

INTERVIEW WITH ARDEN BREDEMEIER
BY GAYLE STARR
June 16, 2014

1 MR. STARR: This is June 16th and I'm doing an
2 interview with Arden Bredemeier, who was on the Nemaha NRD
3 Board, the original board. And this is for the Nebraska
4 Natural Resources District's Oral History Project. And
5 doing it in his home near DuBois, Nebraska. So, Arden, why
6 don't you tell me about your history with the conservation
7 movement?

8 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, in 1964, we started a small
9 watershed project down here in southeast Nebraska. We
10 called it the Southfork Watershed. It encompassed two small
11 branches and an NRD Statewide Conservation District and
12 Natural Resource Commission. And I served on quite a few
13 national and state conventions in Hawaii, and Wyoming, South
14 Dakota, and other places, as well as all the state and local
15 ones. I served just one year on -- as the vice-president.
16 The rest of the time, I was just a director. I was always
17 interested in soil conservation. Back in 1947, I was just a
18 freshman in high school and we're still farming that very
19 same terrace that we built with the ag instructor, Harold
20 Vance. He came out and we laid that terrace, and our whole
21 farm got under that program back there then in about -- I
22 got out of the service in '56, and between me and my
23 brother, back in '54, he did a lot of it, and then I did,
24 from '56 on when he was in the service, so our farms have
25 both in soil conservation ever since the mid-'50s, actually.

1 About '58, we (indiscernible) terracing.

2 MR. STARR: All right.

3 MR. BREDEMEIER: So, I've always been interested
4 in soil and water conservation. I was always a little
5 disappointed in -- with all the recreation that they're
6 putting into the watershed program today, but I guess we've
7 got to include recreation as well as just water and soil,
8 because we got to maintain that, too.

9 MR. STARR: Why don't -- when you first heard
10 about the NRD, natural resource district law, what was your
11 opinion? What did you think?

12 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, when we first started, we
13 wanted to try to keep our small watershed program, because
14 we had local control and local interest and local
15 involvement there. When the NRD came into effect, there was
16 a while, actually our NRD was actually fighting it. They
17 wanted to keep -- Paul Eddy (phonetic) was in, kind of the
18 head man of that. They called themselves the Soil for Soil
19 and Water Conservation, I believe. It was some kind of a
20 figure like that. But we ended up on the -- allowed that
21 sort of thing, natural resource district to be included, you
22 know, and small watersheds and soil conservation boards
23 dissolved, actually.

24 MR. STARR: Right. You were on that original
25 board, right?

1 MR. BREDEMEIER: I was an original board member.
2 Our Nemaha NRD was organized by one director from each
3 watershed that was in the original district boundaries, and
4 one director from each soil and water conservation county.
5 And that made up our 21 board members. And Ernest
6 Bredemeier, he served as the one from Rock Creek, as well as
7 our county supervisor at the time.

8 MR. STARR: So, what was your involvement in that
9 opposition movement? Did you get involved?

10 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, not really. I mean, we
11 didn't ever go out and do any campaigning against it or
12 anything. We just -- as far as I was concerned, I mean, I
13 couldn't see how we were going to stop something that the
14 state level was doing it, because -- now I can see how much
15 better it is that we do have the big district. I mean, you
16 get a lot more funds to do a lot more with than what we
17 could have done otherwise. We was lucky. We pretty much
18 got every one of the structures we had planned in our
19 Southfork Watershed, and I think -- I know Rock Creek, they
20 were already built before the NRD came into effect. And
21 Long Branch, they finished all their construction under
22 their plan that they had as a small watershed at that time.

23 MR. STARR: When you first formed those 21 guys, I
24 guess it was all guys, were they pretty much unanimous in
25 their opposition to the NRDs?

1 MR. BREDEMEIER: Who was?

2 MR. STARR: The 21 board -- first board members.

3 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, I don't think -- there was
4 Fall City and maybe just in Syracuse area was a little bit
5 more in opposition, but other than that, I think the rest of
6 us pretty much just had to go along with, because they
7 already had some of their watersheds planned, anyhow, like
8 (indiscernible) and that, so --

9 MR. STARR: So, as you said, you were on the board
10 20 years. How did the opinion of the directors change over
11 the first 20 years or did it change?

12 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, basically, we've got more
13 city director involvement from the directors in the city
14 than what we had when I was on the board. Other than that,
15 they still got about -- the proportion is probably still
16 according to the law and regulations of where they come from
17 and everything. Rural development is getting further and
18 farther between, the farmers are, actually. I mean, you
19 might have more area additions, but you don't have the
20 population in that area.

