

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN NEUBERGER

August 28, 2013

1 MR. BARR: This is August 28th, Jim Barr
2 interviewing John Neuberger in Lincoln. And, John, do you
3 want to give a little bit of your background just as kind of
4 a summary, overview?

5 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah. I was born and raised on a
6 farm in South Dakota between Canistota and Montrose, South
7 Dakota, McCook County, and went all four years of high
8 school at Canistota High School, and followed in my
9 brother's footsteps and went to college at Brookings, South
10 Dakota, South Dakota State College then, now it's State
11 University. And with his encouragement, I hung in there and
12 made it through the first year and then stayed and was in a
13 little athletics, played a little basketball and track, and
14 was in an ROTC program there, and then was able to get
15 my -- when I graduated with my bachelor's degree in
16 agricultural engineering, I was able to get my commission as
17 a second lieutenant. Back then, you had to serve in some
18 active duty time, so I was expecting to go right out of
19 college when I graduated into active duty. Well, about five
20 months before I graduated, I get orders that tell me that
21 it's going to be six months after I graduated before I was
22 supposed to show up at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, so now I've got
23 to find a job for six months. So I got busy and applied for
24 a couple government jobs and found a job out in Casper,
25 Wyoming with U.S. Geological Survey. They needed what they

1 called a hydrographer, basically, a stream gager. And they
2 were probably one of the nicest assignments you could draw,
3 because I had the northwest corner of Wyoming, Yellowstone
4 Park, to gage the streams at Yellowstone. Can you imagine
5 that? And I could stay out overnight and take my fly rod
6 along. I had to be very careful, because I tried to find a
7 friend or somebody to take me out fishing rather than to use
8 a government vehicle, because you can get in a little
9 trouble with some rancher or taxpayer seeing a government
10 employee fishing with a government vehicle, even if it's
11 after work hours. They're going to assume something's up
12 here. So I was conscious of that problem and most of the
13 time was able to get someone to take me around to their
14 favorite fishing spot. But combining that job with
15 the -- your hobby of fishing was a pretty neat career for
16 just six months. And then I had to go into active duty for
17 six months. I went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. And I was in
18 the Army Artillery and had to learn how to fire a 105
19 Howitzers out ahead of the battle line, you know. And the
20 war observer, of course, would be ahead of the battle line.
21 So you're not in very good shape when the enemy is trying
22 to -- so I learned that and I was here praying that I
23 wouldn't ever have to go into active duty and it worked out
24 that I didn't. I ended up coming out of that right in
25 between Korea and Vietnam era. It'd have been, I guess,

1 after the Korean War, before the Korean War.

2 And from there, I took a job with the Agricultural
3 Research Service, Newell, South Dakota, in the Dryland
4 Irrigation Station out there. They needed an engineer to
5 help run some of the research being done on their range land
6 watersheds. And so I went up there and spent three years
7 helping USDA scientists that were stationed there and the
8 head guy was then stationed in Denver. But it was a good
9 experience, because it's a dry part of the country. And we
10 were trying to figure out just what the runoff relationships
11 were on the various soils. They had some heavy clay soils
12 up there and then they have some sandy soil. And we were
13 able to show over about three or four years of data that,
14 hey, when you design culverts and things, with that sandy
15 soil, you don't need them as big as you do on the clay soil
16 watersheds, because you can get a whole lot more water to
17 deal with. And so that probably saved a little money for
18 the county and state engineers that were designing and
19 redesigning bridges and waterways.

20 From there, applied for a job down here at Lincoln
21 at the University of Nebraska Extension Service, and went to
22 work with Paul Fishback (phonetic) and Dion Axtelm
23 (phonetic) at the Ag Engineering Department there
24 under -- it was an Extension Service job, so it was like,
25 kind of a federal job, you know, with the ASCS to -- not

1 ASCS, ARS, Agricultural Research Service, to Extension
2 Service. It was kind of a lateral transfer. There I pretty
3 much worked on minimum tillage. It was a new development
4 then, and equipment was just being developed by Buffalo.
5 And we were quite interested in getting that so farmers
6 could understand it and learn how to operate in a trashy
7 field, because the -- as row crop agriculture had been
8 handed down from generation to generation, having a nice
9 black field out there in the spring was sort of the goal.
10 And when we found out that, hey, the spring rains are going
11 to tear that stuff up and wash it away for you, and if you
12 could live with keeping the trash on the surface and operate
13 and handle the weed problem, you're going to hold the soil
14 in place, save a lot of moisture, and now, with the price of
15 fuel, save on a lot of operating costs, because you don't
16 have near as many -- they used to disk it, drag it, you
17 know, maybe disk it again, and then drag it again, and then
18 they plant. And at about three or four operations, then
19 they had a planting.

20 And so that was a good experience to be kind of
21 out front of an innovative practice that was not too well
22 accepted at first. I can remember a good friend, Lloyd
23 Sierk (phonetic), over in Omaha, west edge of Omaha, where
24 the city grew out over his farm, minimum tilled popcorn
25 there for ten years before I met him. And he was a lone guy

1 in that whole county, you know, and he'd look out over his
2 popcorn when it was -- after it was planted, you know, and
3 see the trash, and it had a lot of farmer pressure put on
4 that, and I can kind of remember holding meetings over
5 there, then, to try to educate the farmers with the County
6 Extension Office setting up the meetings and trying to show
7 them a few slides and a few overheads and get them
8 acquainted how this could be done. And when I'd ask who's
9 tried this, you know, there'd be about two guys in a room of
10 50 farmers that would admit that they'd tried minimum
11 tillage back then in the '60s. And then you'd get a lot of
12 opposition, people who just outright telling you it isn't
13 going to work, you know, and that they weren't going to try
14 it, and to go on back to the University. So the first
15 meetings we had on some of that stuff were hard to handle
16 and some of the farmers were very resistant.

