a short period teaching high school history in North Carolina, he went on to complete an MA in history at Florida State University in 1970, followed by a PhD in 1977 with a dissertation on that topic, “Just Lookin’ for a Home: The Cotton Boll Weevil and the South.”

While studying at Florida State under William W. Rogers and John Hebron Moore, Helms won a Smithsonian Institution predoctoral fellowship at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) and spent the 1972–1973 academic year working with John T. Schlebecker, Curator of Agricultural Implements. His time at the Smithsonian and a summer spent working for the USDA’s Cotton Insects Research Station in Tallulah, Louisiana, contributed to the technical and scientific knowledge that influenced his approach to agricultural history.

Helms joined the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in 1973 as an agricultural records specialist, helping researchers navigate the

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1. The author wishes to acknowledge Sam Stalcup, who worked for Douglas Helms as an intern before stepping into his shoes as NRCS historian following his retirement. Much of the factual material in this essay on Helms’s life and career comes from Stalcup’s introduction in his edited collection, He Loved to Carry the Message: The Collected Writings of Douglas Helms, 1979–2010 (Lulu.com, 2012).
complex of bureaus and agencies that make up the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) collections. He remained there through 1980, although on leave with a postdoctoral fellowship at the NMAH during his final year. In his time at NARA, he developed a permanent expertise that continued to benefit the many agricultural historians who had the good fortune to cross his path over the years. Always a believer in sharing knowledge, Helms was quick to offer colleagues and young historians research guidance and tips for using the USDA records held by NARA.

In 1980, when Soil Conservation Service (SCS) Chief Norm Berg determined to add a historian to the agency’s staff, Wayne Rasmussen, long-time USDA historian who was familiar with Helms through his work at NARA and NMAH, encouraged him to apply for the position. Helms became the first historian of USDA’s Soil Conservation Service in January 1981, where he remained until his retirement more than thirty years later, in December 2011. While support for the historian position in SCS waxed and waned over those years, Helms survived and remained dedicated to serving his colleagues in SCS and bringing historical knowledge and perspective to bear on the agency’s mission wherever possible. He also remained dedicated to encouraging young historians to study agricultural history and the history of the USDA. He embraced the rising interest in soil and environment that marked the latter years of his career, but worked to keep that interest grounded in the technical and scientific knowledge he considered essential foundations of agricultural history.

Helms published a wide range of articles in history and soil conservation journals, edited collections, and government reports, examining southern agriculture, soil science and scientists, and soil and water conservation programs and policy development. Much of his work documents the founding and growth of the SCS and its precursor agencies. While never short-changing the scientific and political elements of those narratives, Helms was attracted to the stories of the individuals involved, both leaders and rank and file staff. His writing includes a number of biographies of scientists, bureaucrats, and political figures involved in the evolution of soil science and soil conservation, and he compiled a series of oral histories with agency leaders over the years, but he also documented the slow integration of women and African Americans into the field of soil science and into the ranks of the SCS. Over the years Helms also examined the broadening mission of SCS as it grew from its initial focus on controlling erosion for the purpose of flood control and protecting soil fertility and became the Natural Resources Conservation Service.
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(NRCS) in 2002. He published multiple studies of the evolving soil survey as it expanded into land use issues and urban areas and became interested in the snow survey and its role in supporting irrigation and water use planning in the West. He also wrote on the roots of wildlife protection as a goal of natural resources conservation and traced the incorporation of broader agro-environmental goals into conservation programs.

Throughout, Helms remained committed to his roots in North Carolina, returning frequently to his home and contributing to local and state historical and cultural preservation. Even his project to complete a book-length biography of Hugh Hammond Bennett, still unfinished at his death, had links to his North Carolina heritage. Bennett, creator and long-time SCS chief, was born in Anson County, North Carolina, not too far from the Helms home place in neighboring Union County.

