

NRD ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW:

RON FLEECES by DAYLE WILLIAMSON,
April 10, 2013

PP. 2 - 30

PROCEEDINGS, April 10, 2013:

1 MR. WILLIAMSON: This is Dayle Williamson, and I'm
2 interviewing Ron Fleecs. It's the 10th day of April, 2013.

3 Ron, it was 44 years ago April the 1st that the
4 NRD law was passed. And so, why don't you start out and
5 give us a little of your background and how you became
6 involved with the natural resources districts?

7 MR. FLEECS: Thanks, Dayle.

8 I became an official employee of the Nebraska
9 Soil and Water Conservation Commission in December, of
10 1963, and that is when I started working for the
11 commission as a watershed specialist. I came to the
12 commission from Chappell, Nebraska, where I was district
13 conservationist with the Soil Conservation Service. I
14 worked for them for about four years. I was at Oshkosh
15 for three years and Chappell for one year after I
16 graduated from college in 1959. My friend Duane
17 Chamberlain stopped one day when I was at Chappell and
18 says, "How about coming to work for the commission as a
19 watershed Specialist?" And I said, "Just -- What's a
20 watershed?" So, he had to explain to me a little bit
21 about what a watershed was, which is kind of interesting.
22 So, that's where we first got acquainted and ended up
23 coming to Lincoln working for the commission in 1963 as a
24 watershed specialist.

1 During those nine years, I worked there until the
2 districts were organized in 1972. And during that period of
3 time when I was on the commission, we had some interesting
4 times going back and forth talking with Warren Fairchild
5 when he came up with this idea about reorganization of the
6 special purpose districts and what we would have to do and
7 what was going to be involved. And I always remember some
8 of our meetings that we were -- had at the office. And we
9 were at that time up on the sixth floor, if I recall, at the
10 State Capitol Building.

11 I always recall Warren talking about the natural
12 resource district law and what we were going to do. Every
13 once in a while Fairchild would call us in there, and he had
14 some brainstorm about something, you know, about the law and
15 what we thought about it and what we should do. And those
16 were very interesting times, especially when we had to go
17 around and talk to some of the special purpose districts
18 about what we were trying to do.

19 I went to work for the Lower Big Blue, Natural
20 Resources District, in July right after the law became
21 effective in July of 1972. I never really told my wife
22 this, but I went to work there not knowing for sure whether
23 or not there was really going to be an NRD, because there
24 was a lawsuit going on --

25 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah.

1 MR. FLEECS: About the constitutionality of the
2 NRD law, which, I guess, it came out later that year that
3 everything was okay. So, I stayed. We'd already moved to
4 Beatrice when that happened. And I'm glad it turned out the
5 way it was. So, that's kind of a little bit of my
6 background.

7 MR. WILLIAMSON: Thanks, Ron. And it always
8 reminds you of other background, you know. And I remember
9 when you came to our group. And I started with the old soil
10 and water conservation commission about the same way. I was
11 the third employee in 1958, and I came there without any
12 assurance there would be state funding. The districts
13 gathered up enough money to pay a meager salary. You know,
14 probably our salaries were \$400 a month back then, and that
15 was probably a good salary. And so, I started out that was
16 too. So, we're really pleased you started with the natural
17 resources districts early. And -- Well, just when they got
18 started. And a number of our employees did the same thing
19 from the state office. And they were natural ones to help
20 start the natural resources districts because of all the
21 experience.

22 What year do you think we started talking about
23 natural resources districts? You came in 1963, and I'm
24 guessing, maybe, in '65 we started talking about them, but
25 I'm not sure.

1 MR. FLEECS: It could have been about that time.
2 I was thinking it had to be somewhat before, around that
3 time because, I think, wasn't the LB1357 introduced, in '67
4 or '69?

5 MR. WILLIAMSON: '69.

6 MR. FLEECS: '69. It had to be sometime in the
7 mid sixties because we had a lot of meetings across the
8 state and that went on for probably a good two years.
9 Talking to some of our conservation districts and watershed
10 districts as to what the philosophy was about trying to
11 organize into one special-purpose district, or natural
12 resources district, and combining all of the special purpose
13 districts. At that time there close to 85 special-purpose
14 districts, or was it more than that?

