

INTERVIEW WITH GERALD ROYAL  
BY GAYLE STARR

1                   MR. STARR: This is an interview with Gerald  
2 Royal, former director of the Nemaha Natural Resources  
3 District. The interview is being conducted by the Natural  
4 Resources District Oral History Interview Project. The  
5 interviewer is Gayle Starr. The interview is being  
6 conducted at Gerald's home south of Palmyra, Nebraska.

7                   First, Gerald, I'm going to ask you to just give a  
8 little background of what your life's been like and what  
9 you've done with your life, not a whole lot of details, just  
10 general.

11                  MR. ROYAL: Well, this is where we grew up. This  
12 was our home place, and I was born in 1940. My dad was  
13 farm -- he bought this farm in 1950. And he was always  
14 really interested in conservation work and the flooding,  
15 because the farm he bought here where we live on now was in  
16 a flood plain, a lot of it. It would flood about every  
17 year. Almost every year, we would get flooded out and we'd  
18 have to replant, sometimes twice. And so, he was real  
19 interested in watersheds. He was instrumental in forming  
20 the Upper Little Nemaha Watershed. And they tried for years  
21 to fund it by the federal program, but they didn't have any  
22 luck getting funding federally. And Don Larson was really  
23 instrumental in getting State funding for this Upper Little  
24 Nemaha Watershed, which we're really thankful for, because  
25 when Don got that done for us, we could move ahead and we

1       constructed 18 flood control structures in the Upper Little  
2       Nemaha. And that's something that really, we haven't had a  
3       flood since then that's flooded us out. So, it's been a  
4       real privilege to be part of that. And that's, I guess,  
5       that's about all I know.

6               MR. STARR: And I think you told me, I was going  
7       to ask you, though, how long was your father on the Nemaha  
8       NRD Board?

9               MR. ROYAL: He was on there from 1974 to '84, and  
10       then again '86 to '90. And in '90, he passed away at  
11       mid-term.

12              MR. STARR: I remember Herman was one of the  
13       original folks on the board, but -- who we worked with.  
14       Were you very aware of the -- at the time of the opposition  
15       to the NRD law and what the opinion of some of the local  
16       people were, including your father?

17              MR. ROYAL: Well, just kind of what Dad had said  
18       and things, you know. I was young enough that we weren't  
19       really, I suppose, that interested in to know for sure what  
20       was going on then, but as time went on, I remember some of  
21       the comments and problems that were involved and some of the  
22       people that were involved in these special purpose districts  
23       that were opposed to that. And so, I learned more after --  
24       later on than I did at the present time -- or at that time,  
25       I guess.

1                   MR. STARR: What was your father's position?  
2                   Where did he come down?

3                   MR. ROYAL: Oh, he wanted it so bad. This was his  
4                   thing. He wanted to get that watershed put in here.

5                   MR. STARR: Do you remember any of your father's  
6                   comments or reactions of the NRD Board and the whole  
7                   operation when he first -- when that whole thing got  
8                   started?

9                   MR. ROYAL: Oh, I really don't know any --  
10                  remember anything particularly, just that he was always  
11                  talking about it and was real enthused about it.

12                  MR. STARR: When were you on the board?

13                  MR. ROYAL: I got appointed after Dad passed away  
14                  in mid-term to finish out his term, and so I was on from  
15                  1990 to '92, and then again from '95 to 2006.

16                  MR. STARR: What was -- when you first got  
17                  appointed on the board, what was your first impression of  
18                  the board, of the other members? What was your first  
19                  thoughts?

20                  MR. ROYAL: Well, I guess I was really impressed  
21                  with their attitude and their dedication to conservation.  
22                  And they were just like a bunch of old grandpas to me. They  
23                  treated me really well and I really liked it.

24                  MR. STARR: What about the activities that you  
25                  were -- the board was involved in, what the things they were

1       doing? Was that any surprise to you or were there some  
2       things, you know, golly, this is not something I knew they  
3       were doing?

4               MR. ROYAL: Well, no, because I was pretty well up  
5       on what was going on from what -- Dad always kept us pretty  
6       well informed, and we were always interested in -- that's  
7       the only thing I ever wanted to do was farm and be involved.  
8       And we always wanted to make -- leave the land better than  
9       when we got it and we still feel that way.

10              MR. STARR: Were there any big surprises when you  
11       got on the board, that, golly, this is something bigger than  
12       I thought or this is something different than I thought?

13              MR. ROYAL: No. The only thing, not at the first.  
14       When I first got on, there wasn't. But later on, I got to  
15       wondering why we have to deal with so much recreation. And  
16       that kind of bothered me. I thought it should have been  
17       kept more for conservation.

