

INTERVIEW WITH DEAN GRAFF  
BY JIM BARR

November 1, 2013

1                   MR. BARR: This is Jim Barr. It's November 1<sup>st</sup>,  
2                   2013. I'm in Ainsworth, Nebraska, talking with Dean Graff.  
3                   Dean, would you want to just kind of give us a little  
4                   background on your history and what all you did, and then  
5                   how long you were involved with the NRD and that sort of  
6                   thing.

7                   MR. GRAFF: Well, I been kind of close to  
8                   conservation for several years. My dad was one of the  
9                   original board members, promoters of the KBR Soil  
10                  Conservation District, which includes three counties, Keya  
11                  Paha, Brown, and Rock, at that time. So, I was aware of the  
12                  organization and things as time went on. And then I kind of  
13                  got drifted off doing other things. Got married, of course,  
14                  went to Omaha, worked in the stockyards a couple of years.  
15                  City life wasn't for me, this old country boy.

16                 MR. BARR: Where were you from, originally?

17                 MR. GRAFF: Right here.

18                 MR. BARR: Okay.

19                 MR. GRAFF: Born ten miles north of Johnstown.

20                 And then I worked for the U.S. -- after I got  
21                 married, I worked up here for the Agriculture Department,  
22                 (indiscernible) Agriculture, measuring land, measuring corn,  
23                 for corn loans. Farm program, could be in the early '60s,  
24                 we had to measure about every field in the county,  
25                 three-county area. I mean, actually did. A lot of them we

1 had to walk them, because they could back up, take -- some  
2 of them had been into grass for years, so we kind of had to  
3 use our imaginations (indiscernible). That was the -- what  
4 did they call that originally?

5 MR. BARR: Soil --

6 MR. GRAFF: I can't remember.

7 MR. BARR: The CCC was Commodity Credit  
8 Corporation, the Soil Bank, and Idle Acres, and I don't  
9 remember. I measured some, too, when I was in high school  
10 and college in the summers. Had the chain and the stakes  
11 and all that sort of thing.

12 MR. GRAFF: It was all part of the total ag  
13 program.

14 MR. BARR: Right.

15 MR. GRAFF: It was coming into being as time went  
16 on there.

17 And then the local district, local soil and water  
18 conservation, SWCD they was known as in them days. They  
19 organized and they decided they wanted a manager. So, I  
20 went and had a talk with them. My dad was not a director  
21 anymore, so that rules out any conflict. And I went to work  
22 for them in '68, somewhere along there. No. I got my  
23 dates -- my dates are not (indiscernible). And then shortly  
24 after -- I was there about two and a half years then the  
25 state come along and put in this new system of natural

1 resource districts. Some of our districts were combined up  
2 here. It was pretty simple for most of the state, because  
3 they had watersheds. We had nothing up here. There was  
4 SWCD boards. Like you say, they were a bunch of jolly good  
5 fellows. They hardly knew what was going on, so we had no  
6 rules, no office procedures, no board rules, no nothing.  
7 Just started from scratch.

8 The first manager, he didn't get along with them.  
9 When the district was formed, they kept me. I was manager  
10 here and he was manager of Valentine. Well, I could see I  
11 didn't dare go to Valentine and try to throw my weight  
12 around, intercity conflict. So I just kind of set back and  
13 they left me down here as assistant manager. Well, he got  
14 in trouble with his board up there and they fired him after  
15 about a year. So I just went up and told them I'd try it.  
16 I put in about, not quite 20 years, I guess. We had our  
17 conflicts, of course, of getting organized. Board assuming  
18 the responsibilities as put out by the Legislature through  
19 the Natural Resource Commission in Lincoln. They were our  
20 parent bosses.

21 MR. BARR: You had a local member that was on that  
22 board, didn't you?

23 MR. GRAFF: Yeah, Jim Cook, from Mills. There was  
24 a lot of conflicts of interest for a couple years. And as  
25 time -- I thought maybe as time went on, they'd wear off.

1 But it took longer than I thought.

2 MR. BARR: What sort of conflicts?

3 MR. GRAFF: Well, they -- I had one director, he  
4 was on the old SWCD in Cherry County. And after about six,  
5 seven years as an NRD, he still had no idea, no concept of  
6 what was going on, no matter how much preaching they did.  
7 So, we had quite a learning (indiscernible) for all of us.  
8 We had taxing authority, so we did have responsibilities to  
9 the public, accountability. (indiscernible) district,  
10 Sandhills District at that time, a valuation was pretty low.  
11 We didn't hardly have enough money to operate on for the  
12 first five years.