17 So, from the University, then, in 1964, there was
18 this terrific flood in Omaha in June, and just kind of
19 started at the north end of the watershed and went down
20 towards Sarpy County and just rained all the way down and I
21 think they had measurements over seven, eight inches there,
22 a couple hours. And there were seven, I think, lives lost,
23 and over five million dollars worth of damage from that one
24 flood, which prompted the state -- the governor and the
25 state natural resource agencies to get involved. And they

1 formed a steering committee made up of members of
2 both -- all three counties and all three soil conservation
3 districts. You had Sarpy in the lower end, and Douglas in
4 the middle, and Washington on the upper end. And that
5 steering committee was -- Warren Fairchild was appointed the
6 coordinator of it, initially, and they'd met a number of
7 times trying to get federal government agencies there and to
8 find out what they could offer. And then they did get
9 commitments out of the Corps and SCS to do studies and
10 problems. The flood was also big, but the erosion control
11 and just the channel erosion was also a huge problem. And
12 we found out later that another problem that stuck up pretty
13 big was the trash that a flood would bring in to the
14 waterways and plug the bridges. And it added tremendous to
15 the depth of flooding on the land and as well as the damage
16 to the roads and bridges. And so that was another problem,
17 just waste disposal between the three counties as being
18 handled. The City of Omaha was sort of handling theirs, but
19 the county waste disposal was nonexistent to actually people
20 bootlegging it down along and dumping it in the creek. And
21 once we flew over and got pictures of the trash built up on
22 these bridges that crossed the Papio, both the Little and
23 the Big Papio and showed -- had the evidence, hey, look
24 what's happening here, the counties got with it and began to
25 get serious about planning for waste disposal. And Sarpy

1 County ended up getting a grant from EPA. I don't suppose
2 it was called EPA then. It was predecessor of EPA. And
3 they got some help, then, to do the first gully landfill in
4 which they actually built a structure with a drop structure
5 for the water, and then get land filled in behind it, and
6 healed up some huge gullies that had developed in the land
7 in the Lower Papio, the county, and those land owners, of
8 course, were all a part of that. And gave easements and end
9 up with improved land. Most of it was then pretty much
10 suitable once a waterway, grass waterway was built back
11 through it, most of that, then, was suitable -- they gained
12 several acres of farmland to their farm. So those were
13 pretty easy to get done. But, if the county had to take
14 some leadership and then the watershed office provided some
15 of the staff support to get that done.

16 So those years, matter of fact, I do have what's
17 called a Case History of Citizen Action that I can leave
18 with you. It looks like it was something I prepared for a
19 League of Women Voters Educational Fund Seminar on the Lower
20 Missouri Basin, Water and Land for Tomorrow, November 15,
21 1967. And it describes not only the watershed, but what I
22 found interesting to review is I've listed all of the
23 history of the Watershed Advisory Board by date. And it
24 goes back to '63 before I was ever involved as a manager,
25 which was a year later. Why that shows some of the key

1 actions, and then it goes on up through 1967, and it tells
2 what the state and local actions were to get a plan approved
3 for flood control and (indiscernible). Apparently, it was
4 in a file I found. You're welcome to have that summary.

5 MR. BARR: Okay, well, that'd be great.

6 MR. NEUBERGER: And here's a map of the watershed,
7 and pretty much the one we had to use, because a lot of our
8 efforts at first were just educating the population and the
9 civic groups in the area, tried to build good will between
10 the three counties, because there was obviously a feeling of
11 this that we shouldn't sacrifice. So, their problem, you
12 know, the attitude based, is they go, well, if they wouldn't
13 have built in the way, yeah, we wouldn't be --

14 MR. BARR: Some of that still exists today.

15 MR. NEUBERGER: Oh, yeah. I mean, that didn't --
16 we didn't solve 100 percent, but I think we got the county
17 boards and the leaders to understand they've got to do this
18 together. And there's individual (indiscernible) who's
19 obviously -- and there's a good little story right here on
20 this Irvington site. One of the board members of the
21 Douglas Soil and Conservation District, the name is Bob
22 Botker (phonetic). Bob was on the Soil Conservation Board
23 and appointed to the steering committee originally, I
24 believe, and I got to meet him right away. And Bob and I
25 hit it off pretty good, and particularly Bob's wife and my

1 wife really hit it off well, and so they had three girls and
2 I had three boys, so we did a lot of things together on
3 weekends. And their farm was right on this highway here, is
4 that Highway 32 or Highway 6 or something. Yeah, 36,
5 Highway 36 goes through here. Well, their farm was just off
6 of the West Little Papio here, and of course, is going to be
7 gobbled up with that site. So, here one of my good friends
8 is going to have to -- this plan got approved and moved
9 forward, he's going to have to sell a good deal of that
10 farm, all the farmable -- good farmable land. Maybe a
11 corner of the hills or something he wouldn't, but to the
12 Corps to build that site. And, of course, that's ended up
13 what happened and then they bought a farm with that money up
14 in Washington County and moved. And we're still friends
15 today.

16 But there was a lot of things like that where
17 farmers were displaced, but in some cases, having the money
18 to go do something else was a blessing. In other cases, it
19 did upset along -- like, his dad owned that farm, you know,
20 for his lifetime, and so it was an inheritance and stuff, so
21 you got to feel, and just talking with him and knowing him,
22 you got to feel for these people. And probably had more
23 empathy for him and could go out and -- because I was the
24 one that'd be out talking to these groups and meetings and
25 stuff, and I had to look them in the eye and try to convince

1 them that, you know, we're trying to do something here
2 that's going to provide. And then you can see several of
3 these were built. The one at Irvington was built and is
4 quite a recreation site, not only providing flood control
5 down this Little Papio, but now developed by water
6 recreation site, fishery, so on.

