

INTERVIEW OF
JOHN WILLIAMS
August 20, 2013

1 MR. BARR: This is Jim Barr and it's August 20th,
2 2013, in North Platte, Nebraska. I'm visiting with John
3 Williams.

4 John would you give us just a little summary of
5 your background?

6 MR. WILLIAMS: Yes. I was district manager of the
7 Upper Niobrara White Natural Resources District for 22
8 years, from spring of 1975 until 1997. I was born and
9 raised on a cattle ranch, irrigated farm, dry land wheat
10 operation in northern Sheridan County, active in 4-H, and
11 had two brothers and a sister. I was the oldest. Went to
12 the University of Nebraska in the fall of 1967 as an
13 agricultural economics major and was there three years and
14 then transferred to the University of Montana, Missoula, and
15 switched to natural resource economics -- forestry
16 economics, got my bachelor's degree, and then was out for a
17 year or so and then went back in graduate school, natural
18 resource administration and came -- made it back to
19 Nebraska, was hired as a district forester with Nebraska
20 Forest Service in Chadron, Nebraska, the fall of 1974,
21 working on Timber Stand Improvement Project on Ponderosa
22 Pine and became acquainted with the Natural Resource
23 District through that. And then the Upper Niobrara White
24 NRD was the last district, I believe, in the state to hire a
25 general manager and that position came open in May of '75

1 and I was selected for that position. So that started my
2 career with NRDs at that time.

3 MR. BARR: What were some of the initial
4 challenges you faced as manager at that NRD?

5 MR. WILLIAMS: Well, it was a -- the Upper
6 Niobrara White really, to that time, I had just been
7 functioning as kind of a committee or a group of three soil
8 and water conservation districts. There were three district
9 conservationists and there was a lot of transition to be
10 made. My initial contact with the Natural Resources
11 Commission was Duane Chamberlain, he was very helpful. And
12 we started the process of broadening out our partnerships
13 with other entities and other agencies quite abruptly and so
14 there were some real growing pains because we weren't going
15 to be there just for the promotion and encouragement of a
16 federal agency, although that would continue, but the U.S.
17 Forest Service had a big presence in the Pine Ridge,
18 Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and University of
19 Nebraska. I, of course, had worked closely with them in my
20 forestry position. So it was a really wonderful experience
21 for a young person starting out in natural resource
22 management.

23 MR. BARR: You were there about the time the first
24 elected board had just taken over shortly before you came
25 on. How many board members were there?

1 MR. WILLIAMS: We had 11 board members and a very
2 diverse district, a lot of irrigation development,
3 groundwater irrigation development in Box Butte County, and
4 then two Bureau of Reclamation sponsored districts at
5 Whitney and Mirage Flats, and then of course dry land
6 wheat production and then the rest was cattle
7 ranching -- commercial cattle ranching. And, of course,
8 then 120,000 acres of native Ponderosa Pine Forest that
9 was -- also had a lot of commercial potential.

10 MR. BARR: What were some of the original either
11 projects or programs that you worked with in the first two
12 or three years?

13 MR. WILLIAMS: We were -- I know the traditional
14 tree planting program in the spring was going very well and
15 we were just in the -- at that time, in the initial stages
16 of working closely with Deon Axthelm with the Ag Engineering
17 Department, was out helping us, and then the Conservation
18 Survey Division had staff in -- at the panhandle station in
19 Scottsbluff so we were moving toward trying to increase
20 groundwater use efficiency especially in Box Butte County.

21 MR. BARR: There had been quite a bit of decline
22 in the water table, hadn't there, at that point?

23 MR. WILLIAMS: Well, in Box Butte County,
24 probably -- the first irrigation well went in, I think it
25 was in 1937, and so 20 years of gravity irrigation

1 development around Alliance and to the east, but even at
2 that time the aquifer was not being used on a sustainable
3 basis because the recharge potential is so limited, not much
4 rainfall. And, yeah, there were irrigation wells being
5 measured at that time and over the next several years that
6 increased a lot because we had NRD capability then. And
7 then, well, the 70s, as we all know, were tremendous years
8 for development of new wells and sprinkler systems and
9 that's when we really got underway with some -- there hadn't
10 been, til that time, really much basic framework -- geologic
11 work done so we set up a network of test well -- test hole
12 drilling, especially across Box Butte County and then also
13 up into the irrigated acres in Dawes and Sheridan Counties.
14 And then, from that work, the Conservation Survey Division
15 and, oh, probably some consultants had something they could
16 start working on to do some initial modeling.

