

INTERVIEW WITH SENATOR DENNIS RASMUSSEN

July 5, 2013

1 PROCEEDINGS, JULY 5, 2013:

2 MR. BARR: This is Jim Barr. It's July 5th. I'm
3 in Cotesfield, Nebraska, interviewing former Senator Dennis
4 Rasmussen. And if you would like to make a few comments
5 about your background and --

6 MR. RASMUSSEN: Well, I've had a very interesting
7 life, of course. I served in the legislature for six years
8 and went broke feeding cattle in the '70s and I had to find
9 a job. John Humpel, Blue Cross, right at that time he says,
10 why don't you lobby. I says, I don't think I can do it.
11 Oh, yes, he says, you can. So he says I'll help you get
12 your first client. So we did it and one Friday afternoon
13 was my last day in the legislature in the start of the '79
14 session and then Monday morning I was a tried and true hard-
15 working lobbyist. If you don't think that was a change. It
16 was a little like a dog that gets dumped off along the
17 highway. I didn't really know which way was home. But for
18 me it worked out so well and I went at that for about 35
19 years and found out one thing. You could still do an
20 excellent job of lobbying by shooting just as straight as
21 the people I have to deal with. And there was one thing,
22 being a lobbyist, if you were ever caught lying, you were
23 just about done because we did have to have a lot of
24 integrity. And I think that was pretty -- I think that's
25 carrying on now. I don't know now for the last -- since the

1 new people coming in for eight years, term limits, not the
2 best in the west.

3 And as long as I'm reminiscing, I followed a guy
4 by the name of Dick Lewis very well. He was from Arapahoe
5 or somewhere out west. He was kind of my mentor. I went to
6 him a lot and he had been there quite a while and he could
7 give me a lot of good advice. And another guy that really
8 helped me tremendously was Bill Scarda, good friend of Gene
9 Mahoney. And he was really, really fair to me. He would
10 always ask me if it was ag-related, water-related, do you
11 want this, will it help you? And if I said yes, I always
12 got -- always, always got his vote.

13 But by the same token, when they were building
14 their first, second office building in Omaha, which was
15 really the start of the downtown development that many years
16 ago, and he asked me if I would vote for that, and I could
17 see no reason why not to because a city of that size, even
18 at that time, still had a tremendous amount of state
19 workers. And so we got that bill run through then and to me
20 it was not -- I knew in my own mind that it was a good
21 thing, not that I had ever dreamt that downtown Omaha would
22 ever come on like they have with the big arena and all that
23 kind of stuff. But it was the start and it's still there
24 and being used today.

25 MR. BARR: Did you have any involvement with

1 either the Soil and Water Conservation districts or the NRD
2 before you got to the legislature?

3 MR. RASMUSSEN: No, I did not. I was a pretty
4 dumb, green farmer, Jim. I had never served on anything.
5 And the only reason I got into it was that we did not have
6 one person running, representing agriculture. And I thought
7 that there should be.

8 MR. BARR: Sure.

9 MR. RASMUSSEN: And lo and behold. But I've got
10 to put one little caveat in here. I did every night when I
11 went -- said my prayers at night --

12 (Phone ringing.)

13 MR. RASMUSSEN: Anyway, it's interesting. Every
14 night when I said my prayers, still say them, of course, but
15 I'd always say, God, if you want me in Lincoln, help me get
16 elected. I'll be darned if he didn't. So I guess that
17 was -- if he hadn't of, I wouldn't have got there. I know
18 that. What is your next question?

19 MR. BARR: Well, what were some of the -- well,
20 let's just start. Was there any major issues in the
21 campaign that you had as you were getting ready to serve in
22 the legislature?

23 MR. RASMUSSEN: Well, yeah, the death penalty was
24 big at that time and that had just been rescinded by
25 Congress in '72. And that's another little story. Jim Exon

1 come into my office, as a green senator, and says, will you
2 carry a bill for me? What do you think a guy from out here
3 would think when the governor came in, and I said sure. He
4 didn't tell me it was the death penalty until afterward, so
5 I had quite a struggle with Ernie for about six weeks. But
6 I did find out that the death penalty, abortion, it comes
7 from -- I didn't lobby one guy because it comes from within
8 your heart. You cannot change their philosophy, and I don't
9 think you should.