7 So that plan eventually didn't all get approved.
8 There was opposition to it, and some of that opposition got
9 to some of the leaders in the Douglas County Board and
10 others, and so some of it didn't get built.

11 Now, piece by piece, the Papio NRD now, which I
12 would consider the Watershed Advisory Board here as kind of
13 the forerunner of the NRD. And with everything that it was
14 doing then got rolled into the NRD when it was formed and
15 established. And I always felt that what we were doing here
16 to get these three counties working together was really just
17 a model of what the NRD laws turned out to be. And it was
18 all tied together by this hydrologic unit that really --
19 somewhere in this paper, it talked about the miles of
20 straightening that had gone on in that over the years. I
21 think the numbers are in here accurately in this paper that
22 talks about the flood. But somewhere in there I saw some of
23 these numbers of how many miles they shortened -- they
24 formed drainage districts. At one time, there were four
25 drainage districts. Most of them were in Sarpy County. One

1 was in Douglas County. And between 1908 and 1928, at least
2 four drainage districts were organized along the meandering
3 Papio channels, the Little, Big, and the West Branch. These
4 earlier flood control plans were primarily limited to
5 channel straightening, relocation, or diking. In the
6 aggregate, succeeded in shortening the 96 miles of natural
7 channel to 59. So, you can see a drop of water, at one time
8 had to go 96 miles to get into the Missouri River. After
9 all that kind of work, 59 miles. And that time of
10 concentration was really sort of the problem is that all
11 that had just built up and all the concrete and the roads
12 and the rooftops and everything up above it, it just pushed
13 water down to the lower western end of Douglas County and
14 then all through Sarpy County, and the channel would
15 just -- I think there were several times a three-inch rain
16 put it out of its banks. And so we were able to document
17 that and as people saw what had gone on and that, hey, you
18 just can't continue that way. And eventually, I think the
19 majority bought in to the reservoirs and the bank
20 stabilization.

21 But you're welcome to have this case history.

22 MR. BARR: Thank you.

23 MR. NEUBERGER: I don't know that it got
24 publicized very much. I just happened to have it in the
25 files that I was cleaning out and I said, well, I'll bring

1 that along to Jim.

2 MR. BARR: Thank you. The organization, how was
3 it administered and funded and that sort of thing?

4 MR. NEUBERGER: Now, when the advisory board, the
5 Papio Watershed Board, was set up, the three counties shared
6 in the operations of it. So it was county board funded.
7 And we looked for free help wherever we could find it, and
8 did get quite a bit of free help from the State and from
9 soil conservation districts. Soil conservation districts at
10 that time didn't have much of an operating budget. The
11 Sarpy County was one that did have some income, and they
12 did -- some of it was repairing the channels. They had a
13 bulldozer and different things, so they had a way of raising
14 some money. Douglas County, I don't think had any way of
15 raising much of anything, and neither did Washington County.
16 And, of course, that's one of the limitations of soil
17 conservation districts at that time is that they basically
18 didn't have authority for raising any funds. They didn't
19 have taxing authority. And some of them were doing some
20 renting of tax grass seeding equipment, renting of tree
21 planting equipment, and, you know, had a token amount of
22 money, but it would barely, you know, replenish the coffee
23 pot for a year. So a part of the Watershed Advisory Board
24 was to having the counties to use the county taxing
25 authority to fund the Watershed Advisory Board. Now, that

1 in itself was working because of the crisis that they were
2 dealing with. They were -- it was given high priority by
3 them, but at the same time, there was always politics played
4 with that when we'd submit our budget. There seemed to be a
5 lot of nit-picking going on over a small amount of money
6 that we were asking for, and so generally, I was having to
7 use my board members with the county commissioners. Mark
8 Gratier (phonetic) was one of the strong guys for Douglas
9 County that helped us. You'll see here, the guys are listed
10 by -- Mark Gratier, Bob Botker, and Dan Lynch would be
11 Douglas County's members to it. Sarpy County's would have
12 been Milt Fricke, Harold Jennings (phonetic), and Dale
13 Carter (phonetic). And Washington County had Fred Hansen
14 (phonetic), Leslie French (phonetic), and Loren Biffer
15 (phonetic). That would have been in about 1967, and, of
16 course, did change over time.

17 But when the NRDS were formed, of course, they
18 held elections and some of these same people ran for those
19 jobs and were reelected. Milt Fricke, I know did and one of
20 the -- but I remember Mark, they did a little story about
21 his involvement. Now, this is the news director at Channel
22 3, KMTV. I don't know if you ever got to know Mark --

23 MR. BARR: No, I did not.

24 MR. NEUBERGER: -- but a talented news director.
25 I sat up there watching him do his job a few times as I was

1 trying to get a few things -- brief him on a few things or
2 something, and I just, man, news directors are -- back then
3 it was teletypes running and phones ringing, and it was like
4 a zoo to me. You know, I was running an office with two
5 employees, I think, one a secretary, a pretty quiet deal.
6 We didn't make any noise. It was quiet. But Mark's
7 environment was something else. Yet, he was willing to be
8 Douglas County's member on this and served very well, and
9 helped me a tremendous amount with Douglas County political
10 shenanigans, I'd call them. You got to learn to live with
11 politics, but I came into the job without much experience at
12 it. And so, boy, I'm indebted to Mark and, well, Milt
13 Fricke, too, in Sarpy County, and some of these guys that
14 helped me in the counties, because trying to broker
15 something like this in three political settings was asking a
16 lot, plus, without help, it wouldn't have been possible. I
17 just know an individual could not have done it without these
18 men wanting to -- believing in what we were trying to do and
19 wanting to help. And when I laid out my problem of what we
20 needed to do, we got to get this budget through, and here's
21 what's happened from what I know, they -- Mark had some
22 phone conversations with the chairman of the Douglas County
23 Board and, boy, next thing, moved. Because I was right up
24 against it, like a -- "Mark, I've done everything I can do.
25 These guys are intentionally trying to disrupt things so

1 that I'll leave and they can put their guy in here." I
2 said, "I understand what is going to happen here. And if
3 that happens, I'll move on and find something else." I
4 mean, I wasn't going to do anything desperate or crooked or
5 anything to save my job there, yet, that's how it was, and I
6 laid it out. And Mark had it turned around.