15 MR. WILLIAMSON: Probably about 154 all together.

16 MR. FLEECS: Yeah.

17 MR. WILLIAMSON: Well, adding the 87 soil and
18 water districts.

19 MR. FLEECS: Yes, 87. We had had at least 35 or
20 40 watershed conservancy districts at that time, too.

21 MR. WILLIAMSON: Right. And you helped organize a
22 lot of those.

23 MR. FLEECS: It was interesting.

24 MR. WILLIAMSON: We're going to talk a little bit
25 about the state association of soil and water conservation

1 districts, and you had a gentleman from Holmesville down in
2 your area by the name of Chet Ellis, a very slow-talking
3 gentleman. Can you say anything about Chet? Was he a
4 supporter of the NRDs?

5 MR. FLEECES: Yes, very much so. He was supporting
6 it 110 percent. Chet was a supervisor on the Gage County
7 Soil and Water Conservation District Board. He had been on
8 the board for a number of years. And I think another reason
9 he was a big supporter of it, was he lived in an area of the
10 Mission Creek Watershed Conservancy District, which had had
11 some problems with some of the local landowners down there
12 after the conservancy district was organized. They tried to
13 dissolve it because they didn't like the idea of what was
14 going on between some of the people that was on the
15 watershed district board and landowners on where the
16 structures were going to be. We also had a part of the
17 Mission Creek Watershed in Kansas and part in Nebraska. We
18 were getting some opposition from those people in Kansas,
19 also.

20 I think Chet saw the problems that he had living
21 in that area about the watershed districts, even though they
22 were doing a great job, they were sometimes too local to the
23 problems. Sometimes some of the landowners would say,
24 "Well, yeah, you don't have a dam on your land. You're
25 putting it on somebody else." And I think Chet saw that

1 natural resources districts would take a broader view of all
2 the special purposes that the watershed districts would do
3 along with soil and water conservation districts could
4 accomplish without having so much local involvement. Not so
5 much the public part of it, but at least take it away from
6 maybe some of the criticisms that we got from some of the
7 local people involved with those areas.

8 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah, that's good. You had some
9 other people down there that were very involved with
10 watersheds. I remember a gentleman by the name of Al Leseur
11 and also, Ben Enez in the Cub Creek Water.
12 Ben -- gosh, I've lost his name right now. Anyhow, that's
13 beside the point. You had 11 watersheds around Beatrice.
14 Can you remember any of those having big objections to the
15 NRD idea?

16 MR. FLEECES: No. Not really. Because most
17 of them had watersheds down there, like Plum Creek was one
18 of them that Al Leseur was with.

19 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

20 MR. FLEECES: He was a watershed director.
21 But Plum Creek had a very small tax base. They had gotten
22 an FHA loan to help with the land rights. They were at a
23 point that, once that project got completed with the "O" and
24 "M" that they were going to be involved with and the
25 repayment of their Farmer's Home Administration loan, they

1 would not be able to generate enough revenue, from their two
2 mil tax levy that they had authority, to really keep
3 everything in good shape, but pay the loan, do the "O" and
4 "M", and some other things involved. That's one reason that
5 Al Leseur was a big supporter.

6 There was a Herman Backenberg on the Plum Creek
7 from Pawnee City. He was on the board. Herman owned a lot
8 of land in Plum Creek, also, he loaned a lot of money to
9 landowners that were involved with farming. He was a strong
10 supporter of NRDs because he had enough vision to look at
11 that, we don't do something with this, we're not going to be
12 able to support ourselves. And so he was another strong
13 supporter of it.

14 And the same way with the Big Indian Project. Big
15 Indian was one of the largest watershed projects in Nebraska
16 at that time, 33 structures. And they had a one of the
17 largest Farmer's Home Administration loans for watershed
18 development in the country. They had a public recreation
19 area that they were trying to develop, the Big Indian
20 Recreation Area. And they did the same thing. They looked
21 at those problems they were going to have in financing a
22 public recreation area, financing a big FHA loan which took
23 almost 1 mil, one-half of their mil levy just to pay the
24 principle and interest for the next 40 years to FHA even
25 though the interest rate on those loans was, like, $2\frac{3}{4}$

1 percent, very low. And so that board was a very strong
2 supporter.

