

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 20th, 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.

14 - - -

15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25