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A WINDOW INTO THE PAST. . .

# FRANCIS JOSEPH MARSCHNER

## USDA GEOGRAPHER



These days we are used to seeing land use imagery from space, with computers receiving and collating billions of bits of data from satellites in a single pass over the continent. Francis Marschner, a USDA geographer in both the Bureau of

Using survey field notes, aerial photographs, and statistical compilations, Francis Marschner created the first authoritative medium-scale U.S. land use map in 1950. This version of the map, published in 1958, depicts twelve categories of land use, ranging from cropland and pastureland to desert and marshland. The heir to Marschner's work at ERS is the *Major Uses of Land in the United States, 1997*, available at [www.ers.usda.gov/publications/sb973](http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/sb973)

of the United States. The *Major Land Uses* series has been published every 5 years ever since, and is still the only comprehensive picture of all land uses for the U.S. prepared by the Federal government. The Association of American

Agricultural Economics (BAE) and Economic Research Service, went about it the hard way in the 1920s and 1930s. By painstakingly consulting survey field notes, aerial photographs, and statistical compilations, he fashioned continental scale maps of land use. This pioneering work established the interdisciplinary approach to land use research in BAE and ERS that informed conservation and land development programs at the Federal and State level, and expanded cartographic methods for depicting economic and physical data.

Born in Austria in 1882, Marschner studied at the Cartographic Institute in Berlin, before immigrating to the United States in 1915. His work at USDA began with the *Atlas of American Agriculture*, published between 1922 and 1936. In 1945, he began work on *Major Land Uses in the United States*, published in 1950, which contained the first authoritative medium-scale U.S. land use map, printed in the *National Atlas*

Geographers awarded this work its citation for meritorious work, the hallmark of Marschner's career.

Another major work was *Land Use Patterns in the United States*, a collection of 168 aerial photographs depicting the variety of landforms across America. Marschner received USDA's Superior Accomplishment Award in 1947, and in 1963 was elected a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Marschner retired from USDA's BAE in 1952, but continued to work under a special unpaid joint appointment in ERS and USDA's Agricultural Research Service, walking nearly 7 miles to work each day. Marschner never married and had no relatives in the country, but, according to the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, he had "the devotion of his 'family' of friends in the Department of Agriculture." He died on January 31, 1966, walking to work at age 83.