3 Cub Creek was another one. They had an FHA loan,
4 and they could see the advantage of it. They were looking
5 at recreation also, they had a lot of opposition in that
6 watershed and in fact, residents tried to dissolve it back
7 in the '60s. They had an election of the taxpayers in that
8 watershed and, luckily, it didn't get dissolved. One of the
9 people representing the landowners ended up being attorney
10 for them? And I think he ended up being a district judge
11 down in that area, if I remember right.

12 MR. WILLIAMSON: Right. I remember that too.

13 MR. FLEECS: And so, that was kind of interesting
14 situation there.

15 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah.

16 MR. FLEECS: So, we had people down there that
17 were really foresighted enough to say, boy, if we don't do
18 something to consolidate all of these watersheds and Gage
19 County was called the watershed capital of Nebraska, because
20 we had watersheds involved with Gage County. They had one
21 of the first pilot PL564 watershed projects in Nebraska,
22 which Warren Fairchild was involved with.

23 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah, in Gage County he worked
24 for soil conservation service

25 MR. FLEECS: Yeah, as a soil scientist.

1 MR. WILLIAMSON: Little Indian Watershed.

2 MR. FLEECES: Their soil conservation person.

3 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah.

4 MR. FLEECES: And so, this is why that area -- the
5 soil and water conservation district supervisors, they were
6 all really supportive of it just because they had the vision
7 to see, if we don't do something, we're going to be in deep
8 trouble down the road in trying just to stay afloat.

9 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah. As a sidelight, the Little
10 Indian, I was the assistant county agent in Gage County down
11 when Ezra Taft Benson came to visit Little Indian. He was
12 Secretary of Agriculture.

13 MR. FLEECES: Uh-huh.

14 MR. WILLIAMSON: And my boss down there, the
15 county agent, was Robin Spence. And he sold the Secretary a
16 couple of purebred Angus bulls. And he had a long time
17 getting, a hard time getting paid for those bulls. So,
18 we're probably getting far afield here on the history thing,
19 but I think it's interesting.

20 Talking about Little Indian, did you know one of
21 the leaders there by the name of Art Cacek? Art was Ron
22 Cacek's father. Ron's been a long-time NRD manager. When
23 he came back from Vietnam, he got with the NRD.

24 MR. FLEECES: Yeah. Art was a car dealer. He was
25 (also) a Big Indian watershed director and lived in Odell.

1 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah, Big Indian watershed.

2 MR. FLEECS: He was car dealer and sold cars in
3 Odell.

4 MR. WILLIAMSON: That right?

5 MR. FLEECS: Yeah. He was on the Big Indian
6 watershed conservancy district board.

7 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes. And he was always very
8 positive.

9 MR. FLEECS: Very positive.

10 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah, great guy.

11 MR. FLEECS: Ron Cacek had a good upbringing about
12 the need for NRD's --

13 MR. WILLIAMSON: You bet.

14 MR. FLEECS: (Learned) importance of watershed
15 through his dad.

16 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah. He was always so great to
17 deal with.

18 And I'm glad you brought up Herman Bachenberg. I
19 was thinking about him. Herman was really a quiet guy. We
20 would sit there and look at different sites where dams might
21 be. And then, Herman would speak up and say, "Oh, there
22 won't be any problem there, 'cause I own that farm."

23 MR. FLEECS: Yes. Owned it or he had mortgages on
24 many of the lands involved, which helped get the easements
25 signed by those landowners.

1 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

2 MR. FLEECS: Herman said, "I'll convince him that
3 it was a good thing."

4 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah. And for posterity, you
5 know, we could talk a little about the dress code. And, you
6 know, maybe I'm really getting far afield, but -- and
7 farmers did this at that time. When Herman went to a nice
8 meeting, he would have one of his old Sunday suit coats on
9 and a new pair of overalls, and that was the dress code.

10 MR. FLEECS: Yes.

11 MR. WILLIAMSON: And so, that was the dress code
12 in the '50s and '60s when we were working with these guys.

13 MR. FLEECS: He had his good, clean, new bib
14 overalls on, you know.

15 MR. WILLIAMSON: Bib overalls.

16 MR. FLEECS: With a checkbook.

17 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

18 MR. FLEECS: It was up in the top pocket.

19 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

20 MR. FLEECS: Another big supporter in that area
21 there that a lot of people might know would have been Dwight
22 Dell.

