

INTERVIEW WITH STEVE OLTMANS

July 29, 2013

1 PROCEEDINGS, JULY 29, 2013:

2 MR. FLEECS: I'm Ron Fleecs. I've got a little  
3 history project involving natural resource districts, and  
4 I'm visiting with Steve Oltmans here in Omaha, Nebraska, and  
5 going over with him, some of his past experiences and what  
6 he's been involved with in the natural resource field. So,  
7 Steve, I would ask you to state your name and address and go  
8 from there.

9 MR. OLTMANS: Okay, very good. Good morning,  
10 everybody, Steve Oltmans, lives in Omaha at 15733 O Circle,  
11 68135. I've been here since 1986. First of all, I was a  
12 farm boy in Nuckolls County. I graduated from Nelson,  
13 Nebraska High School and then enrolled at the University of  
14 Nebraska. I received a lot out of the high school "blue  
15 coat program", I call it, the FFA. All the contests and  
16 competitiveness that I participated in really helped me in  
17 my UNL experience and career.

18 MR. FLEECS: Oh, yeah, it's good experience.

19 MR. OLTMANS: So I went on to the University and  
20 received a degree in agriculture with emphasis in soil and  
21 water conservation, resources management. While I was in  
22 college I worked for the Agriculture Research Service there  
23 on campus. We did contracted soil erosion research for the  
24 Federal government. Most of it was for the defense  
25 department because that was during the Cold War when we were

1 building bases all over the world and they would ship in  
2 boxes of soil from the sites that they wanted to build an  
3 air base.

4 MR. FLEECS: When was that?

5 MR. OLTMANS: That would have been in the early  
6 '60s.

7 MR. FLEECS: Early '60s, okay.

8 MR. OLTMANS: And we would then model the slopes  
9 and tell them the steepest slopes they could cut and still  
10 try to get some vegetation. We would then give them  
11 recommendations on that. And how did we do that? Well, we  
12 did some of the research in the lab, but we also had  
13 research land east of Lincoln in the Stephens Creek  
14 Watershed. The research we used was one of the best of the  
15 universities in the world doing that type of soil erosion  
16 research. Our big competitor were Purdue and Penn State  
17 which had similar programs of research. It was a great  
18 experience. I received a degree in soil and water  
19 management and water resources, with emphasis in water  
20 resources. And I learned a lot from that. I worked closely  
21 with engineers.

22 MR. FLEECS: We all love engineers.

23 MR. OLTMANS: Yeah, right. So that was great  
24 experience. And then I got on a couple summers or two with  
25 the Soil Conservation Service in Nuckolls County and did

1       some basic surveying. I love surveying. Of course, we  
2       didn't have GPS and all that stuff. We would survey with  
3       the old stadium board in the morning and then in the  
4       afternoon when it was hot we would take all them in and plot  
5       out our work. So, anyway, great, great basic experience.

6                Duane Chamberlain hired me to work for the State  
7       of Nebraska along with Dayle Williamson, and, of course, Mr.  
8       Fairchild who was the director of the Soil and Water  
9       Conservation Commission in those days. I ran a lot of  
10      summer employment programs with the conservation districts  
11      across the state. So I traveled the whole state quite a  
12      little bit and, even though I grew up in Nebraska, I really  
13      didn't know Nebraska.

14               MR. FLEECS: That's right. None of us did.

15               MR. OLTMANS: It was a great experience. I got to  
16      every county. And in those days we had this great frame,  
17      you know, aluminum frame with a picture of the award winner  
18      from each county. We went to every county fair. I drew  
19      that straw a lot. I'll never forget one experience that I  
20      had, and not that this is important, but I was coming back  
21      from Box Butte County and the interstate was, most of the  
22      interstate was open then. So I was traveling on that,  
23      pulling a trailer with that --

24               MR. FLEECS: Big trailer with that big --

25               MR. OLTMANS: -- big trailer. And I got pulled

1 over and got a speeding ticket. I was doing about 80 miles  
2 an hour in that thing. I'll never forget that. So I paid  
3 the ticket. You know, I was guilty. Morrison was governor  
4 then and he had a policy that if you got any traffic  
5 violation as a state employee, you got to talk with the  
6 governor. Well, I didn't know that. So one morning Dayle  
7 calls me in and he says -- Dayle Williamson says, well,  
8 Steve, you're going to have a good day. You've got a three  
9 o'clock appointment with Governor Morrison. I thought, holy  
10 crap, what -- so I went down there and he says, young man,  
11 you've got a heavy foot and that's not a good thing. Of  
12 course, he's a foot taller than I am. I am sitting there  
13 shaking in my shoes, you know. And, of course, in those  
14 days state government was pretty simple. All the state  
15 agencies, other than the highway department, was located in  
16 the Capitol. There was no State Office Building. There was  
17 no Game and Parks building. Game and Parks was up on ninth  
18 floor.

19 MR. FLEECS: We were on, what, sixth?

20 MR. OLTMANS: Sixth and --

21 MR. FLEECS: Fifth, fifth and sixth.

22 MR. OLTMANS: Fifth and sixth. The sixth is  
23 around the top of that Rotunda in the Capital. So, anyway,  
24 that was -- I'd go in the south door every morning. That's  
25 where I parked. And Morrison was the first governor in the

1 new mansion, and he'd go in the south door. Well, every  
2 once in a while we would run into each other and he'd put  
3 his hands around me and say, how is that heavy foot of yours  
4 doing, Steve?