21 MR. STARR: Not at all, yeah. So, when you first
22 started the NRD, what surprised you the most about the NRD
23 law? What surprised you?

24 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, the biggest stair step I
25 can see from the day we started we started meeting in

1 Tecumseh in the community building, and there was just a
2 manager and a secretary and us 21 directors. And we sat on
3 folding chairs. And we only had a little old -- real old
4 Ford pickup for maintenance. And at that time -- now I
5 can't say his name, Ray Kinney (phonetic) was our manager at
6 that time, and we -- it's went a long way, because since
7 then, I mean, we've still got just our same 21 directors.
8 We've changed our criteria a little bit. Instead of having
9 21 district, we're down to ten, but two out of a district.
10 And like I say, they got all kinds -- about three or four
11 secretaries and two or three tractors for mowing and
12 maintaining our recreation areas. And at that time when we
13 started, well, we had basically structures built was
14 structures that was built through the watershed programs.
15 And then I don't remember what year it was, but I know it
16 was 1985 when we completed the Iron Horse Trail Lakes. And
17 then we had Kirkman's Cove was there (indiscernible)
18 recreation project, and that was dedicated in '90, last of
19 that somewhere in there.

20 MR. STARR: The Iron Horse is just up the road
21 here a ways. How is that -- is that used a lot or how is
22 it?

23 MR. BREDEMEIER: It was used real heavy at the
24 very start with boating and skiing and then they finally
25 took the boating and skiing out. They thought they had too

1 much riprap, but they -- there was a lot of good fishing in
2 it, and that's what they more or less turned it back into.
3 And then, just two years ago, they did a lot of work on it
4 as far as the recreation area portions of it. And they
5 cleaned the sediment out and put some sediment basins in the
6 top of it, and some fishing piers on it. It's a pretty lake
7 today. I wanted them to take more of them trees out in the
8 original plan. We dozed out a lot of them that
9 wasn't -- that the Corps didn't want to take out -- or that
10 the Service didn't want to take out when they built, so we
11 hired J.R. Vaughn (phonetic) that time to clear that out, so
12 we could ski and that. And this time, all those trees died
13 so they took that out and Clean Lakes Program, and the State
14 Water Commission may have helped with a lot of that. But I
15 was a little disappointed in the fact that it cost about as
16 much to do all this work as it did when we built the dam. I
17 mean, the cost of all that was as great as them, and I
18 probably think we wisely spent that money for more
19 structures, but I'm pleased with it. And then they're
20 getting -- it took a while to get restocked on account of
21 the rainfall and everything, but it filled up and there's
22 good fishing in it now again.

23 MR. STARR: A couple years ago, there was a group
24 that wanted to build a big dam south of Pawnee City, maybe
25 on Turkey Creek, and it wasn't the NRD --

1 MR. BREDEMEIER: That big dam you're talking?

2 MR. STARR: Yeah. That died or --

3 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, there's a long story about
4 that. Way back in the '40s, there was talk of the Corps of
5 Engineers wanting to build a structure across Turkey Creek
6 clear down in -- two miles into Kansas, across from hill to
7 hill. Well, all of the opposition at that time was from the
8 farmers that had all that bottom ground.

9 MR. STARR: Sure.

10 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, then that died, and when
11 the floods came back in '51 and everything and then again in
12 the '80s and the -- then again in the '90s, it kind of got
13 stirred up. And then, there was a group they called some
14 kind of lake association people. They was trying to get it
15 to be built here about a mile into Nebraska from Kansas
16 side. Well, Kansas was getting all the protection and
17 didn't want to put any money into it. And the land, at that
18 time, here -- it must have been back in 2000 or even earlier
19 than that, and the land value at that time was only about
20 \$1,000 an acre or 500 or something. And today, it's \$3- and
21 \$4- and \$5,000 an acre, but I think it's by the wayside
22 because the -- there's just too much grit and too much mud
23 and everything else here. It'd just be a mud hole in a few
24 years. We found that in our other lakes around here. We
25 have trouble with -- like I said, we've cleaned Kirkman's

1 Cove twice and Iron Horse once, and so, I think it would be
2 a waste of time and money compared to what a whole bunch of
3 smaller structures would do.

4 MR. STARR: You mentioned recreation. When did
5 that come up in the NRD?

6 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, they allow boating on all
7 of these lakes up to 25 miles an hour, which is great, but
8 right now over the last couple of years, we've been having a
9 lot of that algae, and so right now you can't ski in it.
10 You could still ski in Humboldt's lake, Kirkman's Cove, but
11 now they've got algaes, so you can boat in there. Sunday,
12 when we was over there for Father's Day picnic, but just
13 boating, no skiing because of the algae.

