

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

J. WILLIS ERVIN



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“ . . . I had the opportunity . . . to go on to the University of Nebraska via a scholarship from the Sears-Roebuck Foundation. I think it was awarded not so much on scholastic ability, but more on financial needs. Without it, I would never have been able to go on to the university. . . .” 9

“I went to the University of Nebraska for three semesters. Then I joined the enlisted reserve corps . . . shortly after I signed the enlistment papers, we were . . . all called up to active duty . . . April, of 1943 . . . Then I spent the next three years in the Army. . . .” 10

Army Sent Him to Oklahoma State University in a Pre-Engineering Program 10

Transferred to Europe in the Spring of 1944. 11

“ . . . went to Camp House, Texas, to the 103rd Infantry Division . . . In September we shipped out to Europe. . . .” 11

Was in Europe until February of 1946 and Then Discharged in April That Year 11

“We landed on the East Coast. . . I was sent back to Fort Leavenworth for discharge . . . On my way home . . . I stopped off in Lincoln and made arrangements to come back to school there in the fall. . . .” 12

“ . . . I signed up for . . . unemployment insurance . . . fifty bucks a month or something like that, until you could find a job. I put down my experience, the kind of a job, the work I had experience in . . . at the university, prior to World War II . . . I had worked in the state seed laboratory as a seed analyst . . . I didn’t think they would find me a job that matched that. Well, about a couple of weeks later, they called up and told me that they wanted me to go to the Bureau of Reclamation offices and be interviewed . . .” 13

“ . . . Bureau had opened a small office in McCook . . . to begin the initial planning and construction activities associated with the Missouri River Basin Project, under the Pick-Sloan Plan. . . . there was not a decent place, large enough place to accommodate them, so they were set up in the city auditorium, which is about like a gymnasium. That’s where I went to the interview . . .” 14

“I went to work for the Bureau . . . a GS-2. . . . we had land classifiers in the field who were classifying land as to its suitability for irrigation. Those soil samples had to be analyzed for salt content or pH and other things. That’s what I went to work doing. . . .” 14

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“The Bureau had its own unique system of land classification . . . [most] systems sort of recognized the ability of the soils to sustain agriculture. The Bureau, on top of that, added the ability of the soils and the land to sustain irrigation over a long period of time. It was a . . . dimension added on top of most traditional soil surveys. . . .”	28
“. . . the Bureau had learned over years of other projects, operations, that the ability of the land to sustain irrigation over a long period of time was a critical factor. Many projects, or parts of projects, failed because of lack of drainage . . . Reclamation had a unique system of land classification designed for particular needs. . . .”	28
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- “ . . . I helped the farmers get their initial ditches dug, and helped teach them how to put in check dams, and hold the water up, and use siphon tubes. . . .”
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- Enjoyed Working with Farmers Because, Unlike Land Classification, it Wasn’t Tied to Extensive Guidance and Procedures. 37
- “ . . . Reclamation . . . entered into cooperative agreements with . . . Extension Service[s] . . . we transferred funds to the university for . . . a more concentrated effort in the project areas designed to get the irrigated agriculture established. . . .” 37
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- “ . . . there’d be a distinct difference between the experimental farms. The development farm was putting proven practices into work or into place. There were people who wanted to make them experimental farms, but we resisted that. . . .” 38
- “ . . . one of the reasons these were not experimental farms, you entered into an agreement with an individual landowner who was making his living off of this farm, usually. He wasn’t there to do experimental work. . . . we would survey and find a farm in which the owner was interested in having it used as a development farm. . . .” 39
- “We’d have field days, where people could come and watch and see what was going on. You also had a landowner helping educate in the community, as opposed to an experimental scientist from the experiment station. . . .”
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- “The Pick-Sloan Missouri River Basin Project encompassed the whole basin. Then within that there were individual projects, which they called units. A unit was generally a segregated or separate area which had its own facilities” 40
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- “ . . . we wrote a report . . . we found out that most of the project land, 50 percent of it, would be irrigated the first year they had water. . . . At the end of about three years, you were getting about 85 to 90 percent of the land being irrigated” 42
- “ . . . the technology . . . or equipment that was available in the fifties, as compared to projects earlier than that, allowed them to move faster. . . .” 43
- “ . . . the educational program . . . emphasized you either got to get in this ball game of irrigating . . . or sell your farm to somebody that wants to, because you can’t . . . afford not to irrigate, eventually, because they were in an irrigation district, and whether they irrigated or not, the district
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**STATEMENT OF DONATION
OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF
J. WILLIS ERVIN**

1. In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions set forth in this instrument, I, J. Willis Ervin, (hereinafter referred to as "the Donor"), of Evergreen, Colorado, do hereby give, donate, and convey to the Bureau of Reclamation and the National Archives and Records Administration (hereinafter referred to as "the National Archives"), acting for and on behalf of the United States of America, all of my rights and title to, and interest in the information and responses (hereinafter referred to as "the Donated Materials") provided during the interview conducted on June 29, July 1, and July 8, 1998, at my home, and prepared for deposit with the National Archives and Records Administration in the following format: cassette tapes and transcripts. This donation includes, but is not limited to, all copyright interests I now possess in the Donated Materials.
2.
 - a. It is the intention of the Archivist to make Donated Materials available for display and research as soon as possible, and the Donor places no restrictions upon their use.
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4. The Archivist may dispose of Donated Materials at any time after title passes to the National Archives.

Date: July 8, 1998

Signed: J. Willis Ervin
J. Willis Ervin

INTERVIEWER: Christine E Pfaff
Christine Pfaff

Having determined that the materials donated above by J. Willis Ervin are appropriate for preservation as evidence of the United States Government's organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, and transactions, and considering it to be in the public interest to accept these materials for deposit with the National Archives and Records Administration, I accept this gift on behalf of the United States of America, subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions set forth in the above instrument.

Date: _____

Signed: _____
Archivist of the United States

Brief Chronology of J. Willis Ervin

- 1923–Born and raised on a dry land farm in Frontier County, Nebraska, near McCook
- 1941–Graduated from the State of Nebraska School for Agriculture in Curtis, Nebraska
- 1941–Entered the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and worked as a seed analyst
- 1942/3–Enlisted in the Army reserve corps
- April 1943–Called to active duty and after a couple of months the Army sent him to Oklahoma State University in a pre-engineering course. Then he spent eighteen months in Europe.
- April 1946–Discharged from the Army
- Summer 1946 and 1947–Worked for the Bureau of Reclamation in McCook as a soil analyst
- Fall 1946–Reentered the University of Nebraska in Lincoln
- February 1948–Graduated and went to work for Reclamation in McCook as a land classifier
- Office moved out to Indianola, Nebraska, to a German Prisoner of War Camp due to lack of space for an expanding office in McCook
- c. 1950–Became an agriculturist with Reclamation at Indianola, Nebraska
- 1952–Moved from the Reclamation office and camp near Indianola to McCook
- c. 1954–Reclamation’s offices moved from Indianola to McCook
- 1961-1962–Became Land Management Branch Chief in McCook
- c. 1965–Accepted into Reclamation’s Recently Developed Manager Development Program
- 1968–Applied for and became a reports coordinator in the Division of Planning in Washington, D.C.
- November 1970–Left Washington to Move to Denver to Head the Reports Coordination Branch in the Division of Planning of the Lower Missouri Region
- Mid-1972-1983–Became Chief of the Water and Land Operations Division in the Lower

Missouri Region

September 20, 1983–Awarded the Department of the Interior’s Distinguished Service Award in the 49th Convocation Awards Ceremony

Post retirement–Worked with Warren Fairchild for the World Bank and USAID in Pakistan to assist with rehabilitation of the Pakistani irrigation system

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

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Oral History Interviews
J. Willis Ervin

Pfaff: Today is June 29th, 1998. I am interviewing John Willis Ervin, who goes by the name of J. Willis Ervin. We are at his home in Evergreen, Colorado.

First, we'll start, I guess, at the beginning. Tell me you can tell me where you were born.

Born in Frontier County, Nebraska, in 1923

Ervin: Well, I was born in Frontier County, Nebraska, in 1923, on a farm.

Raised on a Farm

I was raised with a farm family. There were six children.

“ . . . I was a kid of about twelve-, thirteen years old when the drought and Depression days descended upon the country and particularly in the southwest Nebraska area. Not only was there lack of crops from lack of precipitation, but the wind also eroded the land resources as a result of the drought. It was a very impressionistic period for me to grow up in that situation. . . .”

You can easily figure out that, having been born in 1923, I was a kid of about twelve, thirteen years old when the drought and Depression days descended upon the country and particularly in the southwest Nebraska area. Not only was there ~~was~~¹ lack

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 struck out 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, the secretary of the interior;" or "Commissioner John Keys" as opposed to "the commissioner, who was John Keys at the time." 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."

The convention with acronyms is that if they are pronounced as a word then they are treated as if they are a word. If they are spelled out by the speaker then they have a hyphen between each letter. An example is the Agency

(continued...)

of crops from lack of precipitation, but the wind also eroded the land resources as a result of the drought. It was a very impressionistic period for me to grow up in that situation.

Pfaff: Did your family had a dry land farm there?

Ervin: Yes, we did, we had a dry land farm. We didn't have any irrigation. In fact, there wasn't any very close around.

Pfaff: I guess at that point, in Nebraska, there was very little irrigation, from my understanding.

Ervin: In that part of the state.

Pfaff: How did the Dust Bowl then affect your family directly?

Ervin: Well, at least in two ways, and probably others, but certainly financially. There was lack of financial resources. The crops didn't mature, so there wasn't much income, other than sustenance. Anyway, there was enough money that you'd get from cream and eggs to take care of the family's needs. But it certainly didn't pay off mortgages, or buy new machinery, or allow you to get an advanced education.

Pfaff: You mentioned you were born in Frontier County. What town did you actually grow up in? What was the closest town?

Grew up in the Area of McCook, Nebraska

Ervin: Well, McCook was the closest town, about twenty miles away.

Pfaff: How big is the farm that you grew up on?

Lived on an Average Size Farm for the Area, about 400 Acres

Ervin: It was only four hundred acres.

Pfaff: Was that considered a small farm for the area at the time?

Ervin: No, it was probably about an average-size farm, maybe a little smaller.

1. (...continued)

for International Development's acronym: said as a word, it appears as AID but spelled out it appears as A-I-D; another example is the acronym for State Historic Preservation Officer: SHPO when said as a word, but S-H-P-O when spelled out.

“ . . . it was along about that time that tractors and so forth replaced horses. Farmers started farming more acreage, or farms got larger, at least, with the capability of bigger machinery. But I have done farm work with horses. . . .”

However, it was along about that time that tractors and so forth replaced horses. Farmers started farming more acreage, or farms got larger, at least, with the capability of bigger machinery. But I have done farm work with horses.

Pfaff: That’s what you remember from the early–

Ervin: Earliest. Then I grew up on one of these things.

Pfaff: You’re looking at a–

Ervin: John Deere, a model John Deere D 1923 tractor.

Pfaff: When did your family get one of those?

Family Bought a John Deere Tractor about 1936

Ervin: Well, I don’t know exactly, but I would say around 1936.

Pfaff: Up until then, it was all with horses?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: How did the tractor make a difference on the farm? What did that do, having that?

“ . . . we got rid of the horses, most of them. We didn’t have to feed the horses. . . . it meant some adaptation of machinery . . . to the tractor power, and the ability to farm more land . . .”

Ervin: Well, we got rid of the horses, most of them. We didn’t have to feed the horses. Tractor doesn’t eat when it’s sitting still. But it meant some adaptation of machinery to what we previously used with horses, to the tractor power, and the ability to farm more land with it. You could cover more ground in a day with the tractor and larger machinery.

Pfaff: As someone helping out on the farm, at that time, as a child, was it exciting for you when you could get on the tractor, instead of having to . . .

Ervin: Go harness the horses? (laughter)

Pfaff: –go harness the horses? (laughter)

Ervin: Yes, that was more fun. That’s right.

Pfaff: So you grew up on a dry land farm. What were you growing on the farm?

Raised Cattle, Hogs, Barley, Wheat, Some Corn, and Sorghum

Ervin: We had some cattle and barley and wheat and, in some instances, corn. But during the drought period, the corn sort of lost its glamour, or least it didn’t produce very well. We planted some grain sorghums, which were sort of in their infancy then, compared to today’s lines of grain sorghum. That was most of it. And quite a few hogs. They don’t take a lot of acreage to raise hogs, compared to cattle. So we had quite a few hogs.

Pfaff: Did the cattle and the hogs then survive through the drought?

Kept Hogs Throughout the Depression, but Didn’t Keep Cattle Due to Lack of Feed

Ervin: Well, the hogs did, as I recall, but the cattle didn’t. The government instituted a program to buy up surplus cattle and slaughter them. Not for food, but they just killed them to get rid of them. As I recall, we got somewhere around eight to twelve dollars a head, I think, for the cattle. But you didn’t have anything to feed them.

Pfaff: But you had enough food for the hogs?

Ervin: Seemed to, yes. Don’t know exactly why. Well, livestock needed acreage to graze on. I guess we’d do enough grain to feed the hogs.

Pfaff: The grain sorghums, did they do better during the drought than other crops?

Ervin: Yes. They’re more drought resistant.

Pfaff: So your family was able to maintain the farm through that whole period?

Parents Were Able to Get a Federal Land Bank Loan to Save the Farm

Ervin: Well, by the skin of our teeth, yes. (laughter) My parents must have had—or now that I’ve been through parenting—they had a very difficult period with just stress from not

only the drought, but the financial resources. They had difficulty in paying off the mortgage for the farm. It was a private loan. But Federal Land Bank loans, or [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's Administration's programs, included farm mortgages at reasonable rates. In other words, to save the farm. And my parents were fortunate enough to get one of those loans, and paid off their private loan they had, and were able to retain the farm. Actually, during World War II, they were able to pay that loan off, too. They did retain the farm.

Pfaff: Did you have neighbors, friends, that ended up leaving Nebraska, leaving their farms, because they could not make it?

“ . . . I remember . . . a family that . . . moved to an irrigated farm in Fort Collins. They thought they were sort of going to heaven, that they could have someplace where they would have some guaranteed water. . . . ”

Ervin: Yes, many did. Many did. I remember particularly remember a family that, I don't know whether they sold or lost their farm out there, but they moved to an irrigated farm in Fort Collins. They thought they were sort of going to heaven, that they could have someplace where they would have some guaranteed water.

Pfaff: I guess. So you really remember, you have some pretty vivid memories of that whole time?

Ervin: Very much, yes. I don't think you ever get that out of your system.

Pfaff: Do you remember seeing the dust storms, and all of that, coming across the plains?

Attended a One Room Schoolhouse

Ervin: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, we lived three miles from the one-room schoolhouse that I went to school in.

“I can remember, in the spring the Dust Bowl windstorms and it getting so dark in the schoolhouse that we couldn't really carry on school. . . . ”

I can remember, in the spring the Dust Bowl windstorms and it getting so dark in the schoolhouse that we couldn't really carry on school. I remember the teacher turning out school early in the afternoon because of the dust in the air. I'm not so sure it was so smart, because it turned these young kids loose in an almost darkened condition to find their way home.

I drove a horse and buggy from our house the three miles to school, and picked up some of the neighbor kids along the way. But the teacher would turn us out, and we'd wet our handkerchiefs and put over our face so we wouldn't breathe quite as much dust. I'd get my horse and the buggy and load it up, and the horse was smart enough to know the way home, better than I did. Even if I couldn't see, she seemed to always get us home.

Pfaff: Is that right. So the dust would be so thick that you couldn't see where you were actually going on the road?

Ervin: That's right.

Pfaff: What about at home? Did your mom have the rugs and the . . .

Ervin: That's right.

Pfaff: . . . coming in under the door and all of that?

Ervin: Right. Wet all those things down, yes.

Pfaff: So during that whole time you were going to school at the one-room schoolhouse up through what grade?

Ervin: Eighth.

Pfaff: So you were helping out on a farm, and going to school at the same time?

Ervin: Well, at that age I don't know whether I was a help or a hindrance on the farm, but, yes, I had my chores to do, you know.

Pfaff: I'd imagine all the kids did that in your family.

Ervin: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes, that was essential. That was I guess what you call a family operation, because everybody was somewhat involved, or involved in something.

Pfaff: What were your chores?

Ervin: Oh, as I recall, feeding the hogs at night and the cattle. Gathering eggs for my mom. Chopping some wood. Milking cows. I guess, from time to time, I suppose, I drove the wagons, and whatever we were doing.

Pfaff: Then started driving the tractor?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: After eighth grade, where did you go to school, after you finished attending the one-room schoolhouse?

