

INTERVIEW WITH JIM NELSON

June 21, 2013

1 PROCEEDINGS, June 21, 2013:

2 MR. NELSON: I realize what a hard time he had.
3 You could fly that airplane and you could see when you
4 crossed the county line into Sherman.

5 MR. BARR: Is that right?

6 MR. NELSON: There was that much less soil
7 conservation and stuff done in Sherman County. One, they
8 were probably a little poorer, not much, but a little bit.
9 But they just -- well, Howard had to have it because of the
10 need for land leveling and I guess SCS sent better men to
11 Howard County. We had some good ones and, you know, at the
12 time I didn't really appreciate or I guess I didn't know
13 what a bad one was.

14 MR. BARR: Sure, sure. About when did the Howard
15 County Conservation Board or district get started,
16 approximately?

17 MR. NELSON: I have no idea.

18 MR. BARR: When did you get involved in it? In
19 the late --

20 MR. NELSON: 1957 or '8 must be about the time I
21 got on, I think. No, no, I'm wrong there. 1966 we were the
22 award farm.

23 MR. BARR: Okay.

24 MR. NELSON: And it's been about '68 that I got --
25 I didn't even get elected. I guess I got appointed to fill

1 someone's unexpired term. And I guess my term has gone
2 since then, probably since about '68.

3 MR. BARR: What all did the Howard County district
4 do before they became involved with the natural resource
5 district?

6 MR. NELSON: So much land leveling. See, the
7 first plotter came in 1963 and we started land leveling,
8 getting ready for irrigation in 1960. We had one of those,
9 I don't recall what the -- Great Plains Program, that's what
10 it was. I think it ran for 10 years. And you had a little
11 segment of each -- you had to do it every year and we did
12 our first waterway and a diversion ditch, I think, to get
13 started and then it kind of went from there. We hired some
14 cousins that had a dirt scraper and we had a small dirt
15 scraper of our own. Are you familiar with what a W6
16 International looks like?

17 MR. BARR: Yeah.

18 MR. NELSON: We had one of them pulling a two and
19 a half yard dirt scraper. It wasn't a pleasant thing to
20 drive, but it got the dirt scraper full. It and the
21 government payment and the cousins' eight yard Johnson
22 paddle scraper and we bench leveled a whole lot. And we've
23 tore them all up by now. They were too flat. We might have
24 had some in there that were 10th grade. Maximum allowable
25 grade was three-tenths, and that just wasn't enough. Early

1 on when everybody started running out of water in the
2 Farwell project they sent a guy from the University out to
3 do a study and he concluded that the average irrigator put
4 on six inches on the first watering. We was doing the best
5 we could and putting on four, and we were allowed 16. So
6 everybody ran out of water.

7 I was on the Water Policy Task Force. And one of
8 the trips that we took was down into Kansas to see the
9 Bostwick. It's a couple years older than Farwell, I think.
10 Maybe it's even five years older. I'm not just sure. But
11 every problem I saw down there we repeated here in Farwell.
12 Apparently SCS wasn't learning. That's the truth. I don't
13 know if they pay you.

14 MR. BARR: No, no, this is totally voluntary.
15 I've never worked for Soil Conservation.

16 MR. NELSON: Well, I don't care if they pay you.
17 What I said is true.

18 MR. BARR: No, no, this is truly a volunteer
19 basis.

20 MR. NELSON: They had -- golly, the average
21 irrigator down there was using like 22 inches of water a
22 year, big amounts of water. And what I saw was flat grade,
23 trouble getting the water through, and high water tables.
24 Every mistake that they made we repeated. And, you know, we
25 would have repeated a lot of them in the North Loup project,

1 lots of them. I was having a hassle with the Farwell
2 district over high groundwater in this field north of my
3 house here. I was raising willow trees and frogs up there
4 and it had never been wet before and they come down there,
5 yep, yep, they studied it, yep, it's our water, it's our
6 fault. And they got ready to do something about it and
7 says, hey, wait a minute. This ain't in the project. So I
8 was angry. I didn't think that was fair. I asked a lawyer
9 and well, he said, who owns the project. Well, we do. How
10 does the Farwell project get the money? Well, it's our
11 money. We pay for the water. Oh, the guy says, well, you
12 can sue yourself and you'll probably win, so I didn't. Pay
13 yourself with your own money.

14 MR. BARR: When did you get aware of the Natural
15 Resource District's idea and how did you get involved and
16 that sort of thing?

17 MR. NELSON: I'd like to take credit but I don't
18 get any.

19 MR. BARR: Excuse me a minute. I forgot to
20 introduce. This is Jim Barr. It's June 21st, 2013, and I
21 am talking with Jim Nelson along the Middle Loup River north
22 of Cairo, Nebraska. And I should let you give a little
23 background on yourself. I think you started before I got
24 the recorder going.