17 MR. BARR: Was there any efforts to hold back
18 either irrigation development or water use at that point on
19 the groundwater wells?

20 MR. WILLIAMS: No. Development was the push, not
21 on our part, but economics drove it.

22 MR. BARR: Sure. How did that interact with
23 Mirage Flats and the other irrigation project?

24 MR. WILLIAMS: Well, on -- of course, where
25 Whitney was situated there is no groundwater aquifer because

1 it's in the White River Basin, but Mirage Flats, since the
2 beginning, had never had only about half of the surface
3 water that had been anticipated for their project so wells
4 went in there very quickly to provide -- or were already in
5 to supplement and provide at least half of the water they
6 were using on that project. And that was a pretty good
7 relationship there. They're in a relationship between well
8 pumping and importing water. It was -- Mirage Flats
9 groundwater levels held their own pretty well until probably
10 into the 1980s and then groundwater pumping got to the point
11 where there was decline in that area also. There's -- Box
12 Butte County had developed a very good seed potato
13 production system. Of course, sugar beets were big and dry
14 edible beans, that with corn, and good soils and good
15 topography in Box Butte County. And Box Butte County
16 became, for us, a -- somewhat of a dilemma. It's not an
17 aquifer with any recharge to speak of. It ranges in depth
18 in the west from I think probably 100 feet to maybe 6- to
19 700 on the east where you then move on into the Sandhills in
20 the Ogallala aquifer. But by the 70s, the horse was out of
21 the barn already in terms of managing groundwater decline in
22 Box Butte County and it got worse. The -- we did -- worked
23 on efficiency. Sprinklers helped alleviate and then
24 regulation also did away with any wasting of groundwater
25 because the re-use pits were required and those practices.

1 But on any groundwater decline map for the state of
2 Nebraska, Box Butte County was always a big red spot with no
3 outside source of recharge and to operate something on a
4 sustained yield basis was -- just wasn't going to be
5 possible.

6 MR. BARR: Did you have any other type of projects
7 in the early years, 70s or early 80s, besides the --

8 MR. WILLIAMS: We had a big project on the Upper
9 White River, a critical area treatment project. It would
10 have been a flood control watershed project. Everything was
11 surveyed and several big structures had design work
12 completed. But due to the size of the drainage and the
13 topography, it just didn't meet feasibility and it would
14 have been a resource conservation and development project
15 under the Soil Conservation Service. We had a sizable
16 sinking fund established and were a year or two away from
17 starting, but the City of Crawford -- what happened -- what
18 really hit us was there was a tremendous forest fire in the
19 upper portion of the watershed called the Fort Robinson
20 burn. Over 50,000 acres burned off. The next -- I think it
21 was just the next season it had a 12-, 13-inch flood event
22 and destroyed Crawford city's water supply system and things
23 just went downhill so that -- Crawford pulled out. They
24 didn't have the resources to go with us as a partner so we
25 backed away from it.

1 MR. BARR: Did you get involved any in the
2 Crawford water supply system?

3 MR. WILLIAMS: Well, in kind of a bad way. They
4 had historically not had access to the wells and the springs
5 on Fort Robinson because it was the U.S. military
6 historically, and they were using a water supply from a
7 little creek called Dead Man and had developed a treatment
8 system and storage capacity to make that work for them.
9 Working with the Soil Conservation Service, we just
10 had -- we had to convince them that that was no longer going
11 to work. The pipeline for like 12 miles, portions of that
12 had just been -- woodstave pipeline just wiped out. And,
13 you know, that did -- the City of Chadron, the city engineer
14 tried to figure out how to put an infiltration system along
15 White River where there was that potential, but it wouldn't
16 work. So what did then finally open up was Fort Robinson
17 allowed the City of Crawford access to their water supply
18 system. So, in the end, they're much better off than they
19 ever had been before. Disaster led to progress.

