

INTERVIEW WITH BILL HARTMANN

July 20, 2013

1 MR. BARR: This is Jim Barr. It's July 17th,
2 2013. I'm in Seward County visiting with Bill Hartmann and
3 wondered if you'd like to give a little bit of your
4 background to begin with, anyhow.

5 MR. HARTMANN: Well, started out in the
6 construction business in 1954, having returned from Korea
7 where, to my pleasure, I got to run a D8 CAT most of the
8 time and did not mind that at all. And we got married in
9 '53 and then started our business in '54. Primarily, we
10 started out doing fertilizing and lime spreading, but at
11 that time, the counties had their own soil conservation
12 districts. Seward County had one. And they approached some
13 three or four of us guys in the county, if we would take
14 over the responsibility of doing that conservation work,
15 they would get out of the business. And they had their own
16 equipment at that time. And so we agreed to do that. And
17 us four guys, different companies -- we're the only one
18 left, I guess, but we did that. And that was nice. It was
19 a good way to get started. I like to say we -- when we did,
20 we started with virtually nothing and we got most of that
21 left yet.

22 (Laughter.)

23 But we've -- it fed us.

24 MR. BARR: Did the County pay for the -- county
25 districts pay or did the individual farmers pay?

1 MR. HARTMANN: No, it was -- well, the federal
2 government was the cost sharer.

3 MR. BARR: Federal government.

4 MR. HARTMANN: But the districts, then they just
5 dissolved, and that's where the NRDs came in to replace
6 them. That was the idea, to have one entity rather than
7 scattered all over. And the NRDs started out doing what the
8 Soil Conservation was doing. And as we get into our talk,
9 I'll probably talk about how they've drifted away from that
10 goal, and much to our consternation, matter of fact. And it
11 was a good business. You had to work hard and I started out
12 with old machinery that probably wore out to the guy that I
13 bought it from. But we'd fortunately, would work all night
14 so we could run during the day. We, being, my brother,
15 Dick, was a school teacher, but he helped me. He was going
16 to school at that time. He helped me when he could, and
17 brother, Jim. And so we kept it going, and eventually grew
18 to a few more things and better equipment and to where we
19 are today with a -- I suppose Andy has a crew of a dozen, my
20 son, Andy.

21 MR. BARR: In the first years, what sort of work
22 were you doing?

23 MR. HARTMANN: Well, basically, terraces and dams
24 and waterways. And that was a -- early on, we had the
25 whirlwind terrace, if you recall those things, but that was

1 a beginning, cheap way of getting --

2 MR. BARR: Can you describe one of those?

3 MR. HARTMANN: They were a plow, Little Giant,
4 International, blunt-bottom plow. They had a group in Texas
5 for an augur splitting on the back where this dirt would fly
6 from the leg and then it would toss it about 12-15 feet.
7 And I suppose you'd go around 100 times, you'd have a pretty
8 good little mound of dirt out there. And we built miles and
9 miles of them, two and a half cents a foot.

10 MR. BARR: Did anybody use the old one-way file in
11 those?

12 MR. HARTMANN: Not much. They really didn't work
13 good. You know, you'd try to plow plowed ground and --
14 that's the way this thing --

15 MR. BARR: That's how my father did it was with
16 those old -- he did his own.

17 MR. HARTMANN: Well, he could make that -- and dad
18 did, too, and then follow that contour. That was the first
19 thing, of course, without terrace is follow the contour.

20 MR. BARR: Would the Soil Conservation Service lay
21 out the --

22 MR. HARTMANN: Yes.

23 MR. BARR: What would you have to start with, just
24 flags, or what?

25 MR. HARTMANN: Yeah, they would put flags every so

1 many feet, steps, but virtually 100 feet. And that was on a
2 grade, of course, and then we just followed that line most
3 times it worked. The detriment was, the drawback, when you
4 went through a ditch, you didn't have -- you had that when
5 you got done in the ridge. No real way to fill them.
6 Tumble bugs, tried them, and could do it, but then when the
7 dozers came in, that all changed and we could build terraces
8 with dozers and also fill those spots in.

