

INTERVIEW WITH DON ROBERTS
BY JIM BARR

November 18, 2013

1 MR. BARR: This is Jim Barr. It's November 18th.
2 I'm visiting with Don Roberts northwest of McCook. Don, do
3 you want to just give us a little bit about your background
4 and that sort of thing?

5 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah. We started out working in
6 McCook, first, for about three years after we got married.

7 MR. BARR: Were you from this area to begin with?

8 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, born here about six miles
9 north, and lived here all my life. And this place came up
10 for sale and there was 500-and-some acres around this area
11 here. We was able to buy this 360 acres here, it's where we
12 started out. I still clerked for a grain company down there
13 for about three years after we got married. And I was still
14 farming. Folks lived right on the highway there north of
15 McCook. And they helped us get started. And then, they
16 asked me if I wanted to be on the -- what was that called,
17 the Southwest Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation. So I
18 got on that there, and all we was doing then is making
19 terraces, mostly, right then. And we weren't paid anything
20 then either. We was just volunteer. Have monthly meetings
21 to see if everything was running like it should be. And
22 then, the Soil and Water Conservation went into the Natural
23 Resources back in, what was it, '72 I think it was. And,
24 you know, first we was working mostly on terraces is about
25 all, and -- yeah, we had stock watering facilities. And we

1 didn't have any local money in them. It was all national.
2 Money to do anything with. When the Natural Resources came
3 in, we did get some financial assistance then. And it
4 started out real slow, didn't have much until the irrigation
5 part of it started. That was probably, oh, early '80s when
6 it first started. And the Upper Republican, they have good
7 water up there. And that's where the irrigation really
8 started. Then come time when there was getting too many
9 wells to supply the recharge areas. We had to figure out
10 where we could pump water and so we -- first we signed a
11 plan to pay for water for going from irrigation back to
12 dryland, is kind of where we started. And, oh, my, we had a
13 lot of meetings trying to decide how to do it and how much
14 we could pump, so we started a measuring system. And that
15 went into allotting acres for irrigation through area
16 producer that wanted to irrigate. And then it -- we, this
17 irrigation from the Bureau of Reclamation was in through
18 this area here. And they put in really nice system to clean
19 water out of Enders and divert it into the -- what did they
20 call that? Frenchman Valley Irrigation District then. They
21 extended it on into Red Willow County. We got real good
22 water then. And when Enders got all their -- Imperial got
23 all their wells in, why, that kind of shut the inflow to
24 Enders. They started out getting 24 inches a year, as much
25 as you wanted. We had water running everywhere for a while.

1 We leveled all the ground around, put in benches, and done
2 all kind of preparation for it. Then it kept getting lesser
3 and lesser water. Got where we was getting down to four
4 inches of water a year. So, we had to take some of it out
5 of irrigation and use it on the ones -- the better ground
6 that we had. And then finally, it ran clear out in, what
7 was it, '97, I think, our last water from the irrigation.
8 It still -- our board is still in service yet. And they
9 used to have a natural flow from the river there to
10 distribute there on the Frenchman Valley part of it. We
11 never did get any down here for that part. We put in some
12 wells, put in three wells, and they only pumped about 300
13 gallon a minute. So, when they decided to pay to take it
14 out, we took one well out of production and cut the other
15 area back to where we only got about -- we had about 200
16 acres for a while that was watered under this irrigation
17 canal. And now we've only got about 100 acres, 120 acres, I
18 think it all we irrigate now out of two wells.

19 MR. BARR: Do you still have to pay anything on
20 the project?

21 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, they still assign us, what is
22 it? A dollar an acre is it?

23 UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: Well, I pay them over \$1,000
24 a year.

25 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, that's right, I guess. Yeah,

1 we still have to pay for the canal, the cost of construction
2 still.

3 MR. BARR: Is there much of any water at all in
4 the Enders anymore or is it pretty much --

5 MR. ROBERTS: It -- there's not a lot of any water
6 that's there all the time. We can't allot any amount to put
7 down the -- they just have the natural flow, that's what
8 they call it, that they can use on that.

9 MR. BARR: Was most of the project in the Upper
10 Republican or about half and half or --

11 MR. ROBERTS: All the water was actually in
12 Frontier and Red Willow County.

13 MR. BARR: Oh, okay.

14 MR. ROBERTS: It diverted clear down to Palisade,
15 and that's where it was diverted out of the river into the
16 canal. But now we've only got one well and we get 12 inches
17 of water per well. We get 45 over five years, I guess it
18 is. And it's getting tighter all the time, too, so I don't
19 know how long that's going to last.

20 MR. BARR: How many acres? Can you go up to the
21 whole 200 or just --

22 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, we can irrigate all that. We
23 put in, of course, we started it just free flowing,
24 everything was leveled and pulled a ditch and put tubes.
25 And then we went to pipes, surge valves, when the water got,

1 you know, where there wasn't much water left. And after
2 that, we just stopped irrigating. We just didn't have
3 enough water to irrigate anymore. Of course, they shut the
4 water clear off. So, I guess that's pretty well what --

5 MR. BARR: What do you use with the well?

6 MR. ROBERTS: What's that again?

7 MR. BARR: What method of distribution do you use
8 with the well?

9 MR. ROBERTS: Oh, yeah, we had a pivot on one of
10 them and then he just bought a -- we put in underground
11 pipe, drip irrigation they call it, you know. We put in 40
12 acres of that, but it didn't turn out very good.

