Joe C. Dahilig
May 1955, Navy Photo Center, Anacostia

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Joe C. Dahilig

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STATUS OF INTERVIEW:
OPEN FOR RESEARCH

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Interview Conducted and Edited by:
George F. Petershagen

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By Brit Allan Storey
Senior Historian
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Oral History Program
Bureau of Reclamation
Denver, Colorado

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OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF
JOE C. DAHILIG

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Introduction

In 1988, Reclamation began to create a history program. While headquartered in Denver, the history program was developed as a bureau-wide program.

One component of Reclamation's history program is its oral history activity. The primary objectives of Reclamation's oral history activities are: preservation of historical data not normally available through Reclamation records (supplementing already available data on the whole range of Reclamation's history); making the preserved data available to researchers inside and outside Reclamation.

The senior historian of the Bureau of Reclamation developed and directs the oral history program. Questions, comments, and suggestions may be addressed to the senior historian.

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For additional information about Reclamation's history program see:
www.usbr.gov/history

Interviewer's Introduction

Joe Dahilig was born in El Centro, California, in 1933. Shortly after graduation from El Centro Union High School, he moved to Sacramento to join his older brother, Augustine. In Sacramento Dahilig worked for the Campbell Soup Company for a short time before joining the Navy. While in the Navy he received his formal training as a photographer.

Following his release from active duty, Dahilig returned to Sacramento where he found employment with the Bureau of Reclamation's Mid-Pacific Region, then Region II, as a photographer. He became the region's chief photographer in 1965.

Some of Dahilig's more vivid memories include participating in photographing a number of dignitaries. This list includes two presidents, Eisenhower and Kennedy, numerous congressmen, secretaries of the interior, governors, and other senior officials.

In addition to his official duties, Dahilig also acted as the coordinator for a number of recreational activities, a role he has continued into retirement. He is an avid bowler and golfer. He is also very active in a community service organization for seniors known as SIRs.

George Petershagen, Bureau of Reclamation historian, interviewed Dahilig at the Dahilig residence in Sacramento on July 19, 1994. Barbara Heginbottom Jardee transcribed the interview, and Petershagen accomplished the editing.

Oral History Interview
Joe Dahilig

Petershagen: This is George Petershagen conducting an interview of Joe Dahilig for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Joe retired as the Chief of the Photographic Section in the Mid-Pacific Region. Today's date is July 19, 1994, and this is Tape 1, Side A.

Joe, I would appreciate it if you'd acknowledge for me on the tape that we are tape recording this with your consent.

Dahilig: Yes, yes it is.

Petershagen: And that you understand that this tape recording becomes the property of the United States as a gift by you to the government.

Dahilig: Yes, I do.

Petershagen: Thank you. Now, to get into things, if we could start at the very beginning, where and

when were you born?

Born in El Centro, California, in 1933

Dahilig: I was born in a little town in southern California, El Centro, California, on October 11, 1933.

Petershagen: And you were raised in El Centro?

Raised and Educated in El Centro

Dahilig: I was born and raised and educated in El Centro.

Petershagen: So you went to El Centro Schools?

Dahilig: Yes, I did.

Petershagen: What was the name of the high school you graduated from?

Dahilig: I graduated from El Centro Union High School in May of 1951.

Petershagen: And what did you do right out of high school?

Worked for U.S. Gypsum for about a Year

Dahilig: Right out of high school I went to work for U.S. Gypsum, which is in Plaster City, about twenty miles west of El Centro.

Petershagen: And how long did you work for them?

Dahilig: I worked there for roughly one year.

Moved to Sacramento to Be near His Oldest Brother in 1952 and Went to Work for the Campbell Soup Company

Subsequent to that, I came up north to Sacramento in early 1952, and I acquired a job at Campbell Soup Company in early '52.

Joined the U.S. Navy in 1952 During the Korean Conflict

At that time, Korea was on, and I was nineteen, was ready to be drafted, so I joined the Navy in 1952.

Petershagen: And why did you come to Sacramento?

Dahilig: I had two brothers up here. My oldest brother, my late brother, Augustine, was up here with his family, and I decided to come

up here and be closer to my oldest brother. And subsequent to that, my middle brother–there's three of us–came up here also.

Petershagen: I see. So you joined the Navy during the Korean War?

Dahilig: Yes, I did.

Petershagen: And your rating was?

Served as a Photographer in the U.S. Navy

Dahilig: I was a photographer in the United States Navy.

Petershagen: So if I were to ask you where you got your vocational training, how you became a photographer, that's where it starts?

"I was educated in photography, a year's education, in Pensacola, Florida. . . ."

Dahilig: That's correct. I was educated in photography, a year's education, in Pensacola, Florida.

Petershagen: Did you have an interest in photography,

take any classes or anything in high school along the way, that might lead you to be a photographer?

Dahilig: No, I did not. I had an uncle that during World War II was involved in photography, and he reared me to shoot photographs, and so when I was given the option on what vocational field I wanted to be as an enlisted man in the Navy, I thought back to those days, so I thought photography was my field.

Petershagen: Interesting. Then from school in the Navy, shipboard duty or naval air station, or where did you go?

Was Assigned to Attack Carrier CVA-15, the USS Randolph for Two Years

Dahilig: Well, right after photo school, I was assigned to a carrier. I was aboard an attack carrier, CVA-15, the *USS Randolph*. I was

aboard that ship for two years.

"I served two tours in the Mediterranean. I did not go to Korea. . . . the French were fighting in . . . Vietnam. And our job aboard the carrier was to train the French pilots that were fighting that war, during the Indo-China War. . . ."

I served two tours in the Mediterranean. I did not go to Korea. In those days the French were fighting in Indo-China, which we later knew as Vietnam. And our job aboard the carrier was to train the French pilots that were fighting that war, during the Indo-China War.

". . . then I was assigned to a Class "A" photo lab, which is the highest-class photo lab in the Navy, in Anacostia, Washington, D.C. . . ."

After the French were defeated there after the Indo-China–for lack of a better name, I guess–then we came back to the United States, and I had served my two-year tour of duty, and then I was assigned to

a Class "A" photo lab, which is the highest-class photo lab in the Navy, in Anacostia, Washington, D.C.

Petershagen: And how long were you there?

Dahilig: I was there about a year-and-a-half when my four-year enlistment was up.

Petershagen: And after that four years, did you participate in the Reserves at all?

"I was separated from the United States Navy in 1956, and I served until 1960 as a Naval Reserve. . . ."

Dahilig: Yes, I served four years in the Reserve. I was separated from the United States Navy in 1956, and I served until 1960 as a Naval Reserve.

Drove from D.C. to El Centro in 1957 to Visit Family and Then Went on to Sacramento to Be with His Brothers

Hired by Reclamation as a Photographer

In 1957, I motored from Washington, D.C.

to California, went to El Centro briefly, just to see my family, and then came up to be with my brothers in Sacramento, where I applied for a job at the Bureau of Reclamation in early 1957, March to be exact, and I was hired as a photographer for the Bureau of Reclamation.

Petershagen: Why the Bureau of Reclamation? Was that just one of a number of places you applied, or was that the only place?

Wanted to Get Away from Working for the Department of Defense

Dahilig: No, I applied for a job. . . I was looking specifically for a photographic job. I applied at McClellan Air Force Base. It was Department of Defense employment. I wanted to get away from Defense. When I started with the Bureau–they hired me first, and I got on–and McClellan had called me

to come for an interview, which I did. Because it was Defense, I decided that I'd drop my name from nomination. I don't know whether I would have gotten the job, but I told them that I had already acquired a job, and I wanted to be with a non-Defense [area of][1] government.

"I wasn't particularly interested in Reclamation. In

1. A note on editorial conventions. In the text of these interviews, information in parentheses, ( ), is actually on the tape. Information in brackets, [ ], has been added to the tape either by the editor to clarify meaning or at the request of the interviewee in order to correct, enlarge, or clarify the interview as it was originally spoken. Words have sometimes been struck out by editor or interviewee in order to clarify meaning or eliminate repetition. In the case of strikeouts, that material has been printed at 50% density to aid in reading the interviews but assuring that the struckout material is readable.

The transcriber and editor also have removed some extraneous words such as false starts and repetitions without indicating their removal. The meaning of the interview has not been changed by this editing.

In an effort to conform to standard academic rules of usage (see *The Chicago Manual of Style*), individual's titles are only capitalized in the text when they are specifically used as a title connected to a name, e.g., Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton as opposed to Gale Norton, secretary of the interior; Commissioner John Keys as opposed to John Keys, commissioner. Likewise formal titles of acts and offices are capitalized but abbreviated usages are not, e.g., Division of Planning as opposed to "planning;" the Reclamation Projects Authorization and Adjustment Act of 1992, as opposed to "the 1992 act."

fact, . . . I didn't even know what Reclamation was. . . ."