**Went to High School at the State of Nebraska School for Agriculture in Curtis,
Nebraska, about Thirty-five Miles from His Home**

Ervin: Well, the state of Nebraska established a high school for agriculture in Nebraska, in Curtis, Nebraska. It seems to me it was about 1913, or early on. It was a four-year high school designed for farm children who were going to maybe make their life farming, or in agriculture. It was designed a lot after the curriculum at the College of Agriculture at the university, only on a lesser scale, I guess. I was fortunate enough to be able to go to that high school for four years, in which I lived away from home.

Pfaff: How far was Curtis?

Ervin: It was about thirty-five miles.

Pfaff: You boarded somewhere while you were at high school?

Ervin: Well, the school had dormitories and they also had a dining facility. It wasn't a cafeteria, but they fed the students there. Unless you lived there, if home was in town, you probably went home to ~~school~~[eat]. But those of us who were staying away from home, we could eat at the school dormitory.

Pfaff: So you would be at the school during the year, and then in the summertime you'd go back home and help out on the farm?

Ervin: That's right. We wouldn't get home very many times a year, or during school season. I suppose Thanksgiving, of course, and Christmas, and once or twice in the spring. Maybe four times a year I spent a little time at home.

Pfaff: Did you go there already thinking that you wanted to pursue a career in agriculture? You said it was a high school for agriculture. Or would that have been where all the children in your area would have gone to high school?

Ervin: Not everybody in our area would have gone there. Most of the kids in that neighborhood went to McCook High School. We had about four hundred at what was

called the Nebraska School of Agriculture. They came from all over the state. Even some of out of state.

Pfaff: So you had to apply to get in?

“ . . . my mom and dad were dedicated to the fact that their kids should get a better education than they had. . . . my three brothers went to school there. But, unfortunately, my two sisters did not get to go there to school. . . . ”

Ervin: Yes, I think. Well, my thought was to continue to learn something. My mother had been a schoolteacher back around 1900 to 1907, I believe, in Buffalo County, Nebraska. And my dad was born in a dugout on his parents' homestead in Red Willow County, Nebraska. I think he always said he was able to get through about the fifth-grade level before he was required to work on the farm, or off the farm to get some money to help sustain his family. So my mom and dad were dedicated to the fact that their kids should get a better education than they had. That was probably the driving force in my going to school there. In fact, my three brothers went to school there. But, unfortunately, my two sisters did not get to go there to school.

Pfaff: Did they go to the local school in McCook?

Ervin: No, they moved. They went to school in Danbury, which is still in Red Willow County, which is close to where my grandparents homesteaded. They were living in Danbury, so my sisters stayed with them. Helped take care of them, and went to high school there most of the years.

Pfaff: Were your brothers in school with you at the same time then? Were you all going together?

Ervin: No, my two older brothers, I think, graduated around 1930, '31. Another older brother graduated in 1938, I think. I was at school with him one year. He was a senior and I was a freshmen.

Pfaff: Tell me about the curriculum there, what you remember about it.

Ervin: Well, first of all, it was basically an agricultural curriculum. Unfortunately, liberal arts students were sort of out of luck. But we had crops and soils, animal husbandry, poultry and dairy husbandry classes. Along with, of course, some basics in math and English, biology, chemistry.

Pfaff: So it was a really good education to prepare you for going on and working on a farm

later on.

“ . . . I had the opportunity . . . to go on to the University of Nebraska via a scholarship from the Sears-Roebuck Foundation. I think it was awarded not so much on scholastic ability, but more on financial needs. Without it, I would never have been able to go on to the university. . . .”

Ervin: That was what it was intended to be, yes. However, I had the opportunity, after graduating there, to go on to the University of Nebraska via a scholarship from the Sears-Roebuck Foundation. I think it was awarded not so much on scholastic ability, but more on financial needs. Without it, I would never have been able to go on to the university.

Pfaff: You applied for this scholarship?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: You were encouraged by your teacher?

Ervin: I was encouraged by the superintendent of [the] school. Without his involvement, I probably wouldn't have gone to the university. As a matter of fact, he went down to the university occasionally. After I graduated my senior year, he took me down there to Lincoln, which was a couple hundred miles away or farther, to register and get ready to go to college.

Pfaff: So you had a lot of encouragement in high school already to go on.

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: You must have been a good student.

Ervin: I was fairly good one, yes.

Pfaff: So when did you enter the University of Nebraska? That's in Lincoln, right?

Ervin: Right. Fall of 1941.

Pfaff: Right before World War II started.

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: I mean just before the U.S. involvement.

Ervin: Yes. I vividly remember Pearl Harbor, because I was working in the cafeteria down at Ag College, washing dishes just after the noon meal, when we got the message about Pearl Harbor.

Pfaff: Did they announce it over the radio at school?

Ervin: Well, it was on a Sunday. Somebody heard it on the radio, I suppose, and the word traveled fast after that.

Pfaff: Do you remember what your reaction was at the time?

Ervin: Not really. Maybe almost, you know, disbelief. I suppose it would have been natural to wonder what this was going to mean to you. How do I fit into this picture?

Pfaff: How did it affect you? Did you end up having to take a break from school and serve in the military?

“I went to the University of Nebraska for three semesters. Then I joined the enlisted reserve corps . . . shortly after I signed the enlistment papers, we were . . . all called up to active duty . . . April, of 1943 . . . Then I spent the next three years in the Army. . . .”

Ervin: I went to the University of Nebraska for three semesters. Then I joined the enlisted reserve corps, which was designed, they said, to keep you in school until you were needed. Well, shortly after I signed the enlistment papers, we were needed and we were all called up to active duty in April, I think it was, first part of March, or April, of 1943, I guess. Then I spent the next three years in the Army.

Pfaff: Were you abroad then?

Army Sent Him to Oklahoma State University in a Pre-Engineering Program

Ervin: I was in Europe for eighteen months. I did have the good fortune of, while I was taken out of college at Nebraska and called into active duty, after I'd been in about two months, the military offered us an opportunity to go back to college, what they called the A-S-T-P Program.² So I signed up. At that time I was in Camp Robertson, California, and was assigned back to Oklahoma State University, along with about two hundred other GIs. We went to school in a pre-engineering curriculum.

2. Army Specialized Training Program.

Pfaff: So this is before you went to Europe?

Ervin: Before, yes.

Pfaff: This was in 1943 then?

Transferred to Europe in the Spring of 1944

Ervin: Right. Then in about April 1944, the Army decided, or the military, the powers-that-be, decided that they needed infantrymen in Europe worse than they needed GIs in college back in the States. The objective of that program was to have trained technical people after the war was over, for whatever the needs of the country were. Plus the fact that universities were probably hurting financially during the war because of lack of students. So that is basically how I happened to get in there. Essentially, I got credit for about a year's college from Oklahoma State towards my degree at Nebraska after the war.

“ . . . went to Camp House, Texas, to the 103rd Infantry Division . . . In September we shipped out to Europe. . . .”

We were called up to, in my particular instance, we went to Camp House, Texas, to the 103rd Infantry Division, which we trained in. In September we shipped out to Europe.

Pfaff: In September 1944?

Ervin: '44, right. 1944.

Pfaff: So you were there from September of '44, until the surrender?

Was in Europe until February of 1946 and Then Discharged in April That Year

Ervin: I was there about another year after that, too, or nine months. I was discharged in April of '46, I believe. I stayed in Europe until February, I think, of that year. February is when we came back home.

Pfaff: Where were you in Europe?

Ervin: France and Germany and Austria, in an infantry division.

Pfaff: At the end of the war, then you ended up coming back to Nebraska and finishing up at

the university. What happened then?

“We landed on the East Coast. . . . I was sent back to Fort Leavenworth for discharge . . . On my way home . . . I stopped off in Lincoln and made arrangements to come back to school there in the fall. . . .”

Ervin: Well, let’s see. We landed on the East Coast. I guess I was sent back to Fort Leavenworth for discharge, because that’s where I was inducted. On my way home from being discharged, I stopped off in Lincoln and made arrangements to come back to school there in the fall.

Pfaff: So you were anxious to go back and finish?

Ervin: Yes, I was still driven by, I guess, the family’s criteria to get an education. I remember many times my mother telling me to, “Get an education and make something of yourself.” That’s about all the guidance I remember her giving me. I don’t know whether I succeeded or not. (laughter)

Pfaff: I would say you did. So you had a pre-engineering year there. That was a big switch then from the agricultural career that you were trying to follow.

Ervin: That’s right.

Pfaff: Did that influence you at all? Did you think about changing your direction at all?

Ervin: No, I think it made me more convinced that I should stay in agriculture. I guess I never had thought much about the engineering aspects. Well, this was sort of a pre-engineering curriculum, so you were really doing the basic sciences, math, physics. We didn’t get into any advanced engineering courses.

Pfaff: Do you feel like it helped you at all in terms of . . .

Ervin: Oh, definitely.

Pfaff: . . . your Reclamation career later on, and then engineering agency, did it contribute to your . . .

Ervin: Yes. I think I had a little better understanding of the engineering principles that were being employed, and I guess, in communicating, or being associated with engineers.

Pfaff: So you went back to Nebraska and reentered the university in Lincoln then?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: Was that in '46?

“ . . . I signed up for . . . unemployment insurance . . . fifty bucks a month or something like that, until you could find a job. I put down my experience, the kind of a job, the work I had experience in . . . at the university, prior to World War II . . . I had worked in the state seed laboratory as a seed analyst . . . I didn't think they would find me a job that matched that. Well, about a couple of weeks later, they called up and told me that they wanted me to go to the Bureau of Reclamation offices and be interviewed . . . ”

Ervin: Well, as a matter of fact, after I got home, after being discharged, I signed up for, I guess it was sort like unemployment insurance at that time. I think you could have close to a year's time, in which they would give you some subsistence payments. I think it amounted to fifty bucks a month or something like that, until you could find a job. I put down my experience, the kind of a job, the work I had experience in, besides farming.

When I was at the university, prior to World War II, I obviously had to work quite a little bit to pay my board and room. The Sears-Roebuck scholarship took care of the tuition. I had worked in the state seed laboratory as a seed analyst, so I put that down as my experience, a seed analyst. I didn't think they would find me a job that matched that. Well, about a couple of weeks later, they called up and told me that they wanted me to go to the Bureau of Reclamation offices and be interviewed for . . .

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1. JUNE 29, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JUNE 29, 1998.

Pfaff: We're continuing the interview on June 29th. This is side two of tape one.

You were talking about being offered a position as a soil analyst with the Bureau of Reclamation at the time that you were going to go back to college, right?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: After the war.

“ . . Bureau had opened a small office in McCook . . . to begin the initial planning and construction activities associated with the Missouri River Basin Project, under the Pick-Sloan Plan. . . . there was not a decent place, large enough place to accommodate them, so they were set up in the city auditorium, which is about like a gymnasium. That’s where I went to the interview . . .”

Ervin: The Bureau had opened a small office in McCook, I believe, before the war, but at least when I got back home, they had established what they called a district office. They now call them area offices, I guess. But to begin the initial planning and construction activities associated with the Missouri River Basin Project, under the Pick-Sloan Plan. The Bureau offices there, there was not a decent place, large enough place to accommodate them, so they were set up in the city auditorium, which is about like a gymnasium. That’s where I went to the interview, and that’s where the Bureau people were headquartered.

Pfaff: Was this in 1946?

Ervin: Right. Yes, 1946.

Pfaff: This would have been in the fall?

“I went to work for the Bureau . . . a GS-2. . . . we had land classifiers in the field who were classifying land as to its suitability for irrigation. Those soil samples had to be analyzed for salt content or pH and other things. That’s what I went to work doing. . . .”

Ervin: Well, this was summer. I went to work for the Bureau, about at the lowest level, I guess. I think maybe it was a GS-2. It didn’t amount to much. But anyway, it paid, when you look back on it. But we had land ~~park~~ classifiers in the field who were classifying land as to its suitability for irrigation. Those soil samples had to be analyzed for salt content or pH and other things. That’s what I went to work doing.

Laboratory Was Set up in a Converted Men’s Restroom

Our laboratory happened to be in one of the men’s rest rooms, that was converted to a laboratory. It still had its utilities, the rest room, too. (laughter)

Before that summer was out, Reclamation, I guess, decided that they were going

to have to have more space to pursue the development of the Pick-Sloan Program, more personnel than there was room for there.

Reclamation Moved into a German Prisoner-of-war Camp near Indianola, Nebraska

During the war there had been a prisoner-of-war camp, German prisoner-of-war camp, near Indianola, which was about eleven miles east of McCook. Reclamation took over that facility and converted some of the major buildings into office spaces and motor pools and supply buildings, that sort of thing.

Pfaff: What was the name of the town?

Ervin: Indianola. That's named after, or at least the legend is, an Indian maiden by the name of Ola, so it's Indianola.

Pfaff: Indianola. Okay.

Ervin: I don't know whether that's true or not. Also, there were a lot of barracks at that prisoner-of-war camp, not only for the American GIs that guarded them, but that housed the German prisoners. A large number of those were converted into apartments for Reclamation employees to live in. I believe that there were at least a hundred families lived there on the base, or on the prisoner-of-war camp.

“You could walk to work and that was handy. The unhandy part was, you couldn't get away from Reclamation people. But it was a big Reclamation family there. . . . Garden plots were offered, or were available, to anybody that wanted to use them. . . . That was one of the community's activities, was raising gardens. . . .”

You could walk to work and that was handy. The unhandy part was, you couldn't get away from Reclamation people. (laughter) But it was a big Reclamation family there. We established a garden area. Garden plots³ were offered, or were available, to anybody that wanted to use them. There was water available. That was one of the community's activities, was raising gardens.

3. John Budd participated in Reclamation's oral history program, and he also talked about the garden plots in Indianola.

I'm not sure when we moved out of there. I believe the Bureau's offices stayed there until about 1952, maybe. They were probably there five years.

Pfaff: At the Indianola place?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: Before they moved into McCook?

Reclamation Moved Back to McCook about 1952

Ervin: Then they moved back to McCook.

Pfaff: How far is Indianola from McCook?

Reclamation Converted a Dance Club for its Offices in McCook

Ervin: Eleven miles. There was a dance hall. That's not the right word. But anyway, dance club, building, facility there that wasn't being utilized. The Bureau obtained that and then built onto it a little for a more permanent headquarters. It was becoming costly, I guess, to maintain all the barracks and everything out at Indianola. It was a way to get integrated into the community. We were sort of isolated from the community when we were at the camp.

Pfaff: So the dance hall, that was in McCook?

Ervin: Right. Yes.

Pfaff: That's when they converted that to their offices?

Ervin: Yes. I think they called it the "Gay Way," was the name of it.

Pfaff: I'm going to go back a little bit here. You said that you were a seed analyst first. You had done that work during college before you moved onto being a soil analyst. Tell me what you did as a seed analyst.

Work as a Seed Analyst Before World War II

Ervin: Well, there's a couple of things behind that. One is complying with state law. It was a requirement of state law, if you were going to sell seeds, that it had to have a germination test run on it. You also had to analyze it to determine whether it was the seed that was being represented, and what weeds were in, if there were weed seed chaff and that sort of stuff. I guess it was an analyst's analysis to determine germination and purity of the seeds.

Pfaff: This seed would have been brought in by farmers?

Ervin: Mailed in, yes.

Pfaff: They would mail in some seed?

Ervin: Mail samples in, yes. And seed companies. Anybody that wanted to sell seed in Nebraska.

Pfaff: Oh, that wanted to sell it. Then you would analysis it in the lab then?

Ervin: Yes, give them the results. Send the results back. I was just a college student doing that, that's all.

Pfaff: But that would have been real good experience, I think, as far as your agricultural education and experience.

Ervin: Yes, it was practical experience, right.

Pfaff: Then when you became a soil analyst in 1946, that was a different type of job then?

Working as a Soil Analyst in 1946 for Reclamation

Ervin: Yes, you started out with a soil sample. You mixed it up with distilled water, and you put it in what really amounted to a Wheatstone bridge, to determine its electrical conductivity. The soils that were low in salt would have a low conductivity. Those that were [unclear] had salts in them would have a higher conductivity. You measured the conductivity in a cross-up of a little cup of the sample. Sort of like making mud pie. (laughter)

Pfaff: You were doing that in the . . .

Ervin: Men's room at the auditorium. (laughter)

Pfaff: . . . men's room in the city auditorium?

Ervin: Right. (laughter)

Pfaff: Were these soil samples, that the reason you were looking at them, these were from lands that were withdrawn Reclamation lands, that were part of the Missouri River . . .