13 MR. BARR: What sort of activities did you do  
14 those first few years?

15 MR. GRAFF: Well, at the prior to the onslaught of  
16 this changeover, the Cherry County Board had made contract  
17 with the telephone company to reseed, reestablish the sod.  
18 They buried a cable clear across the United States, remember  
19 that?

20 MR. BARR: Oh, yeah.

21 MR. GRAFF: That went right through here, went  
22 right south of town. The had a contract with them to reseed  
23 and (indiscernible). And we worked that for years, and we  
24 never did really accomplish it in Cherry County on account  
25 of Sandhills. There's no quick fix. So, after a while --

1 and then we gave -- as we learned more of the  
2 responsibilities, I got the board educated a little bit  
3 (indiscernible) that we were really not to be in conflict  
4 with local business, local contractors. So, we kind of went  
5 ahead and finished up what they had started under the  
6 previous manager. And then we sold some -- we had a  
7 Caterpillar and a loader, trucks, and we disposed of that  
8 property. Stuck with our tree planting, blowout control,  
9 planned grazing systems. We co-signed with the federal Soil  
10 Conservation Service on the grassland management. It was  
11 their program, but we had joint responsibilities. Erosion  
12 control, that was the main --

13 MR. BARR: Did you have quite a bit of blowout  
14 problem up here?

15 MR. GRAFF: Yeah. Cherry County's terrible. It's  
16 just -- from Valentine west, it's almost one big blowout.  
17 And that's -- when they (indiscernible). And they got --  
18 then, as time when on, politics got involved on the Lincoln  
19 level with the Natural Resource Commission. Programs kind  
20 of somewhat changed and we sort of drifted along there for  
21 two or three years on our own. But we made our expenses  
22 along with what little tax money we had by working blowouts  
23 and planting trees and selling them, reseeding.

24 MR. BARR: Did you have any interrelationship with  
25 the irrigation district?

1           MR. GRAFF: Not really, no, just minor. They had  
2 hired local people to do their reseeding of the  
3 (indiscernible).

4           MR. BARR: I was trying to remember the name of  
5 the man that was in charge or staff person of the district.

6           MR. GRAFF: Manager Welch?

7           MR. BARR: Yeah, Welch.

8           MR. GRAFF: Harlan Welch. He still lives over  
9 here.

10          MR. BARR: Okay. He isn't still active in the  
11 district?

12          MR. GRAFF: No.

13          MR. BARR: I'm going to write that down. I've  
14 been trying to figure his name. Harlow, is it?

15          MR. GRAFF: Harlan. He had that ongoing war with  
16 the Legislature over some (indiscernible). I don't know how  
17 his board let him do what he did.

18          MR. BARR: Yeah, he was --

19          MR. GRAFF: I went with him a time or two down to  
20 hearing -- legislative hearings. After two trips, I decided  
21 that wasn't my (indiscernible).

22          MR. BARR: Now, did the district have any  
23 relationship with the proposed Norden Dam or was that  
24 outside of your district? I can't remember exactly.

25          MR. GRAFF: No, it was right over here,

1 (indiscernible).

2 MR. BARR: Yeah, that's what I thought, yeah.

3 MR. GRAFF: We was pretty careful. The feelings  
4 were so evenly split over it. We tried to (indiscernible),  
5 tried to be neutral. I don't know if you -- you get in  
6 trouble -- maybe this is not for that, but you've been down  
7 to Butte?

8 MR. BARR: Yeah.

9 MR. GRAFF: You know what trouble a manager can  
10 get in?

11 MR. BARR: Oh, yeah, I remember that.

12 MR. GRAFF: I felt sorry for him. He was a nice  
13 guy. There was a gentleman that was over there at that time  
14 in Butte is now manager up here in Valentine.

