

INTERVIEW WITH ROD STORM  
BY GAYLE STARR

November 18, 2013

1           MR. STARR: This is an interview with Rod Storm,  
2 former manager of the Middle Missouri Natural Resource  
3 District. And the interviewer is Gale Starr. The interview  
4 is being conducted on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013, at Mr. Storm's  
5 office as the City Manager in Blair, Nebraska.

6           So, Rod, with that, how about giving me a little  
7 background of your life?

8           MR. STORM: Grew up, my family of six children to  
9 Lyle and Alice Storm. Grew up, went to elementary school at  
10 the Macy Public Schools, attended Walthill High School,  
11 graduated in '69, attended Wayne State College. And then  
12 went to work for the Natural Resource District in October of  
13 1972 for roughly 12 years, and worked in private business,  
14 construction management for about two and a half years, City  
15 of Plainview, City Administrator for about two and a half  
16 years, and then with the City of Blair for the last 24  
17 years.

18           MR. STARR: What got you interested in the Natural  
19 Resources District in the first place?

20           MR. STORM: To be honest with you, I was going  
21 to -- attending Wayne and our neighbor -- my dad has always  
22 worked in -- for the old ASCS, Agriculture Stabilization  
23 Service. We farmed. I was familiar with conservation. Our  
24 neighbor was Cloyd Boyston (phonetic), who was the local  
25 district conservationist there in Thurston County. And

1 Cloyd seen me one day on the street and he said, "Would you  
2 be interested in a job with the Natural Resources District?"  
3 And I said, "What's that?" And he kind of explained a  
4 little bit and said, you know, he said, "I've seen some of  
5 the applications. You know more about conservation than  
6 most of those do. If you're interested, you should make an  
7 application." So, I thought about it, I made an  
8 application, I was lucky enough to be interviewed. To put  
9 my side of the story on the interview, after we sat and  
10 visited for about an hour, Vinny Kramper essentially said,  
11 we're looking for somebody, which I've often told people  
12 was, and he didn't put it in those words, but somebody that  
13 doesn't know anything --

14 (Laughter.)

15 -- that we could train to do the job. And I said,  
16 "If you're looking for a dummy, you got one." I says, "I'm  
17 your person." A few days later, they called and offered the  
18 job.

19 MR. STARR: Very good. So you started in, I think  
20 you said October of '72. So, what was your first impression  
21 when you went on the job?

22 MR. STORM: Well, when I went into it, I went very  
23 blind. As a young individual, the age of about 21 or so,  
24 whatever I was at the time, 22 years old, I didn't realize  
25 the politics of what had went on. I didn't realize that you

1 had a board of -- I can't remember whether it was 15 or 17  
2 or whatever the number was, and that there was probably one  
3 more than half that wanted it to succeed, the NRD concept to  
4 succeed. And you had probably the rest of them that really  
5 was looking at hoping that it failed, because they wanted to  
6 go back to the old soil and water conservation days or the  
7 old watershed district that had been formed in the Tekamah  
8 area. So it was a real learning experience on the inter  
9 politics.

10 MR. STARR: So, what was your biggest challenge?

11 MR. STORM: I think the biggest challenge was  
12 trying to help make it successful. That, as I said earlier,  
13 that in the interview, it was kind of like, okay, we want to  
14 hire a dummy that we can train to do it our way. I was too  
15 dumb to know that we were supposed to let it fail, that we  
16 worked hard to try to make sure that everything operated as  
17 it was intended by the legislation that had been adopted by  
18 the Legislature. That included working closely with a lot  
19 of mentors, Steve Oltman, Ron Fleecs, Ron Bishop, and some  
20 of the others that were there to help make it successful,  
21 and not realizing that the amount of people across the state  
22 that was hoping that it would fail.

23 MR. STARR: So you worked with first the so-called  
24 interim board and the elected board.

25 MR. STORM: Right.

1           MR. STARR: So, what was that transition? How did  
2 that help or hurt?

3           MR. STORM: I think it was a seamless transition.  
4 I don't remember it being, you know, what do I want to say?  
5 I don't remember it being that controversial from one to the  
6 next. I think once the election was over, you still had  
7 some of the ones on there that were hoping that it would  
8 fail, and then you had those, of course, that were trying to  
9 do everything to help make it successful. And I think the  
10 best thing that, you know, to everybody's credit was, all of  
11 the meetings was amenable. There wasn't the name-calling  
12 and dissension and so forth. Even though some of them  
13 didn't want it to fail, they were there to help make sure  
14 that we were providing services for providing good  
15 conservation, wildlife management and those types of things.