I wasn't particularly interested in Reclamation. In fact, as far as I know, I didn't even know what Reclamation was.

Petershagen: You picked the very next question right out of my mouth!

"I had absolutely no idea what the Bureau of Reclamation did . . . I was already there a month or two . . . when McClellan had called me. I was impressed with the environment. I was impressed with the people I was working with, and so I decided to withdraw my name from nomination at McClellan. . . ."

Dahilig: I had absolutely no idea what the Bureau of Reclamation did, or what it's function was, but I was already there a month or two, maybe six weeks, when McClellan had called me. I was impressed with the environment. I was impressed with the people I was working with, and so I decided to withdraw my name from nomination at

McClellan.

Petershagen: And who was your supervisor when you started to work for the Bureau?

Bernard "Ben" Glaha Was His Supervisor in Region II until 1958

Dahilig: The chief photographer at the Bureau of Reclamation–and in those days it was called Region II. There were seven regions in the Bureau. Region II, which entailed California, Oregon, and parts of Nevada–was a fellow by the name of Bernard Glaha, G-L-A-H-A. We used to call him Ben Glaha. And I worked with him, as he was my supervisor, until 1958 when he retired.

Petershagen: And you didn't become chief photographer on *his* retirement, did you?

"There were three full-time photographers in Region II . . . Americo D'Alessandro, . . . and Wesley Nell . . . Subsequent to Ben Glaha's retirement, the job was offered to Rex. His name was Americo D'Alessandro, but we used to call

him Rex . . . He took the job for about maybe six months . . . and he decided he didn't want the job. So . . . It was advertised. I applied for it, and I was fortunate enough to get the job. . . ."

Dahilig: No, I did not. There were three full-time photographers in Region II, which is now Mid-Pacific Region. A fellow by the name of Americo D'Alessandro, who's still in town today, and Wesley Nell, who's still in town today. We're all retired now. Subsequent to Ben Glaha's retirement, the job was offered to Rex. His name was Americo D'Alessandro, but we used to call him Rex as a nickname, R-E-X. He took the job for about maybe six months, and he had some health problems. He's a little older than I am, he was born in 1915, and his wife and children, I think, took its toll, and he decided he didn't want the job. So that opened the job up for grabs. So it was open.

It was advertised. I applied for it, and I was fortunate enough to get the job.

Retired from Reclamation in 1987

So I headed the Photo Lab from, my guess now is probably, in the mid-'60s 'til my retirement in 1987.

Petershagen: So a little over twenty years.

Dahilig: Yeah, over twenty years that I headed the Photo Lab.

Petershagen: And a fairly rapid rise from the day you walked in the door to become the Chief of the Section, too, I would think.

". . . I was real fortunate. They selected some very, very good photographers. In those days, a photographer was a photographer. Nowadays, a lot of the photographers are very specialized . . ."

Dahilig: Oh yeah, I was real fortunate. They selected some very, very good photographers. In those days, a photographer was a photographer. Nowadays, a lot of the

photographers are very specialized–they do lab work, or they do aerial work, or they do movie work–and they're specialized in their field, which is a good thing.

". . . in the photo labs in the Bureau of Reclamation . . . you . . . must be very versatile. . . . video cameras, motion picture cameras, still cameras, aerial photography . . . as well as the darkroom work. . . ."

But in the photo labs in the Bureau of Reclamation, I got to tell you that they must be very versatile. They must be able to handle video cameras, motion picture cameras, still cameras, aerial photography–they must be able to do all of these things as well as the darkroom work.

Petershagen: And you have done all those things, as near as I can tell by all the photo credits that I've seen.

Dahilig: Oh, yeah, I went through the ranks.

(chuckles) What I mean to say is I was trained to do lab work, aerial work, motion picture work.

"My specialty in the Navy was motion pictures, but I was aboard a carrier, so we did a lot of aerial photography. . . ."

My specialty in the Navy was motion pictures, but I was aboard a carrier, so we did a lot of aerial photography.

". . . when I came with the Bureau, aerial work was involved so I did most of the aerial photography . . . in Sacramento. . . . We flew at least once a month . . . . we had photographers throughout the field . . . In those days we had a lot of construction going, all over mostly California . . ."

I was fortunate enough, when I came with the Bureau, aerial work was involved so I did most of the aerial photography while I was with the Bureau, in Sacramento.

Petershagen: So I take it that you didn't have any problems with flying: no air sickness, no fear of flying, nothing like that.

Dahilig: Oh, no. We flew at least once a month with the Bureau of Reclamation, and being the regional office, and I being designated the regional photographer, while we had photographers throughout the field . . . In those days we had a lot of construction going, all over mostly California, the Central Valley Project. I was detailed the job of documenting activity–construction and other activity–within the region. I assigned some, but I felt that I wanted to have my hands into everything I could, so I took a lot of the jobs, probably most of them, probably more than I should have. (laughter)

Petershagen: Did the Bureau have a plane, or was this a contracted deal?

Reclamation generally contracted for air service in Region II. "The primary reason is . . . . Most of

the Bureau of Reclamation regional offices are in . . . isolated places . . . So most regions had their own Bureau of Reclamation airplane assigned to them. But in this region . . . contracting was so readily available, and . . . cost effective. . .”

Dahilig: It was all contracted. The primary reason is . . . . Most of the Bureau of Reclamation regional offices are in–I hate to say it, but for lack of a better word–isolated places, like Billings, Montana, or those places. So most regions had their own Bureau of Reclamation airplane assigned to them. But in this region, because they said that contracting was so readily available, and so it was cost effective to, every time we needed a plane, to just contract one.

Petershagen: I see. Then I take it most of the time, if you were flying in and out of Sacramento, it would have been from Executive Airport?

Dahilig: Yeah, we took off from Executive Airport,

and most of the planes were either a small twin engine or a large single engine–that's a Cessna 210 or a 182.

Petershagen: And was all your aerial photography done by flying from Sacramento to someplace? Or did you maybe contract with a flight service in Redding, for example, if you were working up in that end of the valley?

Dahilig: No, our option was always to contract from Sacramento. The range was that there wasn't anyplace in the region–and that included parts of Oregon and parts of Nevada -- that we couldn't get to some filling station and fill up. We did take some trips during my tenure where we landed and stayed overnight, like in Klamath Falls–some of the more distant places, or when the job required multiple-day

coverage.

". . . these places we're covering were mostly planning jobs, where there wasn't a dam, where there weren't any distinguishable landmarks to find, such as dam sites, canal routes, and so forth. So some of these places had to be found . . ."

Some of these areas were pretty isolated and required spotting them . . . You got to remember, these places we're covering were mostly planning jobs, where there wasn't a dam, where there weren't any distinguishable landmarks to find, such as dam sites, canal routes, and so forth. So some of these places had to be found, and we didn't hit them all, but we hit most of them. (laughter)

Petershagen: Did you ever become a pilot yourself or have any dreams of learning to fly as a result of this?

Wanted to Train as a Pilot, but His Wife Was

Opposed to His Doing that

Dahilig: Oh, yeah, I flew quite a bit in the Navy, and I always wanted to be a pilot. I just couldn't afford it frankly. We got married and the children started coming in rapid order. We wound up having four kids, and I wasn't all that high-graded. Besides, my wife would have none of it. She said, "No pilot! You can fly all you want, but don't be a pilot." (both chuckle) I seriously thought of taking a G.I. loan to be a pilot, but my wife really objected to it.

Petershagen: When did you get married?

Dahilig: I got married in 1961, May of 1961.

Petershagen: Almost all of your Bureau of Reclamation career, with the exception of the first four or five years.

Dahilig: That's right, yeah.

Petershagen: Is my math right?

Wife Came into the Region from the Ephrata Office

Dahilig: No, that's right. My wife had transferred from Ephrata, which is up in what we used to call Region I. I guess it's the Pacific Northwest Region now. I have to remember these things. And she came down from the Northwest, and we met and we got married in 1961. I'd been with the Bureau roughly four years, so yeah, most of my career has been with her. We just celebrated our thirty-fourth wedding anniversary, I believe, or thirty-third. God, I can't remember! (laughter) From '61 to now.

Petershagen: Okay. I take it then, from what you've said, that any kinds of trips you had away from home were pretty much just overnight kinds of things?

Dahilig: Oh, well, yes and no, depending where. You've got to remember, this is a pretty large region. When we took trips to, say, Ventura, southern California, the region took us all the way down to Ventura–Santa Barbara, actually, which is north of Los Angeles.

