

INTERVIEW WITH ART KNOX
BY GAYLE STARR

February 22, 2014

1 Mr. Starr: This is an interview as part of the NRD oral
2 history project conducted on February 22, 2014 with Art
3 Knox, who was a long time board member of the Lower Platte
4 South NRD.

5 MR. KNOX: First of all, I was employed at Lincoln Steel at
6 the time, and my father-in-law, Earl Luff, who was very
7 instrumental in the passage of the NRD.

8 MR. STARR: Fine man.

9 MR. KNOX: Yeah. He was very involved in it. The
10 reason for that is that we had a lot of flooding down around
11 Lincoln Steel in 1953, I think it was, the steel company was
12 inundated with about three foot of water. Now, I didn't
13 come to Lincoln until in 1957 when I started to work there.
14 And I can still remember the marks where that flood had
15 been, you know, and the shop and so on. And so, he was
16 always very interested in trying to do things to try to
17 protect that area. And so, he was on Salt-Wahoo Valley
18 Watershed Board for many years and worked there. And that's
19 why he was involved. Well, in 19- -- I think it was 1972,
20 or a little after when they put this -- when they passed
21 this bill. Then, what they did was appointed directors
22 initially, and Earl was one of those directors. Well,
23 he -- the election was held in 1974, the first election.
24 And he wasn't going to run for election, so, I guess, I was
25 either encouraged or interested in it, and so I put my name

1 in the hat and ran for election. And at that time, of
2 course, I think we had -- there were 21 directors to be
3 elected, and my district was in District 6. And the Lower
4 Platte South NRD was divided up into various districts. And
5 so, I was one of four that ran. Well, the election was
6 held. I was endorsed by some of the groups that were really
7 interested in it, like Bob Crosby. You know, Bob Crosby
8 was -- in fact, he was our attorney for many years on the
9 Lower Platte South. And so, I was number two. And the
10 number two person got two years. And the number one person
11 got four years. That was Henry Reifschneider who lived over
12 in Belmont. He was quite a guy. But, anyway, that's how it
13 started out. We used to meet over there at the Villager
14 Hotel out on O Street. Hal Schroeder was a manager and
15 really a good one. But I enjoyed those early days and got
16 my feet wet. I think Harold Sieck was the chairman of the
17 board at that time.

18 So, we went on years, you know, and I ended up
19 serving for 25 years on the board. And was chairman of the
20 board for two different times and treasurer and on many
21 committees. And that just kind of gives you a background.

22 MR. STARR: Were you on the old Salt Valley
23 Watershed Board?

24 MR. KNOX: No, I was not.

25 MR. STARR: You were not on the board, okay.

1 MR. KNOX: No, that was my father-in-law.

2 MR. STARR: When you first came to the NRD, what
3 kind of surprises did you have as to what the NRD was
4 supposed to do? Did you have a pretty good understanding or
5 was it --

6 MR. KNOX: Well, of course, no. You know, you're
7 a greenhorn to start with. But Hal Schroeder was so good,
8 and, you know, he took everybody under the wings that we
9 were oriented pretty well. And, you know, I had been in a
10 lot of organizations and been to a lot of meetings, so, you
11 know, it was kind of routine. And you just kind of learned
12 your way along the way.

13 And, of course, flood control was a big thing back
14 there and conservation. I think those two things we
15 probably concentrated on more than anything else.

16 MR. STARR: The 25 years or however many years you
17 were on the board, how did things change in terms of either
18 of what you did or what the district did or what the
19 attitude of the board was?

20 MR. KNOX: Yeah, it did change over time. First,
21 I want to tell you about one of the big things that happened
22 during those early years and it carried on for many years
23 was when we were trying to -- we had proposed to put dams
24 along Stevens Creek and some big ones. And, of course, that
25 caused a lot of controversy. And the farmers fought that a