“ . . . there was a decided change in . . . Reclamation . . . when they started construction projects in the Missouri River Basin, as opposed to earlier projects . . . quite often, government-owned lands . . . This had some profound effect, I guess, on Reclamation employees and how they went at it. . . . In the Missouri River Basin . . . but the lands were basically all privately owned. . . . in the most of the Missouri River Basin, there was enough precipitation to sustain a level of dry land agriculture. . . . This was some change to some of the older Reclamation people who had worked in these earlier projects. It wasn't so much of a change for me, because I was young then and I wasn't familiar with the other projects that had been built . . . ”

Ervin: They were potential project lands, yes. You made a point of them being withdrawn Reclamation lands. I don't know whether this is the place to talk about it, but there was a decided change in the environment, or where Reclamation was operating, when they started construction projects in the Missouri River Basin, as opposed to earlier projects in the western states, which were on, quite often, government-owned lands, withdrawn lands, still public land, and for the establishment of farm units. This had some profound effect, I guess, on Reclamation employees and how they went at it.

In the Missouri River Basin, it was, of course, years later than some of the other Reclamation projects had been built, but the lands were basically all privately owned. They probably had established agriculture on them, either dry land or dry land farming or grazing. They were in private ownership, where in the earlier Reclamation projects you had free access to the land, rights-of-way were not a problem, you didn't have an existing agriculture to displace and to create an irrigated agriculture in its place. Whereas in the most of the Missouri River Basin, there was enough precipitation to sustain a level of dry land agriculture. So, most of the project areas were already settled, they were already owned by private individuals, and they had an existing agriculture. In some instance, some of it was irrigated from pumps or from some

limited water supplies.

This was some change to some of the older Reclamation people who had worked in these earlier projects. It wasn't so much of a change for me, because I was young then and I wasn't familiar with the other projects that had been built on public land. When public lands were usually settled, they were settled by someone who wanted to have an irrigated farm, if they were lucky. They would apply for a farm unit. They were dedicated to wanting to irrigate.

Irrigation Development in the Pick-Sloan Program Usually Had a District Organized by a Simple Majority of the Landowners—That Meant it Was Possible to Have a District in Which 49 Percent of the Landowners Opposed Irrigation

In the Pick-Sloan Missouri [Basin] Program, the irrigation development was usually encompassed by some type of district, usually an irrigation district or a conservancy district. Such a district can be organized by a simple majority of the landowners owning a majority of land. So, theoretically you could have 49 percent of the people against irrigation, against the development, and 51 percent in favor of it. So, there was that personality of the area to be considered.

“ . . . on public land it was settled, you had a 100 percent of the people wanting irrigation, because that's why they came there. . . . ”

Now, I don't know that we would ever have built a project with that small a majority. Usually there was a much higher majority of people in favor of a district. Three-fourths to 80 percent, or even maybe 90 percent, would vote in favor of the creation of the irrigation district. But you did have some dissenters there. Whereas on public land it was settled, you had a 100 percent of the people wanting irrigation, because that's why they came there.

Pfaff: What was the experience in Nebraska then, where you were out in the McCook office, as far as the farmers around there? Were they strongly in favor of the majority of the Pick-Sloan Project?

Ervin: No.

Pfaff: Was there the kind of dissension that you're describing could occur?

“ . . . where we constructed . . . three-fourths, or eighty to 90 percent, of the people were usually in favor of it. Some of them . . . thought it would improve their value of their lands, I guess. So they were in favor of the development. But there were just some people that plainly didn’t want to irrigate. . . .”

Ervin: Well, I think most of the project lands that were developed for irrigation where we constructed canals and laterals, probably at least three-fourths, or eighty to 90 percent, of the people were usually in favor of it. Some of them may not have wanted to irrigate, but rather they thought it would improve their value of their lands, I guess. So they were in favor of the development. But there were just some people that plainly didn’t want to irrigate. They were happy with what they had.

Pfaff: Did they make a big stink, the people that were against it?

Ervin: Well, there were some lawsuits over being included in the district, I know that. Generally, the percentage was so small, there weren’t many. For the most part, everybody was in favor of it.

Pfaff: I would imagine that, coming out of the Dust Bowl years.

Ervin: Dust Bowl and the war and so forth.

Pfaff: Having that, that people would have seen a real benefit to it at that time. Is that your impression?

Ervin: Yes. Yes, that was my impression in going to work for the Bureau, too.

Pfaff: Tell me how you first heard about the Bureau, became aware of it.

Ervin: Well, I think I first heard about it when they called me up for an interview to be a soils analyst. I didn’t know much about it up to that point.

Pfaff: So they called you out of the blue? You didn’t even have an application in with them or anything? They contacted you?

Ervin: Well, after your discharge, you had to sign up with an employment agency, I guess, to draw your fifty dollars a month unemployment benefits for a year, if necessary. But they would try to place you, this employment agency. That’s how I got the call from

the Bureau.

Pfaff: Growing up there, the Bureau was not an influence then in Nebraska early on, really?

Ervin: No.

Pfaff: Up until the Pick-Sloan along the North Platte?

Ervin: North Platte Project. We always had newspapers at home, and I had taken some interest in the irrigation development and so forth. As a matter of fact, what was called the Tri-County Project, which is the Central Nebraska Public and Private Irrigation District near Holdrege, with the influence of Senator Norris, who was in the U.S. Senate, they obtained, I think, from the Public Works Administration, to construct Kingsley Dam and Lake McConaughy near Ogallala and then a series of canals and powerplants that conveyed the water down to the vicinity of Holdrege, Nebraska. I believe there were about a hundred thousand acres in that district to receive irrigation water.

While I was in high school, we had a field trip to Ogallala, to observe the construction of Kingsley Dam. And I had an uncle who had a farm in the Platte River Valley, which was inundated by Lake McConaughy.

Pfaff: So he had to move?

Ervin: Yes. (laughter)

Pfaff: They relocated him.

Ervin: Yes. Oh, I don't know whether they relocated him. They just bought the farm. I don't think there was relocation benefits in those days. I don't think.

Pfaff: So that gave you first-hand observation, at that time, of a big scale irrigation project.

Ervin: That's right.

Pfaff: That was kind of your first introduction?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: When you went to work for Reclamation, then did you feel that your high school education and your college education up to that point had prepared you for what you were doing at Reclamation?

**Worked Two Summers for Reclamation Before Graduating and Decided He
Wanted to Work for Reclamation**

Ervin: Well, I don't know whether I'd put it quite that way. I worked two summers for Reclamation before I graduated. I think those two summers helped me, or confirming, I guess, that that's what I wanted to do.

Pfaff: Work for Reclamation?

Ervin: Right. My course studies, the courses I took were sort of designed to that end, to work in irrigation and conservation of land. My degree was agronomy, which included crops and soils. I had courses in farm reclamation, too, which was earthmoving to facilitate irrigation and to conserve moisture, that sort of stuff.

Pfaff: Did you continue at the University of Nebraska then, to finish up?

Ervin: Yes, I went back three semesters.

Pfaff: After that first stint at Reclamation, that was just in the summer?

Ervin: In the summer, yes. Yes, I worked that summer, went back to school for a year and a half.

Pfaff: At the University in Lincoln?

Ervin: Yes, and I worked the second summer over with Reclamation.

Pfaff: I imagine that the university had quite a good program in agriculture at that time, is that right? I read about a professor there. He was, I guess, in the thirties, Dr. [George E.] Condra?⁴

Ervin: Conservation Survey Division, right. I never took any courses under him.

4. Director 1921 to 1954 of the Conservation and Survey Division which is now in the School of Natural Resources.

Pfaff: He became a real proponent of soil conservation.

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: Were they kind of on the leading edge of soil conservation movement?

Soil Conservation Movement Active in the Plains States Because of the Drought and Dust Bowl

Ervin: I think so. I think the plains states were, because that's where the drought and the Dust Bowl was. So the plains states were leaders in that area.

At the time I was at Nebraska, I think they had a pretty good curriculum for what I was doing, or what I intended to do. They had a better curriculum than they had a football team at that time. (laughter)

Pfaff: [unclear] today.

Ervin: Well, I don't know. I think they have a world-class curriculum there, too, now. Maybe it's on par with the football team.

Pfaff: Were there any particular courses that you took, or professors that influenced you?

Ervin: Well, as I said earlier, one of the biggest influences in my life, outside of my parents, I think, was the superintendent of the Nebraska School of Agriculture, where I went to high school, in arranging for me to go to the university. After I was down there, I had a couple of advisors that were influential and helped me get started on the right foot, I guess, as I was completing my work for a bachelor of science degree.

Graduated from the University of Nebraska in February of 1948 and Thought about Going on for an Advanced Degree

Incidentally, I graduated not at the normal time, at the end, during May or June. I graduated mid-year, in February of '48. But mainly the people that were there on the G.I. Bill of Rights, many of them went on for advanced degrees. In fact, my probably two best, closest associates in college, and they happened to be in the Army, too, went on and got their doctorate degrees.

I had a little dilemma about whether I wanted to go ahead with the more advanced degree or get out in the work world. One of my professors, who was my advisor in the Department of Agronomy, a Dr. [T. H.] Gooding, who had waited, I guess, into his later academic life before he got his doctorate degree, it was quite an uphill battle for him, I think. He's a good old Scotsman. I talked that over with him and he said, "Well, if you have any doubts about whether you want to go on for an advanced degree, don't do it." So I didn't. I went back to work. Of course, at that time I was married, and I needed to go to work, too.

“. . . I'd been working for the Bureau a couple of three months when the head of the Agronomy Department wrote me a very distasteful letter, about why I would go to work for the Bureau of Reclamation and drag along on the bottom, when I could be in the cream of the crop. . . . I think he just had a mind-set that his better students ought to go ahead and get a doctorate degree, and that the ultimate was being a professor, or something, in a university. . . . as opposed to doing something else.”

But I'd been working for the Bureau a couple of three months when the head of the Agronomy Department wrote me a very distasteful letter, about why I would go to work for the Bureau of Reclamation and drag along on the bottom, when I could be in the cream of the crop. (laughter)

Pfaff: So to speak, "cream of the crop."

Ervin: Yes. So to speak, yes.

Pfaff: In agronomy school?

Ervin: Yes, agronomy school.

Pfaff: He didn't think highly of Reclamation.

Ervin: No, he didn't.

Pfaff: Do you know why?

Ervin: Oh, I think he just had a mind-set that his better students ought to go ahead and get a doctorate degree, and that the ultimate was being a professor, or something, in a

university. That was the ultimate in life, as opposed to doing something else.

Besides that, I liked the work. It was an opportunity to fulfill some dreams, I guess, of trying to provide assistance, or improvement, to the agriculture and farm families and the businesses where the projects were located, bring some stability to the fluctuations that had occurred. I was a believer in Reclamation.

Pfaff: You really saw the value of it after having been through your childhood.

Senator George Norris Had a Home in McCook

Ervin: Right. I went back to work in the home town where I grew up. But Senator Norris' presence was always felt there. He had a home on Main Street, where the Senator lived, when he came back. I always said he probably had as much to do with development of hydroelectric generation in the United States as anybody, namely the TVA Project. He's somewhat considered the father of it, I guess, at least in the political arena.

Pfaff: He was from McCook?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: I didn't realize that.

Ervin: Yes, lived right there on Main Street.

Pfaff: He spent most of his career, then, in Nebraska?

Ervin: I think so, yes. I think he was a lawyer or a judge in the county adjacent to it. But, yes, his career was basically serving the people in Nebraska. I don't think he really considered he was serving himself very much. He was quite an old gentleman.

Pfaff: Was he then a strong proponent for the Pick-Sloan Project?

Ervin: No.

Pfaff: Was he involved at all? No?

Ervin: No, I'm sure he was for it. When did he die? I can't remember. I think he was still alive when the Pick-Sloan was authorized in 1944. I believe the Senator was still alive. I remember he decided not to run, but I don't remember the dates anymore for sure. But he was an influence in my life on the perimeter.

Pfaff: Because of the works that he . . .

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JUNE 29, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JUNE 29, 1998.

Pfaff: This is tape two, side one, of an interview with J. Willis Ervin. This is Christine Pfaff.

We were speaking of Senator Norris and the influence he had on Willis' life. Is there anything else you wanted to add about that? Other early influences?

Harry Strunk, Publisher of the *McCook Daily Gazette* Supported the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Program

Ervin: I don't know that Senator Norris involved himself in the details of the Pick-Sloan Project, other than the congressional authorization. But there was a publisher of the *McCook Daily Gazette*, who I'm sure he conferred with. This man's name was Harry Strunk. He's kind of considered as the father at least of the development of the Bureau projects in the Republican River Valley in Nebraska. He had the Senator for a counsel, I'm sure.

Pfaff: Harry Strunk, after—we have Harry Strunk Reservoir, is that right?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: Named after him?

Ervin: Named after him.

Pfaff: He wrote about the projects then in his paper?

Ervin: Definitely. But more than that, he lobbied for them at the national level, too. Local and national level.

Pfaff: Did you know him?

Ervin: Yes. I read his newspaper years before I knew him. I didn't know him until after I came back to work, after graduating from college.

Pfaff: So he went to Washington a lot to lobby directly?

Ervin: Yes. He was a driving force behind it, the leader, I guess, so to speak. At least the one with prominence. There were a lot of heroes, I guess you could call them, in these project areas. Somebody that was a leader.

Pfaff: Who took up the cause.

Ervin: Yes. But Harry was sort of a leader of leaders, so to speak, and fought the cause.

Pfaff: Motivated a lot of people locally, too?

Ervin: Motivated people, that's right, yes. Through his newspaper, yes.

Pfaff: So he was instrumental in getting the . . .

Ervin: Authorizations and appropriations for . . .

Pfaff: For the Pick-Sloan.

Ervin: Well, for the Reclamation projects, Pick-Sloan Reclamation Projects in his area, mostly the Republican River and its tributary.

Pfaff: Well, let's go back then. You came back, worked a couple of summers at Reclamation, finished up your school, and then did you have a permanent job lined up at Reclamation?

Ervin: No.

Pfaff: How did that happen?

Applied for a Job as a Land Classifier

Ervin: Well, I had to apply for a position, yes. There was a vacancy as a soil scientist, or, as Reclamation called them, land classifier.

Pfaff: So land classifier was the same as a soil scientist at that time?

“ . . . the position was probably called a land classifier, but it took a soil scientist to fill it. It was kind of synonymous. There’s a little bit more to land classification than soil science. . . .”

Ervin: Well, the position was probably called a land classifier, but it took a soil scientist to fill it. It was kind of synonymous. There’s a little bit more to land classification than soil science.

“The Bureau had its own unique system of land classification . . . [most] systems sort of recognized the ability of the soils to sustain agriculture. The Bureau, on top of that, added the ability of the soils and the land to sustain irrigation over a long period of time. It was a . . . dimension added on top of most traditional soil surveys. . . .”

The Bureau had its own unique system of land classification, as compared to other state and Federal agencies that were involved in soil erosion and soil conservation. Their systems sort of recognized the ability of the soils to sustain agriculture. The Bureau, on top of that, added the ability of the soils and the land to sustain irrigation over a long period of time. It was a new dimension, or dimension added on top of most traditional soil surveys.

There were always people who thought the Bureau should be able to use existing soil surveys and not have to do the land classification.

“ . . . the Bureau had learned over years of other projects, operations, that the ability of the land to sustain irrigation over a long period of time was a critical factor. Many projects, or parts of projects, failed because of lack of drainage . . . Reclamation had a unique system of land classification designed for particular needs. . . .”

But the Bureau had learned over years of other projects, operations, that the ability of the land to sustain irrigation over a long period of time was a critical factor. Many projects, or parts of projects, failed because of lack of drainage, really, internal

drainage, generally, which made the lands unfit for crop production. However, in today's world it would make them wetlands. So maybe there was some benefit in them. But Reclamation had a unique system of land classification designed for particular needs.

Pfaff: How did that translate into what you actually did in the field? That ability to sustain irrigation over a long time, how did that make your job different than it would have been if you were a land classifier for the state?

Ervin: Well, you always had to look at the texture of the soil for its water-holding capacity and whether it could sustain land leveling, land forming, they finally got to call it, moving the soil so it could be irrigated more efficiently or effectively. You were always looking for salts, whether there was any saline conditions there. You also, in conjunction with drainage engineers, the Bureau ultimately made those an integral part of the project plan, and the land classification was an evaluation of drainage conditions as they exist, or as they might exist in the future.

As land classifier, while you didn't do the drainage studies, you worked closely with the drainage people. You needed to be aware of the drainage problems, or what conditions might contribute to that, when you were doing land cap classification. That's been a long time. It's been fifty years, I guess, since I was doing land classification work.

Pfaff: When you came back in 1948, when you applied for your job at Reclamation, your job description was for a job as [land] classifier?

Ervin: That's right.

Pfaff: So you wanted to go back to Reclamation? You had had positive experiences there those previous two summers and wanted to go back?