"A lot of our trips were not just one-day jobs. They took a week, sometimes two weeks, projects such as large construction projects up in the Trinity. . . ."

A lot of our trips were not just one-day jobs. They took a week, sometimes two weeks, projects such as large construction projects up in the Trinity. When I first came on board, we were building Trinity Dam, which is a division with a multiple dam area, and they got Clair Engle, which is Trinity Lake, and they've got powerhouses. They've got a series of small dams. That was a pretty big

project in those days.

". . . when I came to this Region, we had something like 3,000 employees, and I don't know what they're down to now, but my guess now would be probably about 400-500. . . ."

My recollection, when I came to this region, we had something like 3,000 employees, and I don't know what they're down to now, but my guess now would be probably about 400-500. To my knowledge, there's no construction that ***I*** know of today.

Petershagen: So you would have, in the time you've been with the Bureau, you would have documented, through your photography, most of the Trinity construction, is that correct?

"Here was the procedure . . . we had photographers in the field. Their primary function was to cover the construction . . . to document all phases of construction . . . My job was to oversee the administration of that photography, and it had to be logged properly, it had to be captioned properly. And my job, in addition to that, would

be to go to these projects periodically, at least once a month, to shoot the P.R., public relation type photography, that our public affairs people could use . . . to advise and to inform the public of what the Bureau of Reclamation was doing. So my job really was public relations related. . . . I remember one of our Assistant Commissioners saying, 'You guys want to beautify the Bureau, but I want the construction people. I want inspectors. If I had a choice between an inspector and a photographer, I'll take the inspector any day of the week.'. . ."

Dahilig: Here was the procedure . . . As I mentioned earlier, we had photographers in the field. Their primary function was to cover the construction photography. Their job was to document all phases of construction, periodical construction. My job was to oversee the administration of that photography, and it had to be logged properly, it had to be captioned properly. And my job, in addition to that, would be to go to these projects periodically, at least once a month, to shoot the P.R., public

relation type photography, that our public affairs people could use in Denver, in Washington, and in our regional office, to use to advise and to inform the public of what the Bureau of Reclamation was doing. So my job really was public relations related. My work was more the . . . . I remember one of our Assistant Commissioners saying, "You guys want to beautify the Bureau, but I want the construction people. I want inspectors. If I had a choice between an inspector and a photographer, I'll take the inspector any day of the week."

". . . they were relying on our type of work to show . . . the work. And what we did . . . we were to inform the people through photography, the benefits of the Bureau of Reclamation. . . ."

But what he failed to realize was that when the lobbyists and our Congress people lobby

for money for the Bureau of Reclamation projects, they were relying on our type of work to show, first of all, the Bureau's building a dam, so we'll show them the work. And what we did, we tried to get them aesthetically–photography that depicted these projects. And also in addition to that, our job was to show the *benefits* of the Bureau, such as where is the water going? who's it being delivered to? show the agriculture, show the benefits of the power that the Bureau of Reclamation's projects are doing for the people. And that was our job. As I understood my job, as I understood it to be the other regional photographers' job, we were to inform the people through photography, the benefits of the Bureau of Reclamation.

Petershagen: So you, besides just being a maker of official visual records, you're a major arm of the public affairs part of the Bureau then, too.

Felt His Office Did More than Just Public Affairs Work

Dahilig: Yes–in fact I was not one of them–in fact–I'm trying to remember–but of the seven regions, I think three or four were actually working under public affairs–the photographer actually worked for Public affairs. I was not one of them. I served under what we call General Services. I was involved *as* a service, and I agreed with that structure. I was a service not only to public affairs, but I was also a service to the other branches of our office, such as geography, geology, design and construction, project planning. So I felt very strongly that

Photography *belonged* in the Services Division, as opposed to just strictly for public affairs.

Petershagen: So if we were to try to draw an organization chart in words, you would be probably lumped together with maybe the library and sections like that?

Dahilig: That's absolutely correct. In fact, the library *was* in our division. We had the library, we had cartographic, another very important function, stenography, another very important . . . You just can't get along without these. I daresay engineers are engineers, but they need these support services–I think they're very important.

Petershagen: Okay. Did you have a standard "kit," I'll call it, for lack of a better term, that you would take with you? Any particular

cameras that you might make sure you always had?

". . . our standard format for photography was a four-by-five press camera, which was a very cumbersome, very large . . . When Ben Glaha ran the shop, he insisted that we take an eight-by-ten camera, which is *very* heavy, very large, very cumbersome. When I took over the lab, I went down to a four-by-five format, and as the years went by, I even went to a smaller format . . ."

Dahilig: Yeah, in the early days, our standard format for photography was a four-by-five press camera, which was a very cumbersome, very large . . . . When Ben Glaha ran the shop, he insisted that we take an eight-by-ten camera, which is ***very*** heavy, very large, very cumbersome. When I took over the lab, I went down to a four-by-five format, and as the years went by, I even went to a smaller format, which is a six-by-seven centimeter, which is roughly two-by-three format, which is pretty standard. I think this

is what they're using now.

"We had to travel pretty light. It was not unusual for us to have ten pieces of equipment. . . . A lot of our jobs required motion pictures. In every case, we had to take it in color as well as black and white, and then as the years went by, video came on board. . . ."

We had to travel pretty light. It was not unusual for us to have ten pieces of equipment. We used to, like I said, we used to be pretty versatile. A lot of our jobs required motion pictures. In every case, we had to take it in color as well as black and white, and then as the years went by, video came on board. So I remember going on trips to Denver and Salt Lake where I had to unload, and it wasn't unusual for me to have five, six, seven, eight pieces of equipment– being sure that I got everything that was needed.

Petershagen: Motion picture, I'm assuming, was mostly

sixteen millimeter?

Ben Glaha Brought Movie Footage from the Construction of Hoover Dam to the Region When He Became Regional Photographer, and He Also Had Outtake Footage from His Filming of *Water in the West*

Dahilig: Yes, all of it was sixteen millimeter. In those days, thirty-five millimeter was being phased out. When Ben Glaha was in charge, he came up from Hoover during construction of Hoover Dam–a very talented man. He had documented the construction of Hoover Dam, and he brought up a lot of that film with him. As far as I know, I think that footage is still somewhere. I believe it's in Folsom. I'm not sure. I tried to dispose of it. We had about 70,000 feet of film. The National Archives was interested in obtaining it, but they needed someone to view it and catalog it. They wouldn't just

take the raw film. And being the small shop that we were, we just . . . And not being able to identify it, because Ben had died in 1960 or '59, I believe. So a lot of that footage was unidentifiable, and our file management people in Sacramento wouldn't let us destroy the stuff unless it was a nitrate, which is a very dangerous, highly flammable film. We ***did*** destroy that. But that film, I've always felt was pretty important. It might be some real important visual documentation there, that if somebody sat and viewed it, would be pretty important from the historical standpoint.

Petershagen: And this would be labeled "Construction of Hoover Dam" or something like that?

Dahilig: Yes. There are two things that are on that. I sat down and viewed some of that footage.

Some years ago Ben produced a film called *Water in the West*. It's a black and white film, and it depicted the water projects in the seventeen western states. And Ben shot this himself. He went around and shot it. He contracted the editing and the printing and so forth, but the film was shot in thirty-five millimeter. And that footage is somewhere in this region, if it hasn't been destroyed in the last seven or eight years, which is the time that I retired, part of that–what we call "outtake" footage–is in that stock. In addition to that, there are some outtakes on the construction of Hoover Dam as well.

Petershagen: And is that color or black and white?

Dahilig: No, it's all black and white. In those days they just didn't have . . . You know, we're talking about the early '30s. Color was not

only very expensive, but you had to preserve the film. You had to be careful with the temperatures. It's not unusual in the Las Vegas area to reach in the 120s, and you'd have reticulation–the film would just buckle. It isn't the film that you see today. The color film was very, very slow. The ASA rating, American Standard, was probably eight or so (Petershagen: Wow!), which meant that you have to shoot that stuff on tripod. It was very, very slow. Nowadays, you know, they got color film that's in the hundreds now.

Petershagen: Right. Let's see, I mentioned the Trinity as probably something that you had a lot of filming associated with. What other projects do you recall that you personally were involved in?

Photographed on the Trinity River Division, the San Luis Unit, Spring Creek Debris Dam, and Many Other Features

Dahilig: Oh, personally I was involved . . . When I first came on board in 1957, one of the first things I was assigned was to go up north and shoot the . . . They were building Trinity Dam. They were in the process of building Whiskeytown Dam, which is part of that Trinity River Division. They were constructing the Spring Creek Debris Dam, which is part of the . . . And all the works–powerplants and so forth–that was north. Down south we were planning the San Luis Unit, which involved . . . It was the first federal-state project where--I'm not sure, don't hold me to this, but I believe–the State funded sixty percent and the Bureau funded forty percent of this project. It was a multi-

million-dollar project. That started in 1962. President Kennedy came down to the groundbreaking of that. That was an eight-year job. I worked on that . . . Once a month at least, I went down there.