7 MR. BARR: What were some of the things you
8 accomplished in the terms of projects or programs?

9 MR. NEUBERGER: Well, the Corps of Engineers plan
10 for flood control was approved by Congress and funded.

11 MR. BARR: Do you have the date there roughly?

12 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah, I think that's all in here.

13 MR. BARR: Okay.

14 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah. See, there was a bill
15 signed here in 1965 that amended the Flood Control Act to
16 give a quarter of a mill -- half a mill levy authorized for
17 the County Reserve Fund. So that's how we then got the
18 counties to use that to raise the funds for the operation of
19 the Watershed Advisory Board. There was 52 gully control
20 dams in SCS's plan. That was approved and I'd say the
21 majority of those got built. I'm sure not all of them,
22 because some of them got taken up by urban development.
23 We'd have a plan for one there, and many times the developer
24 for the housing development would put it right into his
25 plan. That's how it got built. It may not look the way it

1 was intended -- SCS intended it, but it's worked into their
2 plans, so a number of those gully control structures were
3 built closer to the city of Omaha by -- then, I think, you
4 know, not only the facilities, but the communications. As
5 you look through here, an awful lot of things talk about
6 newsletters, newsletters, newsletters. Just the
7 communication effort we had to put out, meeting with the
8 media. Second newsletter. None of this was communicated as
9 a watershed before. It was just news of the problem. News
10 of the amount of flooding, somebody getting their basements
11 filled with water and stuff. And that's what the public was
12 hearing. And so finally, through the Watershed Advisory
13 Board, we were able to get kind of on top of the
14 communications and media relations, and we accomplished --
15 worked pretty hard there for about three or four years. I
16 hadn't thought about it until I kind of reviewed this and
17 then said, man, you know, we didn't have much help to do all
18 this. Nowadays, I see -- we didn't have many programs,
19 either. You know, you look at all the programs NRDs have
20 now, they need -- I'm not trying to compare then with now
21 other than, I think, man, we were really slim.

22 MR. BARR: Then that advisory board was merged
23 into the NRD in 1972 or whenever it was. I think it was --

24 MR. NEUBERGER: Yes, I'd say it was -- I don't
25 have that date on this --

1 MR. BARR: I think it was July '72 was the
2 official --

3 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah, I think we went right on
4 time with the --

5 MR. BARR: And you would have had some of your
6 board members would have --

7 MR. NEUBERGER: Ran and became -- there was a
8 continuity there, because both in Washington, Sarpy, and
9 Douglas, we had somebody that was willing to be on that
10 board.

11 MR. BARR: I remember Milt Fricke, particularly
12 was --

13 MR. NEUBERGER: I think Dale Harter (phonetic) was
14 one from Washington -- from down there also. Bob Botker,
15 then, from Douglas. And I can't remember who in Washington
16 County might have. I don't think it was any of these three,
17 so I don't know that any of those three ran for the Board,
18 but --

19 MR. BARR: Do you have any observations on how the
20 merger went about and how it worked out? Any problems
21 and --

22 MR. NEUBERGER: I think an advisory board approach
23 to that was a good way to do it, where each county named
24 three people, like that. And then you evolved to the
25 elected board. I think that worked very well.

1 MR. BARR: Was there anything else besides
2 the -- what was involved in the Watershed Board added to it
3 to make the Papio NRD? I was trying to remember. That
4 wasn't quite the same boundary, was it, exactly?

5 MR. NEUBERGER: Well, no. It was the whole
6 county. The NRD went to the -- see, this would have
7 been -- you know, each county was involved, but this was
8 focused on the land. But I guess, when the county levied,
9 it was taking money from the whole county. So it
10 wasn't -- we never defined the boundary of the watershed.
11 When the county levied, it just levied -- but they weren't,
12 you know, the budgets were pretty small, because we weren't
13 using a lot of money to do -- at that time, physical
14 structures or anything, you know, or flood control or
15 erosion control. We were just running an office and just
16 trying to -- were pretty much like an extension office,
17 educating, information, and then managing and providing the
18 materials that the Board needed to function. And the Board,
19 you know, Milt was very involved with Warren in the, what
20 you'd call education and lobbying for the bill. And then
21 using the experience here, and testimony. I remember I went
22 down and testified before a committee once as a manager of
23 this. And basically, the points of showing that these
24 things are related across county boundaries, and to deal
25 with them on a county by multiple-county basis is needed.

1 MR. BARR: Do you remember some of the state
2 senators that were involved in that? Particularly, in the
3 area you were involved with?

4 MR. NEUBERGER: Maurice Kremer, of course, was one
5 of our leaders. And then, of course, I suppose the records
6 would show who was on the Public Works Committee at that
7 time.

8 MR. BARR: Do you remember whether the urban
9 legislators were particularly interested in it or opposed or
10 in favor or anything stick out in your memory on that? I
11 don't remember much about --

12 MR. NEUBERGER: No, I don't know, other than after
13 a few years, after the plan was approved, Dan Lynch was in
14 the State Legislature and he sort of led an effort on behalf
15 of landowners up here to try to get some of the sites
16 de-authorized for them. And I was out of the picture then,
17 had moved on from the Papio Watershed Board to a job with
18 Department of Interior in Washington.

