

INTERVIEW WITH DON HOOD  
BY GAYLE STARR

January 30, 2014

1           MR. STARR: This is Gayle Starr interviewing Don  
2 Hood, who was the Manager of the Nemaha NRD in Tecumseh for  
3 some years, and interviewing Don by telephone from his home  
4 in Arkansas on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014. So, with that, Don, why  
5 don't you give me a few minutes of your history.

6           MR. HOOD: Well, Gayle, actually, I would maybe go  
7 back to when I joined the natural resource district. I  
8 joined the district in 1976. I believe it was during the  
9 month of June, and served as the Manager of the Nemaha  
10 Natural Resource District for, I believe, oh, I think 14  
11 years. At that time, I left the NRD and went -- tried to  
12 get involved with another organization. It really turned  
13 out it was not successful, so I started my own business and  
14 headquartered out of Lincoln, Nebraska, and ultimately  
15 constructed a nursery/garden center as far as -- about 16  
16 miles -- well, actually, from the southeast corner of  
17 Lincoln, just inside Otoe County. And that garden center  
18 was named Tree World. And my wife and I ran that business  
19 for 15 years having started it from scratch. Nothing but a  
20 milo/bean field when we began. We built the buildings, the  
21 greenhouses, and sold Ferti-lome products and trees, shrubs.  
22 My wife put in over 24,000 bedding plants each spring, and  
23 in conjunction with that, we did landscaping, as well as  
24 moved trees with two 50-inch tree spades. And we conducted  
25 that business until we decided to retire. And that's when

1 we retired, we decided we wanted to go south and get away a  
2 little bit from the snow and the cold weather. And so we  
3 moved to Bella Vista, Arkansas. And that's where we're at  
4 here, enjoying the retirement years.

5 MR. STARR: Very good. What got you interested  
6 in the job as the NRD manager in the first place? What  
7 brought that about?

8 MR. HOOD: Well, before joining the natural  
9 resource district, I was the State Conservation Commission  
10 Executive Secretary in the state of Wyoming. And that  
11 required considerable travel with the 39 conservation  
12 districts throughout the state of Wyoming. And so, I was  
13 on the road almost weekly. And frankly, my children were  
14 starting to go to school and they were -- I wasn't spending  
15 hardly any time with my family, because I was on the road  
16 so much doing the job as Executive Secretary of the  
17 Commission. So, Dayle Williamson, who was Executive  
18 Secretary at Nebraska Conservation Commission suggested to  
19 me to consider possibly applying for general manager at the  
20 Nemaha NRD, because I wanted to stay in the conservation  
21 field. And so, that's how I ended up applying for work as  
22 general manager of the NRD and I was successful and became  
23 its general manager.

24 MR. STARR: When you first got to Tecumseh and  
25 started on the job, what was your impression? Did you run

1           into a lot of surprises.

2                   MR. HOOD:  Oh, yes.

3                   Yes, there was a lot of surprises.  I was not  
4           familiar with the watershed program and the role of the  
5           natural resource district working in conjunction with the  
6           Soil Conservation Service on the PL 566 watershed program,  
7           and recognizing that the NRD's responsibility required a  
8           lot of time spent on working on land rights and negotiations  
9           and so, that was something new for me and I found it to be  
10          very challenging and actually rewarding, although it surely  
11          had a lot of ups and downs, but it was -- I felt very good  
12          about it.

13                   MR. STARR:  Over the 14 years or however long it  
14          was you were there, what changed for the NRD in your view?

15                   MR. HOOD:  Well, what changed with the NRD is we  
16          started -- when I went there in 1976 to Tecumseh, the staff  
17          for the NRD was very small.  There was just a manager, the  
18          bookkeeper, by the name of Lola Panko, and a secretary, and  
19          then eventually, we did employ an assistant manager who is  
20          since deceased, Dave Nippert.  And so we still operated on a  
21          shoestring, and that meant we did a lot of the work  
22          ourselves, rather than farm it out to additional staff  
23          members.  So, since that time, I have observed that the  
24          staffing has greatly changed.  It has increased.

