

NRD ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW:

TONY VRANA BY JIM BARR,
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PROCEEDINGS, July 26, 2013:

1 MR. BARR: This is Jim Barr. It's July 26th,
2 2013. I am in Seward, Nebraska, interviewing Tony Vrana
3 about soil and water conservation districts and the
4 formation of the natural resource districts.

5 To begin with, Tony, could you just give a little
6 background, your background and your origins and development
7 up through now, I guess, or whatever?

8 MR. VRANA: Okay, Jim. Well, it's a long story
9 and I'll try and brief it down a little bit. But I grew up
10 on a farm north of Garland in what we call affectionately
11 the Bohemian Alps. Graduated from Garland High School.
12 This was at the time of World War II. And I farmed with my
13 folks for a couple years, couple, three years, and then went
14 to work for the Soil Conservation Service in the Department
15 of Agriculture in the spring of 1948 as a technician. I
16 went on permanently with the agency then in that fall, that
17 August, and worked here in Seward as a conservation
18 technician for 10 years.

19 I had gotten involved in the last year or two in
20 the watershed program, PL566, and was a construction
21 inspector for one of the first dams built in the Middle
22 Creek -- or Oak Mill watershed. And then transferred to
23 Lincoln in the summer of '58 and was on full time as far as
24 inspecting watershed dams in the Lincoln area.

1 Then I worked in watershed planning for a while
2 and got into an administrative trainee program through the
3 national office and spent a year in that training, and at
4 the completion of that had made a commitment to go anywhere
5 that they may wish to transfer me, which was to Washington,
6 D.C., which was a surprise. So I worked in the personnel
7 division from '62 and finished my college degree and went on
8 and got an MBA at George Washington University and became
9 the director of the personnel division in '72. Then went on
10 to later become the assistant administrator for management
11 and eventually the associate deputy chief for
12 administration.

13 Retired in 1980, came back to Nebraska to work for
14 the Nebraska Natural Resources Commission as chief of the
15 planning division. Worked with Dale Williamson and company
16 for about eight and a half years or so. We were farming at
17 the same time and I was very active in the Soil and Water
18 Conservation Society. So after a few months of farming
19 almost on a full-time basis and going on a six-week trip to
20 Alaska I took on the position of executive vice president
21 for the Soil and Water Conservation Society over at Ankeny,
22 Iowa. I was in that for about three years.

23 MR. BARR: About what year did that start?

24 MR. VRANA: This would have been from '89 through
25 '91, I guess. And then following that I decided it was time

1 to retire so we moved back to Seward here. We had already
2 had a house in town and we had sold the farm by then. And
3 coming back to Seward here I was on the Upper Big Blue NRD
4 Board. In fact, I had been on the NRD Board at the time I
5 left to go to Ankeny and had to resign from that. But I ran
6 for the board again then when I came back and never got
7 elected. And so I got involved with city government.
8 Continued to be actively involved with Soil and Water
9 Conservation Society. But then I got involved with the city
10 as far as being on the city council, which I spent 12 years
11 at. And now I'm to the point where I am basically retired.
12 I completed my tenure with the city just a year or so ago.
13 I'm still on the Cattle Bank Board and active, involved with
14 Kiwanis and the church, of course. But we are just enjoying
15 growing old.

16 MR. BARR: Back to your initial experiences with
17 the Soil Conservation Service -- I've got to keep everything
18 straight here -- when the original -- well, you know the
19 history of the origination of the soil and water
20 conservation districts, about when it was a little bit of
21 the history of it. I haven't had anybody cover that yet.
22 Would you be able to kind of give a short overview of how
23 they developed and who was kind of involved in setting it up
24 and that sort of thing?

25 MR. VRANA: I'm not sure yet where the idea came

1 from. Hugh Hammond Bennett, of course, gets a lot of credit
2 for working with President Roosevelt and getting the soil
3 erosion agency established in the Department of Interior. I
4 forget the name of the secretary of agriculture who was
5 instrumental in getting it moved over to agriculture. But
6 the thing that really seemed to make a difference with SCS
7 moving from working with the CC camp people and
8 demonstrations farms was the origination of the soil
9 conservation districts.

10 And when we moved back -- when I got back to D.C.
11 there in '62, an attorney by the name of Phil Glick
12 (phonetic) was still around as an elderly gent and he was
13 very highly respected as the author of that original soil
14 conservation district law. And it was through those efforts
15 that we got districts established on a county level
16 throughout the country that really provided the framework in
17 which the Soil Conservation Service technicians could work
18 with local farmers in applying conservation treatment to the
19 land.

20 MR. BARR: What period did -- I know it probably
21 took several years to develop it, but when did it kind of
22 start and how long did it kind of take to get these
23 districts organized?

