

INTERVIEW OF  
JOHN WILLIAMS  
August 20, 2013

1                   MR. BARR: This is Jim Barr and it's August 20<sup>th</sup>,  
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.

23 - - -

24