25 MR. NELSON: Today is my birthday. I'm 75 years

1 old. And I've never had a job. I was born and raised on a
2 farm and inherited the same farm and I'm just kind of trying
3 to step back and get out of the way now. But I've been a
4 farmer all my life and loved it.

5 MR. BARR: Back to the question about the NRD.

6 MR. NELSON: Yeah, I don't get to take any credit
7 for that. I hadn't been on the Soil and Water Conservation
8 District board that long, but I had been on long enough to
9 realize that county lines were a real big barrier. We had
10 drain problems between us and Hall County and I think a
11 little bit with Merrick County. Whenever we got to the
12 county line things just stopped. And so I guess it was
13 when -- I'm losing the guy's name at Aurora, Maurice Kremer.

14 MR. BARR: Right.

15 MR. NELSON: He must have been a director, too,
16 because he talked about those problems and figured that NRDs
17 would solve it. I guess he was right. I know he was right.

18 MR. BARR: Along the lines you had mentioned
19 earlier about doing some flying and seeing the difference in
20 the --

21 MR. NELSON: Yeah, I became aware of the value of
22 good soil conservation district personnel and directors.
23 That goes both ways. When I flew over the county line, I
24 could easily see the difference between the people we had in
25 Howard County and the people in the neighboring county. I

1 won't say which one because that's not really right, but it
2 was sure easily visible. All you had to do was just look
3 where the farm dam stopped and you knew you had crossed the
4 line.

5

6 Note: Added comments: "Good, knowledgeable contractors
7 made a big contribution also. Road builders who were out of
8 a job and made the low bid were often less capable."

9

10 MR. BARR: Were you involved in the original
11 board, the interim board of directors for the Loup?

12 MR. NELSON: Yes, I was. Howard County had six
13 directors and we elected two of our own group to go ahead
14 and I guess they must have picked me because I was the
15 youngest and probably picked Dean Rasmussen because he was
16 in an area that needed the most getting ready for
17 irrigation. So it looked to the rest of them like we were
18 those most likely to need the future.

19 MR. BARR: And you have been elected ever since?

20 MR. NELSON: Ever since, yeah, it's 42 years.

21 MR. BARR: I think so.

22 MR. NELSON: Yeah, it will be.

23 MR. BARR: What were some of the challenges you
24 faced as you organized the board and organized offices and
25 that sort of thing?

1 MR. NELSON: Land leveling. We had two or three
2 guys in the Howard County office drawing up maps all the
3 time. We had, in hindsight, just pretty good men in there.
4 I did some dirt work myself and there were a couple of those
5 guys that were really my favorites because they could stay
6 within the rules and make my day a lot easier. Most of the
7 time, I was hauling my own dirt so I wasn't paid by the
8 hour. Now if I was out working for somebody else and paid
9 by the hour, I might not have seen it quite like those guys
10 did. But, yeah, they were good. And pastures, we still
11 don't know range management here. The Sandhills people come
12 down and drive by our pastures and shake their head and say,
13 what's the matter? I say it in my own house.

14 MR. BARR: What are some of the examples of that?

15 MR. NELSON: Overgrazing, just not rotating the
16 pastures. The cedar trees, we've just never been taught.
17 Our fathers didn't know. My father didn't know.

18 MR. BARR: You're in kind of the southeastern part
19 of the NRD, is that right?

20 MR. NELSON: No, I'm pretty much in the belly of
21 it.

22 MR. BARR: In the belly of it, okay, all right.

23 MR. NELSON: Yeah.

24 MR. BARR: Looking throughout the district, what
25 are some of the other challenges or projects or programs

1 that worked out pretty good over either the whole district
2 or other parts of the district?

3 MR. NELSON: Well, I don't know about a specific
4 answer to your question, but right now every day I look out
5 and see the river running by my house and think, isn't there
6 a little better use for that water today? I don't know. I
7 think about how a reservoir could be embezzling 150 cfs a
8 day all winter long and no one would be aware until July
9 comes and then say, my, isn't this nice.

10 MR. BARR: Do you have good sites that you could
11 find to do something like that or -- in the area? Or would
12 it have to be further upstream?

13 MR. NELSON: Not real good. The only one we have
14 thought about a little bit is on the South Loup. It's
15 probably our most critical. And the reservoir would have to
16 be in the neighboring NRD and they would get all the
17 negative part and we'd get all the benefit. And maybe
18 there's not enough flow in that river at that point. I've
19 seen the South Loup River down to where I can step across
20 it.