24 MR. VRANA: World War II had quite an impact on
25 that because I think the district law was passed in about

1 '38. But because of things being devoted almost 100 percent
2 to the war effort for about five years there, districts
3 didn't become widespread really until after the war. Here
4 in our local county, for instance, I think that we had three
5 townships in the original district probably in about '43 or
6 '44. But it wasn't until after the war I believe that the
7 whole county was brought in and they evolved rather slowly
8 but pretty methodically after the war.

9 MR. BARR: Could you just give kind of an overview
10 of a typical county soil and water conservation district,
11 how it was organized, whether there were board members,
12 staff, how it was financed, any of that sort of thing, if
13 there were -- the sort of projects or efforts that they
14 undertook? We have talked about them in other interviews
15 but we have never really focused on what a district did.
16 And maybe I'm being unfair to ask you this question but --

17 MR. VRANA: Well, no, you're not unfair but I'm
18 probably a little unprepared to really go into it in great
19 detail. But each state had to write a state law that would
20 provide for them. And within that framework then a certain
21 percentage of, I believe it was landowners in any identified
22 area, had to be in favor. I believe it was restricted to
23 the landowners in that district.

24 In Seward County here there were five supervisors
25 and we had the benefit of having one lady, Mrs. Jones, as

1 one of the initial supervisors. And at that time I believe
2 the story was that she was the only one in the United States
3 that was a woman. But she was a large landowner and she and
4 her family were very committed to soil and water
5 conservation and a very good board member.

6 But the board members were looked upon as
7 disciples, I guess you would say, in promoting soil
8 conservation practices. And back in those days, even as I
9 came on to work in '48, our job was probably more promotion
10 than what it was actually technical work. And the
11 supervisors played a large role in that. We would have
12 field days. We would have different events at country
13 schools. One of my fellow technicians and I wrote a little
14 three act play that we put on and invited all of the farmers
15 in that school district to come to that play and we had
16 taken pictures of their farms and stuff that we also showed
17 and it was a great night. We accomplished a lot really
18 through those sorts of fun events.

19 And we also tied it closely, you know -- soil
20 stewardship was mighty important in those days. The
21 supervisors were, for the most part, very devoted Christians
22 and looked upon the earth as the Lord's and the fullness
23 thereof. And so stewardship was mighty important and a real
24 talking point in working with farmers to convince them that
25 the soil wasn't theirs to lose. So that is part of it.

1 MR. BARR: Okay. Now if you were going to do a
2 project that involved money, how would you -- what would be
3 the source of any sort of funds or sources?

4 MR. VRANA: We were, of course, in those days
5 working on the farm type practices and there was cost share
6 through the ASCS office or terrace construction and dam
7 building and other conservation practices. And really that
8 was the source of financial assistance.

9 MR. BARR: What was the program at the national
10 level? Was that the same one that Carrs and Whitman had
11 done or was that a program that developed later? I can't
12 remember the exact name of it, the cost share program, prior
13 to the current type program. I remember Jamie Whitman was a
14 big supporter of it. Whether he was an author of it, I
15 don't know.

16 MR. VRANA: I really don't know, but I expect
17 Jamie Whitman was because he was our banker as far as when I
18 got back to D.C. in '62, when we had hearings before the
19 House appropriations subcommittee, which Whitman chaired, he
20 was a very strong advocate and he would tell the same story
21 every year, you know, about how important it was to get this
22 done. And, interestingly, we among us in the agency talked
23 about that as much good as he did for us, we didn't think he
24 ever really understood districts. He really usually always
25 talked about ACP payments.

1 MR. BARR: ACP, that was the program.

2 MR. VRANA: Uh-huh.

3 MR. BARR: That was Agriculture --

4 MR. VRANA: Agriculture Conservation Program.

5 MR. BARR: But what he did understand was how to
6 organize political support for farming.

7 MR. VRANA: Sure, well, yeah.

8 MR. BARR: And that part of the program he
9 understood quite well.

10 MR. VRANA: Yeah.

11 MR. BARR: Well, anything else about the
12 conservation districts that you might want to comment on in
13 general before -- and then the predecessors in Nebraska to
14 the natural resource districts. And then I don't know how
15 much you were involved at the time but any observations that
16 you might have about this process of developing a
17 combination of special purpose districts into natural
18 resource districts? Any observations you might have from
19 the national office as to how that was regarded at the time?

20 MR. VRANA: Well, that's quite an assignment. I
21 don't know whether I will remember all those questions or
22 not. But let me talk a little bit about these original
23 supervisors because the voting for the supervisors was done
24 through -- we had ballot boxes scattered around at different
25 locations. And I remember distinctly of one day driving

1 around and picking up the ballots, you know, from different
2 places. And I don't remember for sure. I think nominations
3 were accepted by just about anyone that wanted to nominate
4 someone. So it wasn't hard to get nominations.

