



MATTHEW PUTNEY, COURIER PHOTO EDITOR

Farmer Dennis Messingham, left, is shown with land owners Mark Jackson, center, and his mother, Jane Jackson, on land they have practiced conservation measures on for decades in rural Cedar Falls.

Conscious conservation

Family uses no-till, soil-saving practices on Cedar Falls land

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CEDAR FALLS — Dennis Messingham remembers the grilling he received when Ken Jackson interviewed him about renting 135 acres of farmland five years ago.

It didn't let up until Messingham managed to get in a question of his own about the planting practices he planned to use on the field.

"I asked him if I could no-till the beans into the corn, and I thought he was going to faint," recalled Messingham, who rotates between planting the two crops. He assumed Jackson, already in his 80s, would favor the older practice of tilling the field to prepare it for planting rather than the no-till approach Messingham uses to better control erosion.

But his question "was the right answer," said the farmer.

That's because Jackson, who died in May 2016 at the age of 86, had already significantly invested in conservation efforts on the field, located at the northwest edge of Cedar Falls. Since 1988, about 45 acres of the land has been terraced, a conservation practice that minimizes

erosion and washing nitrogen from fertilizers into waterways on hilly or sloped land.

A sign next to the field near Union and Westbrook roads commemorates that decision with the words "Saving our soil for decades." It includes the names KLJ Farms (for Kenneth Leigh Jackson) and Black Hawk Soil and Water Conservation District, which encourages such farming practices and paid for the sign. It was installed several months ago, replacing an older, worn sign the agency also installed.

It's the only sign noting the use of terraces in the county. Officials say Jackson's family has been continuously using the practice longer than any other landowner here.

Jackson, who owned Century Pattern Co. in Cedar Falls, wasn't a farmer.

"He always wanted to farm," said Jane Jackson, Ken's wife. "When this (land) came available, we had some money and we got it from the bank. He loved to come out and walk the fields."

They also owned other farmland across the Cedar Valley where Ken had implemented various conservation practices over the years. "I would probably say it was in the mid-'60s when he started to put land in conservation reserve," said Mark Jackson, his son. So his father

welcomed the opportunity to install the terraces on this land.

Elaine Hammer, conservation technician with the Natural Resources Conservation Services in Waterloo, helped lay out Jackson's terraces. The NRCS works closely with the conservation district.

"It's a little dike we built up, a little dam," she explained. A system of tiles also was installed just below the surface with a series of intakes at the bottom of each terrace, allowing the water to drain. The terraces curve around the sloped land, slowing the water.

"They're normally on this type of land," she said. "This was a perfect piece for this."

Terraces are partially paid for with federal cost-sharing funds on land that qualifies because of topography. Farmers who install the terraces are required to keep them in place for a set number of years — which the Jackson land has far exceeded. The terraces have remained despite the growing size of equipment and newer conservation practices some farmers use instead.

"It's all about carrying on Dad's legacy," said Mark Jackson. "He knew that with bad farming measures, the character of the farm wouldn't last."

Some who installed the terraces in Jackson's era eventually removed them.

"A lot of people like to knock these terraces out these days," said Messingham. "That's a really bad thing. I don't see any reason to take them out if they're already there."

"In certain parts of the state, probably Northeast Iowa, it's still pretty common" to have the terraces, Hammer added. "Building new ones is down, really, throughout the state."

Farming Jackson's land was a good fit for Messingham.

"I've been for the conservation ever since I started farming" in 1984, he said. "The rest of the farm that isn't terraced, I farm on the contour. We also are minimal till to no till — no till mostly."

In addition, he plants a cereal rye cover crop after harvest. Along with stopping erosion, cover crops help control weeds.

Messingham acknowledged not everyone farming on hilly land will go through the expense of terracing, which also has the potential of reducing crop yields since not as many acres can be planted in a field. He suggested those farmers may use some of the other methods to slow erosion or keep nitrogen in fertilizers out of waterways.

"I truly think everybody is working towards the conservation end of it," he said. "The Jacksons just went a little further."