Ervin: Right. It was a lot better than fighting the war. (laughter)

Pfaff: Yes, I bet. What were your first impressions when you went back to work for Reclamation, of the office, as a full-time employee now?

Worked at Indianola, Nebraska

Ervin: We were all situated out at Indianola, at the old prisoner-of-war camp then. Well, I don't know. I don't know as I had the appreciation for the total effort that was going into the project planning. You got a little bit more involved in your own little piece of the pie. But that came later, an appreciation for the other disciplines that were involved. I guess my impression was, finally I got somewhere where I could do something.

Pfaff: Where you could do something of benefit to other people, that was really going to be able to help out the farmers in Nebraska?

Ervin: Yes. I was doing something worthwhile.

Pfaff: The soil sampling that you were doing, the land classifying, at that time was that all land that was going to be part of the Pick-Sloan Project?

Ervin: I believe so.

Pfaff: There weren't any other big projects at that time, or projects going on at that time you were involved with?

Ervin: No.

Pfaff: They hired you specifically to be working on that?

Worked in the Kansas River District Office, Later a Project Office

Ervin: Well, they hired me at what had been established as the Kansas River District Office, I believe. Later it was changed to a project office.

Pfaff: So the whole office in Indianola was called the Kansas River District Office?

Ervin: Kansas River District Office, yes. That encompassed an area—well, the Kansas River is what they call in Kansas a “call river.” It drains into the Missouri at Kansas City. All the tributaries to that was in our study area or work area.

Pfaff: Which covered a lot of rivers and streams and tributaries.

Ervin: Northern Kansas and southern Nebraska and a little bit of eastern Colorado.

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- Pfaff: Was it the same boundaries that the office in McCook later became the head of? Were the project boundaries the same for those two offices?
- Ervin: Which two, now?
- Pfaff: The one at Indianola.
- Ervin: They were the same. They were the same office, right.
- Pfaff: The boundaries for the area?
- Ervin: Right.
- Pfaff: So when you came on board in 1948 then, that office at Indianola had grown quite a bit.
- Ervin: Yes.
- Pfaff: Quite a big complex then.
- Ervin: You bet. It was probably approaching a hundred families in there, I think. It was a big renovation to take those barracks, the barracks the prisoners had been housed in, or the GIs, and they'd probably make two or three apartments out of each one of them.
- Pfaff: Did you move onto the campus then when you came there?
- Ervin: Yes.
- Pfaff: You were married at that time, you said, right?
- Ervin: Yes. The second place we lived in. I was married when I was in the last semester of school, so that was the second place, one of those barracks apartments, which weren't palatial. (laughter)
- Pfaff: Was there a choice of living on-site or off-site?
- Ervin: Oh, yes. You didn't have to live there if you didn't want to.
- Pfaff: But they offered cheap rent?

Paid \$20 a Month Rent at Indianola

Ervin: Yes, I think our rent was twenty dollars a month when we moved in there. We didn't pay any utilities.

Pfaff: You didn't have far to go to go to work either.

Ervin: No.

Pfaff: You didn't have a commute. (laughter)

Ervin: I think one time I stepped it--no, it had to be more than that. It probably was about a hundred yards from the office.

Pfaff: You could practically roll out of bed and be at work. (laughter)

Ervin: It was different than commuting in Washington.

Pfaff: Oh, I bet, yes. How many people were in the Land Classifying Division, or branch, at that time then?

Ervin: Oh, I suppose five or six. It wasn't a big unit, not large in numbers, anyway. We did various levels of land classification in terms of detail. There were reconnaissance classifications, where you didn't do your soils evaluation in great detail. Then there was another level, I think, called semi-detail land classification. Then there was the final land classification, where you usually took a soil sample at least every forty acres, and maybe more than that, depending upon the condition.

Pfaff: So you were doing all of these different levels of evaluation?

Most Reconnaissance Work Was Complete When He Arrived, and His Assignment Was the More Detailed Land Classifications

Ervin: I think most of the recon was over with when I got there. That had been done in the pre-planning. I did mostly the detail classification. We were far enough along that we were down to canal locations and where the dams were going to be built and that sort of thing, and what lands could be served. We did more detailed classifications when we knew what lands were going to be actually served.

Pfaff: These would have been the farms that were going to be included in the irrigation?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: What would the detail level involve, as far as what you actually could do then?

Ervin: Well, basic map we used was aerial photographs. I don't know whether they were flown by the [U.S. Army] Corps of Engineers or Department of Agriculture in the late thirties. It was aerial photograph, four hundred foot to the inch. In other words, a section was about—well, it was more than a foot square. It was larger than that. About eighteen inches square, I think.

But you would get permission to go on the land, first of all. You'd take soil samples with an auger, down to a depth of five feet. You would sample various layers in that profile, depending upon what they were. You'd generally take a sample whenever it was apparent that soil conditions changed.

Pfaff: Then you'd bring the soil samples back to the lab and do your analysis there of the salt content?

Issues That Might Eliminate Land from a Project

Ervin: Right. Samples you'd taken. We did this all up and down the Republican Valley. We did it in Kansas, too. Several projects in Kansas in that [unclear] drainage basin. Some projects, or some lands, certainly, we eliminated because of the soil conditions.

Pfaff: What would be the reason for eliminating them?

Ervin: They wouldn't be suitable for sustained irrigation.

Pfaff: Because of drainage?

Ervin: Well, it might even be texture. They might be so dense that you couldn't irrigate them and get water into them. They might be so sandy that they wouldn't hold any water, or they might be saline now, or the potential of becoming saline.

Pfaff: Were there farmers who were disappointed if they found out that their soils, that their acreage, was not appropriate for irrigation?

Ervin: Oh, they might have been later on. They generally weren't too—they didn't seem to be too concerned about the classification, because they hadn't heard much about—we were some of the first people in the field before projects got formulated, and before they knew how the farmers, each, individually, might be affected. So I guess it varied. Some were interested and some weren't.

Pfaff: They knew about the project, though?

Landowners Were Notified Before Reclamation Went out to Do Studies

Ervin: Well, they might have known in general terms. Well, we got to the point where, as I said, one of the differences in the Pick-Sloan was the fact that people already occupied the land. Frequently through newspaper articles or even maybe public meetings, we'd advise people when we were going to be working in the area, and what we were doing and why.

Pfaff: Before you went out?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: You would [put] notices in the paper to let people know that you were going to be doing soil samples?

“ . . . after we'd finished up our land classification and after the engineers had laid out the canal lateral systems, we did have . . . public meetings, where landowners could come in and look . . . to determine how they were going to be affected by the project. . . . ”

Ervin: And ultimately, after we'd finished up our land classification and after the engineers had laid out the canal lateral systems, we did have public hearings, or public meetings, where landowners could come in and look at the land classification. We'd have a land classifier there, and whoever did the engineering work, would be there to determine how they were going to be affected by the project.

Pfaff: Was there a lot of public involvement then at that point? Was there a lot of interest?

“ . . . projects, earlier ones, had been planned and got under construction, and we found out that here landowners started . . . objections to some things. It was kind

of disquieting at that late date to make changes in some of the project works or whatever. So it was . . .” later changed so landowners could see the planning work and raise concerns and objections earlier.

Ervin: Yes. I don't know, but from my standpoint, that was some of our first experiences in public involvement. We didn't call it public involvement. Some projects, earlier ones, had been planned and got under construction, and we found out that here landowners started getting interested in what was going on. They might have some objections to some things. It was kind of disquieting at that late date to make changes in some of the project works or whatever. So it was partly—well, it was in response to that—let's move this time frame ahead to where landowners can view this stuff while still on paper.

Pfaff: In the planning stages.

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: You're talking about after it had already been pretty much laid out.

Ervin: Right. We were ready to go to construction.

Pfaff: Did you wind up having to change any of the plans at that point due to public involvement?

Ervin: Yes. We were responsive to some things that we could be. But then is when the landowners usually also found out the details of their land classification.

Pfaff: I imagine you knew a lot of these people, didn't you, a lot of the farmers, since you had grown up there?

Ervin: No, I lived on a dry land farm twenty miles away from McCook, anyway. We worked all over southern Nebraska and northern Kansas. So, no, I didn't know too many of them. I know them now. I did, anyway.

Pfaff: I bet you did. I bet you got to know a lot of them, because you were out there in the field.

Worked as a Land Classifier for about Two Years

Ervin: But we're only talking about--I was only a land classifier for two years, I think.

Pfaff: Oh, really. So you started in the small group of five or six people as a land classifier.

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: You did this for a couple of years then. Then what did you move on to become, after that experience?

Moved into a smaller group as an agriculturist--". . . more or less . . . [a] combination . . . of a public affairs and a land classifier . . ."

Ervin: Well, it sort of fits in with some of the comments I made. They created the position of agriculturist, I think was the name was used. I think I moved into a smaller group. There were only, well, two or three of us. I think there were no more than four of us at any one time. We were more or less, well, some combination, almost of a public affairs and a land classifier, in a way.

Worked with Farmers and the County Agents to Try to Assure Successful Irrigation Farmers on Reclamation Projects

Our mission was to try to ensure that the irrigation development was successful, that the farmers became successful irrigation farmers. Quite often we worked directly with the landowners, and with, particularly, Extension Service, county agents, Extension Service, and the College of Agriculture in the two states, or three states, to ensure that they gave attention to the project areas and landowners' needs, to ensure that they could transpose from a dry land agriculture to an irrigated agriculture. So we did a lot of work between the landowners and county agents, or with them.

". . . I helped the farmers get their initial ditches dug, and helped teach them how to put in check dams, and hold the water up, and use siphon tubes. . . ."

Out in the field, I helped the farmers get their initial ditches dug, and helped teach them how to put in check dams, and hold the water up, and use siphon tubes. I guess, in today's world a lot of that's gone. They use pipe, gated pipe to do that.

Pfaff: So you really served an educational role there.

Enjoyed Working with Farmers Because, Unlike Land Classification, it Wasn't Tied to Extensive Guidance and Procedures

Ervin: Yes, in a sense, right. It was an ill-defined job description. You know, it was more or less make sure the irrigation agriculture succeeds. There was some guidance. I liked the job, because it wasn't something written down in the procedure that you have to go through. It was quite a contrast from being a land classification person, because you had a rather—I wouldn't call it rigid, but you had a definite procedure you went through to do things.

Pfaff: To do your classifications.

Ervin: Yes. And this, you did what was necessary. You had to figure out what was necessary. The main thrust behind that, or key point, I think it came out of the experience with the Columbia Basin Project, was the establishment of development farms in certain project areas, major project areas. These were usually established through joint efforts of people in the community and the university.

“ . . . Reclamation . . . entered into cooperative agreements with . . . Extension Service[s] . . . we transferred funds to the university for . . . a more concentrated effort in the project areas designed to get the irrigated agriculture established. . . . ”

In fact, Reclamation, we entered into cooperative agreements with most of the universities, their Extension Service, in particular, in which we transferred funds to the university for purposes of carrying on a more concentrated effort in the project areas designed to get the irrigated agriculture established.

Pfaff: Now, again, these would have been irrigated areas under Pick-Sloan?

Ervin: On the project.

Pfaff: On the Pick-Sloan Project, as it was being built?

This Effort Didn't Start until Construction Began on a Project

Ervin: Yes. But this didn't start until after you'd had construction and you were ready to start irrigating, or shortly before that. That's probably the reason that I moved after two

years of land classification and did this agriculturist job, because we were busy constructing some canals in some areas and we were on the verge of starting to irrigate. So in a sense, this was kind of follow-on job from the land classification.

Pfaff: This was putting it into practice.

Ervin: That's right.

Pfaff: Once they had the water, how did they use it.

Ervin: That's right.

Pfaff: Tell me more about—you called them development farms. Are those the same as experimental farms, sometimes called experimental farms in Reclamation?

“ . . . there'd be a distinct difference between the experimental farms. The development farm was putting proven practices into work or into place. There were people who wanted to make them experimental farms, but we resisted that. . . ”

Ervin: No, there'd be a distinct difference between the experimental farms. The development farm was putting proven practices into work or into place. There were people who wanted to make them experimental farms, but we resisted that. I think Reclamation's experience in the Columbia Basin Project was that the experimental farms haven't reached the practical stage on a lot of things, and they wanted something, or they found that the need was to demonstrate something useable. Well, what we usually did in these cases, since the lands were all privately owned, we would . . .

END SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JUNE 29, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 2. JUNE 29, 1998.

Pfaff: This is side two of tape two, continuing the discussion of the development farms on the Pick-Sloan Project, and the difference between the development farm and the experimental farm.

“ . . . one of the reasons these were not experimental farms, you entered into an agreement with an individual landowner who was making his living off of this farm, usually. He wasn't there to do experimental work. . . we would survey and

find a farm in which the owner was interested in having it used as a development farm. . . .”

Ervin: Well, one of the reasons these were not experimental farms, you entered into an agreement with an individual landowner who was making his living off of this farm, usually. He wasn't there to do experimental work. It wouldn't necessarily contribute to his well-being. But we had joint agency associations, I guess. Usually, the Bureau of Agriculture, the Soil Conservation District person worked for the SCS, and the county agent, and perhaps a representative from the University Extension Service, would—we also had, I guess, the Irrigation District would be involved. But anyway, we would survey and find a farm in which the owner was interested in having it used as a development farm. It was just sort of the focus of the educational program.

“We'd have field days, where people could come and watch and see what was going on. You also had a landowner helping educate in the community, as opposed to an experimental scientist from the experiment station. . . .”

The better practices and crops would be used on that farm. We'd have field days, where people could come and watch and see what was going on. You also had a landowner helping educate in the community, as opposed to an experimental scientist from the experiment station.

I think they had a very successful program in the Columbia Basin Project on this, but, of course, they were looking at a million-acre project. It was basically public land to begin with, so there wasn't much change. Well, there was change in the agriculture. But they didn't have to displace one agriculture with another. I think that's probably one of the benefits of the development farms, was demonstrating the conversion of the dry land agriculture to the irrigated agriculture. We used those in probably half a dozen project areas.

Pfaff: So there would have been a half dozen development farms, then, that were started?

Ervin: Yes, in various project areas.

Pfaff: When you say various project areas, within the boundaries of your Kansas River Project?

“The Pick-Sloan Missouri River Basin Project encompassed the whole basin.

Then within that there were individual projects, which they called units. A unit was generally a segregated or separate area which had its own facilities . . .”

Ervin: Yes, within the Missouri River Basin Project. The Pick-Sloan Missouri River Basin Project⁵ encompassed the whole basin. Then within that there were individual projects, which they called units. A unit was generally a segregated or separate area which had its own facilities, like a diversion dam and canal system. Depending upon how large the unit was and what the schedule of development was, you would locate a development farm in some of these units. Like the Frenchman-Cambridge Unit, we had one. We had one, the Kirwin Unit. The Bostwick Unit. Ainsworth Unit. Those are in Kansas and Nebraska.

Pfaff: So you were involved in the ones just in Kansas and Nebraska, or were there other ones that were in Montana?

Ervin: I don't remember that. The northern part of the Pick-Sloan Project in the Dakotas, eastern Montana didn't—well, I guess, they'd envisioned quite a lot of irrigation development, but a lot of that never happened. There may have been some in Montana, I don't recall right now.

Pfaff: But the ones you were involved with were in Kansas and Nebraska?

Ervin: Kansas and Nebraska, yes.

Pfaff: And eastern Colorado at all?

Ervin: No, that was another irrigation unit that never happened.

Pfaff: Did people apply to become a development farm, or did you actually seek farm owners out?

Choosing Development Farms

Ervin: We sought them. I don't know that many of them were so anxious. Well, it all depends on the individual. You became a focal point in your community. If you liked that, that was all right. You probably would be agreeable. If you didn't want to be a

5. Generally referred to officially as the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Program, rather than “Project.” “Project” is often and commonly substituted by Reclamation staff in speech and conversation. It is also sometimes referred to by staff as the Missouri River Basin Project and variations thereof.

focal point, then you didn't want to be involved.

Pfaff: Did you send out notices, or how did you solicit these farmers to participate in the development farms?

Ervin: I don't remember any solicitation, as such. But just by association of working on the project, you come to know everybody, and you would pick out two or three that you thought might work. Then you'd go talk to them, see whether they're interested.

Pfaff: Then they became a development farm after irrigation had been brought to that farm?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: After there was water delivery?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: Would you assist them in picking out crops to plant and that kind of thing, what would be the best types of crops?

Ervin: Yes, we tried to apply the practices that were being recommended by the university or the Soil Conservation Service, to avoid as many mistakes in the development of the land as possible.

Pfaff: It sounds like a really good example of partnership, early government partnerships, all these different entities working together. Did it work well?