16           MR. STARR: So, when the board, as it moved along  
17 for the few years, did you see much change in the outlook of  
18 the board or how was that --

19           MR. STORM: The board stayed fairly consistent and  
20 gradually changed. I think each two years or each four  
21 years you could see that you were generally running into  
22 boards that -- individuals that were supportive of the idea,  
23 that understood the concept of managing our natural  
24 resources by the hydrologic units rather than by the old  
25 ancient county lines that sometimes hindered those types of

1           developments.

2                   MR. STARR:   What -- in those first few years, did  
3           you have any projects or things that your board had said,  
4           "Let's do this"?

5                   MR. STORM:   The early years in the NRD that, in  
6           the Middle Missouri, we worked primarily just those basic  
7           conservation type practices, tree plantings.  Continued to  
8           work on the Tekamah Mud Creek Watershed, which was the major  
9           project for that district.  The Middle Missouri always was  
10          challenged from a financial standpoint, never had a lot of  
11          money to be able to do projects just from the standpoint  
12          that it was a small district to start with and the fact that  
13          Thurston County made up about a third of that district, and  
14          out of that third, probably 60 percent of that area was  
15          non-taxable as far as property-tax-generated funds because  
16          of the reservation lands.

17                  MR. STARR:   Right.  So, did you work any with the  
18          tribal folks, either the Winnebagos or Omahas?

19                  MR. STORM:   We worked a little bit directly with  
20          the tribes, more so with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.  They  
21          pretty much handled all of the farming leases and the  
22          conservation and so forth that had to be applied to the  
23          tribal lands, the individual allotments.  So they were in  
24          charge of that.  That's who the -- as staff that I worked  
25          with and who the local district conservationists and so

1       forth worked with in those types of projects.

2               MR. STARR:   The only significant urban community  
3       you had was South Sioux City.   Did you work with them or how  
4       did that work?

5               MR. STORM:   We tried to.   Again, we had such  
6       limited financial resources that we had the major flood  
7       control project in the Tekamah area that needed to --  
8       something happened.   We had, you know, the normal  
9       conservation things that we were trying to provide  
10      additional dollars to and the limited funds there didn't  
11      make for a lot of urban projects.   We tried doing a few  
12      little things with some park development with the city just  
13      to, lack of a better term, give them some assistance, some  
14      appeasement with the projects.   South Sioux, being that  
15      urban dominated area of that district, being one of the  
16      primary funding areas of the district, created some problems  
17      in the fact that they were opposed then, to the Tekamah Mud  
18      Creek Watershed, because most of the money was being set  
19      aside to be able to develop that flood control to protect  
20      the city of Tekamah.   Therefore, there was less dollars to  
21      be able to do things in the South Sioux area.   So we worked  
22      on some things, some small wildlife areas, to do some  
23      improvements, Omadi Bend and different things.   But the  
24      financial restrictions of that small district really caused  
25      a lot of problems trying to get anything done.

1           In addition to the Tekamah Mud Creek Watershed, we  
2 got heavily into rural water. We had two projects, one in  
3 Dakota County, that ended up getting built, the Dakota  
4 County Rural Water Project. We've put a tremendous amount  
5 of time and effort helping work with those people to obtain  
6 good quality drinking water. And to make that feasible, we  
7 tried to connect a system that would have included South  
8 Sioux, Jackson, Hubbard, Homer, Dakota City, all into one  
9 treatment plant, distribution type system and everybody  
10 still owning their own. We weren't successful with the  
11 communities being involved, all of them, but we were able to  
12 build a successful rural water system to serve the rural  
13 needs. We also built the rural water system in Thurston  
14 County, which was a joint project between the Lower Elkhorn  
15 and the Middle Missouri, but because we had the project in  
16 Dakota County and our proximity to the western part of  
17 Thurston County, we took the lead on that project and did  
18 the project versus the Lower Elkhorn getting involved in it.

19           So we were very heavily in those last, probably  
20 six, seven years, in the development of the two rural water  
21 systems and then the Tekamah Mud Creek Watershed with the  
22 construction of some of the smaller dams and then the main  
23 recreational, main flood control structure in Summit Lake.

24           MR. STARR: One of the big things that happened,  
25 of course, to the Middle Missouri was the merger with the

1 Papio. And that was after your time. Did that ever come up  
2 when --

3 MR. STORM: You know, it never came up in the time  
4 that I was there. I can tell you that was probably the lack  
5 of funds to be able to do anything was one of the reasons  
6 that I looked at leaving and went to work for a contractor  
7 in Garden City, Kansas, to manage one of his construction  
8 companies, because I could see in the future that the  
9 limited funds that was going to be available would be barely  
10 enough to cover staffing costs, leaving nothing more to do  
11 than to shuffle paper from one side of the desk to the  
12 other. And I guess, I was looking for more of a challenge  
13 than that. And I had the opportunity to, what I thought,  
14 advance my career at that point in time. So I did that.  
15 And then it was shortly after that that the NRD got together  
16 with the Papio and completed the merger.