1 lot. And Glen Johnson became the manager. And I remember
2 having lots and lots of meetings about that. And we fought
3 that thing for many years. We had divisions on the board at
4 that time. But it finally ended up where they had made a
5 proposal to maybe have -- I think it was 10 smaller dams
6 instead of two or three larger dams. And that sort of
7 pacified everybody. And that's the direction we took. And
8 over time, probably the thing that changed the most -- well,
9 first of all, the League of Women Voters, and this was when
10 Bob Crosby was involved. I remember testifying. They'd
11 brought lawsuit against the NRD for the one man, one vote
12 thing. We had the district set up and there was emphasis to
13 put on so that we had good representation from the rural
14 areas. Well, that's probably the biggest change that has
15 happened over the years. I would say right now, you don't
16 have that much representation from the rural area on the
17 board because of the one man, one vote. But the League of
18 Women Voters, as I recall, they'd get their way on that and
19 we had to do some changes, had to realign the districts, had
20 come closer to the one man, one vote thing, if I recall
21 correctly.

22 MR. STARR: Yeah, that's right. There was a
23 gradual process of how that worked.

24 MR. KNOX: It was a gradual process. We had 21
25 directors and, you know, we pretty much kept to that. There

1 were a lot of things that we held together at the Lower
2 Platte South. Some of the other districts, as you know,
3 there was 24 to start with, and those were reduced, I
4 think -- there's 20 now?

5 MR. STARR: Twenty-three, just by one.

6 MR. KNOX: Twenty-three now? Yeah, okay. Anyway,
7 those were a lot of the changes that happened. And I was
8 involved in all of them.

9 The other big change that happened was -- and I
10 forget where our first offices were, but we were looking for
11 a building, our own building. I was on the building
12 committee. That was one of the best things we ever did. We
13 found that location out there and we did a building project.
14 And it was quite a bit of money, but it was a very good
15 investment. So, that was the other thing.

16 But, to answer your question, as I said at the
17 beginning, our emphasis was on flood control and
18 conservation. But, as time went on, then you got a little
19 bit more involved in environmental things like trails. And
20 trails was one of the biggest things that kind of come into
21 the thing, and was a lot of controversy about that. The
22 farmers fought that a lot. But there were some urban people
23 on there that really wanted those trails, wanted the NRD
24 involved. And so, over time, the NRD got more and more
25 involved in the trails program.

1 MR. STARR: Going back to the one person, one
2 vote, as we looked at it at the state level, this district
3 had the biggest disparity of rural-urban than any district,
4 even Omaha. But get outside of Lincoln and there aren't
5 many people, I mean, there just aren't, whereas a lot of the
6 other districts had other sizable towns, not big, but
7 sizeable, like the one in Omaha has Blair and South Sioux
8 City and so forth.

9 MR. KNOX: And at the beginning, we had very
10 strong representation from the rural area there. And
11 myself, even though I was urban, all of my background was in
12 agriculture. I have a degree in agriculture. And so, I had
13 a special interest in all of this. And so, I felt like even
14 though I was urban, I represented a lot the rural area.

15 MR. STARR: Yeah. One of the controversies that I
16 remember in the district was, I think it was called 7-G down
17 at Weeping Water.

18 MR. KNOX: No question about that.

19 MR. STARR: Were you still on the board when that
20 happened?

21 MR. KNOX: I was. And the staff supported that.
22 And we always thought that would be a great economic
23 development for that area. And we supported that, but there
24 were a lot of the farmers that were really against it. In
25 fact, I think it was in 2000 or so, somewhere --

1 MR. STARR: Somewhere in there.

2 MR. KNOX: And I ran for the board my last time I
3 ran for the board. I got defeated, because they went out
4 and they campaigned -- I was one of those people who
5 supported the large dam there.

6 MR. STARR: Right.

7 MR. KNOX: And that's what happened. So, those
8 controversies did occur.

9 MR. STARR: Were there many more instances of
10 people running for the board on a single issue as opposed to
11 people running for the board with a broad picture of
12 issues.

13 MR. KNOX: I think, at that particular time, that
14 question you just asked, I think that was -- they ran for
15 the special issue in that Weeping Water deal. They
16 ran -- there was a whole bunch of them. They really
17 organized. I was surprised. They took me by surprise. I
18 didn't think anything would happen. They kind of caught me
19 with my pants down.