5 But for the most part there would be a very low
6 ballot turnout. But the people elected were for the most
7 part not only committed to conservation but respected in
8 their communities. One of the interesting things was the
9 relationship between the district conservationists, the head
10 guy in the county where their districts were, and the
11 selection of the board members. Theoretically, they were
12 just supposed to be completely hands off. But in one
13 instance, after I retired I heard about this state
14 conservationist that advised this young D.C., he says, now I
15 don't ever want to hear about you influencing one of these
16 elections, but I don't ever want to find out that you're
17 not. I don't know whether that was an unwritten policy, but
18 I think it was rather typical of how you needed to be
19 involved in local relationships enough to see that the right
20 people got nominated. I'm sure that once the nominations
21 were in everything was 100 percent above board. But I have
22 been amused by that because I think that happens in quite a
23 few areas.

24 Now what was the next question?

25 MR. BARR: Well, at some point I was going to

1 talk -- see if you had any thoughts on the combination of
2 the soil and water conservation districts with other special
3 purpose districts in Nebraska into natural resource
4 districts, both in the development of the original
5 legislation and then as it developed into practice.

6 MR. VRANA: You almost have to have a feeling for
7 the -- and, again, I'll go back to this stewardship
8 commitment that existed for soil conservation practices back
9 in the '40s and '50s. And it seemed like that the people
10 that were involved with the agency and with the districts at
11 that time were so committed to that conservation of the soil
12 that they really didn't look as broadly as what might have
13 been appropriate. And when it became necessary to
14 incorporate these other districts it was, as I would
15 interpret it at least, it was looked upon as a dissolution
16 of their duties. And, consequently, people were being
17 elected to districts, supervisor, or I should say to the NRD
18 boards on a general election basis. So there was the
19 closeness between the agency and the NRD managers or the NRD
20 program had separated substantially. You had people being
21 elected to boards that while they may have been interested
22 in soil conservation, it was certainly not their passion or
23 their priority as it was on the old district boards.

24 And so from the standpoint of efficiency and
25 government, it was probably looked upon as a good thing, but

1 from the standpoint of carrying out this sacred mission of
2 the Soil Conservation Service, it was probably a deterrent.

3 MR. BARR: Was there any significant involvement
4 of the agency in the discussions of this sort of program,
5 the proposed program and your -- I'm just fishing.

6 MR. VRANA: Yeah. From my perspective, as
7 director of personnel, I got in on a lot of discussion, but
8 it was only in Nebraska. Nebraska is one of 50 states. And
9 it wasn't a big thing in my mind.

10 MR. BARR: Speaking on that, do you have any
11 thoughts on why it might have happened in Nebraska and
12 doesn't -- has never happened anywhere else?

13 MR. VRANA: Well, that's interesting. But, of
14 course, we and Maine are the only ones that have the
15 unicameral and the nonpartisan legislature. And so we are a
16 bit unique here in Nebraska, but I must say that as I became
17 familiar with the NRD, particularly after having served on
18 the NRD Board over at York, and as I became executive
19 director of the Soil and Water Conservation Society, I went
20 to quite a bit of effort on a national basis of trying to
21 encourage NRDs elsewhere. And I remember very well at a
22 meeting in Washington, D.C., during the time -- it would
23 have probably been in about '91 and Jerry Vap was the NRD
24 president at that time. And I had gotten a little hot in
25 the discussion and Jerry took me aside and he says, Tony,

1 you've got to realize that we're not going to force the rest
2 of these states to take NRDs. They've got to want it. But
3 I remember that very distinctly.

4 MR. BARR: I guess while we're talking about your
5 time at the Soil and Water Conservation Society, did you get
6 involved in any particular legislation or what sort of a
7 role did you have when you were there? I guess maybe that's
8 the other question.

9 MR. VRANA: Well, the 1980 farm bill -- 1985 farm
10 bill was landmark legislation. There's no question about
11 it. Probably one of the most important farm bills for
12 conservation that we have ever had. And the timing was such
13 that I came on board over there at the time there was
14 already an assignment that had been made for a special study
15 on looking at the effectiveness of the legislation. It was
16 a very controversial thing. And my loyalties to the Soil
17 Conservation Service were still very strong. I had grown up
18 in the SCS family, even though I had worked for the state of
19 Nebraska, and in working for the state those years certainly
20 my perspective of SCS was broadened. I realized they
21 weren't always right.