19 MR. BARR: Yeah, that's part of your background.
20 Do you want to go ahead and talk a little about how you went
21 on after the --

22 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah, because of my work on the
23 watershed, I became friends and acquainted with Jim Smith,
24 who at that time, was working for Missouri River Basin
25 Association, as their executive director or executive

1 secretary or some position like that. And got to know Jim
2 and he was selected to be an Assistant Secretary of Interior
3 over water and power. And when I ran into him one time, he
4 wanted to know if I'd be interested in coming back and
5 helping him. This, I guess, is about five or six years
6 after I was on this job and I talked to my wife and kind of
7 hemmed and hawed around, because that's a big -- three kids
8 in schools in Omaha and the thought of moving to Washington,
9 D.C. was kind of flattering, but at the same time, just not
10 all that appealing. And then they offered to bring us back
11 there and show us around. So we thought, "Well, that makes
12 sense. Hey, let's see what we could get into." And you may
13 have heard of an individual by the name of Jim Watt.

14 MR. BARR: Oh, sure.

15 MR. NEUBERGER: Jim was the Assistant Secretary
16 then for Jim Smith in Interior, and Jim was the one then was
17 kind of given the job to get me back there. And so, I was
18 working with Jim, and Jim and his staff there showed us
19 around, and we looked around, and, you know, "This is
20 doable. We could do this." So we made the decision to go
21 back. And my first assignment there was coordinator of
22 project reviews. Now, we've just taken over from the
23 previous administration, and those are political appointed
24 jobs, and so I was to be the coordinator for Department of
25 Interior's, like, CORE, and the SCS, and Federal Power

1 Administration Projects, come to the Interior and somebody's
2 got to ram them through the agencies and pull together a
3 letter for the secretary to write. So that was my job. And
4 I thought that sounded fun.

5 But the keys were broke off in the locks by the
6 outgoing person. So I show up and I can't get into any of
7 the files. Okay, now how do you get a hold of somebody that
8 knows how to get these things -- take these things apart?
9 Well, it took about two or three days and we got somebody up
10 there and finally get into the files and find out what's
11 pending and what's hanging loose. By then, the phone's
12 ringing off the hook from congressmen, their pet project.
13 "Well, where's your secretary's review?" I don't know how
14 they found out so soon I was in charge of that, but, man,
15 you get a congressman calling you directly, a senator, you
16 know. Jennings Randolph from West Virginia on the phone,
17 and he's got this project in Wheeling, Virginia, and we're
18 sitting on it. "Oh, I'll check that right out for you."
19 I'll find out if he's trying to build an SCS dam over an
20 abandoned coal mine. And here you got the senior senator
21 wanting this thing done. And now you got to sit down and
22 explain that, hey, (indiscernible) getting it moved, at
23 least something got done there, but we didn't build it over
24 an abandoned coal mine. So, you know, of course, Geological
25 Survey had to sign off on this thing, and the coordinator

1 for Interior, like that, has got about 15 agencies. USGS,
2 Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Reclamation, you go on, Parks,
3 National Park Service. I guess there isn't 15, maybe about
4 a dozen now. And so these comments would come in, and, of
5 course, many of them didn't agree, and now you've got to
6 have a meeting to just find who you're going to -- and so
7 that letter that got prepared then, drafted, went to Jim
8 Watt to sign off and then it'd got to the Secretary of
9 Interior. That's how it went, from me, Jim, Secretary. So
10 you're preparing letters that were going out over Secretary
11 of Interior's signature and that job. And so I felt the
12 pressure of that, and I worked some long hours trying to get
13 some of those things done and resolved, because he felt the
14 pressure and it's an important role.

15 Most people would never realize that all goes on,
16 but that's the bureaucracy that's got to be managed. And
17 Jim had a great -- Jim Watt taught me a lot, because he knew
18 how to do that. And I tell you, right now, it looks like we
19 don't have a lot of skilled appointees in federal government
20 that know how to manage the bureaucracy. And it just scares
21 the dickens out of me to think how the bureaucracy that
22 loves this administration that's doling out the money and
23 after being there and knowing how Jim Watt, Jim Smith, and
24 the other guy that I know, I observed Vice-President Cheney
25 knew how to run the bureaucracy, to manage it. And, you

1 know, and he was firm and right on, and yet, (indiscernible)
2 run away or just ignore them and not get their way.

3 So that was a good experience in Interior. Then
4 after about a year of that job, I was given a chance to be
5 an assistant secretary in Water and Power for Jim, so then
6 there were two of us. And that responsibility gave me more
7 responsibility over the power marketing agencies in our
8 country, federal power marketing agencies. At the time
9 there were three. I'm not sure what they are today.
10 Southwest and Bonneville and Alaska.

11 And from there, Missouri River, I went to -- of
12 course, the administration changed. Well, from there we
13 formed the Missouri River Basin Commission. That's quite a
14 story, because here, Jim Smith had been a part of the
15 Missouri River Basin Association. And when they were
16 working on the federal legislation to form river basin
17 commissions, you know, he was very instrumental in that and
18 interested in that, because he knew something about it and
19 he knew a lot of the players and their states, and so I was
20 carrying for him to the secretary, from the secretary to the
21 White House, the material that formed the six river basin
22 commissions. And that night I talked to Arlyce. She
23 said -- I said, "You know, that one in Missouri is going to
24 end up being in Omaha. I think I could do that. What do
25 you think?" Boy, she jumped right on that, because she

1 wanted to get back.

2 MR. BARR: Sure.

3 MR. NEUBERGER: And I said, "You know, I wonder
4 how I'd go about this." So, actually, I talked to Jim Watt
5 and said, "Hey, Jim, you know, I think I'd like to put my
6 name in. What would you think?" "Well, talk to the boss."
7 So I went and talked to Jim, he said, "Yeah, you'd be good
8 at that. Go ahead. I'll help you. Let me know." Well,
9 what I had to do then, is go out and get my support. And
10 so, Hruska and Curtis were easy. They knew me. They'd like
11 to have a Nebraska guy head that. And then Milt -- in North
12 Dakota, Milt -- Hansen, Larson, Milt somebody. Anyway, he
13 did whatever the Nebraska guys wanted, pretty much, and so
14 got him. Anyway, lo and behold, there apparently wasn't
15 much other competition. You know, I don't know, because for
16 a presidential appointment, coming from a guy that had held
17 jobs that I've held, isn't too likely that's going to
18 happen. Usually it's some higher up contributor type of
19 person, you know. I was registered with the right party,
20 but I was not what you'd call a huge contributor. I just
21 wanted to see if I could do that job and I knew the area and
22 it helped me get back to the Midwest. And that worked out.
23 And much surprise.