10 Another thing, too, we had a guy, Mark Scheidler.
11 He had a call-in radio show for me at Ord every Wednesday at
12 one o'clock. I called from the office in Lincoln. And that
13 was really the best thing for me that I had all those years,
14 was that I never knew the questions. But I did find out
15 that I could explain a no in a way that they understood why
16 I was going the way I was, and then they were satisfied.
17 They had never thought of that other side of the issue. So
18 that helped me tremendously and I still thank Mark for that
19 whenever I see him. It really was a wide open forum. They
20 could ask any question they wanted to and I was supposed to
21 know the answers. But if I didn't, I didn't pass the buck.
22 I says, I'll get back to you on that.

23 MR. BARR: You were there about the time they
24 started implementing the natural resource district law. And
25 was there anything in particular that you remember about

1 that?

2 MR. RASMUSSEN: Well, I do remember that as we
3 were discussing here a little while ago, the lawsuits and
4 everything, but I do remember Loran Schmit had a bill in to
5 outlaw them. And, of course, that failed. And I personally
6 think that they have really done a tremendous job,
7 especially in the water when they started to have the no
8 more drilling and over-appropriated. And, of course, there
9 I've been pretty lucky, too. My older brother by six
10 minutes, Dean, has been on the NRDs for 40 years and any
11 questions that were really kind of bugging me a little, I'd
12 always ask him and always get the straight answer.

13 MR. BARR: Were there some other local water
14 issues here at Calamus or anything else that you got
15 involved with?

16 MR. RASMUSSEN: Oh, yes, Calamus, that was really
17 an interesting one. If you remember, we had the Norden Dam,
18 the Calamus Dam, they were twins. And John Cavanaugh was
19 anti dams and he was in Congress. And Paul O'Hare was his
20 chief of staff. And I went back there numerous times with
21 Shaughnessy and the rest of the -- Henry Lang and testified
22 before Congress on that bill. And finally one day it was
23 getting pretty testy out here and then Paul O'Hare just
24 bluntly says, well, Goddammit, Denny, which dam do you want?
25 And I, a little prejudiced here, of course, and I said,

1 well, the Calamus, of course. And from then on O'Hare left
2 the Calamus alone. And in my old -- I'm an old man now, but
3 that Norden should have been built. They never irrigated
4 one acre. But, of course, it wasn't and it won't be. But
5 so -- little things in life that come about that make an
6 impact, that if it's gone you don't think about it any more.
7 But from then on John did leave Calamus alone.

8 MR. BARR: What has that reservoir or that project
9 done for the area?

10 MR. RASMUSSEN: Well, right as we're sitting here
11 at Cotesfield, we're right in the heart of the North Loup
12 Valley. And for 20 years since Calamus came in, there's
13 been no underground water used. And that home where I was
14 born and raised, there's sloughs down in there and there's
15 water today and it used to be they would have some in the
16 spring. And now there are geese there. They raise young
17 ones down there and the ducks.

18 Another, it's kind of tickled me, Jim. The NRCS,
19 or whatever they are, they build these ponds and my nephew
20 owns the land now where we were born and raised. And he
21 gave an easement to get wildlife in. It was once a heck of
22 a meadow. And they were only making them two and a half
23 foot deep. So he thought, by golly, you know, everybody in
24 the family likes to fish. If we make it 10 or 12 foot deep
25 then we would have a heck of -- oh, no, because the ducks

1 didn't go below two and a half feet of water to find food
2 they were getting. So there's little things along the line,
3 but it has turned out to really be a wildlife oasis that
4 those guys -- somebody dreamt up and somebody got it done.
5 It is, to me -- you know, really, you think about it, the
6 rural people are probably the most environmentally experts
7 of anybody, except there is a few pasture lands that have
8 been broken up that shouldn't be.