23 MR. WILLIAMSON: Dwight Dell. Dwight spoke fast.

24 MR. FLEECS: Yes.

25 MR. WILLIAMSON: Chet Ellis spoke slow(ly).

1 MR. FLEECS: Very slow.

2 MR. WILLIAMSON: I remember Dwight Dell getting
3 all confused talking and he'd say, "The mudshed watershed."

4 MR. FLEECS: Yes.

5 MR. WILLIAMSON: He was in Mud Creek.

6 MR. FLEECS: Mud Creek watershed.

7 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

8 MR. FLEECS: And they ended up supporting the
9 first PL566 watershed public recreation area. I believe it
10 was the first in the country under the PL566 law.

11 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

12 MR. FLEECS: Which is now called Rockford Lake,
13 and is managed by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

14 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

15 MR. FLEECS: The Soil Conservation Service back in
16 the late '50s or early '60s got into multi-purpose business
17 programs and got the law changed that they could fund up to
18 a certain amount of money by 50 percent the size of the pool
19 by at least 50 percent. And so, the Mud Creek directors
20 took that upon themselves and put it on a tributary east of
21 Beatrice. You'd had some old history back in that time,
22 too. They heard of neighbors where that project was built
23 that had feuds and fought one another. There were groups
24 that didn't like each other.

25 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

1 MR. FLEECES: They had an interesting situation.

2 MR. WILLIAMSON: Kind of Hatfield and McCoys type
3 of feud.

4 MR. FLEECES: Yes. They had a situation like that
5 down there in --

6 MR. WILLIAMSON: I forgot where the McCoys were.

7 MR. FLEECES: Located on Mud Creek.

8 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

9 MR. FLEECES: -- As there was a couple of families
10 in that tribe that didn't like each other.

11 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah.

12 MR. FLEECES: And -- but they got that land
13 acquired by fee title and it ended up being turned over to
14 the Game and Parks Commission as one of the first public use
15 areas in the State of Nebraska developed by a watershed
16 conservancy district.

17 MR. WILLIAMSON: Right. Well, that's really
18 interesting. You knew that these people were really
19 supportive. So, how did you happen to select this
20 particular NRD to go to, or did they select you to be their
21 manager? You went to a good one.

22 MR. FLEECES: Well, I think it was basically
23 because of the work and responsibilities I had with the
24 commission and with those watersheds in Gage County. I was
25 involved with the small watershed flood control fund that

1 provided funds to watersheds to acquire land, easements and
2 rights of ways. And a lot of that easements and rights of
3 ways was being obtained through the small watershed fund,
4 for which I was responsible for and meeting with those
5 directors. We made monies available, to Mud Creek to
6 acquire fee title for what became the Rockford Lake area, a
7 public use area, we gave them the money from that fund, and
8 then it was reimbursed back to the fund once it became a
9 public use area of the Game Commission. I guess, working
10 with these directors and them having confidence in me when
11 the NRD became available to them, that they wanted to know
12 if I ever thought about coming down and being their manager.
13 And as far as I knew, I was the only one they interviewed.
14 I said, yes, I would be interested. It's close to where I'm
15 coming from. I'd be happy to be the manager, and that's how
16 I got hired.

17 MR. WILLIAMSON: You never told your wife you
18 might not get paid?

19 MR. FLEECS: Yes.

20 MR. WILLIAMSON: Oh, my gosh, that's good. Ron,
21 let's kind of switch to the state level. What do you recall
22 about the state senators that worked with us to get the NRDs
23 going, by any name or by what they did?

24 MR. FLEECS: Oh, I think the main senator was in
25 the Upper Big Blue. What was his name?

1 MR. WILLIAMSON: Maurice Kremer.

2 MR. FLEECS: Yes, Maurice Kremer. We had some
3 meetings with him in the office because he was a big
4 promoter of 1357. And I would remember that, things would
5 change on the bill back in the 1969 and whenever it did
6 Maurice would come up to our office. And then we would all
7 have a meeting. He would call some of us in and talk to him
8 about different issues. And one other thing, it got pretty
9 critical because we had some pretty organized opposition to
10 the bill at that point in time. There was a group called
11 Nebraskans for Soil and Water. I've got a brochure. It
12 says the Nebraska, Nebraskans for Nebraska Soil and
13 Water.