Ervin: Oh, some of them worked better than others. Some, after you started them, decided they didn't want to do it anymore. You can't force somebody to cooperate. Yes, I think they were successful. They weren't run for a long period of time. Maybe two, three, four years, that was as long as they lasted.

Pfaff: During that time, you would bring other farmers from around there onto the farm and show them what had been done, actually give them hands-on experience, working with the gates?

Ervin: Yes, mostly they'd observe. Well, I think we did teach people how to set syphon tubes to syphon the water out of the ditch into the rows. But it was kind of a hands-on

experience. At least they knew the person who ran the development farm. They could transpose information or what they could see there, back to their own places, their own farms.

Pfaff: What was the hardest thing about the transition from a dry land farm to an irrigated farm, from a farmer's standpoint?

The most difficulty in changing from dry land to irrigated farming involved “. . . getting out and doing the actual irrigation . . . Their operating costs on an irrigated farm would be substantially greater than what it was on their dry land farm. More things to manage . . .”

Ervin: Well, probably getting out and doing the actual irrigation, applying the water, I suppose, was probably their most difficult change. And the capital required. They probably hadn't been using much in the way of fertilizers, and getting used to applying fertilizers. Their operating costs on an irrigated farm would be substantially greater than what it was on their dry land farm. More things to manage, more things under the landowner's control. He had the water under his control, which was the major factor. That, in itself, allowed certain other things to happen, he could use fertilizer and whatever. Different strains of crops respond better to irrigation. So it was kind of a whole new management scheme on the farm. Same land, but the crops were handled differently.

Pfaff: Was it a slow process?

Ervin: Not really.

Pfaff: Or did it go pretty quickly for most farmers, the irrigation?

“. . . we wrote a report . . . we found out that most of the project land, 50 percent of it, would be irrigated the first year they had water. . . . At the end of about three years, you were getting about 85 to 90 percent of the land being irrigated . . .”

Ervin: In fact, we wrote a report on that. I don't know where it is. I think we found out that most of the project land, 50 percent of it, would be irrigated the first year they had water.

Pfaff: 50 percent of that particular farm?

Ervin: Yes. Well, as a whole. The project, as a whole, about 50 percent. Some would irrigate more and some would irrigate less. But I think the second year, we got up to about two-thirds, or three-fourths, of the land. At the end of about three years, you were getting about 85 to 90 percent of the land being irrigated, the third year.

Pfaff: So the transition went quite quickly.

Ervin: Faster than it had in previous projects.

Pfaff: Once the irrigation system was in place.

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: What do you attribute that to, when you say it happened faster than on most other projects?

Ervin: Well, the development farms and the educational program that went with it.

Pfaff: So that was a real conscious effort on Reclamation's part, based on previous experience?

“ . . . the technology . . . or equipment that was available in the fifties, as compared to projects earlier than that, allowed them to move faster. . . .”

Ervin: Yes. Well, the technology, the facilities that were available, or equipment that was available in the fifties, as compared to projects earlier than that, allowed them to move faster.

“ . . . the educational program . . . emphasized you either got to get in this ball game of irrigating . . . or sell your farm to somebody that wants to, because you can't . . . afford not to irrigate, eventually, because they were in an irrigation district, and whether they irrigated or not, the district would make assessments on their land. . . .”

A lot of these people were GIs that were back—well, that's not quite true either, because their parents were probably still holding onto the farms. But I think probably the educational program, which emphasized you either got to get in this ball game of irrigating, or get out, or sell your farm to somebody that wants to, because you can't

really afford to go at it halfway. You can't afford not to irrigate, eventually, because they were in an irrigation district, and whether they irrigated or not, the district would make assessments on their land.

Pfaff: So they were paying for it whether they used it or not?

Ervin: Yes, they couldn't afford not to do that. That probably is one of the more difficult areas to talk to a farmer about, is if you don't want to do it, you'd better turn this over to somebody who does, because his family may have lived there forever or something. He wasn't too keen to—he just wanted to be left alone. “Why can't I just stay here like this?”

“Well, you could, but you're going to have all these assessments to pay for irrigation, and you won't be getting the benefit out of them.”

Pfaff: But it sounds like that didn't happen too often?

Ervin: No, I don't think so. I think there was land changed hands, because somebody--he might have been at the right stage of life. “If I'm so old, if I'm up in my sixties, maybe I don't want to learn to irrigate. I'd better sell it.”

Pfaff: But for the most part, from what you said before, people were pretty receptive to the project?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: Really wanted the irrigation?

Ervin: Yes. They'd had the same experience I had growing up.

Pfaff: The development farms, you were working with those during the first, it sounds like the first five years or so that you were an agriculturist for Reclamation.

Ervin: Well, yes. I was in McCook twenty years. It probably lasted ten years or so.

Pfaff: Was that your primary responsibility then when you were an agriculturist?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: The development farms, working with these four or five other people?

Ervin: Yes, and the landowners and the irrigation districts.

Pfaff: Did you enjoy that? Did you enjoy working with the other agencies?

Ervin: Yes. I think I particularly enjoyed the freedom I had in determining what to do and when to do it.

Pfaff: Did you feel like you were kind of winging it?

Ervin: Definitely, yes. (laughter)

Pfaff: Learning as you went along?

Mirage Flats Project

Ervin: Yes. Fortunately, I had a supervisor at the time, whose name was Nat Tolman. He was an owner of irrigated land in eastern Nebraska, pump-irrigated land. He'd worked on irrigation projects with the Bureau, the Mirage Flats Project, which was, I guess, later authorized as part of the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Project. But it was a Wheeler-Case Project.⁶ I don't know that I know what that is, other than the name. They were authorized by Congress in response to the drought programs. The lands were bought up, the private lands were bought up, and an irrigation system laid out, and the farms then rearranged, the boundaries of the farms were rearranged to the irrigation system. Then the farm units were sold back to people.

There was one of those at Hay Springs, Nebraska, called the Mirage Flats Project. Those projects were also a joint effort of the Soil Conservation Service and the Bureau of Reclamation. The Soil Conservation Service bought up the land, and the Bureau of Reclamation built the irrigation system. I think it was the Soil Conservation Service sold the land back then. Well, Nat Tolman was the manager for the Soil Conservation Service on the Mirage Flats Project.

Pfaff: That was on the Niobrara?

6. The Water Conservation and Utilization Act of 1939 (Act of August 11, 1939, ch. 717, 53 Stat. 1418) is also popularly known as the Case-Wheeler Act and the Wheeler-Case Act. The act assures that there is no question that Reclamation retains title to the works of a project unless otherwise directed by Congress. Other provisions address repayment, feasibility, and readying the land for irrigation.

Supervisor Was a Good Resource for His Work as an Agriculturist for Reclamation

Ervin: Niobrara, right. So he'd had first-hand knowledge of project development. I was fortunate to have him as a supervisor. He'd also been a county agent before that, before the Mirage Flats Project. So he had a pretty good idea of what needed to be done, as opposed to me thinking these up all by myself. He was a pretty good tutor.

Pfaff: So he gave you good direction prior to going out and working with the different agents, and with the farmers, on setting up the development farms?

Ervin: Right. He came down to the Indianola Camp. He was what they called the O&M supervisor in those days that I worked for him.

Pfaff: That was his title when you were in the agricultural work?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: He was the O&M supervisor?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: He was your boss?

Ervin: Yes, most of the time.

Pfaff: Most of those ten years that you worked on the development farms, he was your boss?

Ervin: Yes. He moved into the region. I don't know exactly the date, he moved into the region, and became the regional O&M supervisor.

Pfaff: At the Lower Missouri?

Ervin: For the Lower Missouri region, yes.

Pfaff: Region Seven?

Ervin: Region Seven, then, yes.

Pfaff: He was the O&M supervisor for you. Then after those ten years, you stayed on in McCook for another ten years?

About 1961 or 1962 the Land Management Branch (Division) Was Created and Ervin Headed It

Ervin: Yes. Well, there was a lessening need for the agriculturist duties. But at the same time, we had constructed several reservoirs in the area.

Managed the Reservoirs and Recreation on the Projects in That Area

Those reservoir areas needed to be managed. Also when we constructed a reservoir, we worked cooperatively with the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and usually the State Recreation and Fish and Game Departments, in the development of facilities and roads and use of the reservoir surface and the lands that surrounded it that had been acquired.

I suppose it was about 1962, possibly, '61 or '62, those responsibilities were added to my duties. I guess they put an organizational title on it. Land management's what it was. Land Management Division, I believe, or branch. Anyway, I was the head of that. There weren't too many, three or four people in it, was all.

We had cooperative agreements usually with State Fish and Game and State Recreation Agency, to manage the reservoir, once the facilities for public use had been installed.

Pfaff: These are other reservoirs in Kansas and Nebraska?

Ervin: Right. I don't know how many we had, eleven of them or something. Quite a few. We had agreements with all three states, I know.

Pfaff: Colorado being a third state?

Ervin: Right, yes, for Bonny Reservoir.

Pfaff: That was a switch from being a land classifier and working in development farms, to getting into the management aspects of reservoirs.

Ervin: Right, and recreation uses. But it was an interesting experience. Expanded my knowledge, I guess, or experiences. They weren't entirely foreign to me. We were all there working together. I knew the people that had been working on the reservoirs. They worked in the same office I did. So it wasn't that big a change. I knew what had been going on, just didn't have any responsibility for it.

Pfaff: So they created this new branch then for the reservoir management?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: Or Land Management Division, as you called it?

Ervin: I think they called it Land Management Branch, or something like that.

Pfaff: That was created basically after these reservoirs were built?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: The project was up and going?

Ervin: Yes. It would occur about the same time as the development farms did downstream, maybe even a little earlier. You'd start planning a development for public use of the reservoir early. We learned that by experience. It's better to plan it early, than later after things have been built. Then you had to live with that. If you plan it as part of the construction program for the reservoir, then it gets coordinated a little better.

Pfaff: That's been done pretty well then?

Ervin: Oh, I think so. Towards the end, anyway. After we got halfway through it, probably, yes.

Pfaff: Because there's pretty heavy recreation use.

At first the “. . . theory was to let the visitors come to the reservoirs and let them look after them themselves. . . . that theory didn't last very long . . . That couldn't be tolerated only about so long. People wanted to go to the reservoir and have a recreational experience, take a picnic. . . . some shelters . . . some rest rooms . . . some roads. So it became imperative to plan them and have some of those

facilities in place when you start impounding water . . .”

Ervin: Now, yes. But at the outset, the early projects that were constructed, Medicine Creek, I believe, and Trenton, the push was to get the reservoirs built, get the money, get it built, get the irrigation going. To some extent the theory was to let the visitors come to the reservoirs and let them look after them themselves.

Pfaff: You mean not provide picnic tables and campsites and all of that?

Ervin: Yes, let them worry about it, the people that use it. Or do without facilities. But that theory didn't last very long, because the reservoirs got inundated with people, and they made their own roads wherever they wanted to go. They were lacking sanitary facilities. That couldn't be tolerated only about so long. People wanted to go to the reservoir and have a recreational experience, take a picnic. They'd want some shelters, they'd want some rest rooms, and they'd want some roads. So it became imperative to plan them and have some of those facilities in place when you start impounding water, because it's an attraction.

“A lot of the area we were in was without surface water resources. There weren't many lakes. So it [the new reservoirs] opened up a whole new experience for a lot of rural people . . .”

A lot of the area we were in was without surface water resources. There weren't many lakes. So it opened up a whole new experience for a lot of rural people not only the boating and the water, but the fishing and just going to the reservoir and watch the water. Sort of like going to the beach.

Pfaff: I bet it was a haven there in those hot summers for these folks.

Ervin: It was. Still is, it's going on.

Pfaff: When you say that initially the reservoirs were built and people would just come to them, are you talking about these eleven reservoirs that you were working on, they were built without the recreation plan in place? That came later?

Ervin: The earlier ones. By the time we got done building them, we'd learned enough to get it planned and get some of it in place.

Pfaff: So the first few reservoirs that were finished were built without any kind of plan in place?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: Then the later reservoirs were built, and there was a recreation plan, a development plan, already instituted for that reservoir?

Ervin: Yes, that's right. There was an evolutionary process from the beginning, when you didn't do much, to the end, where you tried to facilitate it, enhance the recreational experience. Using the term "recreation," I'm talking about not only picnicking and that sort of stuff, but fishing and whatever you went for. Outdoor experience, I guess.

The theory really, in the beginning, and it went back to the early Reclamation projects, in which the irrigation districts, I guess, were obligated earlier on to pay the reservoir costs, so the lands acquired around the reservoir cost money, and the districts were under obligation to repay project costs. So they were entitled to revenues from the leasing of project lands around the reservoirs. Their motivation . . .

Pfaff: The district?

Over Time Reclamation's Attitude Evolved from Keeping People Away from Projects to Encouraging Recreation on the Projects

Ervin: The district, and even the Reclamation people, given those circumstances, the mind-set was to build barricades, keep the people out, lease the lands for grazing or agriculture, to get income. So we went from, in the beginning, of keep them out, have them go somewhere else or whatever, to do their recreation somewhere else, to later, when we saw the responses, to enhance their use of the reservoir land for public use.

Pfaff: Now, is this all happening within the time frame that you're working at--

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: You're seeing this change from, "keep them out," to "enhance the reservoirs"?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: All on the development of the Pick-Sloan Project Reservoirs?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: That's a major change. That's a major shift.

“. . . in the Pick-Sloan, the financial structure was different. The irrigators weren't paying all the project costs. Power was going to pay a bulk of it. So the irrigators didn't really have an entitlement to the revenues off the project lands. . . .”

Ervin: Yes, it is. Of course, in the Pick-Sloan, the financial structure was different. The irrigators weren't paying all the project costs. Power was going to pay a bulk of it. So the irrigators didn't really have an entitlement to the revenues off the project lands.

Well, we tried to plan the recreation development in such a way as some of the lands could be leased. It didn't exclude all of them, but the lessees had to permit . . .

END SIDE 2, TAPE 2. JUNE 29, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 1. JULY 1, 1998.

Pfaff: I am continuing an interview with J. Willis Ervin [on July 1, 1998]. This is tape one, side one. We will pick up where we left off last time.

At that point, we were discussing reservoir planning. Willis had become the Branch Chief of the Land Management Branch at McCook, and was planning for recreation use and grazing use around the reservoirs. We were talking about how the attitude changed from not allowing for recreation needs, basically, to incorporating recreation as a major feature at these reservoirs on the Missouri River Basin Project. Do you want to add anything to that discussion that we were having?

Ervin: I'm not sure whether we got it on the tape or not. The construction of these reservoirs in an area which was largely devoid of flat water, or lakes, and that sort of thing, so as soon as the dams were constructed and the reservoirs were created, there was a major influx of people to those reservoirs for boating and fishing and recreating. It became imperative then to provide some kind of planning and management of the public use of those reservoirs. That's one of the major responsibilities of the land use or Land Management Branch.

Pfaff: Did you actually develop specific management plans for individual reservoirs then that would indicate one area as set aside for picnicking, another area would be boating, that kind of thing?

Ervin: That was the nature of the planning. They were specific for each reservoir and specific for site conditions, too, and the anticipated visitation.

Pfaff: Which reservoirs were you doing plans for at that time? This is in the early sixties.

Ervin: Well, just a minute.

Pfaff: We're going to look at a map here.

Ervin: I can look at this one, the Missouri River Basin.

Pfaff: The Missouri River Basin Project.

Ervin: Well, one was Medicine Creek, which is now Harry Strunk Lake. Red Willow, which is now Hugh Butler Lake. Enders Reservoir. The reservoir behind Trenton Dam, which I believe is now Carl Swanson Reservoir. Bonny Dam Reservoir. Cedar Bluff Reservoir in Kansas. Webster. Glen Elder, Kirwin, and Norton Reservoirs.

Pfaff: You developed individual plans for each of those reservoirs?

Ervin: Well, that's not all of them. (laughter) I discovered some more up here. Merritt Reservoir on the Niobrara. Calamus Reservoir on the North Loup River. Sherman Reservoir on the Middle Loup River, I believe. Maybe when we redo this, or edit it, we maybe should identify, or list, those reservoirs by states. It might be more informative.

Pfaff: Sure, we can do that. We can put that in. What would have been involved in developing these plans? How would you actually do that?

One of the First Things Was to Determine What Area Would Be Taken for Construction of the Project

Ervin: Well, we usually started with an aerial photograph of the reservoir, or the topographic maps which had been made in conjunction with the design of the dam. We would probably have a basic topographic map covering the reservoir area and the perimeter

around it. I think one of the first places in beginning reservoir plans was in developing the acquisition boundary—how much land, and what land are you going to acquire, and what is needed to provide for the public use.