Another project was the Red Bluff Diversion Dam. The Mendaciously Dam, which was nearing completion at that time . . . Sly Park Dam had been completed, but they were building the distribution system.

"When a dam is completed for Reclamation, that's just part of the job. The other part is . . . a distribution system . . ."

When a dam is completed for Reclamation, that's just part of the job. The other part is, if a canal is involved, you have to build the canal to distribute that water. And if a distribution system, you have to build a distribution system.

“One of the largest distribution systems in the world was the Westlands irrigation distribution system . . .”

One of the largest distribution systems in the world was the Westlands irrigation distribution system, which was during my tenure.

Kesterson Issues

We had a lot of troubles with that– namely Kesterson. (laughter)

Petershagen: Okay, just to clear that up, when you say "***we*** had troubles," you mean the Bureau?

Dahilig: The Bureau of Reclamation had troubles, yes.

Petershagen: No photographic troubles?

Dahilig: Oh, no, no, no. No, the project came to a stop.

Petershagen: And I'm sure, with a project like that, with all the political attention that Kesterson

received, that you get real busy around a project like that. My sense is that project managers and regional directors and people like that would like to have lots of photo documentation to use to make their points in public meetings, and in dealing with, oh, the Commissioner or whoever in Denver, that sort of thing?

The Washington, D.C., Office Wanted to Review Everything Shot at Kesterson by the Regional Photographers as Well as All Media Coverage of Kesterson

Dahilig: Well, Kesterson, I believe, was what evolved the Bureau public relations into what it is today, really. What happened was, when Kesterson broke out, and as you know the problem with Kesterson was the toxic deformation of the birds and wildlife. What happened was that we were instructed by our Washington Office, the Commissioner's

Office, to catch any documentation, any photo documentation, any video documentation, any news documentation, and shoot it back to Washington as soon as possible. They wanted to review all this stuff, in addition to the material that we were shooting. When I went by shooting . . . In those days we started to video tape stuff. We had acquired video cameras.

"They wanted first-hand knowledge of what was happening out West. . . ."

They wanted first-hand knowledge of what was happening out West.

Capturing News Media Coverage of Kesterson and Transmitting it Back to the Washington Office

Anything that had to do with Kesterson, news reporting, we were catching it on the airwaves. We were copying it. We had equipped ourselves with an antenna here at

the office on Cottage Way. We had acquired TV sets. We had acquired video recorders, audio recorders, and what we did, we captured anything that had anything to do with that subject, and then we're shooting it back to Washington so they could respond intelligently. When they deal from 3,000 miles away, it was pretty difficult for them to relate to what was being said up there.

"Our regional director at that time was Dave Houston, and he was very articulate. He did a pretty good job, and so anything that *he* said during the news to the media, we were shooting it back [to D.C.]. And I remember he was on *60 Minutes*, and I didn't think that they did a good job. You know, *60 Minutes* edited the way they wanted. They made him say what *they* wanted to say. So we acquired the full interview, which was well over an hour, and the public only saw about probably five or six minutes of it. . . ."

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anything that ***he*** said during the news to the media, we were shooting it back. And I remember he was on *60 Minutes*, and I didn't think that they did a good job. You know, *60 Minutes* edited the way they wanted. They made him say what ***they*** wanted to say. (Petershagen: Right.) So we acquired the full interview, which was well over an hour, and the public only saw about probably five or six minutes of it. So we made copies of that and shot it back to Washington. So in that regard, this is what we were involved in. It was pretty hectic in those days.

Petershagen: I see. This might be a good place to stop, I think, because the tape's about to run out, and we'll turn it over.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1. JULY 19, 1994.
BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JULY 19, 1994.

Petershagen: Joe, on the other side of the tape we were talking about Kesterson and your role in photo documentation and so forth associated with that. And you were talking about catching the news coverage from the local TV stations and so forth. Did you have a setup maybe in Fresno, or other places in the valley that you might get TV stations from there also?

Dahilig: Yes, we had contacted the other stations. Our job mainly was to capture *all* media within the Central Valley, any way we could. We would contact the Fresno TV offices and our 140[2] people–everybody has a number, Public Affairs were 140–and the 140 people would also be involved in this. Actually, they were spearheading this. In

2. This is "Reclamation speak" referring to the mail code for public affairs staff–not the number of people involved.

those days we had Gerry King, a very competent Public Affairs chief, and under Houston, we coordinated all this stuff that was being transmitted back to the Washington Office. For years, we kept that on file. Mark Wolkoff–I guess he's now in charge of the Photo Lab–he may still have copies of all those, during those hectic years when we had acquired hours and hours of footage.

Petershagen: Now, did you have pretty good relationships with people at the TV stations and the *Sacramento Bee* and so forth?

"We went out and shot right next to them. We were right next to them when we set up cameras when Dave Houston, our regional director, would give interviews. We'd be having a camera right next to them, and we'd share footage. . . ."

Dahilig: Yes, they were very cooperative with us. I found them to be super. They never turned

us down that I know of. We went out and shot right next to them. We were right next to them when we set up cameras when Dave Houston, our regional director, would give interviews. We'd be having a camera right next to them, and we'd share footage. They would ask us for footage, and we would cooperate with them, any way that we could. We presented off of this a lot of visuals, a lot of video coverage, and a lot of anything we could use to combat the adverse publicity that the Bureau of Reclamation was getting. In those days we were really getting it from every side.

"I thought that the Bureau got a bad shake–that's just my own opinion–on Kesterson. But that's what the Bureau was dealing with. . . ."

I thought that the Bureau got a bad

shake–that's just my own opinion–on Kesterson. But that's what the Bureau was dealing with.

". . . Kesterson was subsequently buried under, literally–they just wiped it off the map. . . ."

My guess is that the Bureau lost in this battle, because Kesterson was subsequently buried under, literally–they just wiped it off the map.

Petershagen: Any other projects that come to mind that were really big flaps, like Kesterson?

Issues at San Felipe Division of the Central Valley Project

Dahilig: Well, yeah, the last big job that I worked on was the San Felipe Division. You have to know the Central Valley Project, the plan of the CVP. The plan was that when we developed San Luis Reservoir, 60 percent of that water was supposed to be state, 40

percent was the Bureau of Reclamation. This is from a layman's point of view, I guess. But 40 percent of the water in San Luis Reservoir was like a bank. We'd put it in there when the water was available out of the Delta-Mendota Canal through the Tracy Pumping Plant and Shasta and Folsom. Okay, we got water in there. Now from there, we would deliver water down on the west side, which would be the Westlands [Irrigation District]– 500,000 acres' worth that the Bureau was supposed to distribute water to, out of that forty percent.

In addition to that, they built a tunnel that was pretty controversial at the time because of the geography. It was bad geography. We had to build a tunnel on the west side of the San Luis Reservoir, which

would divert water into Santa Clara County and . . . God, I can't think of the other county now,[3] but it was a tunnel and it was a pretty big project. As it was designed, it was supposed to be much longer than it wound up. They had to cut it short because of funding. The geography, I guess, was pretty bad. And environmentally, I guess, people got involved. There was a number of tunnels.

We built a reservoir–I can't think of the name of the reservoir right now, but it created . . . The geography was bad for that holding reservoir, and we went up there, and the E-&-R people, Engineering and Research people, in Denver, designed some plastic covering to cover the reservoir, and

3. San Benito County.

hopefully plug up some of the seepage on that reservoir. And so we had to cover that with video tape, and also from the air, aerial photography, and from the ground. Well, as it turned out, they had ***really*** big problems with that reservoir. The thing leaked all over the place. The lining ripped and tore and so forth. So after I retired, Don Westphal, the guy that took my job, tells me that they plugged up the leaks and it's now functioning.

But that was a pretty controversial job–I guess it still is, because it's through Hollister, earthquake area. We have to go up there, and the Bureau of Reclamation designed something to withstand earthquakes. It's right on one of the faults–not San Andreas–it's the Hollister Fault, I

believe. And so we had to shoot that during its construction.

"Construction photography is very important. If you have a failure, the only way they can report, is to go back and find out, first of all, what was there before the project was constructed–that structure, any structure. They want to see what it looked like before construction. They wanted to see all phases of construction *during* construction. And they wanted to see *after* construction . . ."

All of this stuff was being documented. Construction photography is very important. If you have a failure, the only way they can report, is to go back and find out, first of all, what was there before the project was constructed–that structure, any structure. They want to see what it looked like before construction. They wanted to see all phases of construction ***during*** construction. And they wanted to see ***after*** construction, what it looks like now.