9 MR. BARR: Roughly, what time -- when did the
10 dozers come in, approximately?

11 MR. HARTMANN: Well, I had one when we started.

12 MR. BARR: When you started, okay.

13 MR. HARTMANN: But we still did whirlwind
14 terraces, because the farmer could afford that as opposed to
15 a dozer terrace, which was much more well-built, but cost
16 more.

17 MR. BARR: Sure.

18 MR. HARTMANN: So, with the two tied together, we
19 still got the whirlwind plow out here. It works.

20 MR. BARR: On the dams that you did, are they
21 mostly just farm dams or --

22 MR. HARTMANN: Yeah, farm ones. And early one,
23 had the Soil Conservation, of course, told us how to build
24 them, drew up the specifications. But we didn't have any
25 such thing as an air tamper, so you hand tamped the tube in,

1 which was a terrible job, hard work. And then they came out
2 with a directive that we will have an air compressor with a
3 tamper. "Oh, my God, we can't afford that kind of fancy
4 stuff." Once you had one, you didn't -- you wanted it from
5 then on.

6 (Laughter.)

7 And of course, it evolved into better terraces,
8 eventually, and now, of course, they do the tile outlets
9 which are -- and massive in size, but wonderful to farm.

10 MR. BARR: When the natural resource district idea
11 was being discussed, did you have any -- were there any
12 meetings or input or anything like that?

13 MR. HARTMANN: Lots of them. And I represented
14 our contractors. Hal Schroeder, I don't know if you
15 remember that name.

16 MR. BARR: Yes, I remember Hal.

17 MR. HARTMANN: A wonderful person. He took the
18 Lower Platte South leadership. He was involved in that and,
19 oh, I'd have to think a little bit about others that I could
20 recall really were involved. I think Bryce Neidig from
21 Madison was involved, and, well, Dale Williamson, obviously.
22 And, you know, there was a bunch of people that were really
23 interested in that kind of work. And it went well. We did
24 lots and lots of things like that.

25 MR. BARR: When that actually started, was there

1 any kind of difference in the way you did business or the
2 work you had to do? Transitioning from the county soil and
3 water districts to the NRD, was there any basic change?

4 MR. HARTMANN: No, I don't think that -- just good
5 business practice was -- is still in effect, and we tried to
6 do our best.

7 MR. BARR: But, I mean, were there different types
8 of projects that you needed to work on or was it pretty much
9 the continuation of the same?

10 MR. HARTMANN: I think it continued. Eventually,
11 we got into bigger watershed dams, per se, and land
12 leveling, which became a big, big part of our business when
13 that was a big item. But we still always built dams until
14 recently. Now the government doesn't want to hold the
15 water. They want to let it go down the creek, let it flow
16 in the river, which is asinine, just plain asinine. But
17 they've lost the focus, which I want to relate to
18 eventually.

19 MR. BARR: Go ahead.

20 (Laughter.)

21 MR. HARTMANN: Well, maybe it's too early to --

22 MR. BARR: No, if you got something else you want
23 to talk about, go ahead, because this -- I don't have a real
24 agenda. I just pretty much --

25 MR. HARTMANN: And I suppose you'll edit this

1 thing a little bit, but early on, of course, water -- and
2 soil and water conservation, that was the deal. And I like
3 to think we were the first environmentalists. There wasn't
4 even a word like that then. All of us didn't even know
5 what -- but we were. And over time, now, after the NRDs got
6 in and the Soil Conservation backed off somewhat -- they
7 work together. And I called -- it's NRCS now, but they -- I
8 think the NRDs, they like -- in ours from York, they even
9 have a person they pay in the local office, clerk or
10 something, so they're on the same page, but they've drifted
11 away from being out there to help the farmer with his land
12 and his crops and his farm, help him make the most out of
13 it, to become a regulatory agency. And today, I would bet
14 you they say, "You can't do that" more often than "That
15 sounds like a good idea. Let's do it." And I'm talking
16 about such things as, well, building a dam or straightening
17 out a ditch, a meandering waterway, as they call them, a
18 ditch, a creek and a draw or a cleaning out a wetland. You
19 can't do that anymore. They call them wetlands, I call them
20 swamp, which are of no value to a reasonable thinking
21 person.