17 MR. STARR: One of the -- as I remember, one of  
18 the considerations at that time was not just to merge the  
19 two districts, but to merge the whole district or parts of  
20 the district with the Lewis and Clark. And that, of course,  
21 never happened.

22 MR. STORM: Yeah, you know, that was never a  
23 discussion that we had directly, although there was probably  
24 times in the early days when, you know, there was those  
25 discussions that it may have made more sense to have had one

1 district that would have been Dakota County up more north  
2 and be a part of the Lewis and Clark district. And then the  
3 other three counties, going south -- the other two counties  
4 south with the Papio. Unfortunately, not knowing the  
5 politics when the lines was drawn being part of that when  
6 the Legislature did all that, pretty much the assumption is  
7 that probably nobody really wanted the Thurston County area.

8 (Laughter.)

9 Because there was just no financial basis there.  
10 There was just nothing there, you know, to support that.  
11 And 24 was a good number, and so they whittled out those  
12 three counties. But it was just probably never a real  
13 long-term viable district, so I always looked at it after I  
14 left is that I probably run it into the ground and that left  
15 them with only one choice, but you had some major projects  
16 that needed to be done there and the financial ability to do  
17 that was just limited.

18 MR. STARR: Yeah.

19 MR. STORM: The rural water was easy, because they  
20 were generating -- revenue generating and self-supporting.  
21 But when you looked at the need of the Summit -- of the  
22 Tekamah Mud Creek Watershed, and you looked at the needs of  
23 Elk Creek or the Omaha Creek Watersheds and others there,  
24 that there was just way more than would ever be funds to be  
25 able to do. So, from my standpoint, the merger with the

1       Papio of those three areas have been tremendous, I think,  
2       for those areas. It's given them some sound financial, but  
3       has also given the Papio enough area to be able to expand  
4       beyond the Omaha area and to help have an impact on the  
5       management of the resources. We see it even here now today  
6       working with the Papio and their staff on things that being  
7       a part of that larger district gives the resources an  
8       ability to do things that otherwise, as individual counties  
9       and individual smaller districts, you wouldn't have the  
10      capabilities to accomplish.

11               MR. STARR: Yeah. And if I remember right, you  
12      said you were there about 12 years?

13               MR. STORM: Just roughly 12 years.

14               MR. STARR: What progress or what change, I should  
15      say, not progress, did you see in the board in that 12-year  
16      period? Did you see much change?

17               MR. STORM: There was -- the board was fairly  
18      stable if I remember right. We had a couple elections where  
19      we had two or three people that was elected that was maybe  
20      anti-watershed project, you know, type of thing. I know  
21      particularly one individual from South Sioux was elected for  
22      that purpose. Was actually a good board member, added a lot  
23      of insight and a lot of -- on most things. It's just that  
24      anything that was related to the Tekamah project, it was an  
25      automatic no, and wouldn't even listen to it. But throw

1 that project aside and everything else, that individual was  
2 a good board member. The Middle Missouri, in my opinion,  
3 had the luxury of, in the 12 years that I was there, of  
4 having one chairman, and that chairman was Vince Kramper who  
5 was an outstanding individual as far as leadership and being  
6 able to conduct a public meeting. And I say that  
7 wholeheartedly. I think he just did a tremendous job in  
8 making that district as successful as it was, could be. I  
9 can remember once when we had to adopt some groundwater  
10 management regulations and stuff that the Legislature had  
11 just mandated that we look at. And we had a public hearing  
12 in the Tekamah area, which the Tekamah area was pretty much  
13 anti-regulations, particularly, "You're not going to tell me  
14 how I was going to use my land" in them days. And we had  
15 the meeting at 2:00 in the afternoon in a January or  
16 February time frame so that the farmers would all be able to  
17 be there. They wouldn't be in the fields and all those  
18 types of things. Unfortunately, we had it at 2:00 and a  
19 number of them had already been to a local tavern for two or  
20 three hours, and, you know, we went through our spiel and we  
21 took our licks through that hearing. Yeah, we heard  
22 people's opposition that you shouldn't be doing this and the  
23 name-calling and so forth. And the meeting was over,  
24 everything went great. One individual that came up  
25 afterwards and you knew he was still looking, for lack of a