14 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes, that's right.

15 MR. FLEECS: That was the name of the
16 organization. And one of the things they were always
17 bringing up is that we were going to take away local
18 control, and it's going to cost more to do this because the
19 mill levy, at that time we were talking was two cents as the
20 maximum mill levy that the NRDs would have. And that was
21 basically the same maximum levy that the watershed
22 conservancy districts, was the two mill. And they were
23 opposed to it. And Maurice would come to your office and
24 ask about this. He says, "These guys were claiming that
25 this is going to happen and this and that."

1 And I did a study on that at this time when this
2 bill was being introduced. This study was what watershed
3 conservancy districts were paying. Because a lot of them,
4 especially down in the area where we had a lot of
5 watersheds, were up to their two mills already. And I did
6 enough study on all of their budgets for '69 and '70. In
7 almost all cases when they included everybody within that
8 NRD as to what their valuation would be, because you could
9 start including towns, Beatrice in that case, would be
10 involved with some of these watersheds and a lot of those
11 two mill levies would come down too, in one case, in the
12 Upper Big Nemaha, it would go from two mills to about seven-
13 tenths of a mill. The NRD would get started, because of the
14 consolidation, and the work that they had in their budget
15 for 1970, '72, their mill levy would have went up to about
16 1.2 to 1.3 mills.

17 So, in almost all cases that we looked at, instead
18 of talking more than two mills, it would be less, probably
19 in a lot of cases, less than a mill. Some of the
20 conservation districts and, also, when you added the
21 conservancy districts' mill levy and funds from the old
22 county flood control act levy, which some of the districts
23 soil and water conservation districts were getting monies
24 from that county flood control act. So, if you added those
25 two mills, plus what they were getting from the county,

1 taxpayers were being assessed more than two mills. The NRD
2 law was going to bring that mill levy down. We kind of sold
3 Senator Kremer that this wasn't going to be one of those
4 things that was going to cost the taxpayers more money. It
5 would probably end up giving them a break.

6 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes. And Ron's mentioned the
7 county flood control act. Soil and water conservation
8 districts could get money from the county flood control act,
9 but it was at the mercy of the county board of commissioners
10 or supervisors, however the county was set up. And they
11 would have to have the district representatives go to the
12 county budget hearing each year and ask for some money.

13 MR. FLEECES: Yes.

14 MR. WILLIAMSON: So, they kind of felt like they
15 had to beg.

16 How did the soil and water conservation districts
17 get their money, Ron? You could elaborate on that a little
18 bit.

19 MR. FLEECES: Oh, a lot of them got their funds
20 from their equipment they owned, like, tree planters in some
21 cases. Some of the districts had heavy equipment that they
22 used to build terraces, waterways, and do that kind of work.
23 But most of them were in the tree-planting business, and
24 they got quite a bit of their revenues from planting trees
25 and providing some other services where they were able to

1 charge for. Their budgets were pretty small. Most of their
2 money they were getting from the county and some from the
3 state commission was matching some of that money. And that
4 was going primarily to provide a clerk at the soil and water
5 conservation district offices to allow the technician to do
6 technical work. The clerical help to the soil and water
7 conservation districts, as the SWCD supervisors did not
8 receive per diem. They got some expenses paid. Some of
9 their districts would have bake sales and some of those
10 types of fund raising programs. Some of them owned their
11 buildings, and they would rent them out to USDA for space
12 for the Soil Conservation Service because they had SCS
13 people there. So, there were all kinds of ways that
14 districts earned money. But it was a real struggle every
15 year for a lot of them to just get money to operate on.

16 MR. WILLIAMSON: Well, and that brings up a good
17 thing. Ron, as a former Soil Conservation Service employee
18 and their coming to work for the state and then, finally,
19 the NRD, can you recall anything about the Soil Conservation
20 Service? Were they really pushing hard to get the NRDs
21 going? Or, how did that all work out?