“So they have a failure, the only way they can report or find out what went wrong, is to go back and look at this photography. . . .”

So they have a failure, the only way they can report or find out what went wrong, is to go back and look at this photography.

“Our photography spanned construction of Shasta Dam from day one, when there was absolutely nothing there. Same thing with Trinity and same thing with any project the Bureau's involved with, you have to have construction progress photography. . . .”

Our photography spanned construction of Shasta Dam from day one, when there was absolutely nothing there. Same thing with Trinity and same thing with any project the Bureau's involved with, you have to have construction progress photography. That's very, very important.

Divers Use Construction Photography in Their Work

We have a team of underwater

divers, that when they have problems and these structures are underwater, before they go down there, they look over our photography during construction to see what's there. Something may be very hazardous, something they shouldn't go into. So on numerous occasions our underwater team would come with us, and we'd go with them, and they'd study the photography of that particular structure, to find out if there's anything hazardous down there. Visibility is extremely, extremely short down there– muddy conditions and so forth. In fact, Wes Nell, one of our photographers, ***was*** an underwater diver, and his experience was that in some cases, fourteen- or fifteen-inch visibility at a target is not unusual.

Petershagen: My goodness! So I guess I could say that

the kinds of pictures that you took throughout your career in the Bureau could be something that might end up on the cover of a brochure, that might be given out during tours of Shasta Dam, from that all the way to maybe if there were ever a lawsuit or something over a dam failure, giving evidence in that–and everything in between, I guess.

Reclamation Photographs Are Widely Used in Publications World Wide

Dahilig: Oh yeah, our photographs have been in literally thousands of brochures, I can tell you that. I've seen them in encyclopedias. We used to get requests from Simon and Schuster–publishing outfits. We've sent photography all over the world. I remember sending some to Japan, some to Paris.

We had problems with the Delta-

Mendota Canal that geologist Nik Prokopovich[4] worked on. We were having problems with some clams that were being produced in the Delta-Mendota Canal that could plug up siphons, could plug up some of the works, and he wrote a paper on it. And we got a letter from Paris that they wanted the photography on that, which we complied with. Nik would give papers in the Orient, in Japan, and we'd supply him with all the photography for his distribution, as he published his paper. So, yeah, I've seen work in newspapers and magazines, brochures like I said–I've seen hundreds, maybe thousands.

Petershagen: Now, when you went to work for the Bureau of Reclamation, there was not nearly the

4. Nicolas Prokopovich has been interviewed by George Petershagen for Reclamation's oral history program.

construction pace going on that there had been, oh, say fifteen or so years before. And over your career at the Bureau, even that construction pace kind of started to drop off. I would think that makes things less exciting to work there. And certainly, for some of the engineers and planners and so forth that I've talked to, they would agree with that, I think. Did you feel that or notice any of that in your work?

"As I was winding down my career in 1987, I don't recall any large construction. I was getting a little frustrated. . . ."

Dahilig: Yes. As I was winding down my career in 1987, I don't recall any large construction. I was getting a little frustrated.

On His Second Day on the Job with Reclamation Ben Glaha Sent Him to Take Geology Photos of the Auburn Dam Site

I remember in 1957 the second day I started

with the Bureau, Ben said, "Joe, I want you to go up and take a camera and go with this geologist." It was a lady geologist–at that time I never knew any existed–and she was a very good geologist. "Go up with her and take whatever she wants you to do." And I said, "Well, where are we going? Do I need a bag?" He said, "No, just down the hill over here at a little town called Auburn. We've got an Auburn Dam planned there."

"This was in 1957, and here we are 1994, and that dam has still not been built yet. And so you can see the frustration that a lot of the Bureau people have gone through in the last thirty-five or forty years. The environmental people just are finding ways to stop the development of natural resources, which I feel that we're going to need. . . ."

So we went over there, took pictures of the dam site, and the tunnels and some of the geography problems they might have. This was in 1957, and here we are

1994, and (chuckles) that dam has still not been built yet. And so you can see the frustration that a lot of the Bureau people have gone through in the last thirty-five or forty years. The environmental people just are finding ways to stop the development of natural resources, which I feel that we're going to need.

I remember, right before I retired, I went to a water conference. I think his name was Douglas Wheeler, who's the head of the California Department of Water Resources.[5] He came up with a statement that by the year 2000 California will exceed 40 million people. And the first thing I thought of was, "Where are they going to

5. Wheeler is California's Secretary for Resources, the member of the Governor's Cabinet who heads the Resources Agency. The Department of Water Resources is one department within that agency.

live?! Where are we going to get the water?! Where are the resources coming . . . Where's the power coming from?!"

"I guess I shouldn't say this, but why do we have a Planning Division here in Sacramento? As far as I know, there isn't anything in the planning works. . . ."

The State is not advocating new projects, and the Bureau of Reclamation, of course, is not. I guess I shouldn't say this, but why do we have a Planning Division here in Sacramento? As far as I know, there isn't anything in the planning works. The Bureau of Reclamation, I feel, has just ***totally*** changed directions, and we're more of a . . . I think we're just kind of in a holding mode right now.

Believes Auburn Dam Should Be Built

You know, the North Coast, there's a moratorium, the Wild and Scenic Act, I

guess is the act where you can't develop anything in the North Coast, which is okay. You can't develop everything. You know, you got to put a stop to it, but on the other hand, if something is started–and I'm referring to Auburn Dam, I guess–we should go ahead and go through with it–not only for the development of that water, which is disputed by a lot of environmentalists, but we've spent an awful lot of money up there. You know, the Bureau has acquired the land. The land is ours.

"You know, a lot of people are underplaying flood protection. I remember in *my* career, getting up in a helicopter in 1964 and again in 1986 where if it weren't for a few hours or the let-up of the rain, you know, Sacramento could have been in deep trouble. They relied on Folsom Dam, they relied on the levy system down below Folsom and Nimbus, and that's pretty heavy reliance when you think that those levies had been there a long time. . . ."

Flood protection . . . You know, a lot of people are underplaying flood protection. I remember in ***my*** career, getting up in a helicopter in 1964 and again in 1986 where if it weren't for a few hours or the let-up of the rain, you know, Sacramento could have been in deep trouble. They relied on Folsom Dam, they relied on the levy system down below Folsom and Nimbus, and that's pretty heavy reliance when you think that those levies had been there a long time. There's a lot of moles, a lot of burrowing animals. There's a lot of growth in the American River Parkway, which some people don't seem to realize, when those levies were built–and they were built to a certain capacity–that was on the assumption there wouldn't be any growth there.

So you've got to remember all those trees and all the development that's gone on in the Parkway has diminished that capacity. In 1986 we were ***at*** capacity. Just only for the grace of God we didn't have a levy break. That could have been disastrous. It could have made the Mississippi River levy break, you know, [look like] a cake walk, because I believe we could have had ***much*** more damage -- monetary -- because everything's developed. Down below Folsom Dam, everything's developed. You got businesses, you got residents, lives. A lot of these areas that were affected in some of these other areas, while they were tragic, most of them were farm areas, where there wasn't too much populace. A similar interest here, I believe,

down below Folsom could be ***really*** a tragedy.

Petershagen: You obviously don't go to bed afraid every night of a levy break, but you must have some personal concern. I guess I'm hearing that in your voice. (Dahilig: Yeah.) You would feel better if another flood control dam existed up the river someplace.

Photographed Failure of the Auburn Coffer Dam in 1986

Dahilig: What scares me is that I've seen these things from the air. I remember right before I retired, the assistant regional director, Neil Schild, called me. It was about three or four in the morning. It was in 1986.

When we were starting to build Auburn Dam, they did build a keyway. The keyway, as you know, is the foundation for the dam. And in anticipation of that, the

Bureau had built a thirty-three-foot tunnel to divert the water as it was being constructed. And they also built a cofferdam, which was as big as a lot of dams are–my guess would be well over 200 feet high. This was the cofferdam that was supposed to hold the water back, to give the construction people a chance to build the dam to a certain level where they could then divert the water. Well, in 1986 the rainfall was tremendous. I don't know the figures, but it was probably over twenty inches, and maybe more–twenty-five inches. The cofferdam, as our engineers had predicted, was going to give–there was just too much pressure on it. The coffer dam is always, ***always***, designed to be a temporary structure. There was too much strain on that, and Neil Schild called me one

morning about three or four in the morning, got me out of bed, and he said, "Joe, you'd better get a video camera out. The cofferdam at Auburn is going to breach." So I can tell you first hand I've seen a dam breach, and it's not a very pleasant experience.

