

INTERVIEW WITH KENT MILLER
BY ANN BLEED

1 MS. BLEED: This is Ann Bleed and I'm sitting here
2 with Kent Miller, the manager of the Twin Platte NRD. And
3 he will be doing the interview with us today. The first
4 thing I'd like you to do, Kent, is tell us a little bit
5 about your background and how you came to be involved with
6 the NRDs.

7 MR. MILLER: My involvement with the NRDs began
8 when I worked with Nebraska Natural Resources Commission, at
9 the time, which is the Department of Natural Resources now.
10 When I graduated with a master's degree in civil
11 engineering, I was hired by the Natural Resources Commission
12 to work in the engineering department within the Natural
13 Resources Conservation Service. So, I actually never worked
14 in the Natural Resources Commission offices. And in working
15 in the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Engineering
16 Division, I learned that the -- Twin Platte Natural
17 Resources District was going to be hiring a manager that
18 would begin employment in July of 1973. And that
19 information -- when I got that information, I applied for
20 the job and began working for the Twin Platte Natural
21 Resources District on July 1 of 1973.

22 MS. BLEED: So, you were in on some of the very
23 earliest years of the District. Do you remember much
24 discussion about the formation of the NRDs and all the
25 discussions that went into that?

1 MR. MILLER: You know, I heard people talking
2 about the creation of the NRDs. I know in the case of the
3 Twin Platte Natural Resource District, they did not hire a
4 manager the first year. The natural resources districts
5 began July 1, 1972, and I think there was some belief within
6 the Twin Platte Natural Resource District that would NRDs
7 continue. I think that was part of the reason they didn't
8 hire the first year. I think part of the reason was, is
9 there wasn't complete support within the Twin Platte Natural
10 Resource District Board for natural resource districts. You
11 know, I was aware of that. Beyond that, it was just
12 listening to Maurice Kremer talk, listening to Dale
13 Williamson talk. You know, I learned some about the
14 history. You know, Hazel Jenkins from the Department of
15 Natural Resources, Natural Resources Commission then, was
16 very helpful in the formation of the natural resource
17 districts.

18 MS. BLEED: So, your board was skeptical. Do you
19 have any understanding of why they felt that way?

20 MR. MILLER: No, I really don't. Because from the
21 first day I went to work for the Twin Platte Natural
22 Resource District Board, there was good support. There were
23 never any issues that we weren't moving forward at that
24 point.

25 MS. BLEED: So, what were the first -- some of the

1 first issues you had to tackle, then, after that first year?

2 MR. MILLER: You know, in the early years of NRDs,
3 you know, our involvement was working with Soil and Water
4 Conservation. We had no regulatory authorities. And so, we
5 were promoting conservation, promoting technical assistance
6 from the Soil Conservation Service at that time. Our
7 district had a full-time secretary. I think they called
8 them clerks then, a full-time technician, in each of the
9 Soil Conservation Service offices in Ogallala and North
10 Platte, and so there was a lot of promotion of technical
11 assistance for conservation measures. In the Twin Platte
12 NRD, that was focused predominantly on range, promoting
13 cross-fencing, promoting tree planting. In those days, we
14 hired, basically, a farmer who would work for the District
15 in the spring to plant trees. And the first Twin Platte NRD
16 office, it was myself and a secretary, and then, the four
17 individuals I mentioned in the Soil Conservation Service
18 offices.

19 MS. BLEED: So, tell me how you moved on, then,
20 from that point.

21 MR. MILLER: You know, it was to a large part, an
22 evolution. You know, in the 1980s, regulatory came in. As
23 the districts got more involved on the regulatory side, the
24 Natural Resources Conservation Service was continuing to do
25 a very good job on the technical assistance side.

1 MS. BLEED: Yeah.

2 MR. MILLER: And so, you know, as I've seen the
3 Twin Platte Natural Resources District evolve, you know, we
4 evolved from a huge amount of priority and efforts on the
5 soil and water conservation side, the technical assistance,
6 the tree planting, the habitat assistance, to water issues.
7 And initially, our groundwater management plan -- and in the
8 Twin Platte Natural Resources District, we did not see
9 declines occurring in our groundwater. We really don't see
10 declines occurring in our groundwater today. But we put
11 together the monitoring programs. We put together for
12 levels as well as quality, worked with other natural
13 resource districts to begin the COHYST, the Cooperative
14 Hydrology Study. And it was a very good foresight that we
15 began that when we did, so we -- you know, one of the --
16 probably the more sophisticated groundwater, and now
17 groundwater and surface water, models anywhere in the
18 country. It was a lot of foresight there. But as we
19 evolved to today, what -- a huge significant change for the
20 Twin Platte Natural Resource District was the passage of
21 LB962 in 2004, with the requirement of integrated
22 management, because that significantly changed the
23 priorities of the Twin Platte Natural Resource District,
24 because we did not have groundwater declines occurring. We
25 had no need for management dealing with groundwater issues.

1 The majority of our district is Sandhills and even though
2 you can irrigate the Sandhills, those lands are, for the
3 most part, spread out. But with the requirement for an
4 integrated management plan, that significantly changed the
5 needs, if you will, in the Twin Platte Natural Resource
6 District, because all of a sudden, the Platte Basin was
7 over-appropriated. Having seen that come, our board put a
8 moratorium on groundwater irrigation (indiscernible) which
9 was good they did it, when they did it at the time. But,
10 you know, in the Upper Platte Basin, the Twin Platte Natural
11 Resource District and the North Platte Natural Resource
12 District had the predominant offset water that has to be
13 returned to the river. And we don't have the financial
14 resources like the Central Platte Natural Resource District.
15 So, I saw our District go from the lowest tax levy in the
16 State to the second highest in the state today.