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

6 MR. OLTMANS: All right, so that gets you -- so I  
7 learned to stay the lot. And it took me, Ron, until I was  
8 about 30 years old to appreciate the fact that I grew up on  
9 a farm. You know, now living in a concrete jungle city now  
10 most of my life, and, of course, it's not a big city  
11 compared to most but, you know, I had my own national park  
12 growing up on a farm, so to speak, didn't know it. So,  
13 anyway --

14 MR. FLEECS: Well, and that helped you communicate  
15 to most of the Soil and Water Conservation districts and the  
16 people you were out there visiting because of your farm  
17 background you could talk their language and that was 90  
18 percent of gaining their confidence in what you were telling  
19 them was good fact, actual stuff.

20 MR. OLTMANS: And, you know, my dad was not a  
21 conservation farmer at the time we were growing up. He  
22 would send my brother out to plow every spring and said, now  
23 plow in those ditches first and then start going around the  
24 field. Well, at age about 15 or 16 I got to thinking, in my  
25 simple way of thinking in those days, this is crazy. What's

1 the deal here? We just lose more topsoil every year and I'm  
2 proud to say that he was the Nuckolls County conservation  
3 farmer in 1969, he and mom, and they got the annual award at  
4 the annual Soil and Water Conservation Convention in South  
5 Sioux City, when the convention center was brand new. It  
6 was a big deal. And then he and two other farmers after  
7 they retired, they would go around the county after a hard  
8 rain and they would stop in and see their buddies and say,  
9 you know, you need another terrace line there. Before  
10 applying conservation measures to his land he would say "I  
11 can't", so I was really proud of that because I pounded on  
12 him, the smart kid from the college.

13 MR. FLEECS: When you were working with the  
14 Commission back in the mid '60s, Warren Fairchild, of  
15 course, was the director at that time. When do you recall  
16 did they start talking, hearing about natural resource  
17 districts?

18 MR. OLTMANS: I think 1966 was the first that I  
19 heard it mentioned.

20 MR. FLEECS: Pretty close to that time.

21 MR. OLTMANS: Yes, and I remember I was, kind of a  
22 grunt employee, and I don't say that negatively. I was  
23 asked to draw some maps. Well, what would be the logical  
24 boundaries? The maps that I remember seeing, even after I  
25 left there and then came to Omaha the first time and worked

1 for the Papio Watershed Advisory Board, when the 21 Corps  
2 reservoirs were originally authorized by Congress, thanks to  
3 Roman Hruska. Tthe maps that I saw were 66 districts, 44,  
4 33, 24 and 16. Now as I look back on that, I think 16 would  
5 have been better because we were looking significantly at  
6 the areas in the state where you had an interstate compact,  
7 Republican Basin, Niobrara.

8 MR. FLEECS: Blues.

9 MR. OLTMANS: Now I can tell you that there is  
10 considerable difference in the topography, the groundwater  
11 in the Big Blue basin. So certainly there was some logic  
12 there, same thing in the Elkhorn. The legislature the first  
13 year after they passed the legislature in '68 on a 29 to 19  
14 vote, Tiemann was governor and so he was supporting it. And  
15 if he had vetoed that, we may not have them today. He  
16 supported it.

17 MR. FLEECS: But he was supportive of multipurpose  
18 or consolidation, I think, to get some of these things. So  
19 I think that helped a lot.

20 MR. OLTMANS: It did.

21 MR. FLEECS: His support for natural resource  
22 districts.

23 MR. OLTMANS: So looking back I think the map of  
24 the 16 might have been better, but when you talk about  
25 consolidating government, it was phenomenal we got as far as



1 we did, in my opinion.

2 MR. FLEECS: Well, look at how many we were  
3 looking at. Was it 150-some?

4 MR. OLTMANS: 154 mandatorily.

5 MR. FLEECS: Yeah, special purpose districts.

6 MR. OLTMANS: The Papio Watershed Advisory Board  
7 was written specifically so they could sponsor the Corps  
8 authorization project and then we had a PL 566 program above  
9 each of those sites, to get water quality involved. That  
10 was one of my main responsibilities while employed by the  
11 Papio Watershed Advisory Board. I was hired by John  
12 Neuberger, who was the general manager, he was the second  
13 general manager after Merlin England for the Papio Watershed  
14 Advisory Board, and he hired me away from the Commission  
15 then. And the Commission trained quite a few of us, as you  
16 know.

17 MR. FLEECS: Yeah.

18 MR. OLTMANS: I moved on from the State Commission  
19 to Papio, and that was a great three and a half years  
20 experience working for John Neuberger and getting things  
21 moving. I managed the PL566 program above the main Corps  
22 sites that were authorized by Congress in 1968. And then I  
23 had my chance to have my own leadership position. I was  
24 hired by the Maple Creek Watershed Advisory Board, which was  
25 organized the same way, three counties again, Stanton,

1 Colfax and Dodge. They had had a major flood in '66.

2 MR. FLEECS: Was that back in that time when you  
3 were doing that?

4 MR. OLTMANS: Yes.

5 MR. FLEECS: It was before NRD legislation,  
6 basically.

7 MR. OLTMAN: Yes. The office was located in  
8 Clarkson, Nebraska in '69 to '72 when the NRDs operatively  
9 started. And ultimately I interviewed in five districts.  
10 The two that were the most serious ones for me were the  
11 Lower Loup in Ord, and then the Lower Elkhorn in Norfolk,  
12 where I ended up staying. I'll never forget the Loup and  
13 the power boys really lobbied me to come over there. The  
14 Lower Loup representatives flew me all over in an airplane  
15 looking at the district and everything and the wife and kids  
16 went over there. And who was the guy that really ram-rodged  
17 it? It was a state senator.