15 MR. BARR: Oh, is that right?

16 MR. GRAFF: (Indiscernible).

17 MR. BARR: And that is --

18 MR. GRAFF: I can't say it.

19 MR. BARR: Okay, that's fine. I'll figure it out.

20 MR. GRAFF: I can't say his name.

21 MR. BARR: Yeah, I --

22 MR. GRAFF: And I've known him for years. That's  
23 part of getting old.

24 MR. BARR: I know. That's why I asked you about  
25 Harlan Welch. I couldn't remember his name.



1           MR. GRAFF: Alzheimer's kicking in real strong  
2 with me here.

3           MR. BARR: Yeah.

4           MR. GRAFF: We got some things going, watersheds  
5 being old, they still had a lot of political problems. And  
6 they couldn't (indiscernible). They had to get their two  
7 boards lined up on the same track. And we was starting new  
8 so we -- if we done something wrong, they expected it of us.

9           MR. BARR: Now, in terms of soil and water  
10 districts, was it just the two, KBR and Cherry County or was  
11 there more?

12          MR. GRAFF: No, there was -- the one down east, I  
13 don't know what they called the one down east.

14          MR. BARR: Oh, okay.

15          MR. GRAFF: On the other end of the Niobrara  
16 River.

17          MR. BARR: Yeah, okay.

18          MR. GRAFF: Holt County.

19          MR. BARR: Yeah, Holt County.

20          MR. GRAFF: They kind of had their own.

21          MR. BARR: Yeah, okay.

22          MR. GRAFF: They kind of had their own district.  
23 We had -- the original one here was Keya Paha, Brown, and  
24 Rock. We kept our Cat loader, Caterpillar crawler around a  
25 couple of years. We did a little blowout work. There was a

1 lot of little nasty jobs not big enough to call a contractor  
2 in. And yet the (indiscernible) wanted it done. So, for a  
3 price, we did them.

4 MR. BARR: There was some irrigation development  
5 in the Sandhills. Did you end up getting involved in the  
6 reclamation of any of those when they were trying to quit  
7 irrigating them or --

8 MR. GRAFF: No, not really.

9 MR. BARR: How has the blowout -- when I was real  
10 young, I remember a lot of problems. Has that been kind of  
11 brought under control up here or is it still a pretty active  
12 problem?

13 MR. GRAFF: Well, it's pretty well under control,  
14 I should say. Two reasons. One was in the early years, we  
15 did go out and try to smooth it off. Lots of them reseeded.  
16 And the Soil Conservation Service found out. They come in  
17 with their graze -- planned grazing system. That was the  
18 biggest thing to help cure these blowouts. We really wasn't  
19 keeping up with our reseeding and mulching program. But  
20 there's a lot of ranchers didn't want to fence them. And  
21 you had to keep livestock out. But they come along with  
22 this planned grazing system and rotation certain times of  
23 year, was the biggest thing that cured a lot of these  
24 blowouts.

25 There are blowouts around that are still active,

1 and they always will be, because they're big. But it was a  
2 good program.

3 MR. BARR: Any other programs or projects or  
4 anything that you kind of want to mention?

5 MR. GRAFF: Well, I had the second project -- I  
6 think it was the second project after the Legislature  
7 authorized the state to cost share. Norfolk had the first  
8 one.

9 MR. BARR: Yep.

10 MR. GRAFF: Maskenthine. I got to be real good  
11 friends with -- well, what's his name, the manager?

12 MR. BARR: Steve Oltman.

13 MR. GRAFF: Steve, yeah, Oltman. Thank goodness  
14 all of his deals didn't brush off on me.

15 (Laughter.)

16 Him and I, we were good friends. On the start, he  
17 coached me in a lot of this stuff, big help to me. But I  
18 had the second project. It was over here on Plum Creek,  
19 Keya Paha County. The stream over there, the highway was  
20 coming through relocating Highway 12 crossing this creek.  
21 So, the local people out of Springview got to pushing it.  
22 They wanted a fish pond for their kids. So they came up to  
23 the district and got our endorsement. I went to the  
24 Commission and got some cost share funds to build the  
25 highway that would be -- serve as the dam across this creek.