20 But anyway, but I think over time, that's not as
21 much of an issue. I think the trails, I think there were
22 people who were involved in trails. Really, that was a
23 special issue. My neighbor, Elaine Hammer, who has been a
24 very outstanding board member, her main passion has been
25 trails. But she's been very good on all the other issues

1 and we usually agreed on things.

2 MR. STARR: What other big controversies did you
3 have when you were on the board other than the ones we've
4 already talked about?

5 MR. KNOX: Well, the very first one was those in
6 the Stevens Creek, the dams. That was a huge controversy.
7 Even our building project was a little bit of a controversy,
8 but we got through that. It was a huge -- trails was a big
9 controversy, and, of course, the Weeping Water. Those are
10 the ones I recall the most, but I'm sure there were others.

11 MR. STARR: Over the years that you were on the
12 board, was there board members whose attitudes changed?
13 When they came on the board, they were interested in one
14 subject, but as they came along, they really learned a lot?

15 MR. KNOX: Yeah, that's actually a very good
16 question, because I observed that very close. I was really
17 one of the leaders all through my time that I was on the
18 board. And I had a lot of influence on what happened. And
19 I did notice that some directors sort of, you know, when
20 they came in, boy, they had an axe to grind, but over time,
21 as they got acclimated -- and I give a lot of credit for the
22 managers, particularly Glen Johnson, who -- and Hal
23 Schroeder were very good. In fact, it's kind of amazing how
24 they've managed the different boards over the years, because
25 there've been a lot of diversity here. But, yeah, I have

1 seen board members who come in, you know, really there to
2 change a bunch of things. But, as they got acclimated and
3 saw the big picture, they kind of calmed down. They kind of
4 got with the program and pretty much supported what the
5 district wanted, the managers and so on, the staff. And I
6 still get the minutes and I read those. And one of the
7 first things I do is see how many people vote no. There are
8 very few. When I was defeated after 25 years, we had a lot
9 of no votes. We had a lot of controversy, and that's what
10 caused the board to become upset. The new board came in
11 and, of course, they were all ready to change everything,
12 but as time went on, I think they kind of settled down and
13 I've noticed over the past several years there's not been a
14 lot of controversy.

15 MR. STARR: That's good.

16 MR. KNOX: Except, I think there was one that came
17 up on the groundwater here recently. And Elaine told me
18 that that caused some controversy.

19 MR. STARR: I think that's right. When you first
20 got on the board, were there still some people on the board
21 or people contacting you that were just opposed to the
22 districts, didn't want them to be formed? Because
23 originally, there was a lot of opposition from various parts
24 of the state, including this part.

25 MR. KNOX: I do not recall that. The first thing

1 that happened pretty closely after that and that might have
2 been a part of that, was when the League of Women Voters
3 said, "Hey, you've got this thing set up wrong." And so
4 they started fighting it. And I think we had one or two
5 people on the board who were very sympathetic to their
6 cause.

7 MR. STARR: Sure. And I think -- I don't think
8 their position was opposition to the district. It was just
9 opposition to the way the directors were elected, yeah.

10 MR. KNOX: Opposition to how it was set up. They
11 wanted to change it. And it seems to me, as I recall, that
12 many would kind of come together and set this thing up where
13 it was pretty satisfactory to everybody.

14 MR. STARR: One of the -- and then, the
15 Legislature, when those laws were changed, one of the people
16 that was pushing to change was Dave Landis, who is still on
17 the board.

18 MR. KNOX: Interesting, because, yeah, Dave was on
19 that first board.

20 MR. STARR: That's right.

21 MR. KNOX: And I remember Dave. And always
22 thought he was a pretty fair director. And I think his
23 politics was different at that time than it is now, but,
24 then he come back on the board. And I don't know how he
25 operates now, but that was interesting.

1 MR. STARR: Yeah, exactly. You've had a whole
2 change in terms of the staff. You know, originally, I
3 think, when you came on the board, there was probably just
4 Hal and Glen and Opal.