22 MR. FLEECS: Well, that, again, goes back to the
23 area that I was involved with. In Gage County, for
24 instance, we had a district conservationist that had some
25 pretty good vision there, and he had been down in Gage

1 County quite a few years working with those conservancy
2 districts and what they were involved with and what they
3 were doing. And they were very supportive of what was
4 happening here, because they could see that, with the NRDs,
5 this was really going to be an asset to their operation and
6 the PL566 law. The Soil Conservation Service was primarily
7 involved with getting a lot of the multi-purpose programs
8 put together for land treatment through some of the tax
9 monies, watershed development, a whole variety of things.

10 But then, you went into other areas. And you may
11 not have gotten the support from some of the people because
12 I think they felt they were going to lose control of what
13 they thought they had at that point in time as pretty much
14 acting as the watershed managers and the soil and water
15 conservation district managers in those counties. And they,
16 I think they kind of said, boy, if we get an NRD, we're not
17 going to be able to do that and we won't have any say of
18 what the watersheds or the soil and water conservation
19 districts will be involved with.

20 I think, in some cases, they really didn't talk it
21 up very much even though there was a great need in some of
22 those areas and not so much in other areas. So, it was an
23 interesting time because I worked with one individual with
24 these, and he ended up being an NRD's first assistant
25 manager down in the Nemaha NRD, a very capable person as far

1 as an SCS person, very good. But he wasn't sure of what was
2 going to happen to the responsibilities of SCS and what they
3 would have in those projects.

4 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah. Well, that's good. Ron,
5 you were with our state agency when we had to do the NRD
6 boundaries. I remember one of our staff people who worked a
7 lot on those boundaries was Dick Kennedy, but we all worked
8 with him. Can you say something about the boundary
9 formation of NRDs?

10 MR. FLEECES: Well, I think the boundaries idea was
11 to have the NRDs on hydrologic units. Especially in
12 Southeast Nebraska where we really had some defined
13 watershed boundaries in the Big Blue River Basin and the
14 Nemaha Basins and the Little Blue Basins. And all of these
15 had really defined hydrologic boundaries, and there was no
16 reason not to have those NRDs based on those boundaries.
17 Then, you had to look at where those boundaries were and how
18 they were associated with county lines, and if there was a
19 way to keep it close to county lines, so it would help when
20 you're talking about taxation, talking about elections,
21 everything, it's much easier to administer and everything if
22 some of it was a little better to do it on a county basis.
23 But, with a lot of the watersheds down in that area that
24 pretty much follow the hydrologic boundaries, even though it
25 may have affected two counties, like the Nemaha. Upper Big

1 Nemaha had part of their district in Lancaster County. It
2 went into that county. And they had part of Gage County at
3 least four or five different counties pretty much was all on
4 hydrologic line. But it just seemed like the thing to do.
5 So, it was easy to do.

6 But when you went out west, that was a different
7 story. You just had to look at the situations out there.
8 You're looking at groundwater more as causing flood problems
9 and some of those issues versus what we were looking at, was
10 mostly land treatment, flood control, not so much the
11 groundwater issues. But there's a lot of difference
12 throughout the state when you'd look at rainfall at 30
13 inches versus 12 inches.

14 MR. WILLIAMSON: Well, you mentioned taxation.
15 And then, all at once, the county assessors got involved.
16 Can you say anything about county assessors, how that all
17 worked out?

18 MR. FLEECES: Oh, I think it was a matter, again,
19 of changing some way upon which they did things, and it
20 doesn't. I was on the county board for four years. If this
21 section was in one NRD and another one was in another NRD in
22 their county, it's just a matter of putting that value of
23 that section in this NRD and the other one in the other NRD.
24 It may have created some paperwork for them initially to get
25 everything straight, but I think the biggest problem was, it

1 was a change of what they were used to.

2 But, again, some of those watersheds crossed
3 county lines at that time.

4 MR. WILLIAMSON: Sure.

5 MR. FLEECES: Cub Creek was in Gage and in
6 Jefferson County. Big Indian was in Gage and Jefferson.
7 And so, they were somewhat familiar with working with
8 different valuations for different watersheds. And so, this
9 just expanded it more. In fact, in some cases, it made it a
10 lot easier because everything was covered by one levy.

11 MR. WILLIAMSON: Sure. Well, we've really focused
12 on the importance of the watershed program and bringing in
13 the natural resources districts. There are a number of
14 other things that were brought in. Can you -- And you've
15 already commented on we were beginning to see the importance
16 of groundwater. But some of the other things that were put
17 under the so-called big umbrella of natural resource
18 districts as they were formed.