18 MR. FLEECS: Wasn't Burbach.

19 MR. OLTMANS: No.

20 MR. FLEECS: The guy you're thinking of is from  
21 Spalding.

22 MR. OLTMANS: Yeah.

23 MR. FLEECS: Good Irishman from Spalding.

24 MR. OLTMANS: I was hired by the Lower Elkhorn  
25 NRD. And I had a great 14 years in Norfolk, Nebraska. We

1 organized a few programs, built some fairly significant  
2 projects for that day and I am really proud of the  
3 Maskenthine Reservoir north of Stanton and the Willow Creek  
4 project west of Pierce, because that's a state recreation  
5 now area, very popular. The resources development fund was  
6 the only reason those were built. Financially we would not  
7 have been able to do it because that was -- in the early  
8 '80s, the one at Pierce was an \$8 million project.

9 MR. FLEECES: Going back to the mid '60s with the  
10 Papio Advisory Board, didn't that come about with the  
11 Commission at that time it seems like -- did we go to  
12 Papillion after that big flood in the middle '60s?

13 MR. OLTMANS: Yes.

14 MR. FLEECES: Took a bunch of pictures and see all  
15 that stuff.

16 MR. OLTMANS: Yes, I -- you and I did that.

17 MR. FLEECES: Wasn't that kind of what spearheaded  
18 the Papio Watershed Advisory Board?

19 MR. OLTMANS: It did. We had historic floods in  
20 the Papio watershed, which is a quarter million acres, three  
21 counties, parts of three counties, runs down through the  
22 metropolitan area. It still has some issues. There's  
23 enough reservoirs now built on the west branch that comes  
24 from the Elkhorn area down through Millard and Papillion  
25 that does some significant good on heavy rains. Then on the

1 Little Papio you've got a channel project and Cunningham  
2 Lake that controls almost 30 square miles coming down out of  
3 Washington County. But there's still a big threat here in  
4 the Papio. The '64 flood killed seven people and that flood  
5 came down the Elkhorn. It was the historic -- the modern  
6 day historic flood. Yes, it started up at Bassett, a lot of  
7 hail that plugged pipes and the roads, and came right down  
8 the Elkhorn Valley and into the Papio system. (It) killed  
9 seven people. And I don't know, in those days I think it  
10 was like 6 or \$7 million worth of damage.

11 They had another 100-year flood that was in June,  
12 and in September of '65 they had another 100-year. Killed  
13 one person and, I don't know, about \$2 million of damage.  
14 Those two back-to-back 100-year storms is what got the  
15 authorization done for the Corps in Washington.

16 MR. FLEECES: Now Milt Fricke was involved some  
17 time back on the advisory board.

18 MR. OLTMANS: Yes.

19 MR. FLEECES: Was he on an SWCD board?

20 MR. OLTMANS: Yes. Milt went back to the SWCD  
21 boards, helped organize the Papio Watershed Advisory Board.  
22 He was a super guy. He farmed a lot of land in the Big  
23 Papio Valley just immediately east of Papillion. And one of  
24 his boys still farms that land.

25 MR. FLEECES: Wasn't he also pretty active with the

1 National Association of Conservation Districts?

2 MR. OLTMANS: Yes, he was --

3 MR. FLEECES: And I think he could see the  
4 importance of your advisory board and what was going to be  
5 needed in Nebraska to carry out the type of projects.

6 MR. OLTMANS: Yes.

7 MR. FLEECES: And I think, you know, having him  
8 supporting the NRDs was very important as far as Omaha goes.

9 MR. OLTMANS: It was. He had a lot of respect  
10 from numerous senators, and particularly the urban senators.  
11 And, of course, that was relatively right after the '64 and  
12 5 floods. It's interesting, that watershed hasn't had a  
13 (hundred year flood since); I think the highest frequency  
14 storm they had was in '99, about a 10-year storm. So they  
15 are way overdue for something to happen, unfortunately.  
16 Milt was a major player there. You know, Herman Link from  
17 the Central Platte was another one, as I recall. Who was  
18 the one right east of Lincoln or right west of Lincoln?  
19 He's the one that got the -- was a major player in the Salt  
20 Valley.

21 MR. FLEECES: Yeah, Salt, yeah.

22 MR. OLTMANS: There were a lot of people there at  
23 the meeting. It was authorized in the '60s before we had  
24 EPA. We didn't have EPA and all the environmental  
25 requirements.

1           MR. FLEECES: Didn't have all these permits from  
2 the Corps and everything else that was needed.

3           MR. OLTMANS: Yeah. Papio got kind of caught up  
4 in that. So, anyway, I think the NRD -- and then I had an  
5 opportunity when my good friend, Jerry Wehrspan, developed a  
6 malignant brain tumor, inoperable, in 19- -- I was with him  
7 and we were having our September conference of NRDs at the  
8 new Hilton. It was brand new. Or not Hilton but --

9           MR. FLEECES: The Holiday --

10          MR. OLTMANS: In Lincoln, the new Cornhusker. We  
11 were out on a coffee break and his hand started shaking with  
12 the coffee cup and he said, Steve, I think something is  
13 happening to me. He said, would you take me to the  
14 emergency room at Lincoln General? Yeah. Well, we got out  
15 to the parking lot and he couldn't walk any more, he was  
16 shaking so bad. He was having a seizure, scared the heck  
17 out of me, of course. I went with him and emergency doctor  
18 came out in about 20 minutes and said, you need to call his  
19 wife and have her come down here. Of course, I wasn't a  
20 family member so he wouldn't tell me. But that was a --  
21 poor guy lived six months, so 43 years old when we buried  
22 him.