17 MS. BLEED: Wow.

18 MR. MILLER: And that occurred over, basically, a
19 two-year period, because we had to develop financial
20 resources to be able to implement our integrated management
21 plan or we were into regulations. And regulations are very,
22 very expensive for the producer. And so, we went from
23 a -- I think it was a levy of 1.3 cents to 6.9 cents,
24 literally, you know, over night.

25 MS. BLEED: And you survived?

1 MR. MILLER: I survived. Yeah.

2 MS. BLEED: That couldn't have been easy.

3 MR. MILLER: You know, it really wasn't as
4 difficult as you might think, and part of it is, the folks
5 in western Nebraska are -- they understand the value of
6 agriculture. And they understood that we were working to
7 stay out of regulations. And in our district, they saw
8 regulations occurring to the south in the Republican River
9 Basin, and we had a chance to explain to people that the
10 additional need for tax dollars was to prevent regulations.
11 That generally brought support. You know, we probably have
12 seen a bigger level of concern, if you will, with the
13 occupation tax that we are now levying this year. You know,
14 we're the fourth NRD in the state, the first NRD out of the
15 Republican basin to levy the occupation tax, and to levy the
16 maximum of \$10 per acre. And that has generated a lot of
17 comments. But when we have a chance to explain to them why,
18 we get -- they don't like it, but they'll support it.

19 MS. BLEED: And so, you're going to use that money
20 for?

21 MR. MILLER: The occupation tax, the N-CORPE
22 project, and is the project that was a joint effort between
23 the Lower, Middle, and Upper Republican Natural Resource
24 District and the Twin Platte Natural Resource Districts to
25 purchase a 20,000-acre farm, dry up 16,000 acres of

1 irrigated land, and provide that water to the Platte River
2 and to the Republican River. The water to the Platte for
3 the Twin Platte NRD was for our implementation of our
4 integrated management plan. The occupation tax was intended
5 and will fully fund the N-CORPE project, so the irrigators
6 who are being protected from regulations are the ones who
7 are paying for the Twin Platte NRD's share of the N-CORPE
8 project. There is no property tax funds used for that
9 project. Up front there had to be some, but those will be
10 paid back from the occupation tax.

11 MS. BLEED: That's great. Have you been involved
12 a lot with water quality issues?

13 MR. MILLER: No.

14 MS. BLEED: That's mostly --

15 MR. MILLER: We're very fortunate in our district.
16 We have a very small area on the South Platte River in
17 western Keith County that has higher nitrates, but not to
18 the point requiring regulations. So, other than having a
19 very extensive monitoring program, no, we have not had water
20 quality issues.

21 MS. BLEED: I assume you're continuing to do your
22 soil and water conservation activities, et cetera.

23 MR. MILLER: Oh, yeah, every one of those programs
24 that began in the early years are ongoing. And it's
25 interesting working with the board today. You know, our

1 board meetings (were) from month to month water, water,
2 water. And so, periodically, we'll go through cycles of
3 having monthly reports on the other programs, because they
4 are ongoing. They did not go away. It's just that the
5 majority of our time, the majority of our money is going on
6 the water side.

7 MS. BLEED: So, your district has changed over the
8 years. I assume you have an increase of staff?

9 MR. MILLER: Yes. You know, we went from
10 initially me and a secretary, to two technicians in the NRCS
11 offices and two clerks, to now we have ten employees. Two
12 of those ten are in the NRCS offices, and the rest are in
13 our office. And they're, to a large extent, focused on the
14 water side. We have an integrated management plan manager,
15 a hydrologist, a GIS person, a field programs coordinator
16 for the water programs.

17 You know, another thing that's changed
18 significantly is, in the early years, we had, basically, two
19 secretaries. And now, we have one administrative assistant,
20 which basically answers the phone, greets the people coming
21 to our office and does the finances. The day of a secretary
22 drafting letters, that's gone.

23 MS. BLEED: Yeah, the changes in technology in the
24 office, yeah.

25 MR. MILLER: We don't do many letters to begin

1 with, and what we do, we do ourselves. Fortunately, the
2 computer can make an engineer's letter look pretty good.

3 (Laughter.)

4 MS. BLEED: Well, is there anything else you'd
5 like to add for the record while the tape recorder's on?

6 MR. MILLER: The only thing is, I think natural
7 resource districts have been very, very good for Nebraska.
8 I think, particularly when you have a state that the eastern
9 edge is predominantly urban and then you go west and it's
10 predominantly rural. I think natural resource districts
11 have been very good for Nebraska with that local control.
12 What I've observed is that a local control is -- they take
13 very serious the work of the natural resource districts.
14 And I've known from day one folks said, well, "We don't
15 necessarily like local control, but we'd much rather do it
16 locally than have the State tell us what to do." And I
17 think that's been very, very good for Nebraska. And I think
18 that there would be a lot more water quality problems, a lot
19 more quantity problems, and a lot more regulations if it
20 wasn't for the foresight of what natural resource districts
21 were able to do.

22 MS. BLEED: Well, thank you very much, Kent. I
23 appreciate that interview.

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