



Hardy Webster Campbell

Dakota Images

Hardy Webster Campbell combined his firsthand knowledge of dry-land farming with his talents as a publicist to play a vital role in the settlement of the semiarid West.

Campbell was born on a Vermont farm in 1850 and worked at various nonagricultural occupations until 1879, when he filed claims on a total of 480 acres in Brown County, Dakota Territory. He served on the first Brown County Commission and helped to found the county's first rural school near the town of Putney, which was established on his land in 1886. In 1887, he built the town's first store.

After several crop failures during the waning years of the Great Dakota Boom, Campbell began to experiment with farming techniques designed to conserve soil moisture. By the turn of the century, he had established a system called "Scientific Soil Culture," which, he maintained, could assure successful farming of semiarid lands even in drought years. Based on deep fall plowing, subsurface packing, light seeding, and frequent cultivation, the system also utilized a Campbell invention called the subsurface packer, designed to conserve moisture by pressing the soil firmly at the bottom of a furrow while stirring the surface to a mulch.

Campbell quickly came to the attention of major railroads throughout the Great Plains and Southwest. During the first three decades of the 1900s, he managed demonstration farms and lectured at stops along several rail lines. He also wrote for many agricultural publications, produced several books, and established two journals: *Western Soil Culture* and *Campbell's Scientific Farmer*. The latter attained a circulation of thirty thousand within six years. From 1907 to 1914, he offered courses in dry-land farming, irrigation, and horticulture through his Correspondence School of Soil Culture.

While some revered Campbell as a "practical farmer," agricultural scientists resented his ties to the promoters of marginal lands and argued that no single farming formula was droughtproof. By the time of his death in 1937, Campbell's system had been largely forgotten. His death certificate listed him as a "fireman" for the Southern Pacific, one of the railroads for whom Campbell's "Scientific Soil Culture" system had attracted scores of settlers during the early 1900s.

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