22 And so now, they -- like I say, the NRDs and SCS,
23 they say "No" more than "Yes." Although, they do cost share
24 yet on terracing and things. But they've lost their focus,
25 they really have. Now, the NRDs, they worry more about

1 trees and birds and bees and fish and tiger beetles and such
2 things as that. In fact, bike trails instead of "Let's help
3 that farmer get more out of his land and make a better
4 living." I think they've really gone -- and because of what
5 I call the extreme -- I can't think of my word now,
6 environmentalists, that have a different focus. They've
7 lost the real reason for soil and water and for the farm.

8 And with that in mind, I'll go back to the Bible
9 and I dug this out because I got an award this fall.

10 MR. BARR: Oh.

11 MR. HARTMANN: And it related -- from Concordia.
12 It related to the faith and things. But I found this in the
13 Bible, and here's what it says. In Genesis 1:28, maybe like
14 the fifth day of creation is where this -- or sixth. "And
15 God blessed them," I'm quoting now, "And God blessed them
16 and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply and
17 replenish the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over
18 the fish and the birds and every living thing that moveth on
19 the earth." So, what does subdue mean? I looked that up in
20 the dictionary, because it sounded interesting, and it does.
21 Subdue, and I won't read all of them, but "to conquer; to
22 overcome by superior force; to get the better of; to gain
23 control over; to subdue to tone down and soften;" and here,
24 number six, right out of the dictionary, to bring -- the
25 meaning of the word subdue, "to bring land under

1 cultivation." That's a direct quote from the Bible, from
2 God. We're not supposed to worship the earth and worship
3 and think it's pristine. He doesn't ever say it -- he never
4 says the earth is pristine, far from it, subdue it. That
5 means it's vicious and violent, which it is. Nature is
6 violent and is far from pristine. Nothing pristine about
7 it. So that's where they're in conflict, I think, of even
8 the Bible itself.

9 MR. BARR: Just looking at the condition of the
10 land, say, I don't know, you would have been born in the
11 '30s, probably.

12 MR. HARTMANN: '29.

13 MR. BARR: From that time until now, just kind of
14 relay what you've seen over that period of time in relation
15 to the land here in this general area of the state.

16 MR. HARTMANN: Well, of course, the hills have --
17 many of the hills in eastern Seward County have gone back to
18 grass because of the CRP program, which was great. And
19 that'll stay there. I don't look for that to be tore up
20 like it was, simply because it's pretty tough farming. But,
21 it can be done and so we've seen people go from all
22 agriculture every acre to putting away some of it. And we
23 even had some CRP here that part of which we took out this
24 year, but leaving about seven acres, simply because it's
25 pretty poor soil. And I won't get paid any more, but

1 it's -- grass is there, and that's wonderful. And then,
2 going from gravity irrigation to the pivot irrigation, that
3 was a pretty big step.

4 MR. BARR: Well, the biggest step may have been
5 going from dry land to irrigated (land).

6 MR. HARTMANN: That's right, and because of the
7 pivot, they're irrigating hills now that they couldn't even
8 dream of -- well, it didn't make sense to try and water.

9 MR. BARR: Was there any irrigation that you
10 recall when you were young?

11 MR. HARTMANN: Oh, yes. Clear back -- my uncle,
12 Paul Vander, lived by Clarks on the sand bottom.

13 MR. BARR: Sure.

14 MR. HARTMANN: He had a well, you had to dig down
15 about ten feet you'd have all the water you needed.

16 MR. BARR: Well, I guess that's true. Is that
17 what you do here on this farm?

18 MR. HARTMANN: No, we don't, but we've got a thing
19 coming we may be able to. East of the Blue River, you can't
20 hardly find enough water for irrigation. Neighbor has a
21 well, it might be a 250 or maybe a couple of them put in.
22 There was another one down the road, but we never tried.

23 It hasn't got anything to do with your report, but
24 it's interesting. There's a company from Wisconsin, Growth
25 Design Engineers, I don't know what they call it,

1 (indiscernible), by Monday we may sign the papers to where
2 they're going to build a bio-plant on 15 acres of our
3 northeast corner. They want to, which will take animal
4 waste and turn it into all kinds of wonderful things,
5 biodiesel, natural gas, fertilizer, farm fertilizer, and
6 other interesting products. But, as a result of that
7 operation, they will generate an enormous amount of water.
8 Enough, if their projections hold true, that we would
9 probably -- we got a dam down here -- we'd enlarge it to
10 hold at least three quarters of that total volume of water,
11 which would be enough, by the figures, to irrigate probably
12 80 acres.