23          MR. FLEECES: And that's when you became manager?

24          MR. OLTMANS: Yes, I applied for the position  
25 while I was in Norfolk. I had managed the Lower Elkhorn

1 district there about as far as it could go at the time, I  
2 pushed that district as hard as you could. I was ready for  
3 the next step, so to speak, and I was fortunate. Actually,  
4 I competed with John Neuberger for that job, because John  
5 had moved on to the University.

6 MR. FLEECS: Yeah, he was with the environment --  
7 Natural Resources Director.

8 MR. OLTMANS: Yes.

9 MR. FLEECS: When you were at the Papio Advisory  
10 Board -- not Papio, I mean the Maple Creek Advisory Board  
11 when all the NRD stuff was starting in the late '60s, was  
12 there much support or much opposition? What was there  
13 between the SWCDs back at that time before --

14 MR. OLTMANS: Yes, there was. There was an  
15 organizational effort that there where a lawsuit was filed,  
16 as you know, that went to the Supreme Court. A lot of that  
17 opposition came from the soil and water conservation  
18 districts that were the most active ones. A lot of them, as  
19 you know, are in southeast Nebraska where they sponsored  
20 watershed projects. I remember Burt County Soil and Water  
21 Conservation District was one of the main opponents, so they  
22 weren't just southeast. And that was a miserable year and a  
23 half because we didn't know if we were coming or going as it  
24 went through the Supreme Court. The League of Women Voters  
25 in the state of Nebraska, mostly Lincoln and Omaha, really

1 got behind that lawsuit on the side of the NRDs and that was  
2 a major factor. Art Cohart was the manager of the retired  
3 military. Hal Schroeder was a key factor in that because he  
4 could see the benefits that the Corps had done there in  
5 Lincoln with the 10 Corps reservoirs. Many lawsuits that  
6 have been involved in the Lower Elkhorn and the Papio were  
7 attached to the lawsuit the Supreme Court decision that was  
8 constitutional. I don't think a lot of people thought of  
9 that, but that was pretty important.

10 MR. FLEECES: Well, like you and I, maybe not so  
11 much you, but like I took a job as manager of the Lower Blue  
12 NRD before that lawsuit was settled.

13 MR. OLTMANS: I did the same thing.

14 MR. FLEECES: I never mentioned anything to Murray  
15 at the time, that, hey, we might move down here. We had a  
16 house bought. If the thing goes the other way I'd have to  
17 tell her, well, I don't have a job.

18 MR. OLTMANS: We did the same thing when we moved  
19 from Clarkson to Norfolk.

20 MR. FLEECES: You look at some of the people that  
21 were around at that time, like the Hal Schroeder and the  
22 Harold Sieck.

23 MR. OLTMANS: That's the name.

24 MR. FLEECES: Harold Sieck from Seward County.

25 MR. OLTMANS: Yes, he was from Pleasant Dale.



1 MR. FLEECES: Pleasant Dale.

2 MR. OLTMANS: Right west of Lincoln.

3 MR. FLEECES: And Milton Fricke and some of these  
4 people in those urban areas and working with those urban  
5 senators, we would have had a very hard time getting, I  
6 think, personally, NRD legislation passed without those  
7 people and the respect that those senators had for the Hal  
8 Schroeder, the Harold Sieck, the Milton Fricke and the  
9 people -- some of the people down in my area, Chad Ellis  
10 and, you know, some of those guys that -- Duane Allington  
11 and the people out west. You know, some of them were  
12 supporters.

13 MR. OLTMANS: Well, and then Warren Fairchild was  
14 a great marketer, you know, and Dayle was a fantastic  
15 lieutenant for him, I guess I'd say.

16 MR. FLEECES: Putting out fires.

17 MR. OLTMANS: Yes. Dayle was just super at that  
18 and they both were workaholics. We had good mentors there.  
19 I'll tell you, Warren Fairchild and Dayle and Duane  
20 Chamberlain and John Neuberger were great mentors for me.

21 MR. FLEECES: They had this good state senator out  
22 of York (Sen. Kremer of Aurora). What was his name? He was  
23 the head of the natural resource committee or the ag  
24 committee that was?

25 MR. OLTMANS: Yes.

1 MR. FLEECS: He was always coming up to see  
2 Fairchild and say, we don't have the votes today and --

3 MR. OLTMANS: Right, right.

4 MR. FLEECS: And then Duane said -- or not Duane,  
5 but Warren would say, boy, we're working on it. We'll be  
6 okay.