9 Another thing, too, that we were into when I was
10 there on the ag committee, Doug Bereuter was the instrument
11 that started the planning and zoning. And, of course, out
12 here in the west they don't like rules and regs very good.
13 And so Loran Schmit and the ag committee, we flew up to
14 Valentine for a meeting. And I thought they were going to
15 run us out of town with a pitchfork. Well, guess what
16 happened then in the '80s when they started raping the
17 Sandhills. Who was in Lincoln asking for help, but the very
18 people that at that time was -- the idea was too early. So
19 a lot of funny things happened, Jim, along the way.

20 MR. BARR: One of the big issues has been the NRDs
21 having the authority on groundwater use and, of course, with
22 the appropriation right for surface water at the state
23 level. Do you have any thoughts or anything on that issue?

24 MR. RASMUSSEN: I know there's really a rift
25 between surface and underground water. And there just is no

1 doubt in my mind, and there shouldn't be in anybody's, that
2 the groundwater deeply affects the river stream. I was
3 telling you about the sloughs down there where there's geese
4 today. And, of course, this was called an over-appropriated
5 so they can't drill here anymore, but they do go up north
6 and buy Sandhill acres and that's where this pasture land is
7 being broken and I don't think that's a very good idea. But
8 it's not my money nor my business.

9 MR. BARR: Is it still being broken?

10 MR. RASMUSSEN: Yes. And the first Sandhiller I
11 talked to, he sold his for \$350 an acre and he thought he
12 really done well. But now I hear it's \$1,000 or more an
13 acre. So, times change. But water out here is just so key.
14 One time -- this is going back to when I was still in the
15 legislature and actually in the '70s. We had some water
16 meetings and one of them was in Ord. And Virginia Smith was
17 there, who was a central Nebraska guardian angel. But,
18 anyway, we'll get into that a little bit more. But that day
19 I told them that people won't realize that we're short of
20 water until they turn the spigot. And when nothing comes
21 out, then they'll realize it.

22 But back to Virginia (Smith). She created an
23 oasis out here with the Sargent, Farwell and the Calamus
24 dams. And I was a little antsy and we waited. We were the
25 last major project built in the United States. And I was a

1 little antsy that Sargent came first, and then Farwell and
2 then Calamus. But it would be impossible today to build a
3 dam that -- we got it done before common sense left. I
4 don't think common sense enters in anymore. A lot of it --
5 and some of the environmentalists are my best friends, but
6 they don't see both sides of the issue. And we got that --
7 I'm on the NPPD board, and we got that with the wind. They
8 would have windmills all over and close all the coal plants
9 down. They don't realize that only half the time those
10 windmills are turning. And the other five days we would be
11 without. There would be no lights.

12 I gave a talk at the Alliance Club here this
13 winter on this water and the people just don't -- I told
14 them to go home and count up the different appliances from
15 heat, air, to you name it, to the computer age, just to
16 understand how important that electricity is to the farmer
17 out here. I'm a little concerned, maybe we're getting a
18 little bit off here, Jim, but having watched the REA come
19 in. I was young and I remember sitting around the table
20 like you and I are sitting here and, of course, it was a
21 kitchen table because every major thing was taken care of at
22 the kitchen table because you didn't use the dining room and
23 for sure the living room unless company come. But they
24 didn't -- my folks didn't actually know if they could afford
25 \$3.50 a month for 50 kilowatts. Well, they decided they

1 were going to. But there's one thing about it. I'm a
2 little worried about people have forgotten the true purpose
3 of public power and the rancher living 20 miles out of
4 Hyannis or up in the Sandhills, there would never have been
5 a line built in there unless they had the postage stamp
6 fairy, which is still there today.

7 MR. BARR: That --

8 MR. RASMUSSEN: A little off the subject.

9 MR. BARR: Well, yeah, and even further off, that
10 same principle, probably not doing that is what has
11 prevented us from having high speed internet in the rural
12 areas, too, is that they haven't done something like the
13 power.