24 And so then I spent about five years, '73 to '77,
25 setting that up, and our whole effort was to come up with a

1 comprehensive plan for water use on the Missouri River. And
2 that was a similar challenge to the three-county problem in
3 that you got states with different interests and different
4 people and just a bigger river basin and busier people,
5 governors and their water resource people. We'd meet
6 quarterly, and I was in charge of getting those set. And
7 the governors appointed their members. There was some
8 rotation every once in a while, and I had to have a good
9 relationship with, generally, governors' staffs. You know
10 how governors are. Once you get -- if you can get the
11 attention of their staff, get acquainted with them, and that
12 -- so kind of the way I operated is try to be on a first
13 name basis with each of their staff and keep up with the
14 changes.

15 So the Missouri River Basin Commission was only
16 about a five-year assignment, but from there, since that was
17 a political appointment, when the administration in
18 Washington changed there in '78, I was replaced and given a
19 chance by Governor Exon then to go to the Department of
20 Water Resources as the director. And came down to Lincoln
21 to do that.

22 And then, from there, after I was there for about
23 four or five years, another opportunity opened up to me in
24 Northern Plains Natural Gas Company to go over and help them
25 with the public affairs to build a natural gas pipeline down

1 from Canada through North Dakota, South Dakota, and into a
2 little bit of Minnesota, into Iowa, called the Northern
3 Border Pipeline. So I spent, then, six years there with a
4 team of really aggressive, motivated, focused people to
5 build a pipeline. And I handled the government relations
6 with the states we went through and the federal government.
7 Matter of fact, the federal government on that project, and
8 I don't know if it's the same way on this XL thing that
9 they're talking about, but there's a federal agency that got
10 created to oversee the Northern Border Pipeline. And I had
11 about 15-20 people back in Washington with a director and
12 everything. And that was basically to make sure the federal
13 rules -- it was an international pipeline and interstate.
14 So, there's a federal role.

15 MR. BARR: Same -- similar anyhow.

16 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah, and we did a lot of things
17 on behalf of the federal inspector, we called him, federal
18 inspector and his staff. And I had lobbyists in Washington.
19 I had lobbyists in three of the five states, hired
20 lobbyists. They weren't on our staff, but they were
21 contracted people. What happens to a pipeline is you
22 get going and then get some landowners opposing it hire
23 lawyers and then you got all your lawsuits. You've got them
24 going to the legislatures and trying to get laws passed that
25 would, in effect, cause you to go bankrupt. Generally,

1 along the line, you got to build it eight feet deep or you
2 got to bury it eight feet deep instead of three and a half
3 or four or whatever the plan was. Well, if you buried it
4 twice as deep as what you're planning, you can't make it go.
5 So most of those efforts, you got to resist. And you got to
6 explain to the legislature how something gets done
7 backhandedly, and they stop your pipeline project.

8 So, we had that going on in Iowa and I think North
9 Dakota. And so we had to -- we were busy with the
10 legislatures in both states there about -- let's see, I was
11 there five years, six years, so I suppose, you know, five or
12 six year sessions, why, there was legislation introduced by
13 some group. So, from there, when that project was about
14 completed, Northern Plains was a company that was formed to
15 do that job. And I could see that -- we attempted to get
16 another pipeline going and I would have probably stayed on
17 with that. That would have been a (indiscernible) pipeline.
18 Of course, that (indiscernible) would stop that. So seeing
19 that that wasn't going to go anywhere, I decided to help Kay
20 Orr. And that led to her asking me to be her Policy
21 Research person, Policy Research and Energy they called it
22 at that time. And then from there, I went back to the USDA.
23 You probably remember this, when we met one time talking
24 about what that job's really about.

25 (Laughter.)

1 Because I'd gotten a call from Joe Western
2 (phonetic) saying, hey, his boss thought I ought to be
3 considered. "Oh, really?" Well, so I went up to Kay Orr
4 and I said, "Kay, what do you think if I let my name go in
5 there?" "Sure, go ahead." Well, I started -- I said,
6 "Well, I better find out a little more what's going on
7 underneath the headline," because some of the stuff that I
8 was reading and hearing was a little disturbing. And so,
9 you were a big help in knowing that some of that could be
10 overcome and some of it was brought on by the former
11 director and so on. So, getting a little comfortable with
12 that, I did agree to let that -- my name go forward. And
13 then I think Doug and Virginia and somebody else, we had a
14 little meeting out -- somewhere out state and interviewed
15 me. Well, Virginia, Doug -- I'm trying to think who the
16 other one was. But anyway --

17 MR. BARR: Would Karnes (phonetic) have been there
18 then?

19 MR. NEUBERGER: Karnes was there, but I
20 think -- but anyway, I met with the three of our elected
21 officials to let them know that I was willing to try to take
22 that on, and so Virginia was sticking her neck out a long
23 way there.

24 But anyway, that led to five years at ASCS, state
25 director. And then from there I went to ENRON in Omaha.

1 And after that, I -- let's see, I think that pretty well
2 covers it all. Noteworthy accomplishments, 39 years, I held
3 14 different jobs, so that doesn't sound like I was very
4 stable, Jim.

5 (Laughter.)