5 MR. KNOX: Yes.

6 MR. STARR: And now there's, I don't know how
7 many, it's 20, or however many staff.

8 MR. KNOX: Yeah, in a way -- well, two things.
9 First of all, I have been quite amazed at the staff and how
10 they've operated. And Glen has done a superb job. Now,
11 there's times when we had to calm Glen down a little bit,
12 because he kind of had a temper, but he got over that, and
13 he was pretty good. He was pretty good. I think he's
14 managed the directors awful well, and the staff has. And
15 they -- actually, I've been amazed how they've been
16 consistent all through the years. But I will have to say
17 that there've been times when I have been a little concerned
18 about the growth of the staff and how many there was
19 on -- how much money we were spending on staff. It seems to
20 me that the district kind of grew a little too much. But on
21 the other hand, they have accomplished a lot of things. So,
22 I think, in the end it's all good. It's been a good thing.

23 MR. STARR: The recent controversy that you had
24 talked about Elaine saying the moratorium is a product of
25 groundwater legislation that has come over the years, some

1 of which happened during your tenure, how was that looked
2 at, that groundwater legislation, because originally, the
3 districts were not very interested in groundwater? That was
4 something that just didn't -- wasn't on the radar for the
5 most part.

6 MR. KNOX: Let me ask you a question.
7 Didn't -- the taxing issue was always important. We got,
8 what, four mills or something like that. When the
9 groundwater -- didn't they increase that as a result of
10 groundwater?

11 MR. STARR: Yes.

12 MR. KNOX: I think that was the thing that kind of
13 helped the board, you know, to accept it. And, you know,
14 when we took our surveys, groundwater was a big thing. I
15 mean, protecting your water strikes home with a lot of
16 people.

17 MR. STARR: Sure.

18 MR. KNOX: And so, you know, I don't recall
19 specifically, but I kind of think that that was pretty well
20 acceptable to everybody and that we moved on with it, and
21 that we had a responsibility to look after the groundwater.

22 MR. STARR: You mentioned Bob Crosby. He was
23 involved from the very beginning.

24 MR. KNOX: He was one of a kind.

25 MR. STARR: He was one of a kind, for sure, and

1 was a big asset to your district. And, frankly, was a big
2 asset to the state, not just this district. He was also a
3 fine gentleman.

4 MR. KNOX: He was a wonderful gentleman.

5 MR. STARR: Yeah, he was.

6 MR. KNOX: We were very close to him. My
7 father-in-law was extremely close to him. And I remember
8 receiving letters from him. I remember receiving, when my
9 father-in-law died, receiving a letter from him. I mean, he
10 just -- and, of course, a former governor, you know. And he
11 was a great guy. I thought a lot of him.

12 MR. STARR: Sure was. What's -- looking back over
13 your -- what was the thing that you were involved in or
14 pushing that you're the proudest of?

15 MR. KNOX: Say that again?

16 MR. STARR: During your tenure, all of the things
17 that you were involved in and the things that you supported,
18 what one or ones are you the most proud of?

19 MR. KNOX: Well, you know, I loved being involved
20 with it. You know, I was involved in politics pretty heavy
21 and I could have probably run for office, but this was about
22 my speed. I loved being on the board, because of my
23 background in agriculture, I loved that. I guess the
24 biggest thing I was the most proud of was the fact that I
25 felt that I became a leader within that board all through

1 the years, because I ended up being chairman twice, and I
2 don't know that that's happened with anybody else.

3 MR. STARR: Probably not.

4 MR. KNOX: And I felt good about that. And I
5 always felt I was on the right side, but, you know, some
6 other people didn't think so. But I supported the staff a
7 lot, because, you know, I felt that they were experts in
8 what they were doing, and I very seldom disagreed with their
9 direction. And so I really did support the staff. And so I
10 helped to move things along. I guess that's what I'm
11 proudest of is the fact that I felt that I provided some
12 leadership and some influence on the board.

13 MR. STARR: Well, Art, I've about run out of
14 questions. Is there anything else you want to add that you
15 think of?

16 MR. KNOX: No. I enjoyed being on the board.
17 That was one of the highlights of my life, I think, serving
18 on that board. I think when they set this up, it was a
19 great thing for Nebraska, and I think it still is, you know.
20 I think it's one of those things that was done well. And
21 who was the senator that --

22 MR. STARR: Maurice Kremer.

23 MR. KNOX: Yeah, he was a great guy.

24 MR. STARR: A fine gentleman.

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