19 MR. FLEECES: Well, one of them in our area, it
20 wasn't so much in our area as it was to the east, was rural
21 water districts. We had some areas that did have a shortage
22 of rural water, but had quality problems though. In Pawnee
23 County, some of those areas had good water supply but had a
24 lot of iron and sulfur in it and it wasn't fit to drink
25 because of the minerals that were in the water.

1 We were fortunate, at least in our NRD, to have
2 good groundwater. We did organize a rural water district,
3 and it was because of the Homestead National Monument.
4 Basically, they were under an order because of high nitrates
5 that they had to get a different water supply or treat their
6 water, which is very expensive. They contacted us and
7 wanted to know if they could get a rural water project to
8 bring water from Beatrice out to Homestead and follow
9 Highway 4 and then, also, incorporate a lot of the rural
10 homes along the way from Beatrice to the Homestead. We
11 ended up doing that.

12 We had a little bit of a problem doing that in
13 taking the water from Beatrice to an area outside of
14 Beatrice because of a lawsuit that went all the way to the
15 Supreme Court. Beatrice was getting its groundwater
16 Northwest of Beatrice in an area where a railroad was
17 located. They put the wells on the railroad right of way
18 and there was a lawsuit between landowners and the City of
19 Beatrice on whether or not that was legal and whether they
20 could do that. And it ended up that they could, but there
21 was a little statement in suit that said they had to get
22 permission from a state agency, the Department of Natural
23 Resources, before they could transfer water to an area
24 outside of Beatrice, they had to get approval from the
25 state. We had to get that approval from the state in order

1 to provide groundwater to a rural water district and to the
2 Homestead and 41 homeowners along the way.

3 It was a good thing. The same way with the ones
4 in the Nemaha, this had some good rural water projects. But
5 that was one part of the NRD law that that was very
6 important in providing areas that would now be under the
7 responsibilities of the NRDs. Even though the old ones
8 continued to exist, at least people knew that we were around
9 if they had a prime water problem.

10 MR. WILLIAMSON: Sure. Boy, Daniel Freeman would
11 never, never envisioned that.

12 MR. FLEECES: No. He never would have.

13 MR. WILLIAMSON: Well, that's really a good
14 history. And talking about the rural water districts, the
15 federal Farmer's Home Administration were highly involved
16 with the rural water districts. Would you have any
17 comments about that?

18 MR. FLEECES: You know, they were very helpful for
19 us with our rural water project in providing us grant money.
20 We didn't worry about getting a loan like some of the
21 smaller rural water districts had to do because of their
22 finances. And we were able to get a good enough grant. The
23 Homestead Monument picked up a pretty good share of that
24 project because we were providing that water to them. So,
25 we had that advantage of having them subsidize almost half

1 of the cost of that project because of the requirement of
2 that pipeline we would need to provide them with the quality
3 of water that they needed.

4 MR. WILLIAMSON: Well, those listening to this
5 tape, you'll notice the clock on the wall has reminded us
6 that we've been going here for about an hour. So, and it's
7 really a pleasure. Ron has kept a lot of history of natural
8 resources district. And as we go through this oral history,
9 we're going to be reading a lot of this -- a lot of these
10 things and certainly getting some additional things on tape.

11 Ron, do you have anything else you'd like to do in
12 wrap up. It's been a great pleasure in interviewing you and
13 remembering some of these things that happened many years
14 ago as -- And so, anything that you'd like to just give,
15 overall, on wrap-up here?

16 MR. FLEECS: Well, I guess I'd go back to when I
17 became associated with the commission back in 1963 with my
18 friend Duane Chamberlain. And that kind of started getting
19 my career going with multi-purpose experience, I guess a lot
20 of people start at the local level and they go to the state
21 level and then to the federal level. I did the opposite. I
22 went from the federal level, soil conservation service; to
23 the state level; and ended up on the local level. And, I
24 guess, knowing all things, I really enjoyed the local level,
25 because I was a part of an organization, in this case the

1 Lower Big Blue Natural Resource District, that were doing
2 things that were going to be there way past my lifetime and
3 was going to be projects that was going to benefit a whole
4 area for a long time.