14 MR. STARR: Yeah. So, over the years that you
15 were on the board, there were various people that came in
16 from different cities and so forth in the NRD. Did
17 everybody get along pretty well or did that have much
18 controversy?

19 MR. BREDEMEIER: You know, every board you'll have
20 a leader.

21 MR. STARR: Oh, sure.

22 MR. BREDEMEIER: I mean, you'll have somebody
23 that's got a pet project and some that don't have a pet
24 project. I mean, I was always against the Rails to Trails
25 because of the cost that it was, and it was supposed to have

1 been Rails to Trails up the NRD. Well, a couple of board
2 members wanted to take sponsorship of it. And I said, "You
3 know what a sponsorship is. That means later on down the
4 line, you're going to be paying for the" -- "Oh, no, we're
5 just going to sponsor it." Well, it ended up we did pay for
6 it. That's why I got off the board probably in '92, because
7 of that. But I enjoyed my time on board, and I -- you know,
8 new personnel is always great, because new personnel brings
9 in new ideas.

10 MR. STARR: Absolutely.

11 MR. BREDEMEIER: New personnel will bring
12 in -- any governing board, whether it's city, county,
13 school, or whatever, new leadership is always great.

14 MR. STARR: Yeah. So, who were some of the
15 leaders when you were on the board?

16 MR. BREDEMEIER: Oh, Paul was pretty much wanting
17 to lead in his respect when I was on there. And then the
18 rest of us was all pretty much all in the general -- well,
19 Cecil Reese (phonetic), see he was in the Soil Conservation
20 in Falls City there, so he was pretty much up to par on what
21 the laws and things could do, you know, as far as things
22 was, but other than that, until they got a lot of the city
23 board members on later years, that that's when the
24 recreation and the Rails to Trails came in, that was more or
25 less like Ted Gonman (phonetic) and -- oh, I can't think of

1 what the veterinarian's name is right now. I'll think of it
2 after a bit. They had their fights. I mean, they wanted
3 to -- and Doc Gilstad (phonetic), he tried to help them
4 through that Rails to Trails. You get the people that are
5 around the people that are using it, they're the ones that
6 would promote that portion of your program.

7 MR. STARR: Sure.

8 MR. BREDEMEIER: Just like the windbreak program.
9 At one time we, as directors, we'd go around and get farmers
10 to put in windbreaks. I managed to (indiscernible) sold him
11 (indiscernible) which didn't hurt nothing, but I mean, we
12 managed to sell the trees. But today, there's a lot of
13 controversy about the cedar trees the way they're taking
14 over some of our pastures.

15 MR. STARR: For sure. One of the authorities that
16 the NRDs have was to sponsor these rural water districts.
17 Did the NRD ever get involved in --

18 MR. BREDEMEIER: We haven't -- if they did, they
19 do a lot on the irrigation part now as far as permits. And
20 that was just coming into strong effect in '92 when I got
21 off the board. We had to put meters in in our things and
22 safety valves and everything for fertilization, but up
23 until -- I'm going to say up until probably '85 or
24 something, irrigation -- see, our rural water district here
25 was organized prior to the NRD and everything, here in

1 Pawnee County, and Richardson County the same way. Today,
2 they would be in charge of that, too, for well waters.

3 MR. STARR: I think most of them in the Nemaha
4 were built prior to the NRD.

5 MR. BREDEMEIER: Right.

6 MR. STARR: I don't know that the NRD has gotten
7 involved in any its --

8 MR. BREDEMEIER: The only part we ever had
9 involvement with water changing was when Bern, Kansas,
10 needed water. They dug a well over in Richardson County
11 about three miles east of here, four or five miles,
12 actually. And we had to give them a permit to transfer that
13 well water just across the state line. It was about a half
14 a mile or a mile into Nebraska, for the City of Bern for
15 domestic use -- or city use, I should say.

16 MR. STARR: So, after all these years, how do you
17 see the NRDs? What's your opinion as of now?

18 MR. BREDEMEIER: I think they're going strong. I
19 don't think they have slacked up on anything. I mean, it
20 takes funds to do things, and there's still plenty of places
21 that they are in -- our NRD, I know there's plenty of places
22 on the Nemaha. There's plenty of places up there around
23 Peru and especially the river bluff area from the state line
24 north to the Nebraska City area. There's a lot of hills and
25 valleys in there that need some control yet.