6 I hate to put this on the record, but in most of
7 those cases, as you heard, I really didn't look for those
8 jobs. I kind of run into them. I was in the right spot at
9 the right time or knew the right people. And I guess, that
10 is not a bad way in life, in a career, is just do your job
11 to make your boss look good and then he's going to talk
12 about you to other people and then when they got something,
13 they're going to want to talk to you. And that's kind of
14 the way that whole thing worked out. In all those cases,
15 only one that I really went out and had to seek the job.
16 And other than that, everything there is just about the way
17 it worked is that if you do your job, and your boss likes
18 you, and you're making your boss look good, he'll put in a
19 good word for you around his network, and pretty soon,
20 someone in his network's got a better job for you. And you
21 can take a look at it. It's a kind of crazy patchwork
22 career, but it was a challenge. I have to admit there were
23 a few times in there, I wasn't sure I was -- and Arlyce,
24 I've got a thought down here, she's moved to 12 different
25 cities. So packing and unpacking 14 times in 34 years.

1 MR. BARR: Did you manage to lose some of the
2 excess stuff in that process?

3 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah.

4 MR. BARR: Being in the opposite thing there,
5 being in the same place a long time, it's really
6 accumulated.

7 MR. NEUBERGER: Well, that's kind of a long-winded
8 summary of my experience and my career and it's been --

9 MR. BARR: One thing I might ask you about, as I
10 recall on interviewing other people that there were at least
11 a couple people that ended up being NRD managers and
12 employees that had worked with you at one point back in the
13 Papio --

14 MR. NEUBERGER: Yes, they did. We were training,
15 yeah, without knowing it, some future NRD managers, Steve
16 Oltman, hired him -- I believe Steve had a job with one of
17 the soil conservation districts, though, that must have had
18 some -- enough funds to have an employee. There weren't too
19 many of them. But I believe he did. And I hired him to
20 come down and go to work for the Papio Advisory Board before
21 it was an NRD. Dick Berans then was hired, and that was
22 kind of a part of the money we got through the Health and
23 Human Services, I think was the agency then that gave Sarpy
24 County a grant. And then we had some funds in which we
25 needed another employee to help Sarpy County. So, Dick

1 Berans was hired to help Sarpy County with that land fill,
2 gully land fill demonstration and a few other things related
3 to the pollution problem, the trash and the trees and the
4 stuff that we were trying to deal with to get out of those
5 channels because of every -- I'm trying to think. Jerry
6 Wehrspann came out of Iowa, so I don't think Jerry, he ended
7 up becoming a manager there, but Jerry, of course, is
8 deceased now. And there was one of the lakes that's named
9 Wehrspann Lake after Jerry.

10 MR. BARR: Oh, sure. That's right.

11 MR. NEUBERGER: So he became, I think, maybe was
12 the first NRD manager, if I have that right. And then, of
13 course, Steve, I think, went to another NRD and then came
14 back to Papio.

15 MR. BARR: Right.

16 MR. NEUBERGER: Berans went out somewhere out west
17 there, around --

18 MR. BARR: Lower Loup.

19 MR. NEUBERGER: Lower Loup?

20 MR. BARR: Yeah.

21 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah, those guys got some good
22 training right in the thick of things.

23 MR. BARR: They were kind of NRD prior to the NRDs
24 to some extent.

25 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah, they were in training and

1 didn't realize what it was all going to lead to, but they
2 were needed and that was a good way to get some good talent
3 prepared to handle a board.

4 MR. BARR: Looking back at the time -- about the
5 time you were involved in the formation of the Papio to how
6 the NRDs took over and then how they've operated since, do
7 you have any thoughts about how this has evolved and any
8 comparison to how people might have thought it might, or if
9 it was the same or different or --

10 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah, I keep up kind of with the
11 Papio NRD and then here the Lower Platte South. I get
12 their -- I'm on their mailing list. I get their newsletters
13 and stuff. So, those are the only two that I really feel I
14 know kind of what's going on. And, of course, I know this
15 territory real well and so I probably spend more time
16 realizing what they're doing. But I think they -- the early
17 criticism was that they're really farmland oriented and
18 erosion control and stuff. And I think they're dealing with
19 that and that they're doing more for urban people, the trail
20 programs, and the cooperation projects with the city, and
21 the publicity that they're getting. And I think they have,
22 what, nine members now on the Papio? I think nine elected
23 members. And I guess that -- the membership issue is really
24 about the same as what we had on the Advisory Board as far
25 as numbers, I think. There isn't too much difference there.

1 But there is -- so I see them as evolving to meet the need
2 of where the tax base is coming from, which basically, was
3 one of the early resistances to doing this type of thing is
4 that, well, we want the money to, you know, get more --

5 MR. BARR: You think that one man, one vote, did
6 that start or did that happen later, and did that have an
7 effect on how they operated? I can't remember. I know a
8 lot of them went -- weren't one man, one vote to begin with.
9 I don't remember about the Papio, whether that was -- that
10 was always an issue there early in the years and --

11 MR. NEUBERGER: Nothing sticks in my mind other
12 than I think the memberships -- the one man, one vote, I
13 remember something about that, but I just can't remember how
14 it was handled (indiscernible).

15 MR. BARR: One of the questions that's come up in
16 this project has been, a lot of people have thought it's
17 worked pretty well in Nebraska and they've wondered if it
18 might be adopted elsewhere and it hasn't been to date. Do
19 you have any thoughts on why it might have happened here in
20 Nebraska and what were some of the key things that allowed
21 it to happen here in Nebraska?

22 MR. NEUBERGER: Well, I think Warren Fairchild's
23 leadership and the Natural Resource Commissions, him getting
24 them behind it. And then kind of without planning it, a
25 flood demonstrated the need for a hydrologic approach,

1 which, when you say that, you're talking about crossing
2 county lines, because hydrology doesn't -- county lines
3 weren't built very much on hydrology. There might be a few
4 cases where they were, but by and large, county lines cut
5 across. And so I think this experience gave the heavy
6 populated part of the state impetus to see that we're
7 already basically trying to do it, kind of cobbled together
8 a lot of things to do it, and yet we needed some taxing base
9 and might as well include the whole counties.