While Helms’s published work will make a lasting contribution to our understanding of the central role of soil and soil conservation in agriculture and land use, he and his work will also live on through the many agricultural historians and soil science and conservation professionals he influenced over the years as mentor, colleague, and friend. He had a genuine love of helping other scholars, especially those just coming up in the profession, with whom he almost invariably became life-long friends. He sought me out and supported me when I first arrived at USDA and continued to be there for me through the challenges of the next twenty years. As his attention turned more toward car racing and baseball in his retirement, our interactions became less frequent, but in a sure sign that his love of helping young scholars had never waned, he invariably answered with an enthusiastic “yes!” whenever I asked him to stand in for me to present the Agricultural History Society’s prize at the annual National History Day awards ceremony. That beaming smile as he posed for photos with the young winners exemplifies the Douglas Helms who will remain with me forever.

Over the last few months, I have received messages from many of his friends and colleagues, and while all of them acknowledge his historical scholarship, it is that enthusiasm for helping others in their work, along with his kindness and his spirit of fun, that stand out in their memories. A selection of those personal recollections and fond farewells follows.

When I was researching *Breaking the Land* at the National Archives, Doug made suggestions for records that were crucial to my work. He had a firm grasp of the Records of the Secretary of Agriculture and of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and as a historian understood what would be significant to my re-
search. Doug was a friend, and in the year I spent at the Archives in 1978-79, I made other friends who along with Doug invited me to play weekly basketball games and have a pint at the Keyhole Bar.

Pete Daniel, Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, retired

In my conversations with him I was always struck by how much he knew. And he wore his erudition lightly—he was as comfortable as an old shoe.

David Danbom, North Dakota State University, retired

Doug was a terrific historian—his carefully crafted studies were valuable and his advice was of enormous help in the early days of my work on the USDA. He epitomized the essence of what defines a public servant—always helpful, full of insights on where I might find obscure material, a good listener who tried to connect me to archival holdings that might yield the kind of information I was looking for, and a cheerful soul. We will miss him.

Louis Ferleger, Boston University

He was tremendously knowledgeable about things agricultural, especially soils, and over the years he helped me a lot and often kept me from making erroneous claims! He was also as gracious a man as I’ve met in academe: He was always kind, compassionate, and considerate of others, particularly of older people. Whenever he stopped in Chapel Hill (which was fairly frequently), he made it a point to get together with retired professors and librarians who meant a lot to him when he was an undergrad here. He felt the same way about his mentors at Florida State, especially about his adviser, William Warren Rogers. In his quiet, unassuming way, Doug really made a difference to the field of agricultural history, to the Agricultural History Society, and to the members of the society who knew him.

Peter Coclanis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Doug was in many ways a private man, but I thoroughly enjoyed his company. He was an excellent raconteur and a master of understated delivery. He was also a kind man. When I was a poor graduate student doing research in Washington, he always bought me a good meal and listened to my tales of woe. I am so sorry he won’t be in Washington to celebrate the Centennial [of the Agricultural History Society] with us.

Claire Strom, Rollins College

When I think of Douglas Helms, it’s his wicked sense of humor that first comes to mind. We would tease him mercilessly about his southern manners, background, and roots, and he would fire back something about typical Yankee condescension (much of it unprintable). In addition to his passion for history, he was also a great fan of baseball, especially his beloved Nationals. Doug was also
one of the few remaining people on earth whose preferred method of communication was the telephone. The phone would ring, I’d pick up the receiver, and he’d be right in the middle of a sentence, right in the middle of a conversation already started. I would kid him that his party line could be interrupted at any moment. He was a true gentleman and loyal friend.