7 MR. OLTMANS: Let me tell you a story about  
8 Senator Carpenter who voted against the NRD legislation.

9 MR. FLEECS: I've got that at home, of everybody  
10 that voted -- I've got the roll call.

11 MR. OLTMANS: He voted against it. So, years  
12 later I was flying to a watershed conference in Denver and,  
13 of course, in those days that was the original Frontier  
14 (Airline). We'd go Lincoln, Grand Island, North Platte, and  
15 Scottsbluff and then to Denver, call it the puddle jumper.  
16 I was flying back from that one Friday and there sat Senator  
17 Carpenter and one of his sons. And we were waiting, of  
18 course, and I said, well, senator -- and he wasn't a senator  
19 any more at that time. They were in the petroleum business  
20 primarily. So I said, do you mind if we talk a little  
21 natural resource business for a little bit? No, not at all,  
22 he says. I remember you bringing stuff over from Dayle  
23 Williamson and Warren Fairchild to the old Cornhusker where  
24 he always stayed. And, of course, in those days Lincoln was  
25 dry and so you had bottle clubs.

1 MR. FLEECS: That's right, yeah.

2 MR. OLTMANS: So I was the delivery boy from -- to  
3 him. A lot of times, always six o'clock is when he wanted  
4 it. So I'd stay around and do that. And he was usually in  
5 the bottle club and having a hot toddy and that's where I  
6 would take the stuff to him. So he said, I remember you.  
7 He says, you've still got that flattop. At that time I had  
8 that, you know.

9 MR. FLEECS: Yeah, we all did.

10 MR. OLTMANS: We all did.

11 MR. FLEECS: Yeah.

12 MR. OLTMANS: So I say, well, I just was curious,  
13 if I may ask. You didn't vote for the legislation. No. He  
14 says, I'll tell you why. So he took about 15 minutes, Ron,  
15 and told me why. He said, you guys tried to write such  
16 perfect legislation it's a wonder you got that thing  
17 passed. He said, when you write major legislation like that  
18 was, he said it's like building a nice barn. You build the  
19 framework, put a good roof on it, but you don't worry about  
20 how fancy the doors are and certainly you don't put shutters  
21 on it. You guys are trying to put shutters on it. And he  
22 says, the real reason I voted against it, you eliminated  
23 mosquito abatement districts. And I said, well, our goal  
24 was to clean up any old legislation that did anything with  
25 water that wasn't functioning or should be consolidated.

1       And I said I remember very well that that legislation was  
2       almost 10 years old, I think, if I remember right, and there  
3       had never been one farm and they could levy one cent  
4       property tax to do that. And, of course, I said I  
5       understand that purpose because the little town I grew up  
6       by, we were always fogging for mosquitoes and stuff. We  
7       were all breathing the spray. And he says, well, what you  
8       say is accurate but he said, you know, none of you ever  
9       asked me if that was all right. If you would have asked me,  
10      I probably would have voted for it. He said, now keep that  
11      in mind in the future. When you want to pass major  
12      legislation, just make sure you have a good framework and a  
13      good roof. Don't worry about the rest of it. You can add  
14      that later or you won't get it passed. I never forgot that.

15               MR. FLEECS: It's just like a bond issue I was  
16      involved with when I was working on the county board down  
17      there to get the courthouse going. I wanted to go to  
18      organizations that I had a hunch might be against it because  
19      I've always been under -- just working with watersheds, if  
20      you don't go to opposition and explain what you're doing --

21               MR. OLTMANS: They'll kill you.

22               MR. FLEECS: -- you'll stop all that bad  
23      information out there and this is probably what we had maybe  
24      a little bit of with the NRDs, was that we had people from  
25      SWCDs and even some federal agencies out there doing

1 opposition to us, but we probably should have got them set  
2 down.

3 MR. OLTMANS: There were people in USDA agencies  
4 that were not for this.

5 MR. FLEECS: Absolutely.

6 MR. OLTMANS: Because the structure nationwide was  
7 the soil and water conservation districts on a county basis.  
8 And, yes, so why hasn't this spread to other states? Well,  
9 because I think the difficulty in getting that type of  
10 legislation passed is not easy.

11 MR. FLEECS: Well, two things generally would be  
12 hard to get passed today, even in Nebraska; number one, the  
13 mill levy.

14 MR. OLTMANS: Yes.

15 MR. FLEECS: And, number two, eminent domain.

16 MR. OLTMANS: Yes.

17 MR. FLEECS: We were very fortunate to have that  
18 in that legislation to get that, because without that, we  
19 would never have been able to do the projects that we had to  
20 do, even though down in my district we had it, but very few  
21 times that we ever had to use it, you know. But if we  
22 needed it, we needed it, and that was the big talking point  
23 on that. It isn't something evil. It's really something to  
24 protect that landowner out there, that there is a right out  
25 there that he has because of that law.

1 MR. OLTMANS: Yes.

2 MR. FLEECS: We just can't go out and take his  
3 land without going through a good process.

4 MR. OLTMAN: If he gets a 15 percent increase in  
5 the award he doesn't have to pay court costs.

6 MR. FLEECS: That's right.

7 MR. OLTMANS: So it's there to protect the  
8 landowner and property rights.

9 MR. FLEECS: So you've been involved with it now  
10 for a few years.

11 MR. OLTMANS: I came from Norfolk, Ron, yes. I  
12 was 14 years in Norfolk and I served on the City Council  
13 every year I was there, and that was good experience as  
14 well. Then we moved back to Omaha when I replaced Jerry  
15 Wehrspan and was there for 20 years and pushed hard. And  
16 then I worked four years for Olson Engineering. We were  
17 trying to establish an office in Omaha and I'm happy to say  
18 that I think I helped that happen. They've got a very  
19 successful office here now. I've been told recently that  
20 they are adding 17 more people to staff, so they are going  
21 to be close to having 100 people here already.