18              MR. STARR: I think that was pretty much the  
19       general attitude in this part of the state.

20              MR. ROYAL: Yeah. But I can understand, too, that  
21       people are paying taxes towards the NRD and that they  
22       deserve some return, too.

23              MR. STARR: Who was the manager when you first got  
24       on the board?

25              MR. ROYAL: Don had just -- Paul Robaugh

1 (phonetic). Paul Robaugh was the manager.

2 MR. STARR: Don had just left, then.

3 MR. ROYAL: Yeah, Don had just left.

4 MR. STARR: So, you didn't really know him very  
5 well?

6 MR. ROYAL: Well, I knew him because he'd been up  
7 here, talked to Dad different times and things. And then he  
8 started this Tree World out here west of Palmyra.

9 MR. STARR: Right.

10 MR. ROYAL: And that's where I got to know him  
11 best was up here.

12 MR. STARR: Yeah, it wasn't too far from here.

13 MR. ROYAL: Yeah.

14 MR. STARR: Did you know Ray Cumy (phonetic)?

15 MR. ROYAL: Oh, just barely.

16 MR. STARR: He was the manager for a while before  
17 Don.

18 MR. ROYAL: Before Don?

19 MR. STARR: Yeah.

20 MR. ROYAL: Yeah, I remember the name, but I  
21 didn't --

22 MR. STARR: He was a retired SCS employee, and he  
23 was what they called area conservationist in southeast  
24 Nebraska, I think. He was retired.

25 MR. ROYAL: Well, then after Paul, then it was

1 Lynn Hang (phonetic), wasn't it?

2 MR. STARR: I think so.

3 MR. ROYAL: Because he was the assistant and then  
4 we made him a manager. And then, I was chairman of the  
5 board when we hired Bob Hilsky (phonetic).

6 MR. STARR: Okay. He'd been up at Valentine.

7 MR. ROYAL: Yeah. Yeah, in a small district up  
8 there.

9 MR. STARR: Yeah, a lot less activity. A whole  
10 lot less activity. Were you involved or were you on the  
11 board when they -- and this was early on, when they moved  
12 the district office from Syracuse to Tecumseh?

13 MR. ROYAL: No, I wasn't on the board then.

14 MR. STARR: Yeah, that was very early on, as I  
15 recall.

16 MR. ROYAL: Yeah.

17 MR. STARR: And that was -- as I recall, there was  
18 some significant controversy about that, where they was  
19 going to move that. And Auburn was also considered as a  
20 possibility.

21 MR. ROYAL: I see.

22 MR. STARR: Tecumseh ended up being the --

23 MR. ROYAL: Yeah, I was on the board when they  
24 built the new NRD building down here in Tecumseh.

25 MR. STARR: Were there any big controversies while

1           you were on the board, any 11 to 10 votes or --

2                   MR. ROYAL: Oh, I don't remember of anything too  
3 controversial. It seemed like everything went pretty  
4 smoothly usually.

5                   MR. STARR: And about that time, probably when you  
6 were on the board, Dan Watermeier was the chairman of the  
7 board for a while.

8                   MR. ROYAL: Dan -- I don't remember. Did Dan get  
9 on before I got off or not?

10                  MR. STARR: I'm not sure.

11                  MR. ROYAL: I'm not sure, either. I think he  
12 might have been on -- might have got on just afterward.

13                  MR. STARR: Could be.

14                  MR. ROYAL: I believe he did, yeah.

15                  MR. STARR: I assume he's now your state senator.

16                  MR. ROYAL: Yeah, he's our state senator.

17                  MR. STARR: What do you think the view of the NRD  
18 is now after 40 years ago when there was opposition? What's  
19 the view now?

20                  MR. ROYAL: Well, I think a lot of people view it  
21 as they don't have the funding to do what they used to do.  
22 And too much of the funding is going to recreation, trails  
23 and that kind of thing. That's just my feeling that people  
24 kind of tell me.

25                  MR. STARR: What do you think's the most important



1 thing that the NRD has done down here?

2 MR. ROYAL: The most important thing they've done  
3 in this immediate area is the Upper Little Nemaha Watershed,  
4 the 18 structures that they built.

5 MR. STARR: Maybe you don't know, but how are they  
6 on all of the watersheds? Are they pretty much done with  
7 all of them?

8 MR. ROYAL: In the Nemaha?

9 MR. STARR: In the whole NRD.

10 MR. ROYAL: Well, yeah, except, you know, they're  
11 currently working on the Duck and Buck Creek structure down  
12 there around Peru.