“ . . . the Missouri River Basin Program it may have been the first, or one of the first, of these projects where fish and wildlife and recreation were authorized purposes, and this allowed for the acquisition of lands in addition to that required for the operation of the reservoir. . . .”

As far as I know, the Missouri River Basin Program it may have been the first, or one of the first, of these projects where fish and wildlife and recreation were authorized purposes, and this allowed for the acquisition of lands in addition to that required for the operation of the reservoir. You could acquire lands in addition for fish and wildlife or recreation purposes. There was some reluctance, or some controversy, about that authority.

Pfaff: Where was that controversy generated?

There Was Concern about the Extent of Reclamation’s Authorities for Fish and Wildlife and Recreation Activities

Ervin: Well, perhaps the landowners were acquiring land where it wasn’t necessary for reservoir operation.

There Was a Lot of Coordination among Other Federal Bureaus and State Agencies for Reclamation Projects

I suppose some of the controversy or disagreements were between Reclamation people and the other agency people, the Fish and Wildlife people and the National Park Service people who participated in the reservoir planning, as well as state agencies, the State Fish and Wildlife or State Parks Agency. Frequently they might want us to acquire more land than we were used to doing, and we had some reluctance, I guess, to do that. Probably the Reclamation people had more reluctance than certainly the cooperative agencies.

But there was not a clear-cut authority, I don’t believe, for it. It was a purpose in the Missouri River Basin Project, but that in itself, some of the department’s lawyers felt didn’t give the authority to buy lands.

Pfaff: In hindsight, do you think that was a good accomplishment that the extra lands were purchased?

Ervin: Well, yes, we didn't acquire those unless they had a specific reason for either recreation or fish and wildlife purposes. So, in order to achieve the maximum benefits from a reservoir, the acquisition of these additional lands was a good thing.

Pfaff: Did you involve these other agencies in the planning?

Ervin: Oh, yes.

Pfaff: Was the Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service to be represented in the planning process?

Ervin: Yes. The Missouri River Basin Program, it was a committee. In fact, it was fraught with committees. But the guiding group seemed to be the Missouri Basin Interagency Committee, representing the states and the Federal agencies involved, and coordination of the development among those people. That carried on down through to the project level, where you were doing on-site planning and construction, that representatives from the various state and Federal agencies participated in the planning.

Pfaff: So you would do the aerial photographs and you developed the acquisition boundaries, then the committee would get together representatives from these various agencies to decide where the best place would be for campgrounds?

Ervin: Campgrounds, boat ramps, concession areas, wildlife areas.

Pfaff: Then Reclamation would actually draw up the plans, though?

Ervin: Yes, and implement them. Again, in conjunction with the—we were the lead construction agency, and the other related state and Federal agencies continued participating in that.

Pfaff: Did you think the process worked well for the plans for these reservoirs?

“ . . . we learned through trial and error to involve the public more in the later reservoirs, by having public meetings. . . . ”

Ervin: I believe so. At times it seemed like we had a lot of people involved. I think perhaps one of the things we didn't involve much—enough—was the public. I think we learned through trial and error to involve the public more in the later reservoirs, by having public meetings.

Pfaff: So you think that might have changed the outcome of how the reservoirs were planned, how the reservoir uses [unclear] more public input?

“ . . . on some of the earlier ones, we did have perhaps some public meetings. . . . we would tell the people what we were going to do. Towards the end of the process, the later reservoirs, we had meetings and we asked the people what they thought we ought to do. . . . ”

Ervin: I think so. As I recall, on some of the earlier ones, we did have perhaps some public meetings. I don't know that they were sponsored by us. They were probably sponsored by some local group. But at that point, we would tell the people what we were going to do. Towards the end of the process, the later reservoirs, we had meetings and we asked the people what they thought we ought to do. Difference between telling them what we're going to do versus getting their input to what should be done.

Pfaff: You think that worked better?

Ervin: Definitely.

Pfaff: For a better product?

Ervin: Yes. It was more laborious.

Pfaff: More time-consuming, I'm sure.

Ervin: Yes, that's right.

Pfaff: Was there a lot of fanfare when these reservoirs were opened to public use?

Dedication Ceremonies and Use of the New Reservoirs

Ervin: Well, yes. I suppose most of that quite often started with the dedication ceremonies for a dam and reservoir. These frequently were sponsored by local people, local interests

who were supporting, or advocating, the development of the reservoirs. So, yes, quite often there would be a day or weekend set aside for the inauguration of the use of the reservoirs. Boat races and whatnot.

Pfaff: That drew people from quite a wide area then?

Ervin: Yes, usually from within a couple of counties or so, I suppose. Although people from Omaha came out to Medicine Creek Dam, which seemed to become a favorite for people out of Omaha. In Kansas, the Glen Elder Dam seemed to be a favorite for the people out of Kansas City area. Bonny, out in eastern Colorado, some people from the Denver area used that. Although Lake McConaughy on the Platte, which was constructed back in the late thirties, it's a huge reservoir and it seems to be the popular reservoir out that way for people from the Denver area.

Pfaff: At that time, was there any such thing as a recreation planner? Were there special groups that you were working with?

The Park Service Brought Recreation Planning to the Process, and the Fish and Wildlife Service Brought Fisheries and Wildlife Issues to the Process

Ervin: We had people, I guess, we called recreation planners. That was the purpose in jointly planning these in conjunction with the National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service. The National Park Service would provide a recreation plan. Part of it was landscape architect, or someone on their staff, out of their regional offices, that usually participated in that.

The same way with the Fish and Wildlife Service. In the fisheries, part of the plan and other wildlife parts of the plan, they brought fish and wildlife specialists to the planning group.

Pfaff: From the early times to the later reservoirs, where you said there was more public input, what kinds of changes did you actually see in the plans then? What would have been different later on that you had learned through experience?

Evolution of Facilities Provided for Public Use at Reclamation Reservoirs

Ervin: Well, in the earlier plans, earlier reservoirs, the criteria, or concept, that had been with Reclamation for a long time was to construct minimum facilities for the health and

safety of the public. You put more emphasis on keeping people out of areas or restricting their use. Later that evolved into providing facilities that enhanced the use of the reservoir for fishing and for recreation purposes, which was a major change, and it didn't happen overnight.

At the outset, we constructed only what we could justify as minimum facilities for the health and safety of the public, which consisted usually of a few roads, so they controlled traffic. Probably a boat ramp, so that they weren't trying to launch their boats off of the reservoir banks, and some water, potable water, which usually consisted of a hand-pump well. And sanitary facilities, which consisted of non-waterborne rest rooms.

Pfaff: That's a big change.

Ervin: Well, yes. Then towards the tail end, reservoirs constructed in later years, those evolved to building quite often an extensive road system, exterior and interior, to facilitate public use—marinas, as opposed to just a boat ramp, and extensive camping and picnicking facilities, including a waterborne sewage system and solar-heated shower facilities. So there were facilities there not only for the health and safety of the people, but to enhance their recreation experience at the reservoir.

Pfaff: That certainly continues today now with all the reservoirs. There's more and more recreation development in them, as the resources get utilized more and more.

Sometimes Water User Administration of a Reservoir or Project Resulted in Issues about Public Use of the Project

Ervin: Another thing, at the outset of the early construction of the reservoirs, as I said, historically, or at least in the smaller projects, the water users organization frequently administered the reservoir. One of the reasons for that was, I don't know whether it was by law, but in some contracts, the water users organization was entitled to the miscellaneous revenues that were generated by the project, and that would include grazing leases on the reservoir land.

The water users organization was not necessarily oriented to providing for public use of the reservoirs. In fact, their status, or their authority, under the state laws in which they were organized, probably, if not limiting, excluding that, excluding authority to do such things, at least authority wasn't specifically provided to an

irrigation district, for instance, to do such things.

So, with that sort of a background, when we started construction of the reservoirs in that Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado area, we, Reclamation, decided at the outset, at least, to try a different route in administering the reservoirs. Again, Reclamation, itself, was sort of lacking in authority to operate the reservoir areas, manage them for public use purposes.

Sometimes Where a Resource Had National Significance, Reclamation Might Invite the National Park Service or the Fish and Wildlife Service to Administer an Area to Avoid Issues with Local Administration

So, at the outset, it was usually determined whether a reservoir's public use was going to be of national significance either as a wildlife facility or as a recreation facility. If it were to be of national significance, then we might ask the Fish and Wildlife Service to administer it for wildlife purposes, or we would ask the National Park Service to administer it for recreation purposes.

I'm not sure what reservoirs, anymore, are administered by those agencies in the Kansas River Project area. We only had one reservoir managed by a Federal agency, and that was Kirwin Reservoir in Kansas, and it was administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service. I believe that in Wyoming or Montana, the Yellowtail Reservoir was determined to have national significance. I believe it is administered by the National Park Service.

Pfaff: Was that determination of national significance made by Reclamation?

Ervin: Well, it was made by the cooperating agencies, with Reclamation being the lead agency.

Pfaff: You mentioned the water users organization. When the Missouri River Basin Project was developed, irrigation districts had to be established along with that, is that correct?

In Earlier Projects on Public Lands Reclamation Often Served the Functions of an Irrigation District, Constructing, Operating, Maintaining, and Collecting Payments

Ervin: Yes, that's true, although, here again, this was an evolutionary process within Reclamation. Some of this change was brought about by the location or nature of the

various irrigation developments. Earlier Reclamation projects frequently were developing unsettled public lands. Frequently, Reclamation then not only constructed the project, but it developed the irrigation system in the farm units, which were perhaps either homesteaded or sold to individual settlers.

In that process, the Bureau of Reclamation would withdraw a large area of public lands not only for their reservoir areas, but for the area to be irrigated. Without people living there or having been settled there prior to construction of the works, there really wasn't any way to create an irrigation district. So in some of the earlier projects, many of them, Reclamation really served the purpose of an irrigation district, not only constructing the works, but operating them, delivering water and collecting water payments from the individual settlers or landowners.

That became rather burdensome. I think that perhaps it was determined that it would be more appropriate, more efficient, but certainly more appropriate, to have the water users in some type of organization to operate the facilities to deliver the water, collect the revenues, and deal with the irrigators, as opposed to having the Bureau people there. This has kind of been an evolutionary process in Reclamation.

By the Time of the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Program, it Was Necessary There Be a District

By the time the Missouri River Basin Project came along, it was almost necessary that there be a water users organization, or landowners organization, a legal entity, capable of administering and operating and repaying project costs. Such an agency, local agency, needed to be in place, if not at the time of authorization, certainly before construction could be undertaken, there would need to be a legal entity capable of administering the project, at least the irrigation aspects—delivering the water, authority to collect revenues, and to make repayments to the Federal Government.

I guess that's enough of that, isn't it?

Pfaff: There was an entity needed. There were multiple irrigation, multiple districts created?

Pick- Sloan Missouri Basin Program Was More a Concept than Plan When Authorized

Ervin: When the Pick-Sloan Missouri River Basin Project was authorized, it was really more a

concept than it was a plan. The plans are for the individual features. Reservoirs and irrigated land areas had not really been identified. So at the time of authorization, there was no legal entities, at least irrigation districts, in existence for these various project areas. However, it was necessary, in accordance with Reclamation law at that time, that we would not undertake any construction, at least of the irrigation works, until a legal entity had been organized by the . . .

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1. JULY 1, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JULY 1, 1998.

Pfaff: This is side two of tape one on July 1st, 1998. This an interview with J. Willis Ervin. We are talking about setting local irrigation districts on the Missouri River Basin Project.

“Before construction could be undertaken on any of the irrigation distribution works, there needed to be a legal irrigation district . . . and a repayment contract . . . to agree to operate the works and to make repayments of project costs to the United States. . . .”

Ervin: Well, to restate that. Before construction could be undertaken on any of the irrigation distribution works, there needed to be a legal irrigation district, or similar entity, in place, and a repayment contract, or a contract having been executed between that district and the Secretary of Interior, through the Bureau of Reclamation, to agree to operate the works and to make repayments of project costs to the United States.

“There is a distinction between project storage works and the irrigation distribution systems. . . . The storage dam and reservoir, and sometimes the major main canals, were considered water supply works. The water supply works were exempt from the requirement that there be a repayment contract in place in an irrigation district. . . .”

There is a distinction between project storage works and the irrigation distribution systems. The irrigation distribution systems were those which delivered water to the individual farm units. The storage dam and reservoir, and sometimes the major main canals, were considered water supply works. The water supply works were exempt from the requirement that there be a repayment contract in place in an irrigation district. So, legally, the Bureau of Reclamation could undertake the construction of the water supply works without there being an irrigation district in existence and a

repayment contract.

As a practical matter, that wasn't done very often. But in the case of the Missouri River Basin Project, the early days after World War II, the country, the administration, the locals, were anxious to get works constructed, particularly for flood control. So this allowed the Bureau of Reclamation to undertake construction of many of the reservoirs prior to the organization of an irrigation district.

Pfaff: Did you have a direct hand in setting up some of these irrigation districts in Nebraska, Kansas, eastern Colorado?

“ . . . you need a rather detailed project plan of what lands are going to be irrigated and where the distribution system is going to be constructed. So the Bureau planning had to be fairly detailed before you could undertake the organization of an irrigation district. . . . ”

Ervin: Yes. There were ten or twelve irrigation districts, I think, organized in that area. Obviously, you need a rather detailed project plan of what lands are going to be irrigated and where the distribution system is going to be constructed. So the Bureau planning had to be fairly detailed before you could undertake the organization of an irrigation district.

“ . . . generally speaking, a majority of the landowners owning a majority of the land to be irrigated could create an irrigation district . . . ”

In most states, or at least in those three states, Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado, generally speaking, a majority of the landowners owning a majority of the land to be irrigated could create an irrigation district by petitioning either a state agency or the county commissioners. I think in all cases it called for an election of the landowners in the proposed district, as to whether they were for or against the creation of an irrigation district.

Pfaff: Was it difficult establishing boundaries for these districts? Was that problematic at all?

“ . . . for the most part, the areas were identified by those lands which could be irrigated from a gravity irrigation system. . . . many people above the canals wanted to be in the district, and in some instances pumps were put in to serve them. . . . ”

Ervin: Well, I guess it was problematic to those that might be included in the district boundaries that didn't want to be, and it might be problematic to those who were outside of the boundaries and wanted to be in. But for the most part, the areas were identified by those lands which could be irrigated from a gravity irrigation system. In other words, you couldn't necessarily pump water to include them in the district. However, many people above the canals wanted to be in the district, and in some instances pumps were put in to serve them.

But the organization of the district, once you had pretty well defined what lands were going to be irrigated, and to proceed with the petitions, it was necessary to collect reliable information on the owners of the lands to be in the district and the legal descriptions for their property. These were all incorporated in the petition.

“Usually there were local people who were interested in furthering their project, otherwise we probably wouldn't have been dealing if there wasn't some local force advocating it. . . .”

Usually there were local people who were interested in furthering their project, otherwise we probably wouldn't have been dealing if there wasn't some local force advocating it.

Reclamation's Role in Creation of Districts

These people usually were not a legal entity, they would be an association or a committee. They weren't necessarily equipped to prepare or to secure the land, the ownership information and the legal descriptions and the description of the lands to be irrigated. So Reclamation had most of that information, and Reclamation personnel usually assisted the interested landowners in preparing the petitions for the organization of a district. But the landowners—well, actually it was not the landowners. At least in Nebraska the county commissioners conducted the election to determine whether a majority of the landowners owning a majority of the land favored the creation of an irrigation district.

Pfaff: As an agriculturist during the period, did you have a direct role in this? Were you involved in any of the [unclear] the districts?

Ervin: Well, some of these districts were organized before I came to work for the Bureau, but

other Bureau personnel assisted in the organization of those districts. After I became an agriculturist, I participated in the organization of at least two districts.

Pfaff: What would you have done?

Helped Organize Two Irrigation Districts

Ervin: Well, first you seek out who the leaders are in the community that favor the organization of the district. Through some process, usually not an election process, but by consensus, I guess, you would find two or three or more individuals who were willing to be leaders, or they were leaders in the community, and were willing to sponsor the organization of the district. You would work individually with them.

Pfaff: Which two districts were you involved with?

Ervin: I was involved with the organization of the H&RW Irrigation District.

Pfaff: H&RW Irrigation District. Where was that one?

Ervin: It was near McCook. It's in Hitchcock and Red Willow Counties, near McCook.

Pfaff: Would that have been in the area where your family was? When you say it's near McCook.

Ervin: Yes, it was in the area I was from, if you consider McCook the area. But specifically, we didn't have any land in the project area.

Then I helped organize the district in the Little Blue Irrigation District on the Blue River in Nebraska, but that project was never constructed.

Pfaff: What happened with that one?