25                   MR. STARR:  What about the board, itself, the

1 evolution of the board over those 14 years and how their  
2 ideas and interest changed? What's your view there?

3 MR. HOOD: Well, the -- when I started with the  
4 natural resource district, the board of 21 was primarily,  
5 not 100 percent, but very dominant rural. They were farmers  
6 from within the eight-county area. And I've seen it change  
7 over time, more urbanized members coming on board and seeing  
8 the districts expand out going from primarily rural  
9 activities, conservation activities, to working more with  
10 the cities and the towns and the urban areas and working  
11 with the natural resource district board of directors and  
12 going into the new area of recreation and having such as the  
13 recreation lakes like Kirkman's Cove and the other projects  
14 there within the natural resource district. So, it changed  
15 and as far as from the rural orientation to broadening their  
16 scope going into a much larger arena.

17 MR. STARR: How were the board members willing  
18 to, you know, make the change to go to new things that they  
19 weren't used to, like recreation and those other things?

20 MR. HOOD: What was that? I'm sorry.

21 MR. STARR: I was asking, how did the -- what was  
22 the board's view of making change to go to things like  
23 recreation as compared to what they'd been used to?

24 MR. HOOD: I would have to say, very cautiously.  
25 They -- for some board members, that was going a

1 little -- it took a while for adjustments and to recognize  
2 that the area of conservation was more than just working  
3 with agricultural lands. So, it -- there was definitely a  
4 transition period in which -- but I think, as a whole, the  
5 board generally very well accepted it and moved forward and  
6 expanded their horizons.

7 MR. STARR: As you, I'm sure, were well aware,  
8 Don, the Nemaha area was the area of the state where there  
9 was the most opposition to the forming of the NRDs and the  
10 passing of the law back in '69, '70, '72 era. How did that  
11 play out for you or how did you experience that level of  
12 opposition?

13 MR. HOOD: It made the task very challenging.  
14 And it -- a lot of the opposition, initially, was prior to  
15 my time being with the natural resource district. And so,  
16 I would have to say that it made Nemaha NRD sort of special  
17 in my mind, and that to make the change and to make the  
18 adjustments recognizing the NRDs was the way to go in the  
19 future, because, yes, they were initially one of the, if  
20 not the most, I don't know, but one of the most in  
21 opposition to join with the natural resource district  
22 concept. So, I would say this. It was challenging and it  
23 took a lot of work in order to convince the board members  
24 to expand their horizons and that the natural resource  
25 district was the way to go instead of staying with the old

1 soil and water conservation districts. But there was  
2 definitely some mixed feelings about that from some of the  
3 board members.

4 MR. STARR: One of the things that I know you had  
5 to do was to keep separate track of all of the funds that  
6 came out of those various districts and spend it in those  
7 areas. Is that a challenge for the board and you and the  
8 bookkeeper?

9 MR. HOOD: Well, it was a part of that transition,  
10 and, yes, it was challenging, because a lot of the old  
11 boards from the soil and water conservation districts really  
12 were very reluctant to let their funds get out of their  
13 grasp from their old district, that soil and water  
14 conservation district. So, yes, it was -- I would say one  
15 of our accomplishments was to get them to cooperate with  
16 each other and recognize that they all together had a  
17 mission. And the mission was not just for local areas. It  
18 was for the entire area of the NRD.

19 MR. STARR: Based on your experience down there  
20 in Tecumseh and what you heard from the various directors,  
21 what were the primary reasons why they were opposed to the  
22 NRDs?

23 MR. HOOD: Well, the primary reason was they just  
24 did not want to let their particular objectives for their  
25 local districts be joined together. They wanted to

1 maintain their old identity and try to keep the soil and  
2 water conservation objective and goals foremost in their  
3 minds rather than a joint effort to work together with the  
4 other -- all 21 directors. So it was -- primarily, they  
5 wanted was to retain their own identity, retain their own  
6 projects, retain their own goals and objectives, and not  
7 necessarily expand. And so, that part was challenging in  
8 order to make those changes come about.