13 MR. BARR: Wow! that is interesting.

14 MR. HARTMANN: That'll be one of the benefits we
15 will derive from agreeing to go along with this project.
16 So, we may get into irrigation, with a pivot, by the way,
17 because our land is hilly. So, that would be a wonderful
18 thing, if it happens.

19 MR. BARR: In terms of the erosion and that sort
20 of thing, what, if any, changes have you noticed over this
21 period?

22 MR. HARTMANN: Tremendous. You don't see a lot of
23 terrible erosion any longer, and that's due to the terracing
24 and waterways and just doing a better job of farming. No
25 till is a big item. I don't do that. I'm too old to try

1 that stuff, but I still farm. I'm only 83, so I can go a
2 while yet. But, yeah, the erosion potential is diminished
3 because of CRP and grass and people using their land more
4 efficiently, I guess.

5 MR. BARR: One of the aspects of the NRD I wanted
6 to visit with you about a little is the financing side in
7 comparison between the county soil and water conservation
8 districts and the NRD. Was there any major difference in
9 the way financing was undertaken or anything like that?

10 MR. HARTMANN: Only from the standpoint of the
11 NRDs supplemented the government cost share, and that's
12 still going on. I'm not involved in that like I was when I
13 ran the business, so I can't tell you the numbers, but --

14 MR. BARR: Well, no.

15 MR. HARTMANN: -- that helped out. Yeah, that's a
16 good program.

17 MR. BARR: One of the things, I guess, that the
18 arguments for the NRD was that they could have a tax base in
19 which they could support this sort of thing.

20 MR. HARTMANN: Yes, which is what it is.

21 MR. BARR: Yeah.

22 MR. HARTMANN: And I don't mind that. I just
23 don't like to see them spend it on bike trails and trees
24 and -- we got enough trees in this country. We can put new
25 ones in, that's great, but there's a lot of them don't

1 really belong where they are. And people worship them.

2 That's the other sad part of it. They worship trees.

3 MR. BARR: Where are you in relation to the
4 boundary with this NRD? You're in the Upper Big Blue?

5 MR. HARTMANN: We're here in the Upper Big Blue.
6 If we were to go about two miles east and --

7 MR. BARR: I thought it wasn't too far away.

8 MR. HARTMANN: I could take you to Village of
9 Garland, because I lived there many years, to the very spot
10 on the main street where the water runs this way, because we
11 put a curve in the street.

12 MR. BARR: Sure.

13 MR. HARTMANN: We had to find that break, and it's
14 interesting. Everything goes that way from there and this
15 way -- so we're on the east end, I guess, of the Upper Big
16 Blue.

17 MR. BARR: Well, looking back, you've kind of
18 touched on this, but looking back at the history of the NRD
19 and what your expectation or people's expectation might have
20 been when it was enacted, the legislation was enacted, and
21 then over the course of the time, like I said, you kind of
22 touched on it, but you want to comment any more on this?

23 MR. HARTMANN: Well, I think -- I don't know if
24 Hal Schroeder is still living or not, but I think he would
25 be horrified if he could see what the money in the Lower

1 Platte South NRD is being spent for. Hal was a great, great
2 person. You know, he was there when they built the big
3 Branched Oak Lake and all these other watersheds. We worked
4 with him as a contractor and for him as damage control and
5 things. A straightforward guy, and I think he would be
6 horrified.

7 His replacement, Brian Johnson, is a good person,
8 but he's been influenced by the environmental people as is
9 the Upper Big Blue, and to the extent that they've lost
10 focus of their real mission.

11 MR. BARR: One of the differences between the
12 district and the -- the old conservation districts and the
13 natural resource district is, I think the landowners had
14 votes on the other district and now it's basically one
15 person, one vote in terms of electing board members. Is
16 that an issue that you -- that might account for some of the
17 change in the way the projects have gone?