13 MR. BARR: I was curious how that compared.

14 UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: Two thousand dollars is what
15 we paid for that.

16 MR. ROBERTS: Oh, yeah, okay.

17 UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: That we get nothing from, but
18 a weed patch out back.

19 MR. BARR: Is that right?

20 UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: Yeah. (Indiscernible), every
21 year. We pay it under protest every year.

22 MR. BARR: How many more years is that? I suppose
23 it was 50 years or so from the beginning or 100 or what?

24 MR. ROBERTS: I think it's probably 50 years,
25 yeah. Probably potential.

1 MR. BARR: Are you getting close to the end of
2 that or not?

3 MR. ROBERTS: No, it's still got -- I thought
4 maybe they'd fall off that part of it, but they haven't. I
5 don't know if they -- I don't know if the district still
6 pays or if that's just for the -- I think it's just for
7 operation of the -- they go along and cut trees out every
8 year and --

9 MR. BARR: Back to the NRD, what all activities
10 did you get involved with? You've been on the board all
11 this time or --

12 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, I got off four years -- five
13 years ago. And it got pretty interesting. We had a lot of
14 very interesting meetings. We got called quite a few
15 different names and tried to get rules and regulations set
16 up to run it. It was pretty tough going.

17 UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: Thirty-five years, is that
18 what you were on? (Indiscernible).

19 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, I think so. About all my
20 life.

21 (Laughter.)

22 UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: Yeah, that's true. Maybe
23 it was more than that.

24 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, it would have been closer to
25 50 years, I think, that I was on the --

1 MR. BARR: Between the board, the Soil and Water
2 or whatever it was called.

3 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, from the Soil and Water to the
4 NRDs.

5 MR. BARR: What kind of changes have you noticed
6 in farming practices and that sort of thing during that
7 period of time?

8 MR. ROBERTS: It has changed tremendous. It's
9 from we planted with a four-row (indiscernible). Now it's
10 all pretty well just planting, spraying, and planting. You
11 don't hardly work the ground before we plant anymore. It's
12 really changed a lot. And, of course, the seed they got
13 nowadays is a lot better for planting now.

14 MR. BARR: What was some of your average yields
15 when you started versus recently?

16 MR. ROBERTS: Well, when we started, probably the
17 first few years trying to get 100 bushels an acre, but it
18 wasn't -- and now it's, I think this year our irrigated was
19 about 170. So, it has increased it quite a little bit.

20 MR. BARR: You said you had some experience with
21 the underground -- or the underground water. How does that
22 work out?

23 MR. ROBERTS: It didn't work out very good for us.
24 We have -- my son works with me now and he put in 30 acres
25 four years ago. And he -- when we done it, we just chiseled

1 an end, but now they chisel it two different ways so that
2 the gophers and things can't follow that pipe. And we've
3 dug up so many places to fix where they chewed through that
4 pipe, you know. They get into that furrow that we built
5 that in and just follow that pipe down. And we've got two
6 different -- this corner right out north of the house is
7 underground water. And well, that one field down south has
8 some on it, too, that we quit watering at all. It didn't
9 turn out like we thought it was going to do. There's a lot
10 of it going in nowadays that seems to be working out all
11 right.

12 MR. BARR: What other sort of activities did the
13 NRD get involved in?

14 MR. ROBERTS: Oh, it was mostly trying to preserve
15 our water and keep it in -- keep it so that they could use
16 it, you know, to raise a crop. So, that's kind of what
17 we're trying to do now. I don't know how -- of course, you
18 know how Kansas is telling us what we're doing wrong and
19 everything.

20 MR. BARR: Did you happen to hear about the thing
21 this weekend on the most recent decision on the courts?

22 MR. ROBERTS: I don't know. I don't think I have
23 heard anything.

24 MR. BARR: Okay, it sounded fairly favorable to
25 Nebraska.

1 MR. ROBERTS: Oh, did it?

2 MR. BARR: I don't know the details.

3 MR. ROBERTS: Well, you know, it -- they went
4 through so many different phases on that, on what Kansas
5 issued against us and one of the -- what do they call them?

6 MR. BARR: Masters?

7 MR. ROBERTS: Master, yeah, give his opinion and
8 then they take it to another court. The last one was clear
9 up in Maine when they had that court up there and it still
10 isn't settled on exactly what we have to do. But we --
11 since I got off the board, they (indiscernible) plan now and
12 are pumping water into the river to try and give a -- so, I
13 don't know. I kind of just got out of it and left it up to
14 the rest of the guys. But they had -- we still got to only
15 get a foot of water to use. Everybody had to put meters on,
16 of course.

17 MR. BARR: How long ago? Several years ago?

18 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, that's been probably ten years
19 that meters were obligated to put on.