20 MR. BARR: What are some other things that you
21 recollect about the -- that might be different in that NRD,
22 for instance, than in some of the other NRDs in the state?

23 MR. WILLIAMS: Well, we're -- we became very
24 actively involved in doing water quality planning in the
25 upper regions -- all of the upper segments of the Niobrara

1 River because it was -- and this would be especially in
2 Sioux County because it was very high quality water and
3 already it was a good trout fishery. And then the springfed
4 streams in the White River were also real high quality. And
5 there had never been any baseline water quality assessment
6 work done by anyone on those streams so we -- and this was
7 getting probably up into 1978 when we were under the Clean
8 Water Act initiatives. We were able to secure help and
9 funding. We did a water use classification on all those
10 segments in the district, flow -- mapped the flows of all
11 the streams, did extensive interviews with landowners to
12 find where -- and identify intermittent and perennial
13 portions and any springs that had never gone dry clear back
14 into the 1930s that they could remember. And then, in
15 cooperation with the Science Department of Chadron State
16 College and the Department of Environmental Quality with
17 Nebraska, we got a water quality laboratory established at
18 Chadron State College and hired -- was able to hire a water
19 scientist and got baseline water quality data on all those
20 stream segments so that information very -- could prove very
21 beneficial presently and in the future.

22 MR. BARR: Were there any other major issues over
23 the course of your time there that you'd like to comment on?

24 MR. WILLIAMS: Well, we became very politically
25 involved, and citizens also. There was the proposed ETSI

1 coal slurry pipeline and it was proposed to use 20,000 acre
2 feet of water to transport coal from eastern Wyoming by way
3 of slurry to Louisiana. And the well field for that project
4 would have been close enough to northern Sioux County
5 sources of groundwater, deep sources in the Dakota Formation
6 that were being used for livestock water pipelines. That
7 became a major issue and our NRD worked very closely with
8 citizens' groups to oppose that project. I testified very
9 early before the Nebraska Legislature, Maurice Kremer was, I
10 believe, might have been chairman of the water committee at
11 that time, and presented the information that ranchers were
12 concerned about the impact on their deep wells. They had
13 wells that went down 1100 feet and were -- it was warm water
14 that they could get to the surface by artesian, and
15 presented that information. We were a surprise to
16 policymakers and others that were recommending that the
17 project be given eminent domain because it wouldn't have any
18 impact on Nebraska water users and put us directly at odds
19 with the Conservation Survey Division, the Director, Vince
20 Dreesen, and Kansas/Nebraska Natural Gas had 20 percent
21 interest in the project and so it was a very big issue and
22 it failed to get its right of way across Nebraska because
23 of that opposition. A very strong citizen group developed
24 from that called Save Nebraska Water and it branched out to
25 a group called Save Wyoming Water in Wyoming and Save South

1 Dakota Water in South Dakota so it was a three-state
2 regional coalition before it was all over with. ETSI was
3 provided, before they backed out, an alternative. The
4 meeting was held in Governor Hershler's office in Wyoming
5 with Bureau of Reclamation officials and the Bureau of Land
6 Management was represented. And if they wanted to take --
7 do their project, they were -- this was not a publicized
8 meeting, it was quite a private meeting, but the Bureau of
9 Land Management was willing to let them have access across
10 eastern Wyoming and the Bureau of Reclamation, and maybe the
11 Corps of Engineers, would have allowed water to have been
12 taken from Oahe Reservoir piped west for coal transport.
13 And they do that kind of water transfer now for domestic
14 uses all over western South Dakota and southwest South
15 Dakota, but -- and it would have taken probably, well,
16 20,000 acre feet and about the diameter of a dime off the
17 top of that reservoir. News of that proposal, when it hit
18 eastern Nebraska, talk about taking water out of the
19 Missouri River, that project died in a hurry. We had a
20 whole new group of folks that were interested in this
21 business of using water to transport coal and -- so that --