1 MR. STARR: The basic Soil and Water Conservation
2 Program, you know, terraces, waterways, et cetera, did the
3 NRD put some of their funds into that, too?

4 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, at one time, the Soil and
5 Water Conservation paid so much for terracing, you know.
6 Like, a lot of our terraces down here that we built with our
7 own plow and everything, we got, I think, like, a penny or
8 two cents a running foot. Lou Havercamp (phonetic) would
9 have made -- he was (indiscernible) technician, laid them
10 out. And I don't know what the rate would be today, since
11 we built -- like I said, we had ours all done prior to '60,
12 basically. But the NRD, when I was on the board, I know we
13 had funds that we put out for terraces and small dam
14 structures, but we spent most of it in terraces and
15 waterways, and we was limited to -- our funds as far as for
16 building small dams.

17 MR. STARR: How do you think, among the landowners
18 and farmers now that you're familiar with, is there a pretty
19 good conservation ethic or is there more of a --

20 MR. BREDEMEIER: I think it's probably greater,
21 but the funds are so small that anymore, a lot of farmers
22 will just up and do it on their own. Just like, now, these
23 waterways just south where you're looking at here, them
24 waterways was in there back in 1945. We're still using
25 them. But one of them over there we put a tile waterway in.

1 And instead of signing up and waiting for funds, you just go
2 do it. And that's the concept right here in this local.
3 And why wait for funds when you need to have it done?

4 MR. STARR: Right.

5 MR. BREDEMEIER: So, a lot of farms changed hands
6 as far as new ownership and everything, they'll just up and
7 build the terraces and waterway without federal funds
8 anymore. They had a program over west on Turkey Creek area
9 in order to save a lot of the water from going down, and
10 special funds for terraces and waterways where they paid,
11 like, 90 percent of the cost of building. They got some
12 good terraces and tile waterways, and farms and -- a lot of
13 them were, actually, had a conservation audit but they
14 actually improved a lot of them for that purpose. But
15 it's -- like I said, the funds were just as short. Money's
16 tight.

17 MR. STARR: True everywhere. When you were on the
18 NRD board, did you have any big controversial events? The
19 Rails to Trails. Did you have any other big controversial
20 issues where the board was really split?

21 MR. BREDEMEIER: Did we have what?

22 MR. STARR: Any issues that came up where the
23 board was really split on what to do?

24 MR. BREDEMEIER: No, not really. We would always
25 come with our two thirds majority vote on just almost

1 everything. We'd had some directors, it's going to be that
2 way.

3 MR. STARR: Sure.

4 MR. BREDEMEIER: They'll say, "Well, I'm just
5 going to follow the crowd. I'll vote whichever way you
6 vote." And they should vote their opinion and for their
7 district that they're representing, their people that they
8 represent. I always voted to represent my people down here.
9 There were some things where they're getting back home. I
10 said, "Well, I might have voted against it, but I think my
11 people would have really -- this was the way it should have
12 been, you know." You got to steady those -- each program
13 over before you go to a board meeting, and that's what we
14 did after the first few years. We went into committees and
15 we discussed the project before it come to the main board,
16 and then we'd give the board our thoughts, but the board
17 still made the decision.

18 MR. STARR: We mentioned earlier about the lawsuit
19 that some of the people up in Otoe County and so forth were
20 involved in. How much knowledge of that did you have?

21 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, I remember when we first
22 got started and we went up there north of Syracuse and was
23 looking at some watershed -- waterways, I should say. And I
24 don't know why they had done it, but they run cement on it.
25 Do you remember that? They had cement down the sides of

1 their waterways where their water wasn't getting into the
2 waterways. It was under (indiscernible) that cement things.

3 MR. STARR: Washing it out, yeah.

4 MR. BREDEMEIER: And then I helped Don Hood one
5 time, a person -- I don't remember where it was at, but he
6 had a, like, a five-year contract for always showing water
7 conservation and his was water was running to the neighbor
8 south of him and we had -- Don Hood and I had to go out
9 there and survey out some terraces. And he had canceled
10 that program and then we had to get him back in and had to
11 get that farm terraced and waterwayed in order to satisfy
12 the flooding that he was causing on the (indiscernible) to
13 the bottom of him. So, yeah, I was very active. That's one
14 thing I would say maybe against the directors today compared
15 to us. When they'd build a structure, we'd go out -- I know
16 I would. I'd go out there, if it was in Southfork. I'd go
17 out there and watch it while it was being built, and we'd
18 inspect every structure before we -- the NRD would take
19 ownership of it, you know. It was a couple different times
20 we had trouble with the fence that was built that wasn't
21 right. One of them thought, "Well, you just sign off." I
22 said, "No, why sign off on it? We got to leave that open
23 until he fixes it." And I don't think a lot of directors
24 know where a lot of these structures are at today. I mean,
25 they're only on the board, say, like, for four years. If

1 they don't like it, they just get off. And so, I don't
2 think they're -- some of them do, yes, but I don't think
3 they get the involvement that we had.