9 MR. STARR: When you left the NRD for -- did you  
10 have still some of the old directors that were in the  
11 beginning or did the board faces change quite a bit?

12 MR. HOOD: I would say we still had a few board  
13 members -- I really can't remember exactly how many, but we  
14 had a few of the board members that were still on boards  
15 that were there when I joined the natural resource district.  
16 But we had some new ones and generally, the new ones that  
17 came on board added to the harmony and workings to get  
18 everyone working together as a team, as far as a whole NRD  
19 area, as a whole. So, yes, there was still some of those  
20 old former board members still on hand. We lost a few of  
21 them from when I first went there, but generally there were  
22 some and they became very good board members working for  
23 the total district.

24 MR. STARR: One of the things that had to be done  
25 at the first was to consolidate the resources of all of the

1 various districts. And I know that took some time and  
2 probably hadn't been done by the time you got there. Was  
3 that a challenge to work on that?

4 MR. HOOD: Well, somewhat. Yes, some of them did  
5 not want to turn loose with the funds that they had  
6 gathered, and so, we did keep a lot of the individual funds  
7 separated. But as a whole, they were still -- some of  
8 those funds that were kept separated were then somewhat  
9 dedicated toward land rights for the watershed project that  
10 were located within their area. And so, eventually, those  
11 funds were used up because of the fact as we did end up -- I  
12 think, if I recall, over 380, I believe, watershed dams and  
13 projects -- or watershed structures built. And so, some of  
14 those funds were used for maintenance as well as for land  
15 rights, but generally with the cost of land rights going up  
16 all the time, it did not take very long for those funds to  
17 become used up that were originally secured by the old SWCD.

18 MR. STARR: In your tenure down there, what was  
19 the most challenging thing you had to do?

20 MR. HOOD: Oh, wow. I'm not sure I can pinpoint  
21 any one particular item the most challenging, but I would  
22 have to say probably just working with the 21 board members  
23 and the watershed program was probably the biggest challenge  
24 that we had going. And then, getting the watershed program,  
25 which we also included, starting some recreational areas as

1 part of the PL 566 watershed program. So, there was a lot  
2 of challenges. I'm not sure I could really pick one other  
3 than the watershed program being the primary -- one of the  
4 major activities that we were involved with.

5 MR. STARR: Did you do the negotiations for the  
6 easements and rights-of-way for the various structures or  
7 did somebody else do that?

8 MR. HOOD: The acquiring of the land rights was,  
9 basically, was handled within the staff. In other words,  
10 it was -- the assistant manager or myself were most of us  
11 working on it. So, we did not really farm out the  
12 acquisition of land rights to anyone or any organization or  
13 business other than getting necessary appraisals. But  
14 otherwise, the land rights acquisition was pretty well  
15 handled in-house.

16 MR. STARR: During that 14 years, there were some  
17 changes in the state law that affected the NRDs and some  
18 issues that came up new. Did Nemaha get involved in any of  
19 those or were those issues that you didn't worry about?

20 MR. HOOD: Well, there was changes that always  
21 occurred, and, you know, there was changes that were -- came  
22 about by result of the State Natural Resource Commission  
23 with the development funds. And so, there was always  
24 changes that occurred, and we just worked with them as best  
25 we could as they came about to affect us. But we, at that

1 time, you know, when we were developing the groundwater  
2 management plan and things like that, but -- so, yes, there  
3 was always changes that came about. That was one thing the  
4 natural resource district always did get involved with a  
5 lot of different programs and activities other than those  
6 that I've already mentioned. So, we just worked with them  
7 the best we could when we did.

8 MR. STARR: If memory serves me correct, the  
9 biggest change during that time period in terms of authority  
10 was the Groundwater Management Act. I don't know how much  
11 that impacted you as opposed to some of the more heavily  
12 irrigated areas.

13 MR. HOOD: That really did not have that much  
14 effect on the Nemaha NRD at that time. Now, whether that's  
15 over the years since I left has become a major activity for  
16 the Nemaha, I don't know. But at that time, most of our  
17 areas was pretty well considered dry land, row crop farming,  
18 and there was not really that much irrigation going on in  
19 the district except in just a couple localized areas. So,  
20 we were not as heavily involved in the groundwater  
21 management program from that perspective as was some of the  
22 other districts in the state of Nebraska.

