

DINÉ DABIK'IS

(A Friend of the People)

BY LORRAINE B. KINGDON

Leonard Isaacson cares. His 37-year career as Apache County Cooperative Extension director proves it.

His philosophy is simple.

"I try to settle on some things that will do some good," he says. After working with Navajos, Apaches, Hopis and Anglos for as long as he has, Isaacson also admits wryly, "They don't always take."

But most of his projects work out—eventually.

His work at Many Farms, on the Navajo Reservation about 100 miles northwest of Window Rock, is aimed at helping the Many Farms Cooperative farmers make better use of their land.

Each winter, many Navajo farmers buy expensive hay to supplement their livestock through the cold weather. The farmers have been unable to grow much of their own hay because, although some water is available for irrigation, the saltier clay soils often limit the kinds of crops that can succeed.

So Isaacson teamed up with Bahe Billy, a respected Navajo soil scientist, and the Many Farms Cooperative to design a five-acre demonstration plot containing cool season forage varieties that would succeed on Many Farms land. Irrigation water comes from the local reservoir.

Earlier, Isaacson had conducted successful winter rye and winter wheat pasture tests with dry-land, or nonirrigation-using, farmers in other Navajo reservation locations.

"My aim was to find representative farmers who were already growing crops and enlist them as cooperators," Isaacson says.

Once he did that, and the farmers saw the successes their neighbors were having, "then other people paid attention." Isaacson held his first field day in 1987 at Many Farms.

"It was the first one of its kind in the area and it was successful," he says. Of course, the mutton stew and fry bread served for lunch, helped.

Ten years ago, Isaacson decided to learn to speak the Navajo language so he would be able to communicate, particularly with older tribal members.

Learning to speak Navajo as an Anglo adult is a daunting task. Isaacson took classes one night a week for six months.

"It took a lot of patience," he says. But it paid off. "I was practicing my Navajo one time while presenting a talk at a meeting—and was I surprised—all the people there just applauded. Of course, they tease me a lot, too, when I get the words mixed up," he says, laughing.

Isaacson's interaction with Navajo leaders at Lukachukai explains his success. At a recent meeting, chapter leaders were discussing the possibility of increasing income through development of tourism and improved agriculture.

Isaacson listens, asks questions and responds to their questions. As a result of the meeting, he is now collecting information on chapter-area water. If the Lukachukai chapter officers decide to begin farming on a larger scale, he can call on The University of Arizona experts. And if they decide on

tourist facilities, he will be there with help.

Some projects are smaller in scale. Isaacson works with David Silversmith on the Navajo New Dawn program.

Silversmith started the program, which he named after his daughter, Dawn, in 1982 to rekindle interest and expertise in home fruit-and-vegetable gardens. Isaacson helps by holding workshops, and training master gardeners, who in turn, teach other Navajo families the arts of growing vegetables and fruit trees, and drying and preserving the crops.

Isaacson knows his territory—as well he should. He was born and raised in St. Johns. The house he grew up in is but a block away from the Extension office.

After serving in the U.S. Army in World War II and earning bachelor's and master's degrees in agricultural education from the UA, Isaacson taught vocational agriculture for four years in Snowflake, which is less than 40 miles west of St. Johns. When the Apache County Extension job opened, he grabbed the opportunity.

After 37 years, Isaacson will retire in June to care for his small herd of Herefords. "But," he says, "I'm thinking about working part time with Indian agriculture."

Isaacson always will care.

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ARIZONA'S INDIAN RESERVATIONS