10 MR. BARR: That flooding seems to have affected
11 one of your other jobs, too, because some of the Missouri
12 River projects probably evolved out of the earlier floods in
13 that basin.

14 MR. NEUBERGER: Wasn't two years ago something
15 there, 2011? I got a picture of Gavins. I went up to see
16 my brother up in South Dakota and I went across Gavins in
17 July, I guess, 30th or something like that. 60,000, what
18 was it, coming out of there?

19 MR. BARR: Yeah, a record amount, whatever it was.

20 MR. NEUBERGER: I got a picture of that from
21 the -- wow. Who would ever have thought -- it just set a
22 whole new point. I mean, nothing has ever been near that in
23 the history of recording. Yeah, that was a terrible amount
24 of water, and a good thing they had some way to regulate
25 some of that, or there'd have been a huge mess. It was a

1 bad mess, and -- Eppley Airport, and the whole airport would
2 have been under water if it wouldn't have been for the
3 regulation. I guess it was fairly close anyway, because
4 water was boiling -- I guess they were having trouble --

5 MR. BARR: And I guess the groundwater was coming
6 up and raising the -- from below.

7 Well, I don't have anything else in specific, but
8 if there's any other observations you'd like to offer, just
9 give you a chance to do it.

10 MR. NEUBERGER: Well, I'm sure a proponent of
11 natural resource districts by county boundaries. In some
12 cases, you know, I haven't examined everything across the
13 whole state and I've not been in a position to have the
14 information even, that I think -- you know, you hear some
15 criticism of, since they have the levying power or all that,
16 that their budgets are too high and they have too many staff
17 and all that, but I think that's just kind of the normal
18 criticism of government and I don't think too much of it.
19 And I really like to see these things put in the hands of an
20 elected group, body of nine, ten, twelve people, and by
21 distributed around the NRD area by district like that, and I
22 guess generally, they have one or two at large.

23 MR. BARR: And they've also added the other
24 district, too, since --

25 MR. NEUBERGER: Yes, Papio's gone up in --

1 MR. BARR: Sioux City and --

2 MR. NEUBERGER: Uh-huh, so they go all the way up
3 and they have a suboffice somewhere up there somewhere, I
4 think. So, yeah, it's been a fine way to deal with water
5 and soil resources and still provide recreation and trails
6 and biking.

7 My son lives over in Omaha on 140th and Fort
8 Street out here which is not far from the Big Papillion
9 Creek. And this March, I guess it was, nice weather
10 sometime in March, I went over and we did some biking. And
11 we were biking down along the Big Papio in there on some
12 trails, flood plain land that the city has kept from
13 development, and I was telling him how, you know, right
14 where we were riding, on two occasions that are in this
15 paper, in '64 and then two years later, the water would have
16 been six, seven feet deep where we were riding. I said,
17 "Yeah." And I said, I remember a time I remember, one of
18 the perks of working with Dale Williamson is that he had
19 connections with the National Guard. And so talking to
20 Dale, and I said, "Dale, I'd really like to fly right after
21 that second flood and take pictures," I said, of the trash
22 and stuff, because it looks like that I could see a few of
23 them. So he gets me a National Guard helicopter out there.
24 And they did training missions. Just happened that they put
25 me on board and then they flew the way I wanted to fly. So,

1 I got some of the greatest 35 millimeter slides in here.
2 And with those, then I was able to communicate with the
3 county boards, and NRD board and that. And so I was telling
4 Paul, our son who lives there, about that, that hanging out
5 of that helicopter with a strap, I said, taking pictures up
6 and down that thing, and I said, they proved very valuable
7 and didn't have to pay a dime for them other than the
8 taxpayers that had to pay for the National Guard's budget.

9 MR. BARR: Well, they got some training out of the
10 deal.

11 MR. NEUBERGER: That's the way he wrapped it up.
12 He said, "The only way we can do it is if we need to train
13 them anyway." And so, you know, I suppose that training
14 might not have taken place two days after the flood.

15 (Laughter.)

16 But because he knew who to talk to, and, you know,
17 if you had to go through channels, why, you'd have never
18 gotten it done. And I remember, met down here at the
19 airport right from Milt Fricke's place. He has that
20 helicopter there, and I get in it and we go down here and we
21 fly up and back once and land, and I had about four rolls of
22 35 millimeter pictures that really were valuable then for
23 explaining what that three-inch flood caused. You know,
24 there was probably several times the damage just because of
25 the junk, trash and trees, everything, car bodies, you know,

1 that were being pushed into the channels.

2 MR. BARR: Bank stabilization projects, right?

3 MR. NEUBERGER: Yeah, oh, yeah, they -- and some
4 of it, you know, the abutments to bridges that can only take
5 so much and then they're going to fail. But, you know, if
6 the banks go around them, they weren't designed not to have
7 soil around them, you know?

8 I remember Paul -- we ran into three or four other
9 guys that he knew, and they were older guys. And Paul had
10 to tell them about that story, me being up in the
11 helicopter.

12 MR. BARR: I went with the FEMA team in '93 down
13 in -- near Falls City, and we were out checking bridges and
14 stuff, and I found one of the most interesting things I ever
15 saw, we were on the south side, but on the north side of the
16 approach to the bridge, there was a great big washout about
17 as big as this room under the road. And had somebody driven
18 on that, it would have dropped right in. So, a lot of
19 interesting things happen in those floods.

20 Well, I don't --

21 MR. NEUBERGER: I don't have anything else, Jim.

22 MR. BARR: Well, thank you very much for doing
23 this. I appreciate it very much.

24

- - -

25