18 MR. HARTMANN: I don't know if that has been a big
19 effect. You know, there are farmers on the boards, but not
20 all of them are farmers. From that point of view, yes,
21 they've lost their clout. And I suppose in the early days,
22 the districts -- well, their mission was simple. If it made
23 sense, then do it. Now, if it makes sense, "I don't think
24 you can do that." So, I don't think it's the board members.
25 It's the -- it's just the policy of the country.

1 MR. BARR: Is it the district or does it include
2 state and federal legislation that --

3 MR. HARTMANN: Well, yeah, it's all tied together.

4 MR. BARR: -- NRDs had some impact on?

5 MR. HARTMANN: You know, the NRDs and the local
6 offices, they got -- well, I said, they even got a clerk
7 paid for by it. It's all tied to one.

8 MR. BARR: I don't really have a whole set of
9 questions, so if there's anything you'd like to comment on,
10 have at it.

11 MR. HARTMANN: I've got to go through my notes
12 here a little bit.

13 MR. BARR: Because, like I said, I'm not really
14 asking a lot of specific questions. I just kind of give
15 people the opportunity to talk.

16 MR. HARTMANN: Just my thought and my son reflects
17 this, that early on, they were here to help the farmer. I
18 don't think that's true anymore. They'll probably say they
19 are, but in reality, they're more, "No, you can't do that."
20 "Yes, that makes sense. Let's go ahead and do it."

21 Before you leave, I want to take you down the road
22 a mile, not quite, and show you what I'm talking about
23 common sense and the lack of it. It's right there in front
24 of us. More concerned with the environment than with saving
25 land and so forth.

1 I can't read my own writing.

2 MR. BARR: I've had that problem for a long time.

3 MR. HARTMANN: Yeah, well, we talked on most of
4 these things.

5 Well, and then just recently, one of our board
6 members from the Upper Big Blue is a friend, too, a
7 customer. He was telling us that he had been to an NRD
8 meeting down in, well, it was southwest, and they're now
9 encouraging the farmer to take your dam out, destroy it, and
10 let that water go to Kansas. That's got to be the -- well,
11 I better not use that language, stupid. And have we
12 degraded ourselves to that level of thinking? And they're
13 serious.

14 Bike trails, yeah, camping shelters. You know,
15 that's the kind of stuff they like to talk about. Well,
16 that isn't what they were built -- they were developed for.

17 Yeah, well, now here they say they won't let you
18 build a dam because the water has to go to the Platte River.
19 They need water. And just focus changed from farmland to
20 urban interest. That's basically what notes I've made.

21 MR. BARR: Well, like I said, I appreciate your
22 time, and if you have anything else, I'm --

23 MR. HARTMANN: Well, I want to show you this.

24 MR. BARR: No, I will go down there, and I can
25 record that, too, if you want to when we do that.

1 MR. HARTMANN: Sure. I think the overall big
2 concern is the NRDs have lost their focus. And that, I
3 think, is because of the -- not the farmers no longer have
4 the majority to make the decisions. It's urban interests
5 that come in and they get on the board, and they're
6 powerful, and they're, you know, that sounds wonderful to
7 save the earth. Well, might destroy it by trying to save
8 it, too, something like that.

9 MR. BARR: Well, we'll reconvene here in a little
10 bit down there.

11 - - -

12 MR. BARR: Okay, we're back.

13 MR. HARTMANN: Well, here we are. I'm here with
14 Jim, and we're looking at a farm right north of us a mile,
15 half a mile that has what I think is probably one of the
16 dumbest things showing that the government has ever forced
17 on a farmer. And if you were sitting here with us, what
18 you'd be looking at is a meandering creek, not even a
19 stream, just a little channel that meanders through this
20 farmer's field, makes a big loop and goes on downstream.

21 Well, at one time, in the past, the owner had us
22 come out and dig him, with a backhoe, and I straight
23 channeled across the stream, maybe 700 feet or less, and
24 bypass this loop and fill it in for farmland. If you were
25 sitting here with me, you'd say, that makes a lot of sense.

1 But, no, he could not do that. He had to fill that all back
2 in and leave it like it is now, which is a wasteland really.
3 And it just doesn't make any sense whatsoever.

4 MR. BARR: It's not a flowing stream.

5 MR. HARTMANN: No. The farmer did it. He made it
6 low, so it's kind of starting its own channel. And I think
7 he's (indiscernible).

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