4 MR. STARR: Who are the directors from this area
5 now?

6 MR. BREDEMEIER: We got a mailman that's a
7 director from Richardson County, and -- I'll say his name
8 pretty quick. Me and names, I got to think on. Don Sisky
9 (phonetic) is our director from Pawnee County. We only got
10 one out of Pawnee County. And Don Sisky's our director. He
11 lives north of Pawnee City. And the other one is -- he
12 lives right over here in Richardson County.

13 MR. STARR: That's okay.

14 MR. BREDEMEIER: Go ahead, I'll think of it after
15 a bit.

16 MR. STARR: Pawnee County director, yeah. One of
17 the things when the NRDs were first formed, one of the
18 provisions of the law was that all the money that each of
19 the watersheds and counties had, had to be spent in that
20 county. Because you had so many watersheds, was that a big
21 problem or do you remember how that worked?

22 MR. BREDEMEIER: Well, you know, I think -- I
23 guess maybe I didn't know that, but I think maybe our
24 watershed didn't really have a whole lot of funds. It was a
25 small area, and we was only limited to one mil at that time.

1 But we had built a structure, like I said, on the county
2 road, the county put in some money and our small
3 watershed -- Southfork Watershed put in some money and we
4 took out an old bridge that had a 20-foot embankment up and
5 down. And so some of our funds were spent before the NRD
6 would be turned over to them, that is. I think that's
7 probably over \$1,000 that turned over at that time involved.

8 MR. STARR: Yeah, that was one of the original
9 provisions was that the money that each district or
10 watershed had had to stay --

11 MR. BREDEMEIER: In that area.

12 MR. STARR: Because there were a few that had
13 pretty substantial amounts.

14 MR. BREDEMEIER: Yeah, well, we didn't have that
15 much. I know that one of the very first structures built
16 with the NRD in our district down here would have been that
17 (indiscernible) that we had over here on the Beemer
18 (phonetic) -- north of the Beemer place that time.

19 MR. STARR: Yeah, some -- there were a few
20 districts, and most of them were like you, they just had a
21 small amount. But there were a few that had quite a bit of
22 money because they hadn't started building and so forth.

23 MR. BREDEMEIER: I think that's probably why they
24 had the controversy. They wanted to make sure that that
25 money stayed in their district, because it was raised from

1 there.

2 MR. STARR: That was one of the compromises that
3 was made, yeah.

4 MR. BREDEMEIER: I would still say -- I know it's,
5 you know, there's a user fee for everything. Just like, we
6 got to have a park permit to get into Iron Horse, Kirkman's
7 Cove, Prairie Owl, and Wirth Brothers, but, you know, if you
8 got a sticker for the state Game and Parks parks, I mean,
9 Iron Horse was built with state funds. So was Kirkman's
10 Cove. And I can't see why a state Game and Parks permit
11 should not work for a local NRD structure. I don't know
12 what they charge at Lincoln and Omaha on their watershed
13 structures for day use, but day use fees is great, I mean,
14 to help with the maintenance of that structure.

15 MR. STARR: Sure.

16 MR. BREDEMEIER: But there was a lot of
17 controversy over that down here when they did it, because,
18 you know, local funds built it, but then state funds also
19 help build it. State funds bought 50 percent of that land,
20 you know, and cost to build it. And so, it seemed like a
21 state permit should -- I know the first few years, when we
22 hayed those areas that wasn't used, we had to give the money
23 from that hay to the association back.

24 MR. STARR: Yeah. That was a pretty big program
25 where the State put money into buying the land and

1 sometimes, you know, it was hayed or farmed even --

2 MR. BREDEMEIER: Right.

3 MR. STARR: -- before the structure was built. In
4 some cases there were odd plots, little triangles and so
5 forth, that got left over, wasn't used. So, that was, in
6 some cases sold off, in some cases, it just planted to
7 grass. And in a few cases, where it's just farmed, it's
8 just cash rented to some local farmer.

9 Well, I think we've talked about a whole lot of
10 things, Arden. I'm going to shut off, and then we can talk
11 about the real things.

12 MR. BREDEMEIER: I don't know how much
13 condemnation the NRDs ever had to go --

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