22 MR. BARR: There was also an effort to do some
23 uranium mining up there. Was that anything you got involved
24 with?

25 MR. WILLIAMS: It seems like these neat ideas

1 just -- one would go away and another one would come about.
2 The next one, probably in the early 80s, was to develop a
3 coal-fired generation plant in Hemingford by Tri-State
4 Generation and Transmission. They were expanding at that
5 time. And their plan, since there was already groundwater
6 decline in Box Butte County, not enough water in the
7 Niobrara, was to go into central Sheridan County, develop a
8 well field, 30, 40 huge wells, and then pipe that water west
9 to Hemingford. We videotaped the wet hay meadows that would
10 have been adjacent and within reach of that well field and
11 presented that at a hearing at the high school auditorium in
12 Hemingford attended by 500 very interested people, and as we
13 know the Nebraska Sandhills, the top of the aquifer is what
14 is of interest to a rancher there and I don't know how many
15 Sandhillers we had there, but there was a lot of them.

16 MR. BARR: They were not all supporters of the
17 idea, I take it.

18 MR. WILLIAMS: And the local rural electric
19 association in Alliance, who had supported the project,
20 decided to change their mind and Tri-State never built that
21 project. It was a tremendous economic loss for the village
22 of Hemingford, they would have had a power plant like
23 Sutherland, Nebraska, does but it wasn't right for the
24 groundwater. That went away and it wasn't too long before
25 uranium deposits were found in the Crawford area in the

1 Chadron Formation. And it has -- it's turned out to be a
2 great development, but at that time there was no rules or
3 regulations on in situ mining in Nebraska and the mining
4 takes place within 6-700 feet of a surface and it's close
5 proximity to the White River. And the Brule Formation, just
6 above there, is an important source of small yielding wells
7 for livestock purposes. And the original proposal was to
8 have that operation regulated by the Oil and Gas Commission
9 because of their operation with minerals. We opposed that
10 and were able to get legislation and regulation under the
11 Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality and rules and
12 regulations put in place specifically for in situ mining of
13 uranium and that was not well received by industry. They
14 didn't -- they hadn't anticipated that kind of regulation
15 and oversight by the State of Nebraska but it was needed and
16 the project moved forward. It's been, I believe, very
17 successful and the water quality has been protected. So
18 those were big issues for our district and I guess, you
19 know, because of our close proximity to Wyoming and coal
20 resources and we're the only district so far where they've
21 desired uranium mining, those were issues we needed to step
22 up and deal with. The other one that we were able to avoid
23 was the low-level radioactive waste siting process. That
24 was -- the site for that was initially proposed for northern
25 Dawes County, but Save Nebraska Water was so well

1 established and a very active citizenry that they chose to
2 go east. And it was probably a poor decision on their part,
3 but I was glad that that was in some -- another district.

4 MR. BARR: A manager -- former manager down in the
5 lower ones told me that when they went to decommission that
6 site in Boyd County it was under water.

7 MR. WILLIAMS: And, you know, so this is -- it's
8 interesting. I've been thinking a lot that the strength of
9 the Natural Resource District System and the policy-making
10 process and controversy or conflict and resolution of issues
11 really speaks to, I think, the desires and the background of
12 the citizenry of the state of Nebraska. We're conservative
13 in many respects, but I think we're still seeing today that
14 when it comes to natural resource development and especially
15 a potential impact on water, even though people have left
16 the rural area and have gone to our cities for economic
17 reasons, they're still very attune to what's happening to
18 our water resources. And it -- the XL Pipeline, just -- and
19 that's -- no matter what your natural resource base is that
20 you've got to work with, it's the strength of the citizenry
21 that is the guiding force because of the system that's been
22 put in place. And my wife is from Michigan and so I kind of
23 follow what goes on in mid-western states quite a bit. And
24 it was several decades after Nebraska had set up their
25 conservation districts on watershed boundaries and then

1 other states said, "Well, you know, the way to look at our
2 water quality problems is on a watershed basis." We've been
3 doing that and we've got experience in that now for some
4 time.