22 So then I had the opportunity to recruit the staff  
23 for Mayor Suttle and that was a great four years. Of  
24 course, when I took that you always know there's a risk of  
25 not having eight years because you've got to get re-elected.

1 But I cherished all those experiences. I learned something  
2 from every single one of them. And, of course, when you  
3 have people like Fairchild and Williamson and Chamberlain  
4 setting the first examples of work ethic. I've had great  
5 role models.

6 MR. FLEECES: Well, this is kind of why we're doing  
7 this little historical thing to talk to people, you know.  
8 They did interview Fairchild a few years ago and we have  
9 that.

10 MR. OLTMANS: Yes, that's fantastic.

11 MR. FLEECES: Which will be part of this historical  
12 thing, of all this that happened back at that time. And  
13 it's too bad that Duane wasn't around to do the same thing  
14 that we're doing today, of getting his upbeats and -- when  
15 you talk about your speeding ticket, that's probably where  
16 you found it from, was Duane and his heavy foot.

17 MR. OLTMANS: Yep.

18 MR. FLEECES: He had to go from the west to the  
19 east.

20 MR. OLTMANS: Yes. He drove -- yes, when he was  
21 out at the Alliance office there. So I was fortunate to  
22 have those kinds of mentors. It's just -- and the work that  
23 the NRDs -- not all of them are doing it yet as well as I  
24 would like to see, but most of them now have the programs  
25 with cities, and I think that's important. That is the base

1 in most districts, even in Norfolk where I had all or parts  
2 of 15 counties. The tax base there, over 50 percent of it  
3 was in the towns. I assume that is similar, although the  
4 land valuations that we have now might change that to some  
5 degree. It protected towns from flooding and so forth,  
6 pretty important to everybody, whether you live in town or  
7 not because all your services are there, financial and  
8 others.

9 MR. FLEECS: Well, and I think the NRD, having  
10 people, professional people managing those districts. Like  
11 you and I were involved in the start of them and knew what  
12 our intentions were and what we had to do and what the law  
13 says we had a right to do. You were involved with rural  
14 water, I'm sure.

15 MR. OLTMANS: Yep.

16 MR. FLEECS: And so was I down there. And these  
17 were things that we wouldn't have been able to do under the  
18 old single purpose deal.

19 MR. OLTMANS: Oh, no.

20 MR. FLEECS: Recreation areas. Look at the  
21 recreation areas that NRDs now have that are responsible  
22 for. Never would have happened. That was one of the  
23 important things in my NRD, was the old first Rockford Lake  
24 area, the first PL566 in the country that was financed with  
25 federal funds. That would have never been able to do without



1 the NRDs managing those things.

2 MR. OLTMANS: Look at the state recreation areas.  
3 Those would have water-based recreation. Almost all of  
4 those are either Corps, or Bureau of Reclamation or NRD  
5 projects. The one at Willow Creek at Pierce, an example of  
6 water based recreation. That's a fantastic state recreation  
7 area now and it serves a much broader area than just that  
8 NRD. So it's important that the state does that. Game and  
9 Parks has never built a major reservoir. Somebody else  
10 always built them.

11 MR. FLEECS: If it wasn't for the power districts,  
12 you wouldn't have Lake McConaughy.

13 MR. OLTMANS: That's right. So the joint ventures  
14 and another thing I think really helped the districts along  
15 and other governmental entities in Nebraska, too, is I  
16 remember working on this a little bit with Bereuter when he  
17 was the state senator, is the Inter-Agency Agreement Act.  
18 It doesn't sound very glamorous, but I'll tell you what.  
19 You could join hands with any entities and do almost  
20 anything in the state of Nebraska through the Inter-Agency  
21 Agreement. When I was chief of staff for Mayor Suttle I bet  
22 we did three or four of those a month with MUD and with  
23 other neighboring cities.

24 MR. FLEECS: The good thing about it was those  
25 Inter-Agency Agreements always involved projects that may

1 had a conflict with that other agency that you were able,  
2 through that agreement, work them out.

3 MR. OLTMANS: It spells out who, how, what, why,  
4 when and where.

5 MR. FLEECS: That's right.

6 MR. OLTMANS: And like you mentioned rural water.  
7 You know, one of the unique rural water projects that they  
8 were involved in was the one for folks in Washington County.  
9 That is supplied by MUD water. Blair now -- when the flood  
10 was on in '11 they were just about having to shut down their  
11 water plant on the Missouri River. That rural water project  
12 would have piped MUD water to Blair; to the new water tower  
13 right on Highway 133 just southwest of Blair and it would  
14 have supplied the whole city of Blair with pressure and  
15 everything. They never had to do it, but they were ready.  
16 They were ready to do it.

17 MR. FLEECS: And under the old former government  
18 that would have never happened through an old rural water  
19 district that was on the books at that time.

20 MR. OLTMANS: No, and you've got a city manager in  
21 Blair that was an NRD manager.

22 MR. FLEECS: That was an NRD person.

23 MR. OLTMANS: And how many of those have we had  
24 across the state?

25 MR. FLEECS: One at Grand Island.

1 MR. OLTMANS: Grand Island, Sidney.

2 MR. FLEECS: Sidney.

3 MR. OLTMANS: Couple others, I think, and so that  
4 has been extremely helpful. They drink in that rural water  
5 they drink the same water that we do in Omaha. And so, yes,  
6 the NRDs are and I'm sure it's even beyond what Williamson  
7 and Fairchild and Chamberlain ever dreamed. It's been a  
8 very positive experience. I do think that there are some  
9 districts yet that need to be a little more aggressive,  
10 especially with those that have interstate compacts.