David Vaught, Texas A&M University

I first met Doug at the National Archives when I was doing research at the Natural Resources Branch as a PhD student in the early 1970s. I was young and naive, and like many young scholars, found the National Archives intimidating. All the archivists were helpful, but Doug was about my age and performed his job with a genuine desire to guide inexperienced researchers. Not only did he go out of his way to find materials germane to my topic but he taught me how to do archival research. He genuinely liked people, he loved history, and he enjoyed his work. We shared many interests, including major league baseball, college football, and bluegrass music. Doug was always good company. He loved beer, but he loved conversation even more. I remember visiting him in Washington, and he once guided us over several Civil War battlefields. I once asked my student [whom Douglas had hired] what it was like to work for Doug and he responded: “Well, he’s not the most organized person I’ve ever met, but he’s certainly one of the nicest.” I smiled at that comment, remembering the books and papers stacked here, there, and everywhere in Doug’s house. I will miss him, but we will all remember his generosity, decency, good-humor, and kindness.

Don Pisani, University of Oklahoma, retired

I first met Doug doing research in the National Archives in 1979 in obscure US Forest Service records. He took a helpful interest in my project and permitted me to accompany him in pulling trays in the old downtown archives. Thereafter when we met at conferences our friendship continued as he enjoyed good humor and repartee. When his career expanded into the NRCS, he was always helpful in making it possible for graduate students to obtain summer internships in his office. Doug’s efforts on behalf of one of my students launched him into a career in archival work in Nevada. That student gratefully remembers Doug and will do so throughout his career. I remember that Doug not only became good friends with me but with others here in the West—some joshed him about his southernisms, but he gave as good as he took on those regional issues. We sorely miss his absence.

Bill Rowley, University of Nevada-Reno, retired

I met Doug Helms when he worked as an archivist at the National Archives. I told him about my project, and he instantly recommended several collections that I should consult. In the days ahead, I learned that Doug had a detailed, indeed, deep understanding not only of the general collections in his branch but also a precise knowledge about their contents. He knew how to find things, and he did so tenaciously. Doug was not only a skilled archivist but also a solid
Agricultural historian whose work helped inform me about a number of subjects relating to soil conservation, agriculture, and the Great Plains. All of this became increasingly clear the more that I worked with him over the years. Doug always was generous to me with his time, and he was a selfless historian. Beyond his professionalism, Doug’s invariable good spirits, even buoyant personality, could not help but brighten the day of anyone who worked with him. Only a few days before he died, I had a question that I knew Doug probably could answer off the top of his head. I delayed the call. I will always miss him.

Doug Hurt, Purdue University

Douglas always had a keen interest in soils and landscapes and how they influenced human settlement and agriculture. He was a frequent visitor to our Soil Survey Division offices located a couple of floors below his own office in the USDA South Building in Washington, DC. He particularly had a close affinity with Hari Eswaran, former National Leader of World Soil Resources, where I was working as a geographer. Our regular interactions led to our collaborating on several interesting projects. Douglas was a joy to work with and always brought a supportive positive energy. I’ll never forget our frequent discussions where he provided insightful ideas interspersed with his Southern charm and humor.

Paul Reich, Soil Survey Division, NRCS

I remember Douglas Helms as a great boss. He treated me like a colleague from the start. He let me do oral history interviews, travel to the Midwest, and write a small book about the SCS response to the 1993 floods in the Midwest. He was the happiest person I ever worked around. He enjoyed the occasional beer! I think the most unhappy I ever saw him was when the NPR station stopped playing bluegrass and went to all news.

Steven Phillips, Towson University

There is a lot to say about Doug’s professional contributions, but my remembrances are more personal. He gave me the opportunity of a lifetime when he brought me on as an intern and then gave me a full-time job. We had a fruitful working partnership and we had a lot of fun together. He was a great teacher, mentor, and, most of all, a friend to me. For that I will be forever grateful. He called only a week before he passed. He had just returned from Europe—Monaco, I believe—where he had taken in the Formula One Grand Prix. (Car racing, North Carolina, baseball, and bluegrass music were his four great passions outside of history.) He called me from his home office where he was writing on his Hugh Bennett biography—a monster of a manuscript if there was one, I am sure. He had some question or another, but he really just wanted to shoot the breeze. Those conversations, along with his good company, are what I will miss about him the most. Above all, Doug was a kind, humane, and generous person. That is how I will always remember him.

Sam Stalcup, former NRCS historian