5 And I always appreciated the times that we would
6 meet with the Kansas people on the Blue River Compact. They
7 were -- always seemed to want to rub us a little bit about
8 not giving them enough water and all this and that.

9 MR. WILLIAMSON: Or too much atrazine.

10 MR. FLEECS: Yes, or too much atrazine after the
11 1993 flood.

12 MR. WILLIAMSON: That was a big flood.

13 MR. FLEECS: They just about lost their Tuttle
14 Creek Reservoir.

15 MR. WILLIAMSON: (Indiscernible.)

16 MR. FLEECS: And so, they were bringing up some
17 stuff about sediment. We had 230-some structures in our
18 NRD. Flood control structures and grade stabilization. Not
19 only did we stop sediments from getting down to that
20 reservoir, we also stopped flood water. So, at one meeting
21 we had later that summer, they were complaining about
22 sediments. And I said, "I'll tell you guys something. The
23 next time we have a flood like we just got through about six
24 months ago, if you want us to release all this water", and I
25 forget how many thousands of acre feet we had in the flood

1 storage -- I said, "We're just going to open all those
2 little tubes and we'll just send it all down to you. And
3 then, we'll see if you guys can control and store it." You
4 know, I never really heard much from them since then. The
5 same was true with sediments and how much sediments we were
6 storing that wasn't getting into Tuttle Creek and reducing
7 their capacity.

8 But it's projects like that, I think, that really
9 made me proud that I was associated with an organization
10 that was going to do something for recreation, for rural
11 water, for groundwater. We had some water quality studies.
12 Land treatment, we probably had more land treatment
13 installed down there than you could find any place, a big
14 showplace of it.

15 And so, it all helped me. You got involved with
16 the community. I was there from '72 to when I left two
17 years ago. I was on the city council for eight years, the
18 board of public works for six years, and then ended up being
19 on the county board for four years at which time I got
20 involved with renovating the Gage County Courthouse that was
21 built in 1892 and needed a lot of work done. So, I guess,
22 being involved in a local community and being a part of the
23 community is another big asset as far as a job. So, I
24 wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. So then, I
25 moved to Lincoln and semi-retired. Now, I'm on the

1 Lancaster County Extension Board.

2 MR. WILLIAMSON: Yeah, that's great, Ron. Well,
3 that's really a great statement. Moving from the federal to
4 the state down to the local and doing so many great, great
5 things. Somehow, and we'll go back, way back to '62 or '63,
6 somehow Warren Fairchild sort of knew you. Warren
7 handpicked people that he thought would do a good job for
8 our agency and he sent Duane Chamberlain why he said,
9 "Duane, you can go out and talk to that guy by the name of
10 Fleecs, because he'd make a good staff member." So, that's
11 how you got started at the state level.

12 MR. FLEECS: Well, I just wanted to know how he
13 knew me.

14 MR. WILLIAMSON: I don't know how Warren knew you.
15 But he would see a lot of people and, maybe, some of the
16 people out there. But that was good. It was really good.
17 You took a chance, 'cause our salaries were pretty low there
18 and you had a good future in the federal government. But
19 you started to work for state government and you had a good
20 future in state government. And then, boy, you went to
21 Beatrice in 1972 not making -- not sure that the NRDs would
22 stick, but there you were.

23 MR. WILLIAMSON: Well, I'm sure your wife will
24 listen to this tape now at the end of it, and she'll
25 discover that you went down there not sure that you would

1 have a job in the future. But, somehow, it all worked out.

2 MR. FLEECS: Yes, it did.

3 MR. WILLIAMSON: Ron, thank you so much for a
4 great interview. It's probably a different interview than
5 most of them will be because of you and I lived through a
6 lot of the same things. And that was good.

7 MR. FLEECS: Well, it's my pleasure that I could
8 sit down here and visit with you 'cause a lot of the stuff
9 we talked about is great memories. And if we don't think
10 about them and get them down in black and white now or get
11 them on tape, one of these years we probably won't be able
12 to remember what we did --

13 MR. WILLIAMSON: That's right. That's for sure.
14 Well, thank you so much. We're winding up the interview
15 here today at about eleven --

16 MR. FLEECS: Thank you.

17 MR. WILLIAMSON: Thank you very much.

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