11 MR. FLEECS: It's something that will come over  
12 time. I know the Republicans are having a bad time, but up  
13 in the Big Blue we had the Kansas people to worry about.  
14 And the 1993 flood that we had down there and into Kansas  
15 pretty much convinced the people in Kansas, and they tried  
16 to pull some stuff on us down in there and finally one of  
17 the meetings, we had a basin meeting about sediments or  
18 something that we weren't controlling our sediments. I  
19 said, hey, we got 250 structures up here and we're  
20 controlling a lot more sediment with those than you are ever  
21 going to control. And I says, the next time we have a  
22 flood, if you don't like what we're doing up here, we'll  
23 just open the gates of 250 reservoirs and we'll see how long  
24 Cuddle Creek reservoir will still be there. And I said, we  
25 need to cooperate on these things, not saying point fingers

1 back. I never had a problem with them --

2 MR. OLTMANS: After that?

3 MR. FLEECS: -- after that in 1993 with Kansas and  
4 the Big Blue River because you have to lay out things to  
5 them and say, this is the way it is, guys, and we're here to  
6 help you, not to do something against you.

7 MR. OLTMANS: The groundwater issue that the NRD  
8 picked up later then in the '80s, early '80s added to their  
9 authority. I'm really proud of the districts that have  
10 really stepped up and done that. The best example I would  
11 give would be -- and there are others, but I'll never forget  
12 when John Turnbull at the Upper Big Blue had his public  
13 meetings, I think he had like 19 public meetings on whether  
14 they were going to have regulations on the Groundwater  
15 Management Act. I had happened to go down and do some  
16 paperwork at the USDA in the little town of Nelson at our  
17 family farm and I said, John, would you mind if I just stop  
18 at your meetings at Geneva and just sit in the back row? He  
19 said, no. He was my little brother in the fraternity at the  
20 University of Nebraska, so we had that in common. He  
21 started with a 50-minute PowerPoint and I thought he was  
22 nuts.

23 MR. FLEECS: Fifty minutes?

24 MR. OLTMANS: Yes. But he started with irrigation  
25 in Egypt, did two or three minutes on that, but here is how

1 we first learned as human beings to do this. And I could  
2 tell -- I was watching, about 90 people. He averaged 90  
3 people at those. And he said, our board is about ready to  
4 adopt rules and regulations, but if you don't want  
5 regulations you have the opportunity here, because our  
6 district is totally developed, there's very few acres that  
7 could be irrigated yet, and had the most irrigation wells of  
8 any district in the state, I don't know, like 29,000 or  
9 something. He says, they're likely to adopt the 1956 water  
10 levels, was when we first started -- had any records, and  
11 irrigation was really just getting started in this area.  
12 And he says, we're above that now. With modern methods if  
13 more of you convert to center pivots versus gravity, which  
14 is, of course, happening very rapidly, he says the NRD board  
15 probably won't trigger this. So it's up to you guys whether  
16 you want regulations. Now other districts don't have this  
17 opportunity because they don't have the groundwater that we  
18 have.

19 MR. FLEECS: Some of them were too far gone  
20 almost.

21 MR. OLTMANS: Right. So he said, it isn't going to  
22 happen everywhere, but he says I'm really confident that we  
23 could do this. Well, so far, you know, the regulation is  
24 still sitting there but they haven't been triggered because  
25 they've been efficient enough. But I'm so proud of him when

1 I walked out of there that night. Of course, they had 50  
2 questions, you know, and he had heard them all before.

3 MR. FLEECS: Yeah, John had some good background  
4 and he had a way of -- it was his military background. He  
5 had a way of working with those people and when to come out  
6 with both barrels and when to hold both barrels back.

7 MR. OLTMANS: I worried about him because he flew  
8 choppers in Vietnam and was always going down to pick up  
9 wounded soldiers.

10 MR. FLEECS: Well, to sum it up, Steve, pretty  
11 well know the NRDs and pretty well strengthened them since  
12 the legislation was passed back in the late '60s. And we  
13 even had some governors probably that changed their mind  
14 even though they didn't support it and you probably know who  
15 those are.

16 MR. OLTMANS: Well, I think Exon certainly was one  
17 of them.

18 MR. FLEECS: That's one of them.

19 MR. OLTMANS: He used that as a campaign tactic  
20 against Tiemann and I probably would have done the same  
21 thing. But, you know, he was a strong supporter by the end  
22 of his eight years as governor and senator.

23 MR. FLEECS: Yes, but I think a lot of people saw  
24 that after we got into the business and we weren't going to  
25 be levying the big mills, tax things like some of the

1 districts thought we were going to do down in southeast  
2 Nebraska, and we were going to have local control even  
3 though they said we were going to lose it. But I think  
4 that's probably what made things probably work good, was  
5 that we had some good people on those boards to start with,  
6 for the most part, that were visionaries and what could be  
7 done.

8 MR. OLTMANS: Well, I can tell you in the city of  
9 Omaha, Ron, there are a lot of significant projects being  
10 built today because of the NRD. It would not be done. The  
11 city would not have the money. And the best example now is  
12 coming forward. They're going to build one of the original  
13 Corps sites again and with the land development and the park  
14 development around it and cost of the dam, the Papio NRD  
15 will spend about \$40 million on that one site. The city  
16 will operate the park as a city park and pay for part of the  
17 development with the NRD.