23 MR. STARR: Was there any pressure for the NRD to  
24 get involved in any of the rural water districts that were  
25 in that area and might have been in that area?

1           MR. HOOD: Not at that time. The rural water  
2 districts were pretty well organized early in the game and  
3 probably really before I even joined the natural resource  
4 district. So, we were not really involved, because we  
5 already had ongoing rural water districts in progress.

6           MR. STARR: There were at least some areas in the  
7 Nemaha where there were issues with domestic water quality  
8 and domestic water quantity, as far as that goes. Was that  
9 ever a factor for you?

10          MR. HOOD: Not really, not at that time. It may  
11 have perhaps in a sense, but at that time, no, it was not  
12 really something that really came to the forefront with our  
13 district.

14          MR. STARR: Going back to the opposition, this  
15 may be a question you don't want to answer, but were there  
16 some things that happened that caused you to have some real  
17 heartburn over issues?

18          MR. HOOD: Well, we still had some people, like I  
19 said, really did not want to join in with the board as a  
20 whole. They wanted to just -- they wanted to work only on  
21 their own local areas from which they originally were the  
22 SWCD board members. And so, it took some work in order to  
23 be able to convince them to -- that we're working together  
24 and that the district was going to address their problems  
25 as well as everyone else's problems. But some of them

1 still wanted to work only on projects that they were  
2 initially involved with, particularly in Otoe County. But  
3 that changed with time. So, we were -- I felt we were able  
4 to get them all on board, all of them working together,  
5 and, yeah, while they still had some left for their  
6 particular location, they worked together as a board,  
7 ultimately.

8 MR. STARR: I interviewed Gerald Royal last week  
9 one day and I assume you remember Gerald, or at least you  
10 remember Herman Royal.

11 MR. HOOD: Oh, yes.

12 MR. STARR: And I asked Gerald about how his  
13 father, Herman Royal, felt about things at the beginning,  
14 and he said, "Well," he said, "Dad was pretty much in favor  
15 of the NRDs, but he didn't say much, because he knew that  
16 the majority was of the other opinion." And he said that  
17 Herman was very happy to have someone with deeper pockets  
18 and would take over the negotiation of easements. He was  
19 involved in the Upper Little Nemaha Watershed, which is all  
20 completed now.

21 MR. HOOD: Right.

22 MR. STARR: And so --

23 MR. HOOD: And that's true. And we still had a  
24 few board members that, particularly in the very southeast  
25 corner, that liked to get involved with the negotiations and

1       so, like I said, it was a challenge working with the board.  
2       But when you work with 21 individuals, some of them have  
3       pretty strong opinions that are sometimes easy to change and  
4       sometimes they're a little more challenging.

5               MR. STARR: Did you, during your time there, did  
6       you have any real significant controversies on the board,  
7       you know, real divisions of what you should do or what you  
8       should not do?

9               MR. HOOD: Gayle, I really felt good about working  
10      with that board. I had some mixed aspirations as far as  
11      what it was going to be like working with 21 board members,  
12      but it was -- I really actually felt quite well that I was  
13      able to work with them and I felt that I had them very well  
14      going forward and working together. And I was real pleased  
15      with the way it turned out. And I felt very good with the  
16      way the board was when I left.

17              MR. STARR: Well, Don, I've about run out of  
18      questions here. Is there anything else that you would like  
19      to add of your recollections, remembrances, or experiences  
20      up here?

21              MR. HOOD: Oh, gee, not really, Gayle. You caught  
22      me by total surprise tonight.

23              MR. STARR: Well, that's okay.

24              MR. HOOD: So, you know, I might think of  
25      something later, but no, I feel I gave you a pretty fair

1           rundown of the way the things were when I was there.

2                       MR. STARR: Very good. Well, I sure appreciate  
3 you taking part and helping us out.

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