Ervin: Well, I think what happened with that, this was sort of the forerunner of what happened to the Reclamation program. The irrigation district was created. In other words, the landowners were interested in having irrigation, but the project economics, at least in the evaluations made later, did not support it as an economic development. So Reclamation never saw authorization.

Pfaff: They had planned to build canals there, or was there also a dam . . .

Ervin: There was a dam. Dam and pump stations and canal.

Pfaff: So it just was not economically feasible to build [unclear]?

Ervin: Yes, and it died on the vine, I guess, you could say.

Pfaff: I guess so.

Ervin: Well, I personally wasn't too involved. But there were other agriculturists involved in creating irrigation districts, Ziruff [phonetic], Webster, and Kirwin in Kansas, and the North Loup and O'Neill units in Nebraska. Perhaps there were some others.

Pfaff: Did you enjoy that facet of your work?

Ervin: Well, yes. It certainly wasn't routine. It had its challenges and rewards. Particularly, as I recall, in the H&RW Irrigation District, I think all the landowners voted in favor of it, except maybe one. It was a substantial majority that organized that district.

But it was interesting working with the individual landowners. They knew about things that I didn't know about in the community, who might react what way or whatever. And I knew things that they needed to know to create a district.

Pfaff: So, a lot of personal exchange and one-on-one meeting with people and discussing the idea and getting people to support it was involved?

Ervin: That's true. Some people, and I'm presuming the administration, weren't always certain that the Reclamation employees should be that much involved in the creation of the districts. However, it was a means to the end.

Pfaff: To get their support. To get the buying-in.

Ervin: Yes. Without the district, without the contracts, you didn't construct anything.

Pfaff: So you think Reclamation's role was appropriate, as far as getting the district set up and going?

Ervin: As far as I'm concerned, yes.

Pfaff: I want to go back to Indianola for a few minutes, because I'm fascinated to hear about more about life at the Indianola campsite, I guess. We discussed it a little bit. You talked about the barracks there, and it had been a prisoner-of-war camp. I'd like you to describe for me what day-to-day life was like at the camp. You all lived there?

Life at the Indianola Site

Ervin: Maybe it continued, in a sense, as a prisoner-of-war camp, we just had different inhabitants. (laughter)

Pfaff: With different uniforms, I'm sure. (laughter)

Ervin: Right. Yes, we were a community unto ourself. Indianola was a small community. There was one little grocery store there, as I recall.

Pfaff: On the [unclear]?

Ervin: No, in Indianola.

Pfaff: In the town itself?

Ervin: Yes. The camp was located maybe a couple of miles from Indianola, so that's where you went for day-to-day supplies. McCook was only eleven miles from Indianola. It was the major trade center, so most everybody drove to McCook, at least on weekends. There was a school system in Indianola, however, the influx of a hundred families or so strained their capacity to handle that many students.

I guess my recollection was that I didn't feel very rooted in the community, because we lived rather isolated at the camp. Not isolated by distance, but isolated by what you did, I guess. Everyone in Indianola was oriented to that community and quite frequently had grown up there. The Reclamation family came from everywhere. While we worked on some projects near Indianola, for the most part, most of that work was being done in designing dams and irrigation systems in areas removed from Indianola.

Pfaff: What was the structure of the Reclamation office there?

Hub Robinson

Ervin: We had a district manager. His name was Hub Robinson [phonetic]. H. E. Robinson.

Pfaff: Robinson?

Ervin: Robinson, right. And various division chiefs. One for planning, one for design and construction, and one for operation and maintenance. There were various disciplines within each of those.

I'm not certain what the basis for it was, but obviously the project manager, or the district manager, was, in a sense, the mayor of the camp. I don't know whether that was legal, I mean, defined by statute, or whether it was just by edict. Probably the latter.

Pfaff: He wasn't elected? (laughter)

Ervin: No. (laughter) Well, I don't know how you'd operate it much other than him being the boss. So, not only administering the Reclamation program there with the administration of the camp, which was fairly extensive, because there was the conversion of the barracks into apartments. There was the collection of rents, and providing fire protection, and generally giving people something to do outside of their job.

Pfaff: Social activities?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: So he basically determined all that? He was in charge of all that?

Ervin: He was in charge of it. Of course, he was in charge of everything. We had an individual that was a—I'll call him the camp manager. I don't know if that was his title, but as a practical matter it was. He assigned the apartments and he did the repair work. We had plumbers and electricians and fire department. Or fire engine. We never had a fire, so I don't know how that would have operated. But there was a fire engine there and a firehouse.

Pfaff: Was this a fenced-in camp?

Ervin: Well, it was when the prisoners were there. I think it got torn down during the period we were there. We had an airstrip there.

“We had a single-engine airplane and a pilot that was used extensively, particularly by the district manager and the division chiefs, to get around the area. . . .”

We had a single-engine airplane and a pilot that was used extensively, particularly by the district manager and the division chiefs, to get around the area.

Pfaff: Was there a school there, too?

Ervin: School in Indianola.

Pfaff: So the kids would go to Indianola?

Ervin: Indianola, that’s right.

Pfaff: Did you feel like the environment was stifling from the standpoint that all your life was based, your work and your extracurricular life, was all based in the camp, or did you feel like it was a really positive experience?

Ervin: Well, I think, my observation, although we hadn’t been married more than a year when we started living there, and both my wife and I had relatives in the general area. In fact, my Grandfather Ervin and my grandmother homesteaded in 1879, a homestead perhaps fifteen miles from the camp. But, yes, I think the camp environment was sort of restrictive. What was the term you used?

Pfaff: Stifling.

Ervin: Stifling. (laughter) Yes, it was somewhat stifling, yes. The opportunities to intermix socially were somewhat limited. I guess there used to be movie theater, or a gymnasium, that we still had there. That was used for volleyball and dances once in a while, that sort of thing. But on the other hand, it was a kind of supportive group.

I think one of the detracting factors was, we lived side to side in their barracks, apartments, there’d be two or three of them. Well, if some disagreement might develop in the living area--and with a hundred families there’s going to be some develop--that

carried over into the workplace. Or vice versa. If something developed in the work area that was disagreements or hard feelings or something, that carried over into the living area.

Pfaff: That would be tough.

Ervin: Yes. It could have been better, but it could have been worse. We had homes and we had a job.

Pfaff: How did they assign homes? Were they segregated by different grades at all? The managers were in one area and the worker bees in the other areas? How was that done?

Ervin: To some extent that occurred. There was a hospital area at the camp, and those apartments were considerably more spacious and desired. They were better apartments, the better ones to live in. Theoretically, I guess, apartments were allocated on need. In our case, we didn't need a two-bedroom apartment; we only needed a one-bedroom. So that was the kind we got.

Now, there were other older families that had children, that required the larger apartments. I would say the higher-grade people got the better apartments in the hospital area, and to some extent that could be justified, perhaps, on need, because frequently they had the larger families. Secondly, they were among the first people that came on board, so those apartments were available, and obviously they were the first ones allocated.

Pfaff: Did the barracks feel cramped? Did the living quarters feel cramped?

Ervin: Yes. (laughter) Yes. I don't know. You weren't very far from your neighbors in any direction.

Pfaff: You wouldn't be able to get away too easy. (laughter)

Ervin: No. But the other side is that many of the people did become involved in school and church activities in Indianola. There was some intermixing of people. I think the Indianola people were glad to see the camp converted to civilian use, so to speak, because many civilians in Indianola had jobs at the prisoner-of-war camp, and when it closed then they were out of jobs. When Reclamation took it over, then many of these jobs were recreated. The plumbers and the electricians they came back.

Pfaff: Came back to work.

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: Were there also construction types living at Indianola, or was this strictly the planning side, planning and design?

Ervin: I think just planning and design at Indianola. The construction offices were usually located closer to the construction site.

Pfaff: Was there a community garden there?

Community Garden

Ervin: Yes, we had a community garden. It was laid out. It seems like it was about four or five acres of land. So anybody in the camp could have a community garden, or could have a garden. There was an area outside of the residential area, that was, I guess, formerly cultivated, but at least we plowed it and prepared it for gardens every year.

Pfaff: So you had a plot there?

Ervin: Yes. In fact, I laid out the gardens one year as miscellaneous extra duties as assigned.

Pfaff: Did you grow your own food there?

Ervin: Sure.

Pfaff: Is that what most of the people did?

Ervin: That was one of the major outside recreation or activities for people in the camp in the summertime. It seemed like nearly the whole office was up at the gardens in the evenings, tending them, or on weekends. I think it kind of inherent in Reclamation people to want to grow something. (laughter)

Pfaff: Yes, it makes sense that you would have quite a community garden on a Reclamation camp up there.

What was Hub Robinson like?

Hub Robinson

Ervin: Well, I was kind of an underling, about the lowest grade when I started working there. I think Hub had been in the Corps of Engineers during World War II, I believe. He had a facility for working with local community leaders.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JULY 1, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JULY 1, 1998.

Pfaff: Tape two, side one, of an interview with J. Willis Ervin. This is Christine Pfaff.

Willis is talking about Hub Robinson at the Indianola camp.

Ervin: Yes, I would say he was a competent individual. He was a professional person, yet he was cordial. I think he would stop and talk with any of the employees anywhere. He had a facility of working with the community, or the people who were interested in furthering a project in their area.

I know he spent a lot of time with Harry Strunk, who was the editor of the *McCook Daily Gazette*, and who was the president of the Republican Valley Conservation Association, which was a non-legal entity. It was created by the towns and landowners along the Republican River in Nebraska, to further the development of the dams, reservoirs, and irrigation systems in the Republican Valley.

I don't recall any adversities that arose from Mr. Robinson's being district manager, that he didn't handle, anyway. But obviously I didn't know a lot of what went on either. But news traveled fast in the camp.

Pfaff: I'm sure it did. But he was generally well liked?

Ervin: I believe so, yes.

Pfaff: At that point, you would have been under one of these division chiefs that you described, either the planning designer O&M . . .

Was Working in the O&M Division for Nat Tolman

Ervin: I was under O&M, that was Nat Tolman.

Pfaff: He was O&M?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: What was he like to work for?

Ervin: Well, basically he was my mentor during my Reclamation life, or career, I guess, and at times he was my tormentor. (laughter) But I think I spoke about him earlier.

Pfaff: Yes, you mentioned that he had come from . . .

Ervin: Well, actually he was a farmer for a while after he graduated from the University of Nebraska, and then a county agent. Then he worked for the Department of Agriculture, I think. I'm not sure. I think maybe for a while it was a Soil Conservation Service, and then maybe the Farm Security Administration, in the development of the Mirage Flats Wheeler-Case Project.⁷

In the kind of work that I was doing, particularly as an agriculturist, he was an excellent supervisor and mentor, because I was doing many of the things, at least they were closely related, to what he had probably done as a county agent and as he had participated in the Mirage Flats Project. He ultimately left the Kansas River Projects area after we moved to McCook, to become the regional supervisor of the operations.⁸

Pfaff: That's right. Region VII.

Ervin: Yes. It may be somewhat interesting that ultimately I followed him in that position. Not immediately; there was an intervening person. But I ultimately held the same position in the region that he did.

Pfaff: So you really did follow in his footsteps. In 1952, the Indianola camp, around 1952, I think you mentioned, you moved to the McCook office and the dance hall. Is that when it shut down?

Ervin: No, my wife and I moved out of the camp, and moved to McCook in '52. But the camp

7. See footnote on page 45.

8. Nat Tolman first appears in the October 1960 Denver phone directory for Reclamation as the division chief of the Irrigation Division. He dropped out of the Denver phone books between July 1969 and 1972–J. Willis Ervin became chief of the Reports Coordination Branch in the Division of Planning in late 1970. In the November 1972 phone book, he is listed as the chief of the Division of Water and Lands.

didn't come in right then. I think I commuted maybe a couple of years. So I suppose it was around 1954, plus or minus a year, when they shut the camp down and moved into a converted dance hall at McCook.

Pfaff: I've heard the term, the "McCook mafia," applied to that whole McCook office. Were you already known as that back then, or is that a term that was applied later on?

“ . . . the McCook and the Indianola office . . . the early efforts . . . the Missouri River Basin development. Much of the design work was done at McCook . . . So we had a lot of personnel . . . may have had five or six hundred people at its peak. . . . ”

Ervin: Well, let's see. First of all, the McCook and the Indianola office, the program there was one of the early efforts in the development of the Missouri River Basin development. Much of the design work was done at McCook, as opposed to what was known as the chief engineer's office in Denver. So we had a lot of personnel out there. I think the area may have had five or six hundred people at its peak.

Pfaff: When would the peak have been?

Ervin: Well, about the time they moved, in the fifties, mid-fifties. What was the question again, now?

Pfaff: The "McCook mafia."

The McCook Mafia

Ervin: Oh, the mafia. Many people had spent quite a bit of time at McCook, in that office, and they were closely associated with each other. As the program slowed down out there and people transferred out and went to other jobs, frequently there would be a lot of so-called graduates from the McCook office all over the Reclamation area. I think that's perhaps where that term came from. There was so many people went through that office that they contaminated Reclamation with those experiences.

Then I think we that had been there, finally adopted the term. We were called "McCook mafia" for a long time. Then we finally assumed that terminology with some degree of pride.

Pfaff: Well, it seemed like it was a close-knit group just because of your working circumstances there. You lived at the camp together, I can imagine there were a real strong kindred there. You mentioned the engineers work at the E&R Center in Denver. Did you interact with engineers at all?

Most Interrelationships Were Within the Division Office in McCook or with Water Users

Ervin: I interacted with engineers at the district office level, the people who were planning and designing and the construction of the works. I had no particular connection with the chief engineer's office.

Pfaff: While you were at McCook?

Ervin: No.

Pfaff: How did you relate to the engineers then? Were they a group unto themselves?

Ervin: Oh, yes, the design and construction people, particularly, I think, are a unique group, sort of. Well, they're the doers. When you get to the design and construction stage, something's going to happen. They were the people who got to enjoy and do the construction work.

I think a good share of my relations were with the planning people, and in the early design and construction of the works, in trying to convey some of the needs that I saw in the design of the works to serve the irrigation farmers and vice versa. I spent a lot of time with individual landowners, talking to them about why the works were being constructed in such a manner and how it would affect them, and how they could irrigate their land from it. Sometimes I'd go to the field with the people who were doing design, planning and design, even construction, to look over situations and see what I might contribute to a better situation.

Pfaff: From your agricultural background?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: As far as laying out the canals and everything?

Ervin: Canals and irrigating, yes. I consulted and coordinated with them quite a little. Particularly even after we would get to the construction stage, preliminary construction, anyway, I'd go over the plans, plan profile sheets for the canals and laterals.

Pfaff: With the engineers?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: They would ask for your input at that point?

Eventually the Agriculturists Were Integrated into the Planning Process at an Earlier Stage to Avoid Problems During Construction

Ervin: Well, I would give them my input. Sometimes I don't know that they wanted it always. One of the things that happened is, my first involvement in the agriculturist area was in the area of the Cambridge Canal, I think. It was largely designed, and part of it under construction. Well, I saw several problems where they would be brought to my attention by the landowners. I would, in turn, discuss this with our construction people or engineering people.

But when you get that far along with the construction of works, or have it under contract, it's not easy to make changes, or the engineers' reluctant to make them, because it caused them headaches to deal with contractors. So as time went along, I participated, and the other agriculturists, in the development of those plans earlier on, before they got under construction, before the contracts were let, bids were taken, which resulted in a more effective way to do it, and certainly a better relationship with the engineers.

Pfaff: Yes. So it was more of a team approach to designing the system.

Ervin: Right. At the outset, I was kind of an outsider, picking at their plans. But I finally got a place on the team. Maybe as a water boy, I don't know.

Pfaff: It took a while to develop that relationship, is what you're saying.

Ervin: Right. To even understand the need for it.

Pfaff: For the engineers to see the need for it?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: Did they end up changing the Cambridge Canal, based on your recommendations?

Ervin: I think there may be some—not the canal itself, some minor changes of facilities and turnouts and that sort of stuff, locations of the laterals.

Pfaff: All through the fifties and then through the sixties at McCook, they're constructing the Missouri River Basin Project. Was that your primary involvement, would have been with that project?

Ervin: Yes, almost exclusively. Right. There weren't any other Reclamation projects in that area that weren't Missouri River Basin Projects. So I was concerned with the subunits of that, but they were called units and divisions, I guess. But that piece of it down there in the Kansas River Basin.

Pfaff: How did your job evolve once you became the branch chief in the early sixties, when we were talking earlier about the reservoir plans? You had three or four people working under you. What progressed from there?