“I would hate to think anybody downstream of a dam that breaks, because . . . There's nothing in this world that's going to stop that flow of water. It's a torrent, torrential flow, and the water always goes to its weakest point. . . .”

I would hate to think anybody downstream of a dam that breaks, because you cannot stop that water. There's nothing in this world that's going to stop that flow of water. It's a torrent, torrential flow, and the water always goes to its weakest point. And I video taped [with] that camera, which we had made probably a couple hundred copies,

sent it to . . . Almost all universities with engineering schools wanted to see copies of this tape, wanted to see the reaction of the crumbling of the earth and so forth.

So yeah, I'm really aware that we're in a flood plain. We're in a flood plain right now even as we speak. We're in the South Natomas area. We're protected by some levies, the East Main Levy. We've raised them a few feet, which I presume gives us protection here on this side of the East Main. But still, we've seen, since I've been here in '64 . . . In fact, they published a book in 1964 saying *[Three] ~~Twenty-four~~ Hours from Disaster*.[6]

6. This apparently refers to a joint publication of the California Central Valley Flood Control Association and the American River Flood Control District–"Three Hours to Disaster: Sacramento's $15 Billion Dollar Gamble," 7 leaves, 28 cm. The note in the Bureau of Reclamation library cataloguing of this publication says "A paper on the growing need for American River Flood control and the

(continued...)

Folsom Dam has five gates to release water. They also have three auxiliary gates that will empty that reservoir, because that way, even though you'll flood a lot of people downstream, you're protecting the integrity of Folsom Dam. What you do ***not*** want to do is if Folsom breaches, then you would have absolutely no control. And I've seen those eight gates open, and I'll tell you, it is a lot of water coming down that . . . It'll probably tear Nimbus and probably all the levies down around . . . Sac State [California State University, Sacramento] would probably be under water, if we ever get water where Folsom can't handle it. Some of the

6. (...continued)
implications for the Sacramento metropolitan area of the February 1986 floods."

environmental people are saying, "Well, it's the bad operation of Folsom Dam. You should keep it lower than flood criteria." There's a pool down there that they tell you you can only have water . . . I'm talking out of my field, really! (laughter) Yeah, I'm way off base here, I guess.

Petershagen: Okay. Sometimes it doesn't hurt to get a different point of view.

Dahilig: Yeah, well, it's a sore spot with me. We spent, my guess is probably $300 million on Auburn right now, maybe more. Mike Catino[7] could give you a better feel for that. And yet we have nothing to show for it.

Petershagen: Well, even I have taken pictures at Auburn Dam. That's the closest we've come, I guess, to doing the same job. (laughter) But

7. Brit Storey interviewed Mike Catino for Reclamation's oral history program.

mine, of course, are just as a tourist.

Can you give us a sense of how it felt to work in a construction organization, an engineering organization, and not be an engineer, or not be directly involved in construction? Did you ever feel like an outsider, I guess, is what I'm trying to ask.

". . . whenever we went to the projects, it was protocol to visit the P-C-E . . . to say 'Hello, I'm in the area. . .' . . . San Luis Unit had *three* full-time photographers . . . my job was to shoot more like the 'pretty' pictures, aesthetic pictures that could be used . . . in brochures . . . Their job was to show construction progress in all phases, so it could be used for study later if they needed it . . . You know, you just can't have a file cabinet full of photographs. They have to be properly catalogued. They have to be properly captioned, because a photograph ten years after it's shot doesn't mean a hill of beans unless you can identify it. . . ."

Dahilig: No, I didn't, and I'll tell you why, because I felt very comfortable with the project construction engineers, P-C-Es as we used to call them, because I felt they ***needed*** me.

I can tell you that they called me personally, even at my level, and said, "Joe, come on down here." And whenever we went to the projects, it was protocol to visit the P-C-E, or at least his assistant, and just as protocol, as a courtesy call, to say "Hello, I'm in the area. I'm here to photograph your project." At first, yeah, I was apprehensive at first. When I'd go down there, I'd feel, "God, he's got his ***own*** photographer." I can remember San Luis Unit had ***three*** full-time photographers, and yet they didn't object to me going down there and doing my job. As I told you before, my job–they're what we used to call construction photographers, and doing a very good job–my job was to shoot more like the "pretty" pictures, aesthetic pictures that could be used, like you said, in

brochures, for media, and that type of thing. Not that these fellahs couldn't do it–they could do it, they could shoot the same stuff I could do–but that wasn't their job. Their job was to show construction progress in all phases, so it could be used for study later if they needed it, and to make sure that all this work was being documented. You know, you just can't have a file cabinet full of photographs. They have to be properly catalogued. They have to be properly captioned, because a photograph ten years after it's shot doesn't mean a hill of beans unless you can identify it.

Petershagen: Right. Now, who did that captioning? Was that you and the photographers that did that?

Dahilig: Yes. Every photographer was responsible for his own captioning and his own filing.

We didn't do the actual typing, of course. The way I did it, I used to carry a little tape recorder with me, and when I took a photograph I would voice into the recorder what it was, the date. Time wasn't too important, unless it called for it. If we're shooting some studies, we did a lot of planning, a lot of research work. Up in the Trinity we were concerned with the salmon up there, so we put these salmon counters there, so timing was important, you know– what time did we take this photograph, and how many salmon went through this area that we had these counters by sonar? So it was the photographer's responsibility to do his own captioning. I mean, who would have better knowledge of that?

Petershagen: Right. How about developing?

Developing, all black and white was done in-house in those days.

Dahilig: Developing, all black and white was done in-house in those days.

Petershagen: When you say in-house, do you mean yours or the various field photographers, also?

Dahilig: The field photographers did their own lab work, and the regional photographers, us and Don and all the fellows we worked with, we did our own darkroom work, black and white. Now color we used to, in part, the more what we used to call "custom printing," we would do in-house, we would do it. The little Kodak stuff, the little "jumbo" stuff, we'd contract it out.

“We had, in the regional office, as well as the project office, we had about fifteen to twenty cameras we used to call ‘loaners.’ We couldn't be everyplace . . . we'd loan them cameras, and we'd give them all the film they want. They'd be gone for a week, two weeks, or whatever. When they'd come back, they'd give us the film, and . . . We'd

process it for them. . . .”

We had, in the regional office, as well as the project office, we had about fifteen to twenty cameras we used to call "loaners." We couldn't be everyplace–there was only just a few of us–and we had engineers, geologists, planners, they were out in the field all the time. So what we'd do, we'd loan them cameras, and we'd give them all the film they want. They'd be gone for a week, two weeks, or whatever. When they'd come back, they'd give us the film, and then we would contract that out. We'd process it for them. We'd make them the prints that they wanted, and any report pictures that they subsequently needed. But that was all done through the Photo Lab. So in addition to us actually doing the

photography, I mean, literally shooting the work with our cameras, we also coordinated with the other offices in loaning out cameras, having the work done, and so forth.

Petershagen: Movie film, I take it, was all contracted out, as far as developing is concerned?

Took a Lot of Movies in 16mm Format, but Developing Was Contracted out

Dahilig: The developing was, yeah. The shooting, we did a lot of shooting. In those days we had about five or six 16 millimeter motion picture cameras.

Petershagen: And then as video came more and more to be in use, and you started getting into video cameras, then I take it you had commercial cameras such as a TV station might use, that sort of thing?

Reclamation Transitioned to Video Cameras Also

Dahilig: Yeah, once the motion picture became obsolete for a number of reasons, we purchased professional-type video camera and equipment. When I left, we could edit. We could time code, which is very important. We could duplicate, and that's the road now I think most people are going to. In fact, without any qualification, I would say that very little motion picture photography is done anymore. I think it's all video now, and top quality. We supply TV stations. The quality is such that the TV stations would use it.

Petershagen: Just the little bit of time I've been there in the Photographic Section on Cottage Way, it, to me, resembles a lot more an electronics shop than it does a photo studio kind of a setup.

"Video is the avenue I think everybody should go to. It's expensive to set up, but once you're set up for it, it's very inexpensive when you compare motion pictures. Motion pictures is *extremely* expensive. . . ."

Dahilig: Yeah, it's very elaborate, very useful. Video is the avenue I think everybody should go to. It's expensive to set up, but once you're set up for it, it's very inexpensive when you compare motion pictures. Motion pictures is ***extremely*** expensive.

Petershagen: How about life away from the Bureau of Reclamation? While you were working at the Bureau did you have hobbies you may have participated in? Any of the usual father kind of things, Little League, Cub Scouts, any of that sort of stuff?

Dahilig: Yeah, my son played Little League, and my daughters were cheerleaders in high school, and were involved with the usual lessons:

piano lessons, piano recitals. I was involved with golf.