1 We made quite a little fish pond there for the kids, and  
2 still working great.

3 MR. BARR: Was that one of the first road dam  
4 structures in the state?

5 MR. GRAFF: Right. It was the second one.

6 MR. BARR: Okay, that's become --

7 MR. GRAFF: I might be wrong, but I think it was.

8 MR. BARR: That's become a pretty popular program,  
9 or, you know --

10 MR. GRAFF: And that was something that we could  
11 use and take care and get in on right quick, with the help  
12 of the State Commission. I got quite a little money through  
13 the Commission for structure stuff up here before the  
14 watersheds in the old districts really got their programs  
15 settled. And of course, once they got going, then they  
16 talked about millions of dollars and we talked about  
17 \$20,000. So, we got pushed aside.

18 MR. BARR: How has the overall conservation  
19 situation changed from the time you were young until now?  
20 Anything you'd like to mention?

21 MR. GRAFF: Well, of course, we all know the tree  
22 planting program progressed as time went on. And the method  
23 of getting survival with the help of the college forestry  
24 and all them, we had different ways of getting better  
25 survival as time went on. We needed a lot of them out here

1 and we did, we planted, oh, 150- to 160,000 trees here every  
2 year. We had a tree planting machine. We had mowing  
3 machines to take care of the weeds. And the biggest thing I  
4 that this part of the state was planned grazing systems,  
5 rotation grazing when they started moving these cattle  
6 certain times a year according to the grass that was there.  
7 We saw a vast improvement real quick in the pastures. And  
8 that helped the blowout situation considerable. We used  
9 to -- when they started them, you could walk out here in any  
10 pasture in the area and see bare sand between clumps. Now  
11 you don't do that. It's kind of hard nowadays to do that.

12 MR. BARR: How much use was the electric fence in  
13 this planned grazing system? Has that been used up here or  
14 is it pretty much regular fencing here?

15 MR. GRAFF: No, it has come on here lately, later  
16 years.

17 MR. BARR: But they had done quite a bit before.

18 MR. GRAFF: Oh, yeah. They cross-fenced some of  
19 the big pastures. In the olden days, you know, a rancher  
20 had one huge pasture in the summertime. They all went  
21 there. Then, of course, the windmills all happened to be  
22 blowouts. And another thing now, the biggest thing  
23 nowadays, of course, is sun power.

24 MR. BARR: Solar powered waterers?

25 MR. GRAFF: Solar powered. We have a rancher in

1 Valentine where his wife is a United States Senator now.

2 MR. BARR: Oh, sure.

3 MR. GRAFF: We put a lot of trees out there on  
4 their ranch. And they did a lot of cross-fencing. They've  
5 piped water, miles and miles of pipeline now. And they use  
6 these solar heats, solar machines to run their wells, and  
7 they can use them to run their fences. (Indiscernible) they  
8 can divide a pasture and use about a third of it at a time  
9 or -- it's a big help in the management of the forage out  
10 there. And they got more knowledge, of course, on grass  
11 types, a variety of grasses. Some grass has more nutrients  
12 than other.

13 MR. BARR: Sure.

14 MR. GRAFF: And some of the sand, there's only  
15 certain varieties that will grow. I don't care what you do.  
16 Progress has been a big changeover.

17 MR. BARR: When you look at your boards, any other  
18 people involved in this, any other individuals that you  
19 think stood out in leadership or -- you mentioned Jim Cook  
20 as being on the State Commission.

21 MR. GRAFF: Yeah.

22 MR. BARR: Anybody else that had a role up in this  
23 area, a significant role?

24 MR. GRAFF: Well, Cherry County had some pretty  
25 active people. They had one Hereford breeder up there,

1 raised purebred Herefords. He was real active in  
2 (indiscernible) rotation grazing and -- most of the ranchers  
3 bought into the program real -- it wasn't too hard to  
4 convince them something needed to be done, and they all kind  
5 of went along.

6 MR. BARR: About -- I can't remember where in the  
7 south side, where your district versus the, what would be  
8 Lower -- or Upper Loup. Would that be the one next to you?  
9 Roughly, where does that line run?

10 MR. GRAFF: Oh, it's --

11 MR. BARR: How much south of here, for instance?

12 MR. GRAFF: About 14 miles.

13 MR. BARR: Okay.

14 MR. GRAFF: Maybe not quite that far.

15 MR. BARR: I was just -- I couldn't remember  
16 exactly how far.

17 MR. GRAFF: It said they were laid out on  
18 hydrologic -- when the drainage goes to the -- up here,  
19 that's where the line went.