21 MR. BARR: Is that right?

22 MR. NELSON: Oh, yeah. Last summer it got down to
23 I think a foot and a half one day. In 1980 it stopped for
24 24 hours. My son-in-law's father and son-in-law, they own a
25 piece of land at the mouth of the South Loup River and they

1 saw it dry. But I think last summer it was down to about a
2 foot, one and a half cfs. I know I went up there with the
3 air boat to see the situation and turned around in a hurry,
4 or I turned around the best I could.

5 MR. BARR: What are some of the things you
6 especially remember about your 40 years, plus years involved
7 in this?

8 MR. NELSON: Well, we went through a period when
9 everything we did had to have groundwater recharge. And
10 then it began to rain again and we kind of forgot it, but
11 that was the period of the 80s. We went through periods
12 when we really planted a lot of trees for living snow fences
13 and for building sites. I recall once when the Central
14 Platte NRD had a big celebration when, I don't know, they
15 planted a million trees since they began or some occasion
16 with a million trees anyway. And we didn't say anything.
17 We had men on our staff up there who had planted that many
18 trees by themselves.

19 MR. BARR: Looking -- go ahead.

20 MR. NELSON: We've done some with range
21 management, not so much where I live here. We just don't
22 have that much range. We went through some awful scary
23 years in the later 1970s when the big splurge of center
24 pivots in the sandy land. Our manager, Dick Beran, I
25 believe it was, had gotten a brochure or two being handed

1 out to the rich people from the east that this was the last
2 frontier, the last easy money or something similar to that.
3 We had almost tearful ranchers coming out of the Sandhills
4 to our meetings and saying, can't you get them stopped?
5 Well, we tried all kinds of things through the back door and
6 everything with county zoning and so on and we couldn't.
7 And then the price of corn fell and that took care of it.
8 Then we reached the point where so many bankers were getting
9 the land back through loan foreclosures and we wondered,
10 will they just let them go and back taxes will take over and
11 the NRD has to seed them to grass and control the leafy
12 spurge which was a problem also. And along came a weed and
13 saved us, marestail. That is a stiff, coarse weed that can
14 keep standing maybe for several years and it served as a
15 cover crop on some of the Sandhills.

16 MR. BARR: I hadn't heard that.

17 MR. NELSON: Yeah, we were afraid. Several, I
18 don't know, more than one any way, quarter sections got
19 planted to cedar trees because there was such a demand for
20 native grass seed that it was costing \$100 an acre for seed.
21 We've got a bird outside the window that is flying against
22 the window, a Cardinal, a male Cardinal. Did you see it?

23 MR. BARR: No, not yet.

24 MR. NELSON: Yeah, I don't know if you can see it
25 from where you're at. It's sitting on one of the chairs up

1 there.

2 MR. BARR: Oh, yeah.

3 MR. NELSON: It flies against the window every
4 little bit. It's been doing it for about three weeks.

5 MR. BARR: He's trying to get in or --

6 MR. NELSON: He sees his reflection and he's going
7 to beat up on it.

8 MR. BARR: I'll be darned.

9 MR. NELSON: The deck out there is covered with
10 purple manure. My wife has concluded that mulberries are
11 part of their diet.

12 MR. BARR: What are some other things you --
13 anything else you would like to -- well; maybe I should
14 approach it this way. Based on what you were looking at
15 when you started out in this process and what has happened
16 over the 45 years or so, 50 years that you've been involved
17 either in the Howard County or the NRD, any observations
18 you'd like to make?

19 MR. NELSON: There was a few things I was certain
20 of. One was that I was dead set against anybody selling
21 their right to irrigate. I was against anybody telling you
22 you couldn't drill irrigation well if you wanted it because
23 I'm sure that all the water under your farm belonged to you.
24 And I had to change my mind.

25 MR. BARR: Yeah.

1 MR. NELSON: I've been one of them responsible for
2 that.

3 MR. BARR: What do you see as some of the things
4 that the NRD is going to be facing in the next 20 years or
5 so?

6 MR. NELSON: Well, control of groundwater
7 irrigation I'm afraid will continue. I was against most of
8 what I had been doing. I have really growled about the game
9 commission and their control of the water or seemingly
10 trying to control it. You know, they got water rights for a
11 couple of times more water than is in the Platte River and
12 the Loup is a tributary of the Platte. I'm afraid Mike Jess
13 gets some of the credit for that.

14 MR. BARR: Well, I don't have a whole lot more
15 questions but this is the part just open it up to anything
16 you'd like to offer and --

17 MR. NELSON: I've rattled too much already. I
18 love the river. My great grandfather emigrated from Sweden
19 and settled down the river a mile and a half or two. Then
20 later on it was said that he couldn't get any work out of
21 his kids because they were in the river all the time instead
22 of working and he moved away a mile and a half or two miles
23 away from the river. But my grandfather kind of moved back
24 closer to the river and lent money to a man who couldn't pay
25 it back and got this piece of land and some more in the 30s.