20 MR. BARR: Any particular problems in doing the
21 regulatory activity?

22 MR. ROBERTS: Not really. It's gone pretty darn
23 good, you know. Of course, everything's pumped now down
24 this way. I don't know if they're getting water delivered
25 through the ditch anymore or not.

1 MR. BARR: Have you -- do you have a moratorium on
2 wells or anything like that?

3 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, there's no more wells are let
4 being drilled at all, unless it's just a replacement.

5 MR. BARR: Replacement, sure.

6 MR. ROBERTS: They're still there. Now they're
7 charging us \$10 an acre for that water which is being used
8 to try and bring water back in, and turn this ground back to
9 dryland. Most of that goes for that purpose.

10 MR. BARR: How much, in 20 years or so from now,
11 what do you see as the likely amount of irrigation as
12 compared to today?

13 MR. ROBERTS: Well, I didn't think it would go
14 this long, myself, when they first had all these wells
15 drilled and was pumping that much water out of -- I think
16 it's going to have to be diverted back to dryland more to
17 keep enough water in the system to have everybody --
18 available to everybody, you know, because a lot of stock
19 wells have gone dry (indiscernible) and they had to put
20 wells, cut wells that are -- dig deeper, put new wells in
21 for their stock. But right around here, we're pretty well.
22 I guess we lose about a half a foot of water in a system a
23 year in underground water in the last 20 years.

24 MR. BARR: Was the irrigation development fairly
25 evenly spread over the district or was it concentrated in

1 certain areas?

2 MR. ROBERTS: I think it was pretty evenly
3 distributed, yeah. There's -- it's just according to where
4 you're at, yeah. Some people aren't interested in doing
5 any, and some of them got real enthused and drilled a lot of
6 wells. But around here, it's pretty evenly distributed.

7 MR. BARR: Do you have any particular thoughts on
8 the natural resource district system or --

9 MR. ROBERTS: I think it's a very good system and
10 since it's regulated locally, it has really done a good job.
11 Some people have had problems, but they've worked out --
12 worked through it.

13 MR. BARR: Even some of the people at the
14 name-calling?

15 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah. Yeah, they've tried to do
16 different things, you know, and it was brought to their
17 attention they couldn't do it, and so they had their words
18 about it. And then went ahead and done like the board
19 wanted to do. It's really active. The board members are
20 pretty darn good.

21 MR. BARR: Have you had quite a little -- I mean,
22 has your board had fair amount of interaction with the Upper
23 and the Lower districts?

24 MR. ROBERTS: Oh, yeah. They work really good
25 together.

1 MR. BARR: Do you have any kind of formal
2 agreements between the districts or regular meetings or
3 anything like that?

4 MR. ROBERTS: Well, they have one unit that works
5 together where all three of them come together and meet
6 on -- I think they do that twice a year. They have special
7 people that do that.

8 MR. BARR: Have you had much, other than the
9 courtroom contact with the Kansas neighbors or --

10 MR. ROBERTS: When I was on, we went to -- and sat
11 in on some of their yearly meetings to see what they think
12 about what's going on. Of course, Kansas got hit hard by
13 Colorado there on that water through that -- what the heck
14 river is that? I can't even think of the river now that
15 goes through Kansas. They lost a lot of irrigation through
16 that system there. That's why they looked into this here
17 and picked up on what was going on. But they're having a
18 problem in Kansas, too, trying to keep their wells going.

19 MR. BARR: Well, at this point, if there's
20 anything else you'd like to add, otherwise, I'll --

21 MR. ROBERTS: I think I went through it pretty
22 good.

23 MR. BARR: Okay, well, thank you very much. I
24 appreciate it.

25 MR. ROBERTS: I don't know if it was any value to

1 you, but -- oh, yeah, the NRDs are good board to have.

2 MR. BARR: Were there any particular members on
3 that stood out or anything that you particularly want to
4 mention?

5 MR. ROBERTS: No, I think they all worked pretty
6 well together. There was some of them that felt they didn't
7 want to put a -- didn't want to go in to where they had to
8 issue what they could use. That was the biggest problem I
9 think we had. Some of the guys said that that water's there
10 for to use and that's what they wanted to do is use. But
11 that ain't the way it works.

12 MR. BARR: Anybody have a particular tough
13 election experience?

14 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah, they had a lot of people that
15 wanted to get on the board and they come in groups. See,
16 McCook had four representatives on the board because that's
17 where the majority of the people were.

18 MR. BARR: Sure.

19 MR. ROBERTS: And now we're down to just -- well,
20 I guess Red Willow County's got three on there yet. Yeah,
21 that's one of the big things there. Seems last two
22 elections it has pretty well divided up the areas, because
23 we're not -- most of the boards have -- each person has an
24 area that he looks under. Our board doesn't have that.
25 They just all --

1 MR. BARR: Face the same electorate?

2 MR. ROBERTS: Yeah. You're elected to the whole
3 district. You don't have an area you call your own. Yeah,
4 that board member stays on pretty long until -- unless you
5 get some people that don't like you. Then you're -- they
6 pretty well take you off.

7 MR. BARR: Well, thank you, again.

8 MR. ROBERTS: I don't if that helped any.

9 MR. BARR: Appreciate it.

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