18 MR. FLEECS: Well, and that's what is important  
19 about those inter-local agreements.

20 MR. OLTMANS: Absolutely.

21 MR. FLEECS: And it's the same thing down in  
22 Lincoln with the project that they just got done completing.

23 MR. OLTMANS: The Antelope Creek project?

24 MR. FLEECS: Yeah, the Antelope Creek project.

25 MR. OLTMANS: The way that Lower Platte South and

1 Glen Johnson got that done, unbelievable.

2 MR. FLEECS: And the money and the agencies  
3 working together and getting that improvement done.

4 MR. OLTMANS: And there's another one. I don't  
5 think the city of Lincoln would have ever accomplished that  
6 alone.

7 MR. FLEECS: Absolutely. I mean, because there  
8 was too many agencies involved and how are you going to do  
9 it without it, without all the people that were involved  
10 with it.

11 MR. OLTMANS: And that was an inter-agency  
12 agreement again.

13 MR. FLEECS: Yeah, everything was set up with  
14 special organization for that.

15 MR. OLTMANS: So I just think, yes. I'm really  
16 proud to have been one of many that completed a lot of  
17 projects. And as a whole, the NRDs have done a pretty good  
18 job on maintenance. But that's something they need to  
19 develop and work on. I see that in the city government, the  
20 elected folks have a tendency to put off operation and  
21 maintenance costs. It's not glamorous. It's not a new  
22 project. It's just kick the can down the street. All you  
23 have to do is study the European countries, which I've had  
24 that opportunity in recent years to go there a couple times,  
25 and talk about ancient infrastructure that hasn't been



1 maintained. It's a real problem. And we're moving in the  
2 same trap in this country. We just don't have a tendency to  
3 do that. We have to do a better job. And so, the NRDs need  
4 to concentrate on the physical, whether rural water  
5 projects, or reservoirs, or trails that they are responsible  
6 for. A lot of the trails here in Omaha, by the way, would  
7 not be here if it wasn't for the NRD. But in most cases the  
8 cities maintain -- the various cities maintain them.

9 MR. FLEECS: Just like the ones down in my area,  
10 you know. Most of those trails back to the Lower Platte  
11 South. Basically got the first one going outside from  
12 Lincoln east, and a lot of them have developed because of  
13 that. Now they're all the way to Beatrice on that.

14 MR. OLTMAN: And it's a quality life that you need  
15 when you have a concrete jungle and you're concentrating  
16 people. Those projects that become public reservoirs and  
17 public trails are income neutral. You can be a multi-  
18 millionaire and enjoy them or you could be a little bit on  
19 the poor side. You can buy a pretty good bike these days  
20 from Goodwill for 25 bucks.

21 MR. FLEECS: And giving them away sometimes,  
22 police departments.

23 MR. OLTMANS: Yes, right. I saw a couple out of  
24 Wehrspan when we were just moving out there to the  
25 headquarters for the Papio Missouri River NRD. Another

1 success story was when we merged with the Missouri  
2 Tributaries District, which was just too small, not a tax  
3 base that was able to get anything done. And I didn't know  
4 if we would pull that off, but I had some good leadership on  
5 the board.

6 MR. FLEECS: And you had some good leaders up  
7 there on the Missouri.

8 MR. OLTMANS: Vince Kramper, super guy.

9 MR. FLEECS: Yeah, that really promoted that, and  
10 they could see that they couldn't do a whole lot without  
11 going together and hopefully they had enough confidence that  
12 they weren't going to be controlled by the city of Omaha.

13 MR. OLTMANS: Yes.

14 MR. FLEECS: And same way with most of these  
15 districts. If you'd just work with them, they gain your  
16 trust and as long as they got your trust, they'll work with  
17 you. You know, what's good for rural Omaha is good for  
18 Omaha, you know. All these projects, there's a lot of them  
19 outside Omaha, but they're good -- it's good for Omaha.

20 MR. OLTMANS: They couldn't do it without the tax  
21 base.

22 MR. FLEECS: Absolutely not.

23 MR. OLTMANS: There's a project that I got started  
24 before I left the Papio NRD and that is being built right  
25 now. It's going to be a major 240-acre recreation lake in

1           Dakota County. And if it wasn't for the tax base of Omaha,  
2           that wouldn't be built.

3                   MR. FLEECS: Absolutely.

4                   MR. OLTMANS: I mean, Omaha's tax base is 70,  
5           almost 80 percent of the tax base in the Papio NRD.

6                   MR. FLEECS: And look what it is in the state of  
7           Nebraska.

8                   MR. OLTMANS: Well, it's a third of the --

9                   MR. FLEECS: Just the income tax and the sales tax  
10          and all that.

11                   MR. OLTMANS: Right, right.

12                   MR. FLEECS: Everybody has got to work with each  
13          other. Well, Steve, it's been my pleasure to have you sit  
14          down with me for the last almost an hour now.

15                   MR. OLTMANS: Yes, I've enjoyed it.

16                   MR. FLEECS: Shared how some of these good  
17          programs and how we were involved and how important the  
18          state of Nebraska is now I think because of natural resource  
19          districts.

20                   MR. OLTMANS: Yep.

21                   MR. FLEECS: You know, so good. Thank you.

22                   MR. OLTMANS: Enjoyed it, Ron.