"We developed a golf club there at the office, which is still in existence today, over twenty years. . . "

We developed a golf club there at the office, which is still in existence today, over twenty years.

"Bowling league–I was the secretary of the bowling league for eight years in the Bureau–and it still exists today. . . ."

Bowling league–I was the secretary of the bowling league for eight years in the Bureau–and it still exists today.

". . . I was involved in a lot of the social activities with the Bureau of Reclamation people . . ."

So I was involved in a lot of the social activities with the Bureau of Reclamation people–very good people. I wouldn't do it any other way.

Petershagen: Some people have indicated to me that they

almost looked at the Bureau as just part of an extended family sort of a thing.

Dahilig: It was family-oriented. We had what we called the Federal Employees Association–FREA, they call it–and we used to have family picnics. Just about everything, the Christmas parties, the camaraderie was very, very, very close. We're close knit. In fact, I can name you some people that have been a couple of generations Bureau of Reclamation people, that I knew their fathers, and ***they're*** Reclamation people.

Petershagen: Is it fair then, to kind of sum that up by saying that your life pretty much did revolve around the Bureau of Reclamation? It was a job, but even more, most of your social activities involved Bureau people?

Dahilig: Yes, it started in '57, and it exists today. I

played golf yesterday with a fellah I met in 1957, and that's nearing forty years, and probably, of the twelve I play with, ten of them I've known in excess of thirty-five years, and they're all Bureau of Reclamation employees. I'll give you an idea: we go to luncheons, we play golf, we bowl with some of them–not all of them, some of them are in their eighties now. We're in the twilight of our career. In fact, I'm the youngest one of the whole lot.

Petershagen: And pretty much an organizer of what goes on now, as near as I can tell.

Dahilig: Oh, yeah, I'm the handicapper. I'm the coordinator.

Petershagen: Well, let's extend that a little bit into your retired life. You play golf a lot, I know. You've told me that more than once. You

bowl a good deal. How long have you been a bowler?

Dahilig: I started bowling in the military in about 1955 when I first hit Washington, D.C. That's when I first started to bowl–about 1955 would be my guess, forty years ago, something like that. And I started to golf right about the same time.

Petershagen: Pretty good bowler?

Dahilig: Well, I average about 178, 180, something like that. My wife also worked for the Bureau, she averages about the same. She doesn't play golf, but we organized several functions that we're kind of proud of. I'm kind of a homebody. I don't go out a lot, but we do go out on bowling trips with Bureau people. This year we went to Orlando, Florida, and we bowled in a tournament in

Mobile, Alabama. And about two weeks ago, as I mentioned to you earlier why I wasn't available, we went down to southern California and bowled with Bureau people down in San Dimas, which is a little . . . near L.A.

Petershagen: I'm going to have to interrupt you right now to change the tape.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JULY 19, 1994.
BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JULY 19, 1994.

Petershagen: Joe, I think we've covered pretty much your career. Maybe we should cover just a little bit more of what you do in retirement. I think you said that you participate in the SIRs?

Dahilig: Yes, I'm in SIRs.

Petershagen: What is SIRs?

Participates in SIRS–Sons in Retirement

Dahilig: SIRs is a northern California organization

entitled SIRs, which stands for Sons In Retirement. It's a nonprofit organization, and, of course, you must be retired. You're mandated to attend a luncheon–at least seven in a time period of twelve months–and the luncheon involves speakers. It involves a lot of retired social activities: trips, a lot of social activities, Christmas parties, Mother's Day parties, the golf tournaments could go as far as Las Vegas. It's a big outfit, something like 20,000 people are involved. At our last SIRs luncheon . . . Southern California wants to expand the Sons In Retirement to their area, and so the state delegation, I believe, is going to take a vote on it, and our branch–our branch is 117, and there are many branches in Sacramento–our branch has

decided to vote against it. I was for it myself, but they don't want to expand it any bigger than it is. Ours is really a large organization.

Petershagen: Does SIRs have any community associated kind of things, service to the community?

Dahilig: Oh yeah, yeah. They're very much involved in just about anything you can conceivably think of. And their aim is the senior citizen. They advocate senior citizen activities. They give us a lot of breaks in flying and in fares and these type of things. Like I say, it's a non-profit organization, and as I understand it, it was started by a fellow that retired from an office such as the Bureau–it wasn't the Bureau, but it was a similar outfit–and he came in and he said, "Hey, let's have lunch," with three other guys that

retired. And that's how it started, from four guys to have lunch once a month (Petershagen: To 20,000, huh?) to 20,000 plus. So you can see what it's come down to . . . or what it's gone up to.

Petershagen: I guess! One of the things that we discussed as we were arranging for the interview was your contacts with–well, as a group, I'll refer to them as VIPs–in photographing things such as dam dedications, groundbreakings, all that. I know you had contact with President [John F.] Kennedy. Would you care to talk about him for a little bit, from your perspective?

First Assignment to Cover a VIP Was President John F. Kennedy for the San Luis Unit Groundbreaking in 1962

Dahilig: Yeah, my first assignment, to cover a very important person, was President Kennedy. I

can give you the date, in fact. It was August 18, 1962. We were going to break ground for the San Luis Unit. It was a very important unit because it set a precedent. It was the first large state-federal joint function, to build a huge project. The feds, the Bureau of Reclamation was going to construct it, but it was going to be funded in part by the State. And so President Kennedy was invited to start the project, and I was assigned the photographic end of it, to document it. It was a very large ceremony, as all president functions are–a lot of dignitaries–Secretary of the Interior [Stewart L.] Udall was there, a lot of congressmen, senators. Senator [Thomas H.] Kuchel at the time was there. Clair Engle, who at that time was also one of our Senators. [Member

of Congress Harold T.] "Bizz" Johnson. Just numerous congressional people, cabinet-level people, and the President of the United States. We photographed it–in those days it was motion pictures and still photography. It's all on file now. And the highlight of the project was at that time Pat Brown, Governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, and they jointly pressed a plunger that would detonate the start of the construction of the keyway to the dam, which was on the horizon to our west from where we were located. As an explosion went off . . . this was a mock explosion. It wasn't the actual groundbreaking, but it was like most groundbreakings are. They just set an explosion, and then they had helicopters flying what was going to be the height of the

crest of the dam. And they flew, and they had colored smoke coming out. It was a very, very impressive ceremony, one of the most impressive that I've ever seen, and I covered a lot of them.

President Kennedy Also Came to the Dedication of Whiskeytown Dam

And after that, President Kennedy came again during the dedication of Whiskeytown Dam, and we were involved with that dedication. He came down again in September of '63. You know what happened a few months after that. So it was my pleasure to photograph and get very near to the president. I didn't actually shake his hand, but Rex D'Alessandro, the guy that worked for me, he put his camera aside, went up to the president and shook his hand. He told me, "[Take my picture.] I want to

go up there and shake his hand."

Of course, the president was very loose with his Secret Service. I don't feel that today a person could do that, but he went right into the crowd. We had a fence that the Bureau had built. The Bureau had funded all the logistics of the ceremony, and it was unique in that the ceremony took place on top of a dam, at the crest of Whiskeytown Dam, up there near Redding. And the helicopter landed right on the crest, and he just walked up to the podium. Well, right after the ceremony, he walked into the crowd, and Rex and I were, it was just a toss up of who was going to walk up to him and shake his hand, so Rex being older than I am said, "Okay, I'm going to go down there." He shook his hand, and it was a pretty proud

moment.

Photographed the 50th Anniversary of Hoover Dam

I covered many dedications. I covered the Fiftieth Anniversary of the completion of Hoover Dam.

Petershagen: Okay, but before we get into that, you told me a story about some personal contact with President Kennedy. Do you recall what I'm talking about?

President Kennedy Autographed a Photograph for Him

Dahilig: Yeah, I remember that. It's kind of a touchy subject with me, but when he came down on August 18, 1962, I took a picture of the president at the podium. He was looking right at me, and I took his photograph. I enlarged it to an eleven-by-fourteen black and white print, and I sent it to the White House. I mentioned to him that I was an

official photographer for the United States Bureau of Reclamation, an agency of the Department of Interior, and I would very much like for him to autograph this photograph. And I sent it to him, and lo and behold, it was very, very quick–my guess would be probably under three weeks–I got this package in the mail, at my home, and I opened it up, and there was the photograph, and it said, "Best wishes, John F. Kennedy." And I mounted it, and I put it up in the office, and I was convinced by my associate that this was too valuable a photograph, and maybe I ought to take it down. So I did. And he told me, "I want to show it to some friends of mine. Can I take it?" And so I loaned it to him. He never returned it. Of course a few years later he was assassinated,

so I knew I was never going to see it again. Although I still have the photograph. I have the photograph, but it's not autographed. But the reason I say it's a touchy subject is because this fellah is probably my very dearest friend, and the friendship is not worth it to me to get that photograph back.