13 MR. STARR: Is that going to go ahead or what's  
14 the status on that?

15 MR. ROYAL: I think one of them's done, isn't it?

16 MR. STARR: I don't --

17 MR. ROYAL: I'm pretty sure one of them is done  
18 and I was to a public hearing here, I don't know, six-eight  
19 weeks ago on the other one. It'll get done.

20 MR. STARR: So, what do you see as the future of  
21 the NRD? What do you think the things that are going to  
22 happen down the line?

23 MR. ROYAL: Well, I think funding is going to be a  
24 big thing. If they don't have funding, they can't do a lot  
25 of things that they'd like to do. I think it's important

1 that we continue getting the funding to preserve our soil  
2 and water for the future here.

3 MR. STARR: And a whole lot of that depends on  
4 federal funding.

5 MR. ROYAL: Yes, a lot of it.

6 MR. STARR: A farm bill that never seems to get  
7 passed.

8 MR. ROYAL: Yeah, we can't get a farm bill.

9 MR. STARR: Have you been involved in any other ag  
10 activities like the Farm Bureau or any of those types of --

11 MR. ROYAL: No, I really haven't. I was real  
12 involved for a long, long time on the Nebraska Pork  
13 Producers, because that was our main income for a long time.  
14 But other than that, I'm not really involved in too many  
15 other things.

16 MR. STARR: Are you still in the hog business?

17 MR. ROYAL: No, we got out in '93 just before the  
18 price went down real fast.

19 MR. STARR: Got a little lucky, huh?

20 MR. ROYAL: Yeah, that's right.

21 MR. STARR: And you were mostly in the breeding  
22 stock?

23 MR. ROYAL: Yeah. Yeah, we raised purebred SPF  
24 Hampshires. We sold them -- we exported to different  
25 countries and stuff. It was really interesting. Learned a

1 lot and met a lot of people.

2 MR. STARR: Was your -- you had sons and brothers  
3 and so forth involved in that?

4 MR. ROYAL: Well, my brother was partner with me,  
5 but -- and we still are partners. We've been 50-50 partners  
6 in the farming since 1955, when we were in high school.

7 MR. STARR: Wow. A long partnership.

8 MR. ROYAL: Yeah.

9 MR. STARR: Very good. Well, I guess, Gerald,  
10 I've about run out of questions. Is there any other things  
11 that you'd like to say about the NRDS or the conservation  
12 movement down in this area or any other comments?

13 MR. ROYAL: Well, I just hope the younger  
14 generation continues it and makes it better than what it is,  
15 I guess.

16 MR. STARR: What do you see in terms of the  
17 conservation ethic of the younger farmers? Is it still  
18 pretty good or --

19 MR. ROYAL: Well, I think the majority of them are  
20 pretty much conservation-minded, but there's a few that are  
21 getting pretty large, and they don't care about terraces.  
22 They just care about big fields.

23 MR. STARR: Yeah.

24 MR. ROYAL: And they don't -- and that kind of  
25 gripes me a little bit that there isn't some way to prevent

1       them from going out there and flattening up these terraces  
2       that federal money and state money was spent to build up  
3       there. Now they're down there just flattening, tearing them  
4       out and wasting that money that was put in there years back.

5               MR. STARR: Yeah, it's -- I mean, this is not just  
6       statewide, nationwide. Farms are just getting bigger and  
7       bigger and bigger.

8               MR. ROYAL: Yeah. Bigger equipment, so they don't  
9       want to mess with terraces.

10              MR. STARR: Twelve- and 24-row planters don't fit  
11       very good with terraces.

12              MR. ROYAL: Yeah, 50-foot discs.

13              MR. STARR: It doesn't fit very well.

14              MR. ROYAL: No, it don't.

15              MR. STARR: Well, anything else, generally, you'd  
16       like to say or --

17              MR. ROYAL: Well, only that I'm glad to be a part  
18       of it while I was -- when I could and it was a good  
19       experience that I'll always be -- remember and be glad that  
20       I took part in.

21              MR. STARR: So, Bob is -- he's still the manager,  
22       isn't he?

23              MR. ROYAL: Yes, he is.

24              MR. STARR: I've known Bob from Valentine on and  
25       he's a good man.

1 MR. ROYAL: Uh-huh.

2 MR. STARR: A lot of good people have been  
3 involved in this all over the state, not just down here.

4 MR. ROYAL: Yep.

5 MR. STARR: Well, thank you, Gerald, for agreeing  
6 to be interviewed. And I appreciate visiting with you.

7 MR. ROYAL: Well, thanks to you.

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