22 But by the time I got over to Ankeny and saw what
23 I thought was some questionable efforts to try to demean
24 some of the things that the agency was doing, I had a little
25 rough time. And the roughness really came about by some

1 people involved on the special study that was trying to
2 determine how effective SCS was in implementing the
3 regulations. Some of those folks thought that bingo, just
4 like internal revenue, you know, when you pass a law, by
5 golly, everything has to be done 100 percent the moment the
6 law is passed. And I guess that going back to my early days
7 where we worked and pleaded and prayed with farmers to get
8 them to do things right, that wasn't my way of doing things.
9 And so, consequently, there was some dissension among the
10 troops over there as to what kind of a report would come out
11 on the agency's efforts to carry out the law. And I suppose
12 maybe that was one reason I didn't stay over there longer
13 than I did. I didn't have to tolerate that.

14 MR. BARR: Just looking back on your involvement
15 in conservation over the years and up to now, how would you
16 evaluate the flow of activity in relation to conservation,
17 say from the time of the '30s and the depression up to now?
18 I mean, that's not a fairly simple question.

19 MR. VRANA: Yeah, that gives me quite a bit of
20 room. Jim, out at the golf course this morning we went past
21 a field of corn. It was right adjacent to the course. It's
22 the 26th day of July. We had 40-hundredths of rain here the
23 other day. We had 60-hundredths a week or so ago. We
24 haven't had much rain this summer. That corn was beautiful.
25 The ears are setting on, you know. The husks are -- the

1 silks are drying already, you know. The kernels are set.
2 How well they will fill depends on what we get here in the
3 next week or so. But when I think of that and then reflect
4 back on the way people farmed and the crops that we had back
5 in the '30s, it's a difference of night and day. And I
6 think that -- as I told the fellow I was riding with this
7 morning, you know, that corn looks so great and it's largely
8 because of the conservation tillage. Certainly it's a part
9 of the genetics of the corn. But it has made so much
10 difference in the way in which -- soil erosion is in Seward
11 County I would say very minimal. And I think throughout the
12 country it's no longer the concern that it was. And one of
13 the things that you worry about a little bit is I hear
14 stories of people becoming complacent, thinking they need to
15 go back to doing some plowing and that sort of thing. And
16 so you always worry about those sorts of things. But I
17 think we have made tremendous progress. I am pleased with
18 it. I'm proud of it. But at the same time, as we have
19 always said, you have to reeducate every generation.

20 MR. BARR: Speaking of -- you talked about the
21 generations in the '40s and '50s and their commitment to
22 stewardship and that, is that a factor that has changed any
23 with the succeeding generations or --

24 MR. VRANA: It seems like people have so many more
25 different interests these days than we had then. Farmers

1 were tied to the soil. They were tied to their livestock.
2 They were agrarians. Today we have industrial type farmers.
3 They play golf. They have been to college, many of them.
4 And that seems to have given them broader interests and not
5 the focus that we had back in those earlier days.

6 MR. BARR: At this point if you have got any sort
7 of observations you would like to offer on any of these
8 general things we have talked about, in particular as
9 related to NRDs but also just in general about conservation
10 and natural resource programs locally and nationally?

11 MR. VRANA: Well, I think in all due respects to
12 the NRDs, I will say that while my first impression when
13 they were being organized, formed, law passed, I was
14 skeptical. And while they have probably broadened the
15 mission, all in all they have been a good thing. And it
16 would have happened sooner or later I think here in
17 Nebraska. I am a little surprised that other states haven't
18 picked up on it. But I think they have served us well.

19 MR. BARR: Along that same line, the Water for
20 Food Institute has, among other issues that they are looking
21 at, one of the ones is how to organize politically or not
22 necessary politically but in an administrative fashion to
23 deal with natural resource problems and particularly in
24 relating to food, water, production. Is the model of the
25 natural resource district anything that you think might have

1 application beyond the United States?

2 MR. VRANA: Well, that's interesting because the
3 thing that pops in my mind is the Reverend David Beckman who
4 is the head of the Bread for the World, grew up in Garland,
5 Nebraska, or that's where his family came from. And
6 Reverend Beckman I guess I would say honored me here a
7 couple, three years ago when he came to the house to visit
8 and asked that similar question. And we talked about it
9 and, yes, I think that there is room for any type of mission
10 of getting the local people involved in a governing
11 capacity.

12 MR. BARR: Well, you've got one more shot of
13 anything you would like to add.

14 MR. VRANA: Well, all I can say is that be it
15 through NRDs, the Soil Conservation Service, soil
16 conservation districts, I think that I have enjoyed a good
17 life. And while we have had passionate commitment to soil
18 conservation, water conservation, I think that when you can
19 live being satisfied that you are doing something for the
20 good of God's creation, your conscience is clear, there's
21 not the stress, and I feel like I have had a great life.
22 And I tell people that my wife was the one that alerted me
23 to the fact that there was a job opening I might apply for
24 which got me into the Soil Conservation Service. And so my
25 career has been indebted to the two decisions I ever made,

1 first to marry Elaine, and, secondly, to work for the Soil
2 Conservation Service. With that I'll say amen.

3 MR. BARR: Thank you very much.

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