1 better term, for some skin. And he approached Vince and I,  
2 and we stand there talking and he come up and he goes, "You  
3 know," in his slurred type speech, "You know, if somebody  
4 had called me the names and everything that I called you  
5 guys today," he said, "I'd punch them right square in the  
6 face." And Vinny looked at him and smiled and says, "You  
7 know, that's the difference between us, isn't it?" The guy  
8 dropped his hands to his side and, like, what do I do now,  
9 turned and walked away. And it was just that way that Vinny  
10 could work with people that really helped make that district  
11 as successful as it could be. And I know he served for a  
12 number of years after that on the Papio board and on the  
13 State Commission. I encouraged him to get on the State  
14 Commission, because he had that thoughtfulness and ability  
15 to work with people that not a lot of people, you know,  
16 really have.

17 MR. STARR: He could diffuse things easily, rather  
18 quickly. So, I guess I've just about run out of questions  
19 for you, Rod. Is there any other things that you would like  
20 to talk about in terms of --

21 MR. STORM: I think the only thing that I would  
22 add, Gale, is as a young kid growing up in the Thurston  
23 County area, you know, I grew up in the farming background.  
24 In high school, I used to, lack of a better term, cuss the  
25 old terraces, you know, working for my uncle and my

1 granddad, you know, trying to farm those things. We knew  
2 why we were doing it. It still didn't make it easy. I can  
3 remember as a sixth grader that the BIA had a -- always had  
4 a conservation poster contest. I was lucky enough to win it  
5 one year, the art contest, because I drew some bulldozer or  
6 something that, for whatever that was worth. I mean, I was  
7 always aware of conservation and the need for conservation.  
8 And when I worked -- started with the NRD, I totally knew  
9 nothing about what went on. And it was a real, real  
10 experience. I've often told people it was not only  
11 conservation and wildlife and recreation 101, but 202, 303,  
12 404, and it was the college of hard knocks, because you  
13 just -- to me it was, you know, I was going into education.  
14 I took into this job completely another direction. So it  
15 was a lot of hard work to get that. I had excellent, like I  
16 said before, mentors with Steve Oltman, Ron Bishop, Ron  
17 Fleecs, and some of the guys that you could call and ask,  
18 you know, get, you know, how did you do? How would you  
19 approach this? And they would never tell you, "This is how  
20 you need to do it." They'd give you enough information that  
21 you needed, then go back and make it work for your area and  
22 for yourself. So, I think those were the things that I  
23 appreciated with the camaraderie that people had trying to  
24 help make the NRDs a success across the state of Nebraska.

25 MR. STARR: How is the -- in your view, what you

1 see in your 12 years plus what you've seen since then, has  
2 the outlook of the farmers out there on the land changed in  
3 terms of acceptance of regulation, taking care of the land  
4 and so forth? Do you see that?

5 MR. STORM: I don't think anything has changed on  
6 the farmer from the standpoint of wanting to be good  
7 stewards. I think back in the '60s, the early '70s, prior  
8 to the NRDs and then the NRDs helped shape a lot of that  
9 opinion from farmers, but they didn't have the tools.  
10 Everybody had a moldboard plow. I can remember as a young  
11 12-, 13-year-old, taking the tractor with the two-bottom  
12 plow and meeting Dad after work so that he could plow for  
13 four hours, five hours, and after work, you know, in town,  
14 and I don't think people had the tools. I think lack of  
15 some better knowledge that all of a sudden you had the  
16 (indiscernible) that came out with the minimum till and some  
17 of those things. And people started learning that maybe  
18 there's another way to do this. And then, as technology  
19 changed, I think most of the farmers, being the stewards  
20 that they are, the business people that they are, they  
21 adapted and changed because they knew that they could  
22 produce more with less, and at the same time, help preserve  
23 those resources for the future generations. Because I think  
24 across the state, I always thought that our farmers were  
25 good stewards. No different than every profession, you had

1       somebody that was never going to change, but the 90 percent  
2       of the farmers were looking for better ways to do it, better  
3       ways to be better stewards of their land, and I think the  
4       NRD helped shape that. I think it did it better than what  
5       the old soil and water conservation districts did, because  
6       they were so narrowly focused that it allowed to have a  
7       broader environmental picture than what people had been  
8       centered on before. So, I think the NRDs, to me, helped  
9       shape that and bring people closer and give them the tools  
10      that they needed, that they wanted to be able to be better  
11      stewards.

12                   MR. STARR: Very good. Well, I think that's a  
13      good place to end. Thanks a lot, Rod.

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