14 MR. RASMUSSEN: Well, I think the changes -- they
15 use that money from the telephones to --

16 MR. BARR: Do you think that will eventually
17 get --

18 MR. RASMUSSEN: I think they're eventually getting
19 it, yeah.

20 MR. BARR: You mentioned you're on the NPPD board.
21 Is there any particular interrelationships or -- between the
22 NRDs and the power companies?

23 MR. RASMUSSEN: Well, we don't -- water is huge
24 because that's our cooling for our power plants. But we
25 have more dealings with the surface water because we run

1 that through the power plant and that goes on down the canal
2 and somebody down the line uses it for irrigation water.
3 And then when they're done with it, whatever is left goes
4 into the river. So really that water is really getting used
5 twice, even though it goes -- because evaporation is not
6 that great.

7 MR. BARR: Have you been acquainted with the
8 Nebraska Water Balance Alliance?

9 MR. RASMUSSEN: Yeah.

10 MR. BARR: And, you know, largely that kind of
11 formed, the instigation of some of the REAs along the
12 Republican and the Platte because they could see without
13 some thought on water that their eventual existence would be
14 affected.

15 MR. RASMUSSEN: Well, we saw that happen up here
16 in the '60s. The Meeks and the ranch on the Gracey Creek,
17 they came from -- they bought land up here from Texas
18 because they were running out of water down there already
19 that far back. And so they knew what we had up here. And,
20 of course, very successful operations, too. But the thing
21 is that water is so critical, especially from here on west.

22 MR. BARR: Getting back to the original NRD
23 legislation, and this is maybe off subject a little, too,
24 but it passed in Nebraska and there's been efforts over the
25 years to see if other states might adopt this sort of

1 procedure. But, to date, none have. Do you have any
2 thoughts on why that might have succeeded here and not
3 otherwise?

4 MR. RASMUSSEN: I think it's due to Nebraskans.
5 We have the only one-house unicameral, too. And until term
6 limits come along, that was really a good, good way to
7 govern. But since term limits came in, I see wavering
8 because there is no institutional knowledge there. It isn't
9 hurt to be different, as long as we know we're right.

10 MR. BARR: Yeah. What about partisanship? Has
11 that changed since you've been in the unicameral?

12 MR. RASMUSSEN: Yes, very much so. Bill Scarda
13 who I was talking about, dyed-in-the-wool Democrat, and Tom
14 Kennedy from Newman Grove, and they were -- gosh, I worked
15 so well with those guys. I never thought about what their
16 party affiliation was. Well, even at that time, Jim, the
17 Repubs had a breakfast every couple weeks every morning.
18 The Republican senators had a caucus. Well, we didn't pay
19 no attention to them, so they don't do them anymore.
20 Because if we had the same principle in DC today, we would
21 be getting a lot of stuff done. But that's not going to
22 happen for -- I don't know when it's going to happen.
23 Something will bring it.

24 MR. BARR: You've also worked lobbying the
25 legislature over the years and been a close observer of the

1 unicameral. Were there any other major natural resource
2 type issues that you'd like to reflect upon any?

3 MR. RASMUSSEN: Well, the big one was the keeping
4 them intact, and the other big one was the Calamus Dam.
5 Those two were so important to Nebraska that -- and the
6 other, in my lobbying, I got into that and I started in the
7 health care field and it did not take me over one year to
8 realize in that there is so much emotion. I worked for the
9 doctors, and the nursing homes, and so I just, as I could, I
10 was very blessed, as I could, I switched over to business.
11 I had Phillip Morris with Kraft Foods, Miller Brewing and
12 telephone and farm equipment, a lot of important different
13 clients, but they were all business clients. And that is
14 more black and white than -- where emotion can't run away.

15 And I also, Jim, have been in there when emotions
16 run away for an afternoon and we had to come back the next
17 day and change the bill, too. And you've seen that. You're
18 no stranger down there.