20 MR. BARR: Going west, roughly where do you --  
21 where was the end of your district going west, about?

22 MR. GRAFF: West, Cherry County.

23 MR. BARR: Okay. Did you --

24 MR. GRAFF: Pretty big area.

25 MR. BARR: Yes, oh, yes. Very big area.

1 MR. GRAFF: I went from little ol' county like  
2 Brown and Rock.

3 MR. BARR: Well, Cherry's bigger than some states,  
4 isn't it?

5 MR. GRAFF: Yeah. North half of Cherry County and  
6 I had part of Brown, part of west part of Keya Paha, and a  
7 little bit of Rock. And, of course, that upset our board of  
8 directors. We had to reestablish all the voting districts.

9 MR. BARR: Oh, yeah.

10 MR. GRAFF: Quite a job to take a bunch of farmers  
11 and ranchers and put together a set of, what do I want to  
12 call them -- rules and regulations or board policies, --  
13 board policies, district policies, employee policies,  
14 district manager's policies. See, we had nothing. I had to  
15 put all of them together and sell them to the -- sell them  
16 to some of these old ranchers was pretty hard to do.

17 MR. BARR: What's the board size now and what was  
18 the interim board, or do you remember on the interim board?

19 MR. GRAFF: The interim board was 17. I think --  
20 it wasn't quite 17. Eleven.

21 MR. BARR: Okay.

22 MR. GRAFF: And we're down to nine.

23 MR. BARR: What -- as you saw this progress over  
24 the years, any -- not only in this district, but the  
25 district -- natural resource district, you worked with the



1 other districts statewide, so what observations would you  
2 like to have on just the whole general idea of the natural  
3 resource districts, maybe as it compared to what you might  
4 have thought it was originally?

5 MR. GRAFF: Well, I think the concept was long  
6 overdue. Prior to that time, there were no avenue really  
7 for the protection of our resources. And thank goodness,  
8 there was enough minds in the state to look into the future  
9 and see that we had to get a long-term plan laid out and  
10 established. And the original districts, which were  
11 groundwater districts and some of them flood control  
12 districts, each one of them had their own (indiscernible),  
13 kind of got everything in one pot. You got it sorted out  
14 and headed down one road. I think that was the biggest.  
15 And it wasn't easy and it took a while to do it. In fact,  
16 my son's still on the board.

17 MR. BARR: Oh, okay.

18 MR. GRAFF: He's been on the board 20 years. I've  
19 been gone a little over that, I guess.

20 MR. BARR: That's right, it's about a 40-year --  
21 it's about the 40<sup>th</sup> year next year, isn't it?

22 MR. GRAFF: I suppose it's going to be.

23 MR. BARR: '74 to '14, yep, that's going to be  
24 right at 40 --

25 MR. GRAFF: Actually, '62 -- '72 --

1           MR. BARR: Well, yeah, it was started and then the  
2 actual full elections were -- elected boards were '74, but,  
3 yeah, you're right.

4           MR. GRAFF: They couldn't have no elections for a  
5 couple of years.

6           MR. BARR: Right.

7           MR. GRAFF: And we had to put up with a vast  
8 number of boards, so, you know, not too much was  
9 accomplished.

10          MR. BARR: Some of them had 250 or more --

11          MR. GRAFF: Yeah. But as time went on, people saw  
12 the advantage and everybody pitched in and made it work.  
13 The Natural Resource Commission in Lincoln were as guilty as  
14 anybody else about following things. They got a couple of  
15 directors in there that after Dale Williams left that was  
16 pretty easily swayed and and some the special districts got  
17 to them. So, there was a down side there for a while until  
18 that got squared away. I think it's on a pretty forward  
19 track now.

20                 See, Niobrara River, we didn't have anything. We  
21 didn't have watersheds or nothing up there. So, everything  
22 was new up here.

23          MR. BARR: At this point, I guess, if you have  
24 anything you'd like to mention that -- this is your chance.

25          MR. GRAFF: No, I don't think so. No more than

1       you would expect from melding certain boards together,  
2       groups together under a new set of laws which state  
3       obligations. We were under the directions of Natural  
4       Resource Commission through the Legislature with taxing  
5       authority, so we had responsibilities which the old  
6       districts really didn't have.

7               MR. BARR: One thing I thought about, back to the  
8       time when they were forming the legislation, do you remember  
9       who was the state legislators up here or some of the  
10      legislators that you've had that might have been involved  
11      with this? I was trying to think who was up here at that  
12      time.