1 And I bought -- you know, I graduated from high school in
2 1956 and that was the third consecutive year of nothing
3 through drought. And the bank was leaning on my father for
4 a mortgage on the land. And two of dad's brother-in-laws
5 and a neighbor to the north had drilled deep wells and got
6 irrigation and they were saying, well, you don't have an
7 aquifer where you live to get a good well and that was
8 proven. But my dad got a permit to pump from the river here
9 on this piece of land where the house is, and we irrigated
10 35 acres, something like that, the first year. Worked like
11 dogs moving sprinklers by hand through tall corn. But we
12 raised some crops. In the meantime, I graduated from high
13 school, fell in love and got married. I was 19. My wife
14 was 18. We've been married 56 years. That was good. But
15 irrigation really helped.

16 In 1966 we got the first water from the Farwell
17 unit. In 1976 my son got a pilot's license. We went from
18 starving to flying an airplane. 1977, I got a little
19 airplane and a license to fly. Imagine us guys going from
20 that kind of living to flying. None of us went to college.
21 No telling how far we could have got. Yeah, at one time I
22 had one and a half airplanes and probably flew both of them
23 a combined 50 hours a year. Last year Mike flew the
24 airplane seven hours. I bought an Aeronca Champ. Are you
25 familiar with airplanes?

1 MR. BARR: No, I'm not.

2 MR. NELSON: The Aeronca is a real small, light
3 airplane. One sits behind the other. This one was made for
4 the Army in 1947. It had no electrical system so you turned
5 the prop by hand to start it. It's a fabric covered
6 airplane, weighs 700 pounds. But, anyway, I took lessons in
7 it. Had a woman instructor and women's rights were the
8 thing then and she was really that. To prove we could do it
9 she got a couple of little receivers is all they were. You
10 couldn't transmit with it. So you put the receiver in your
11 pocket and the bug in your ear and you were ready. We got
12 our lessons at the Grand Island airport with the control
13 tower. Call them on the phone and say we'd like permission
14 to taxi and to take off on a given runway and what's your
15 condition and so on. Okay, when you get out there and we're
16 ready for you to takeoff, we'll tell you and you'll hear it
17 in your ear. You flop your runs on your wings in response
18 and go to it.

19 When you want to land again you told them, you
20 know, about what time you came in and you got into the
21 traffic pattern and you flew around and around and they
22 would see you out there and tell you (that) you were clear
23 to land. You'd rock your wings and you'd do your thing. So
24 she proved we could do it. And we did. About that time the
25 son graduated from high school. He graduated in '76. But

1 before he graduated he had a license to fly and half an
2 airplane. He made round bales for the neighbors. I believe
3 he might have been -- God, I could go to jail for it, but
4 was he eight years old when he could run the dirt scraper?
5 God, it might be. He was born in '58. Eight years would
6 have been '66. He might have been. 1970 we bought a farm
7 and we did major leveling on that and that was away from
8 home. He was 12 then. Geez, OSHA would have put me in jail
9 forever.

10 MR. BARR: Well, I know the feeling. I ran a Ford
11 9N into the ditch when I was about five. Anyhow, that's --
12 well, I don't want to keep you too long but if there's
13 anything else you'd like to --

14 MR. NELSON: I'm glad you're keeping me. I needed
15 the rest.

16 MR. BARR: Okay, if there are any last things you
17 would like to add, go ahead at this point.

18 MR. NELSON: Well, if there is anything that the
19 NRD probably needs to do, it's to teach those in the
20 transition area between the farming area and the range land
21 how to manage the small amounts of range land they have. Got
22 a lot to learn and this dry weather is teaching it to you in
23 the toughest terms.

24 MR. BARR: Well, thank you very much for your time
25 and contribution.

1 (End of first recording. Begin second recording.)

2 MR. NELSON: It occurred real early in the years
3 of the water policy task force. We were having dinner one
4 day and I sat down to dinner with a lady who I knew was
5 representing I believe the Game Commission or she was
6 representing wildlife, I guess, more technically right on
7 that. She had had occasion to go on big game hunts in other
8 continents even and I knew that her goal for the water in
9 the river was directly opposite from what mine must have
10 been. And I really was a bit uncomfortable about how to go
11 about a conversation with her. And I started out this way.
12 I said, you know, I'm a Christian and I feel that God has
13 left us as stewards on the resources on our land and water
14 and I feel like God is watching us. And she said, you know,
15 I do, too. And we never argued.

16 MR. BARR: Thank you.

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