5 MR. BARR: In your time in the district, were
6 there any particular individuals that stood out in either
7 the board or other issues in relation to that part of the
8 state? I'm just fishing there, I don't know if there is
9 any.

10 MR. WILLIAMS: Well, I was always -- was very
11 impressed early, like I guess so many were, with the
12 integrity of Maurice Kremer. I think the state legislature,
13 even though it's a unicameral and is heavily lobbied by
14 special interests, there were people in there that
15 had -- that were real statesmen and had really integrity and
16 the interest of the natural resources foremost. Governor
17 Exxon was a strong supporter of natural resources and the
18 districts. And the state legislators, I -- the Nebraska
19 Association of Resource Districts was great for NRD managers
20 because we're out there day-to-day and then most of the time
21 on -- autonomous on our own, but to the association and in
22 working closely with the Natural Resources Commission, that
23 framework, it's a good system for letting issues of a
24 broader nature, whether regional or statewide, be dealt with
25 together. And I think it's a system that allowed for local

1 districts to establish good partnerships. It was -- we were
2 able to really branch out from what the soil and water
3 conservation districts had been doing up to that time. And
4 I don't know, I was thinking those original NRD managers
5 were like a group of Teddy Roosevelt Rough Riders sometimes,
6 just whipping and spurring, and I'm sure there's some other
7 entities that thought we were completely out of line, but
8 that kind of progress meant you had to step up and not
9 everybody was always happy with changes that were being
10 made, but -- and feelings got hurt, but I think in time
11 those got healed up and partnerships were strengthened
12 and -- but, you know, when I was in graduate school, natural
13 resource administration, there were Soil Conservation
14 Service personnel there at the same time in graduate school,
15 and the dean of the school of forestry had been in the soil
16 conservation service school here and I never forgot one
17 lecture one afternoon that if you're going to be a
18 successful administrator, 50 percent of your job is to
19 promote and protect the mission of your agency, and
20 that -- and so I got to see, when I got to be an NRD
21 manager, that that had been a strong advocacy role of soil
22 and water conservation districts, but it had to grow and
23 expand beyond that if we were going to do what Nebraska
24 citizens wanted us to get done.

25 MR. BARR: You've had another little different

1 perspective in that you're now a board member of the Twin
2 Platte NRD. Is there any observation you'd like to make in
3 that regard?

4 MR. WILLIAMS: Well, it's -- it has really been
5 fun to be in a natural resource district that's got two big
6 rivers running through it, actually have some potential to
7 do some things because of the quantity of the water and
8 also, in a more abundant rainfall regime. It's -- there's a
9 big difference between being on the board and being in the
10 general manager's seat. There -- being a general manager of
11 a natural resource district is highly political. Most of
12 the time a board will agree on the direction you're going to
13 take, but probably on the tough ones you're going to have
14 some disagreement and you've got to do the job you're
15 directed to do and that means you're not going to be making
16 everybody happy. I often watched the federal employees
17 transfer every three to seven years and I thought, "They're
18 just getting to know the people and the resources." Well,
19 there's also a reason for that, you stay in one place long
20 enough, deal with enough issues, you begin to accumulate a
21 following and some of it is -- are well-wishers and there
22 could also be some that wished you had left quite a while
23 ago. So general managers that have made it long enough to
24 call it a career have -- they've been on the front lines.
25 And it's -- as a group I think it speaks very well to their

1 integrity. But, yeah, this -- I didn't -- I came to North
2 Platte to start a new business in working with library book
3 publishers and I now am established in five states, working
4 with public libraries and schools, my wife and I, and came
5 to North Platte because of its central location. But it is
6 great to be on the board and I think this is a board that,
7 unless somebody discovers uranium and we've got to address
8 uranium mining or something, the issues and the programs
9 that we're working on are well received by the stakeholders
10 and I just think there's a great future. Technology keeps
11 changing. Irrigators are just becoming more efficient all
12 the time. And I have been involved in the trips back to
13 Washington, D.C., which are great because of the opportunity
14 to speak with our representatives very candidly. I think
15 the state of Nebraska, because of federal budgets, but also
16 because of environmental protection agency initiatives, I
17 think may be in a great position to temper and manage some
18 of the initiatives that might be coming from Washington,
19 D.C., in the future. The districts could play a crucial
20 role in tampering and giving some good direction to whatever
21 it is.