13              MR. GRAFF: Oh, Cherry County. Low valuation to  
14      pay secretaries by, office equipment. We had to start  
15      paying directors, mileage, one thing and another, which  
16      before that they didn't. So, we had to get out and make  
17      some of our own money.

18              MR. BARR: What sort of things did you do to do  
19      that?

20              MR. GRAFF: With our tree programs, reseeded,  
21      mulching. We did some fencing of tree belts where it was  
22      difficult for anybody to get somebody to hire.

23              MR. BARR: Did you get involved in any fencing on  
24      planned grazing?

25              MR. GRAFF: No.

1                   MR. BARR: Did SCS or NRCS get involved -- did  
2 they help pay for any of that or not?

3                   MR. GRAFF: No.

4                   MR. BARR: Did you have any state or federal money  
5 involved that you were able to locate for some of your  
6 projects? You mentioned the one from the state on the  
7 (indiscernible) Creek or --

8                   MR. GRAFF: Yeah, I've had several state money  
9 projects. I one big one here north of Ainsworth, or out  
10 northwest of Ainsworth. This was road (indiscernible) in  
11 cooperation with the county out here. Done a lot -- got one  
12 north of the airport. That was a big project, probably the  
13 (indiscernible). It started with the runways. It drained  
14 all the runways on the airport. Went down that draw toward  
15 Plum Creek about ten miles northwest a little bit. And  
16 every year, more than once a year, the county lost a bridge,  
17 no way to keep it in, due to sand. I finally got the  
18 project through and we were able to build a road structure  
19 in that valley. The Soil Conservation approved the  
20 construction man's job, moved out. We got a rain that  
21 night, and that dam was full of water the next morning.  
22 Water was running out (indiscernible).

23                   MR. BARR: Sometimes people would see the benefit  
24 pretty quickly, then, don't they.

25                   (Laughter.)

1                   MR. GRAFF: Yeah. I don't know how much better  
2 public relations (indiscernible) have.

3                   MR. BARR: Was that in the early years or later  
4 on?

5                   MR. GRAFF: Yeah. That was about the third  
6 project I did with the Commission. Wasn't too hard to get  
7 state money then, because the watersheds weren't ready,  
8 because they had to work out their deals with them  
9 (indiscernible). They already had programs ongoing that  
10 they had to finish. Those watersheds have been around a  
11 long time.

12                   MR. BARR: Back was it, in the '30s or '40s they  
13 started. I can't remember.

14                   MR. GRAFF: I don't know exactly.

15                   No, I enjoyed my work up there. The wages were  
16 terrible. I just could hardly make it the first four or  
17 five years.

18                   MR. BARR: Yeah.

19                   MR. GRAFF: But I thought enough of the project,  
20 the concept of it, I wanted to see the thing get going. So,  
21 I drove to Valentine every day.

22                   MR. BARR: That's a fair-sized drive.

23                   MR. GRAFF: I didn't think nothing of it. After a  
24 while, I got a son-in-law -- or a grandson in Omaha, and he  
25 drives 21 miles across Omaha to work mornings.

1 MR. BARR: My goodness.

2 MR. GRAFF: I'd a heck of a lot rather drive mine.

3 MR. BARR: Oh, yeah. You could probably go a  
4 little faster.

5 MR. GRAFF: Yeah. Hell, I've done it in 28  
6 minutes.

7 (Laughter.)

8 People driving Omaha to Lincoln to work and  
9 Lincoln, they drive to Omaha to work.

10 MR. BARR: I remember Sidney has more employees  
11 than they do population, because they draw people from 50 to  
12 60 miles around that drive into work there.

13 Well, let's see, is there anything else you'd like  
14 to mention? I really appreciate you doing this.

15 MR. GRAFF: I don't know what the -- any special  
16 projects the district is working right now and got going. I  
17 try to stay away from it. My son, he was chairman of the  
18 board for --

19 MR. BARR: Oh, sure.

20 MR. GRAFF: I think he's still chair.

21 MR. BARR: Unless you've got something else --

22 MR. GRAFF: We got a lot of work done in 30 years  
23 of -- after they established the cost share fund with the  
24 Commission.

25 MR. BARR: Yeah.