19 MR. BARR: Yeah, it can be interesting.

20 MR. RASMUSSEN: But I do believe that it will come
21 to, every well will have to have a metering and they will be
22 allowed so many inches of water. It is just so important to
23 this state that -- I don't know. They tell me that there is
24 a guy that had a huge land holdings in the Republican
25 Valley, sold it all, moved on up like the Meeks did, up

1 above the Niobrara where there was water. And I think I
2 know that it's so important to the livelihood out here that
3 there could be an arrangement made so that everybody could
4 be pretty happy.

5 Back to NPPD, we put a million dollars a year to
6 the University for energy and they have -- they can prove
7 that you can water for less and get nearly the same bushels.

8 MR. BARR: I think -- and I remember, this is
9 another one of the things that Water Balance Alliance has
10 been working on, too, is that -- and this University Water
11 for Food is more --

12 MR. RASMUSSEN: Yeah, that's for --

13 MR. BARR: Food per drop, or whatever you want to
14 call it, try to get more production per unit of water. And
15 there has been a lot of thought that there's quite a bit
16 more progress that can still be made.

17 MR. RASMUSSEN: Well, that was quite a coup for
18 Nebraska to get that worldwide thing. And that (Ken)
19 Cassman, that one professor down there, is just so sharp.
20 He led us through on a save energy. And the funny thing was
21 we put in a million every year and since then the corn and
22 the soybeans and the Targets and the Shopkos have all got
23 involved in there and they put in over four times the money
24 that we put in.

25 MR. BARR: Well, that water and food (institute) I

1 think was Bob Daugherty's gift, was one of the original ones
2 anyhow.

3 MR. RASMUSSEN: Yes, and, of course, that water,
4 (Ken) Cassman, that was huge when we first started this
5 arrangement. Another funny thing. I dealt with the
6 University all the while I was in the legislature and they
7 were -- the NPPD was going -- had me on this board as
8 advisory. Well, I had seen all through the years that the
9 University didn't really need any advising. They did what
10 they kind of wanted to. But lo and behold, there was a
11 change there and everybody dealt with the same deck and we
12 accomplished so much with that Darrell Nelson million
13 dollars that it's unbelievable.

14 MR. BARR: Well, and this whole -- I don't have
15 any specific questions, but is there anything you'd like to
16 talk about in the general area of water or natural
17 resources?

18 MR. RASMUSSEN: Well, yeah, and we brushed on it.
19 I think the day is coming right here in the heart of the
20 valley, there is no irrigation wells any more. But I do
21 believe before we run out, which the pumps are dry in the
22 Republican Valley, there's just no doubt about it, and
23 before that happens other places I think we probably should
24 be looking more at not water rationing and "X" amount of
25 well. It amounts to that.

1 MR. BARR: Sharing or something.

2 MR. RASMUSSEN: Yeah, sharing, yeah.

3 MR. BARR: Anything else on anything? I didn't
4 want to --

5 MR. RASMUSSEN: I'm an old man and I've been very
6 fortunate to deal with some not only high up people but good
7 people. That's really been quite a trip around the block.
8 But we're sitting here in my two-bedroom bungalow in
9 Cotesfield and when my wife was still alive we had a 4,000
10 square foot house, but that was in the past and there's
11 nothing that can be done about that. And I'm comfortable
12 here anyway. And Jim seems to be, so I think we're doing
13 okay.

14 MR. BARR: Okay, well, thank you very much for
15 doing this.

16 MR. RASMUSSEN: I really appreciate that and I
17 probably got to rambling a little. But a lot -- I found out
18 in the legislature that so many things tie together in the
19 outcome of legislation that it's very important. And that's
20 why I spend so much time out here. I have a place in
21 Hickman, too. But I spend so much time out here because the
22 guys I worked with are some of the top lobbyists and they
23 were my good friends, but I don't keep up with every bill
24 like they do. So I kind of find it a little bit like a city
25 guy sitting down at our coffee table where it's all farming.

1 So they are still my best friends but we are following
2 different paths.

3 MR. BARR: Well, I have really appreciated
4 visiting with you.

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

1