22 MR. BARR: Well, at this point, if there are any
23 observations you'd like to make somewhat related to natural
24 resource districts or natural resources in general, please
25 feel welcome to do so. I don't have specific questions

1 but -- well, like, let me -- there is one question that's
2 come up. There's been some talk about doing natural
3 resource districts in other states, but so far as I know
4 they really haven't developed. Do you have any thoughts on
5 why it might have happened here in Nebraska and not anywhere
6 else so far?

7 MR. WILLIAMS: I think we've just scared the hell
8 out of the Natural Resource Conservation Service. At one
9 point I worked with the NRCS in Wyoming as a watershed
10 coordinator and I would be surprised if it would
11 come -- that kind of initiative would come through their
12 soil and water conservation districts. They were there,
13 initially handpicked, to promote and further the goals of
14 that federal agency and how a transition was able to be made
15 in Nebraska --

16 MR. BARR: I've heard some comments, yeah.

17 MR. WILLIAMS: -- is amazing to me. I -- well,
18 the --

19 FEMALE VOICE: Just giving you a heads up, the
20 place locks up in seven minutes.

21 MR. BARR: Okay. We're wrapping up here.

22 MR. WILLIAMS: The first week I was on the job,
23 thank God Duane Chamberlain with the Commission got there
24 before I had the glad meeting with all of the soil
25 conservation service people in the district.

1 MR. BARR: Do you mind if I take your picture
2 while you're talking?

3 MR. WILLIAMS: No, that'll be fine. Gosh, I
4 was -- I guess there's an advantage to youth, that you have
5 no trepidation about stepping in and -- but I took them all
6 back into the conference room and I shut the door, and had a
7 blackboard in there and I drew a circle on it and I put the
8 Natural Resources District in the middle of it. And because
9 of my administration education and familiar -- I was
10 familiar with how many agencies that we could work together
11 with on natural resources, so I just started listing them on
12 the outside of the circle. And I kind of gave them a
13 lecture that this is what we were going to be is, we were
14 going to be in partnership with anybody we could to further
15 the conservation and development of the natural resources
16 and they mostly just sat there in stunned silence.

17 MR. BARR: But over the years did they pretty well
18 buy into the cooperation?

19 MR. WILLIAMS: They -- it made its transition
20 because of retirement and transfers. It -- and they didn't
21 give up easy. They were all -- they were used to talking to
22 their three-member board and had all done so before they
23 came to a board meeting. It was a long, tough deal.

24 MR. BARR: What about other agencies, like Forest
25 Service and Game Commission and Water Resources? Any

1 problems with those agencies?

2 MR. WILLIAMS: You know, I think there was
3 something about the Upper Niobrara White Natural Resource
4 District having been the last one to hire a manager.
5 Furthest from Lincoln and it was a Soil Conservation Service
6 stronghold, I would say. The -- but no, you know, the
7 Department of Water Resources were used to working with a
8 limited amount of surface water so water limitations were
9 the name of the deal. Forest Service, we had a good working
10 relationship with them. They had grazing associations for
11 the private ranchers that used their grazing lands and we
12 worked closely with them. Like, after the Fort Robinson
13 burn, that was a very intermingled ownership between Forest
14 Service, private landowners, and Game and Parks Commission,
15 but we were able to work out -- we did a reseedling on the
16 area that was quite successful. And no, very -- I think the
17 natural resource districts were pretty well received.

18 MR. BARR: Well, I'm going to have -- thank you
19 very much. I see we're about to be evicted. We've
20 overstayed our time.

21 MR. WILLIAMS: Well, thanks for including me in
22 this.

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