Petershagen: If you ever had to have it for anything, I'm sure you could, though, very easily.

Dahilig: Well, I don't know. You know, we were very close, very, very close to him and his wife. His wife passed away. I think it would offend him if I asked him for it. I really do.

Petershagen: You also mentioned when we were trying to establish a date for the interview that you had taken some pictures of President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower.

Dahilig: Yes, in 1955 I was in what we called a Class "A" Photo Lab. It's the highest class photo lab in the United States Navy, and I was assigned there. I was assigned the studio position, which meant that there was only about five or six of us up there that were involved in covering anything that related to the White House with the Navy–it had to be Navy related. So anything that would involve going to seeing dignitaries, anything that had to do with–if an admiral came on board or something like that, VIPs–we were assigned the jobs. And of the five of us, we were all on call. Well, when President Eisenhower was running for office–I guess it was 1956, I guess it would be that campaign–he came in, he wanted the United

States Navy to take his official photograph, the photograph that was to be used for his campaign. And so he came in to have his photograph taken. I was not the lead photographer, I was more like the grip. I was involved . . . I was in the room, and I was involved. There were three photographers that were setting up the lighting and so forth. And he came in, we took a picture of the president and his wife, Mamie. I thought that was kind of one of the highlights, even though I didn't vote for the guy. (chuckles) But he was a very famous person and I'm very proud to have taken his photo, or at least be involved in the taking of his photograph. A very famous person, five-star general, very well-known, and I'm very proud of that.

Petershagen: Okay. Now, in both of these cases of dealings with these figures, both Kennedy and Eisenhower, you must have had some dealings with Secret Service men or staff aides that set things up for them. (Dahilig: Yeah.) Any problems?

Dahilig: No, we never had any problems at all. Anytime we covered very, very important people that required security, they would give us a little something we put on our lapel that would identify us, who we are, just by sight. I would hate to think (chuckles) what would happen if we approached somebody very important without that little . . . . I remember going on trips with very important people, and they'd give us this lapel, and we'd be staying in a motel room and the whole area would be

blocked off, but we were allowed. There were Secret Service people in the hallways, as an example, sitting in the hallway, and as soon as they'd see that lapel, they'd let us through and stay in that section that the people were staying in. I found them to be very courteous. They never gave us any trouble at all. I remember commenting with these guys, "You don't look very tough!" I don't remember the exact comment, but I'm sure there was a gun hidden under his coat somewhere. But they were very good. The Secret Service, I thought, was super.

Petershagen: How about competition with other people for a specific camera position or something like that? I have this vision of, well, let's say, John Kennedy at the Whiskeytown Dam dedication. There must have been

dozens, maybe even hundreds, of photographers there.

Logistics and Dealing with Other Photographers at High Profile Events

Dahilig: You have that accurate when you say hundreds. And it was very tough, I can tell you. It was extremely tough. I can remember where the local news media would get up there. The Bureau of Reclamation set up a podium, right in front of the main podium, and it was elevated, for the photographers to set their video cameras up there. Well, in those days, it was mostly motion picture cameras, and set it up to get a good aim at the president. When the president and his entourage came, he also brought the national news media with him– you know, the Dan Rathers and . . . . I'm not implying Dan Rather, but you know, the

national media–and White House photographers and so forth. And, of course, they were there at the last moment, and I can tell you, I can remember when these guys were coming on board, and this guy would have been there ***hours*** before, set up his camera, set up his tripod, and they come in there like the Lord himself, and they just dump everything over the side, because they felt they had preference. So yeah, it was very, very competitive, very, very tough. And we got what we got primarily because there were several of us covering the same function, and we got the best photography of all.

When we went down to San Luis, there was four of us that was down there. There was Rex D'Alessandro, myself, and

the two project photographers that were down there. At Whiskeytown, there was three of us. And so we got the best work of all. But you always had to fight the photographer that was in front of you. We'd get up and set up the camera, and my God, there was three guys ahead of you, and before you know it, we'd be just joggling for position. Yeah, it's very tough.

"You can see . . . a picture of the president, they got this high telephoto lens type. They're not anywhere near the president. You've got to have good equipment now to get him. . . ."

You can see the video or the news media tonight when they take a picture of the president, they got this high telephoto lens type. They're not anywhere near the president. You've got to have good equipment now to get him.

Petershagen: I apologized earlier when you were talking

about President Kennedy. I interrupted you. You had started to say something, I think, with regard to Hoover Dam.

50th Anniversary of Hoover Dam

Dahilig: Yeah, there was other functions that I'm quite proud of. I remember at that time it was Secretary of Interior [Donald P.] Hodel, and they were commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the end of construction of Hoover Dam, which I think is one of the wonders of the world, considering it was built in four years. You couldn't build a dam that way now in a million years. There's not enough money right now to build a Hoover Dam. So I covered that function, which involved the fiftieth celebration. You ever been to Union Plaza in Las Vegas?

Petershagen: Yes, uh-huh.

Dahilig: Okay, it was wall-to-wall people. We're talking just like Times Square during New Year's. That's the way it was during that celebration. We had video cameras set up. It was an international affair, really. Hodel was the primary speaker. The president didn't come, but he was invited, but it was the secretary.

Photographed the Slippage at San Luis Dam When Secretary of the Interior James Watt Came out

Another instance I got was when we had a huge slippage at San Luis Reservoir. One of the dams was starting to slough off on the reservoir side. I don't think the dam was in any danger of breaking or breaching, but it was pretty significant, so we had Secretary Watt come, and he was

pretty controversial, Secretary James Watt–very controversial. In fact, he was asked to resign by the Nixon Administration.

Dahilig Accompanied Secretary Watt on Several Trips

Anyway, I had the honor of going with him on several trips, and this was one of them. I took his picture with a hard hat, and I sent it to him like I did the president, and he sent it back. He said, "The hard hat looks good, but the subject is terrible," (Petershagen laughs) or something to that effect, and he signed it James Watt. I still have that photograph, as a matter of fact.

Anyway, those are just some of the things. To me, not only presidents were important. Some of these guys that were secretary–you figure how many secretaries of the interior have there been in the history

of this country. We dedicated Stampede Dam where they had Senator [Alan] Bible, and at that time a Senator from Nevada–I can't think of his name right now. He went on to become Governor of the state.[8] So I had a lot of fun, covering these things.

Petershagen: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about? We've been talking about things I wanted to talk about all morning.

"The only thing I want to talk about, and really why I agreed to this, is to try to give the Bureau of Reclamation it's due credit. . . ."

Dahilig: The only thing I want to talk about, and really why I agreed to this, is to try to give the Bureau of Reclamation it's due credit. I think I covered, as a photographer for the Bureau–and I might not have mentioned this before–but I went not only in this region, but

8. Paul Laxalt.

I covered other regions as well.

Loaned to Other Regions to Do Photography

I went on loan to Texas, to Colorado, to Wyoming, to Utah, up in the Northwest. So I was on loan. Maybe I was unique, I don't know. I don't know what the other fellahs did, but I can tell you I've seen Bureau of Reclamation works all over the western United States, and I think the Bureau of Reclamation has done an awful lot of good. It's getting a lot of knocks, you know, in retrospect, in hindsight, yeah, the Bureau's done some bad things. Maybe they didn't plan them out properly, but you got to remember the times. In those days, people were out of work, they were concerned with putting people to work and getting some benefits from it. And so I think the Bureau

has just really taken a bad rap in late years.

". . . I just like to see the Bureau get its due, its credit. It's done a lot of good for this country. . . ."

And I think anything that I can do–I love the Bureau–and I just like to see the Bureau get its due, its credit. It's done a lot of good for this country.

Petershagen: If I asked you what event that you photographed stands out the most in your mind, what was the most important, to ***you***. What would that be?

Feels the Most Important Events He Covered Were with President John F. Kennedy

Dahilig: Well, it's obvious to me, covering President Kennedy twice. I think that was heart-warming, especially after he was assassinated. I just felt real regret. I really felt bad.

Petershagen: I hear the love and respect in your voice,

and I can see it on your face now that I have a chance to see you face-to-face. My guess was that that was probably what you would say in answer to that question.

That, I think, concludes our interview, then, Joe. I certainly do want to say thank you. I appreciate you taking this time. I need, before we close, once again for you to acknowledge what I asked you at the very beginning, that you understand that this recording is a gift by you to the United States and becomes the government's property.

Dahilig: Yes, I do.

Petershagen: And with that, I'll say thank you very much.

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JULY 19, 1994.
END OF INTERVIEW.