Work as the Land Management Branch Chief

Ervin: Well, as the projects got constructed and developed, less emphasis and time was spent with the landowners in developing irrigation, their individual irrigation needs, and more time was spent in the development of the reservoir plans, and the maintenance of those, and negotiation of agreements. We entered into contractual arrangements, memorandums of agreement, with the state agencies involved for each of the reservoir areas. So there were numerous memorandums and agreements to write and negotiate.

Reclamation Oversight Responsibilities for Project Operated by Others

Reclamation still maintained an oversight responsibility for the reservoir management. It would have been nice, I think, if we could have gotten rid of that oversight responsibility, but it never seemed to work out, even when we tried. If some individual, or group of individuals, became dissatisfied about something, particularly how the reservoir was being administered by a state agency, they wrote to their congressman. The congressman, of course, wrote to the commissioner, and it came back down to the project level again to deal with that. We never were able to say,

“That’s not our responsibility. That’s the administering agency.” That just didn’t fly politically. So we found ourselves still involved in an oversight role with the administering agencies and would have to work with them in solutions to problems that came up.

Soil and Moisture Conservation Program

In addition, the Department of Interior had a responsibility for maintaining the land resources. We continued some erosion and erosion control facilities, largely, on those lands, under what was known as the Soil and Moisture Conservation Program within the Bureau.

Pfaff: You were involved in that also in the sixties as the project was built?

Acreage Limitation as an Issue

Ervin: Yes. I was also involved in administering the provisions of the excess land provisions of the individual districts’ repayment contracts. Each of those contracts, of course, limited the delivery of water to the so-called 160 acres. The excess land provisions were not particularly significant or a big problem in the area where I worked, because there were not really large farms or large areas in one ownership. Because of the nature of the gravity system of canals, while some farmer may have a large acreage, quite often we were not able to survey irrigation water to the whole acreage, so we really didn’t have an excess land problem. But the provisions of the contract had to be administered.

Pfaff: What would that involve?

Ervin: Well, it usually involved determining against specific ownership and notifying the landowner, if they had more than 160 acres, of the excess land provisions. For the most part, the solution was that the land would be put into multiple ownership of a member’s family, quite often, something may be held only in the husband’s name or the wife’s name. If it were more than 160 acres, it might be necessary for the beneficial ownership be extended to the spouse, and then they could own and receive water on 320 acres.

Of course, this has been changed by the Reclamation Reform Act. It came into being about the time I was getting ready to retire, and I chose not to become a student

of it, so I don't know what it all involves anymore.

Pfaff: During this whole time, as the project is being built, irrigation practices themselves were changed, weren't they, with the introduction of the pivot systems and all of that? Center pivot?

Technical Improvements in Irrigation

Ervin: Yes. I guess many irrigation practices hadn't changed much since the [unclear] up to maybe the early 1900s, but there were many developments that facilitated more effective irrigation practices. There were ditchers to make the various distribution systems on the farm. Of course, early on, years ago, those irrigated fields, frequently, the ditch bank was merely cut with a shovel and let the water into the row. That was laborious, and it didn't provide very good control of the amount of water that went onto the field.

I recall, I suppose, in the thirties, when the Tri-County Project was constructed, that the improved way to distribute water onto the fields was to create small lath boxes, which I presume would mean four lath nailed together, which gave a restricted flow when you place those in the ditch banks. You could then check the water up and the water would flow out through the lath boxes into the rows, which gave some control on the amount of water. That was laborious. You built the boxes in the wintertime and used them in the summertime. I suppose you retained them.

Well, subsequent, I suppose, it was, I believe, mostly after the war, World War II, the siphon tube came into use. It just operates on the principle of physics, that water will flow from a higher level to a lower level. The siphon tubes were made either by plastic, and later by aluminum, and they were made in various sizes, from a half inch, probably up to two or three inches, depending. You could place those siphon tubes in each row, over the ditch bank. You didn't have to cut it. So that reduced the labor in irrigating. It also gave a lot of flexibility in the amount of water you could discharge into a particular row or field or something like that.

Then a little later, I suppose, in the late fifties, there was an advent of portable pipe. I suppose this started out generally being aluminum pipe or sheet metal. The aluminum pipe, I presume the use of it maybe was an outgrowth of the use of aluminum in planes during the war. There was production capacity around, anyway. But the on-farm distribution, provided you had enough elevation to make the pipe

work, you could replace the open ditch that had been historically used back to [unclear] times. You could replace that with a pipe, a pipe conveyance. The pipes came in different sizes. Those pipes had individual gates in them that could be opened and shut to regulate the amount of water to any given row or any given field, which gave you almost the ultimate in regulation in terms of matching the water to the irrigation needs of the crop. It also eliminated the open ditches which occupied land that wasn't productive. You could now lay the pipe just along the end of the field and you didn't have the waste area and the weed area that came from open ditches.

Then as I recall, the sizing tube and the pipe, use of pipes, and that was made originally in aluminum. Later, it's now being made in plastic. Those were the means that were the up-to-date, current technology about the time, at least in the fifties, when we started making our initial delivery of water on these projects. I recall a landowner wanting me to come and see him about a system of irrigation involving the sprinkler. I guess also sprinklers were in use, too, in that period. Sprinkler pipe that you used . . .

END SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JULY 1, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 2. JULY 1, 1998.

Pfaff: This is now side two of tape two on July 1st, 1998.

You were speaking, Willis, of the farmer who called you out to see his new sprinkler system.

Ervin: Yes, he'd purchased a system. He had about 40 acres of land to be irrigated, I think. It was rather rough land. It would have been difficult to irrigate by gravity. He had purchased this sprinkler system which went around and around, and wanted to know what I thought about it. I really couldn't tell him what I thought, because he'd already bought it. But it was my first encounter with--what do you call it? Rotary sprinklers, that goes around and around. That was the beginning of the advent of the center pivot sprinklers, at least in the project areas.

Pfaff: Wasn't that pretty much introduced in Nebraska? Isn't that where it started?

Center Pivot Sprinkler Systems in Nebraska

Ervin: I believe so, yes. Most of the irrigation in Nebraska is pump irrigation from groundwater. It made an easy combination. You had a pump to pump the groundwater

anyway, so you merely put that in the center pivot sprinkler system, and it propelled itself around the field and sprinkled the water, delivered the water, which gives you a lot more control of the irrigation, amount of water applied and when. I guess that progression has gone on over centuries.

“ . . . in the last half of the 1900s, or the twentieth century, considerable progress has been made in the efficiency of applying water for irrigation purposes. . . . ”

But certainly, in the last half of the 1900s, or the twentieth century, considerable progress has been made in the efficiency of applying water for irrigation purposes.

Pfaff: What was your reaction when you saw this major change in irrigation systems to the center pivot systems, coming from your agricultural background?

Ervin: Well, there weren't too many of those that occurred on the Reclamation project lands, simply because the configuration of the lands, the fields aren't all that large. The center pivot definitely fits the quarter section of land, in Nebraska, at least, much of it--well, in Colorado and other states, too. The center pivot was developed around the irrigation of a quarter section of land, 160 acres, although they make them larger and smaller. I may have lost touch with how large they are now. But that seems to work. At least to my knowledge, they haven't been used as extensively on Reclamation projects, particularly those in the Missouri River Basin, probably for a couple of reasons, or three.

First of all, the lands may have already been leveled, and investment made in irrigating them by gravity. Secondly, they may not be in large uniform tracts, like a quarter section. Thirdly, the water's delivered by gravity from a canal lateral system. Therefore, to use the center pivot sprinkler, it's necessary to add a power unit and to pump the water to the center pivot sprinkler, which is an additional operation from the gravity delivery, whereas in the pump irrigation situation, you already have a pump, a well to pump the water, and you have a power unit on that. So you already have the equipment to go ahead and pump the water into the sprinkler system, so it will operate.

Pfaff: That didn't affect your planning work? That transition to those center pivot systems didn't affect your planning that much in the late fifties?

Ervin: No, but that's about the time I got out of it, too. I'm not familiar with some of the later planning. Well, I know we had a project area which never got constructed. It was the

O'Neill Unit in northeastern Nebraska, northern, which had a lot of quarter sections. I think the planning work on that was reflecting the use of center pivots. They would have been used extensively there.

Pfaff: Was groundwater depletion already an issue when you were in that office?

Groundwater Depletion as an Issue

Ervin: Yes. Yes, but perhaps not in the manner you normally think of. The reservoirs in the plains area, they depend on their water supply from storm runoff, normally rain and groundwater base flow into the stream on which they're located, as compared to reservoirs in the mountainous area, which depend largely on snow melt for the water supply, maybe some rain. There was considerable groundwater development above some of the reservoir areas, and particularly above Enders Reservoir in Nebraska.

There has been a depletion in the water supply to that reservoir based on probably two principal factors. First of all, the conservation practices that have been employed, put in place, on dry land farms, retained more of the rainfall on the farm, and so there's less runoff. So there's less flow from runoff that accumulates in the reservoir.

In addition, in the case of Enders, it depended considerably on a base flow of groundwater into the stream above the reservoir, and extensive pump irrigation development above that reservoir has resulted in a reduction of the base flow, and, therefore, reduction in the water supply.

Pfaff: This has happened in recent years? Could you already see this happening when you were there?

Ervin: Yes, it was happening in the late fifties, early sixties.

Pfaff: Was this unanticipated?

Ervin: It was unanticipated, yes, because up until that time, it was assumed that you couldn't afford to pump water a hundred or two hundred feet to grow the crops that were being grown there. But with the change in pump design, motors, availability of electric power, the use of center pivot sprinklers to improve the efficiency of water application, the groundwater development had been extensive in those areas over by the Ogallala

formation, which were those areas which have ample groundwater.

Pfaff: Did that affect then how Reclamation had to manage the reservoirs, the fact that some of the runoff they were counting on didn't make it to the reservoir?

Ervin: You couldn't help but change, because you had less water to deliver. I guess that was the change in determining how best to use a limited water supply, how to deliver it. When you had an ample water supply, you maintained delivery throughout the season, but as the water supply becomes more limited on these projects, rather than having a system full and operating all the time, the period of operation would be restricted. Everybody would have an opportunity to operate over a given period of time, and then the system maybe would shut down, so you wouldn't lose so much water from seepage out of the system. Then it would be started up again and make a delivery to them. So it modified the operation of the water delivery, since you didn't have as much to deliver.

Pfaff: As it was implemented the Missouri River Basin Project was different than it was actually planned because of some of these unanticipated occurrences?

Ervin: Well, yes.

Pfaff: At least the units that we're talking about?

Ervin: Yes. Well, an irrigation development, the world's dynamic, the world we're in, it doesn't stay the same. So it's the dynamics of development, I guess, that caused this to happen. Of course, depletion of groundwater is a big question throughout Kansas and Nebraska, eastern Colorado, Texas. The solution at one time was, get a surface irrigation project, and you wouldn't have to pump, or operate in conjunctive use. But when your surface water supply's depleted, that isn't a good answer either. It's a huge problem, the depletion of the aquifer, the Ogallala aquifer, I think.

Pfaff: Did Reclamation foresee where this was going, do you think, back then?

“ . . . the development of non-project irrigation upstream from the reservoirs has been much greater than what was allowed in evaluating the water supply. . . . ”

Ervin: Not to the extent that it developed. In the water supply studies, the hydrologists made allowances for stream depletion from pump irrigation. I shouldn't say it that way.

Maybe not from pump irrigation, probably from gravity irrigation. In any case, the development of non-project irrigation upstream from the reservoirs has been much greater than what was allowed in evaluating the water supply. The feasibility of developing irrigation, or at least pump irrigation, particularly, has improved. There are just a lot more irrigation, many fold, than was anticipated in the water supply states.

Pfaff: I wanted to ask you about . . .

“ . . . in Cedar Bluff Unit, on the Smokey Hill River in Kansas, which was designed, I think, constructed to serve around 10,000 acres of land, the inflow into the reservoir became so [reduced,] and determined to be a permanent depletion, that the project is no longer operated– the irrigation features. The repayment contract has been terminated . . . ”

Ervin: What I was going to say, in fact, in Cedar Bluff Unit, on the Smokey Hill River in Kansas, which was designed, I think, constructed to serve around 10,000 acres of land, the inflow into the reservoir became so [reduced,] ~~great~~, and determined to be a permanent depletion, that the project is no longer operated–the irrigation features. The repayment contract has been terminated with the irrigation district. I believe the rights-of-way for the canals and laterals have been deeded to the irrigation district. I presume that the laterals–I haven’t been out there, but I presume the laterals and the canals are now being filled in by farmers. It’s reverted back to dry land.

Pfaff: Because there was not a water supply?

Ervin: That’s right. Because it depleted. Either we miscalculated it in the beginning, or conditions changed drastically.

Pfaff: When did that happen? When was that reservoir . . .

Ervin: Decommissioned, so to speak?

Pfaff: Yes.

Ervin: In the seventies sometime, I believe. Late seventies, maybe.

Pfaff: I wanted to go back to the McCook office. Was Bob Kutz the manager while you were there? Was he over there?

Bob Kutz

Ervin: He was working there. Bob Kutz⁹ worked in the Kansas River District Project area all his forty-seven years of Reclamation. He was not the project manager when I was there, no, but he was there. He became project manager, I believe, when the Lower Platte District was combined with the Kansas River Project, which is now called Kansas-Nebraska Area Office.¹⁰ The headquarters have moved from McCook to Grand Island. I think that occurred while I was the regional supervisor of [the Division of] Water and Land operations.

Pfaff: So he was starting out while you were there?

Ervin: He became project manager while I was there, yes.

Pfaff: But while you were at McCook he was . . .

Ervin: He was working in the Engineering Division somewhere. Computers, a little bit of everything in the engineering field.

Pfaff: Then he moved up from there?

Ervin: Yes. He had quite a career.

Pfaff: That's what I understand. He went from computers to becoming a project manager.

Ervin: He went to work for Reclamation out at Medicine Creek Dam, I think, before he was old enough to really be working for them. I think he went to work when he was seventeen.

Pfaff: Wow, and he stayed with Reclamation throughout his career. How about the Republican River Compact? Did you have any . . .

Republican River Compact

Ervin: It was already in place, yes. Yes, there was a Compact Commission. I wasn't involved in it, but the hydrologists in the office were. I think they're still working—well, there is an administrative group, I guess, the three states and the Federal rep administer the

9. Bob Kutz participated in Reclamation's oral history program.

10. This happened during Commissioner Daniel P. Beard's reorganization of Reclamation in 1993 and 1994.

compact.

Pfaff: Are you aware now of the lawsuit of Kansas against Nebraska, over the water rights there?

Ervin: Not on the Republican. I'm aware of the one on the Arkansas River. I'm not aware there's one . . .

Pfaff: I had understood that. I may be wrong.

Ervin: Well, I may be out of date, too.

Pfaff: You weren't really involved in any negotiations or the dealings with that?

Ervin: No.

Pfaff: Anything else from your time in Nebraska, any other projects, activities that you were involved with, that we haven't talked about, before we move on?

Accepted into the Newly Created Manager Development Program Around 1965

Ervin: Well, I think there's many things to talk about. But one of the significant things in my Reclamation career happened while I was at McCook. I believe around 1960, Reclamation started a formalized program which they called a Manager Development Program. It was a program where you could apply for it, and certain individuals would be selected, and probably not more than, I don't know, five or six in a year. You would be transferred, I guess. You weren't transferred, you'd be assigned. You developed a training program, which largely consisted of experience in various offices, different offices.

In my case, and that would probably have been typical of others, this experience—so you would end up with experience not only at the project level, the regional level, the commissioner's office, and the Engineering and Research Center. Those periods of assignment would probably run about three months. It also required you to take some academic training in public administration, in my instance. I presume that was the usual for most everybody, but it may not have been. They may have gone and taken technical training.

“Over the next two years, I . . . had temporary assignments at the Lower Missouri Region in Denver and the E&R Center in Denver, the Mid-Pacific Region in California, and the Commissioner’s office in Washington. . . .”

But I suppose about 1965, I applied, and was accepted, into that Manager Development Program. Over the next two years, I spent time, had temporary assignments at the Lower Missouri Region in Denver and the E&R Center in Denver, the Mid-Pacific Region in California, and the Commissioner’s office in Washington.

Pfaff: You were a branch chief at that time?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: For the . . .

“. . . it was almost like the start of a new career. . . . This gave me exposure in the Reclamation program at various levels and responsibilities, and . . . gave me the ability to apply for other positions in the Bureau. . . .”

Ervin: Land Management Branch. This afforded me—it was almost like the start of a new career. I’d been there in McCook all my career up to that point. This gave me exposure in the Reclamation program at various levels and responsibilities, and facilitated my later positions, or gave me the ability to apply for other positions in the Bureau.

Pfaff: Did that lead to your move to Washington in 1968?

In 1968 “. . . I applied for, and obtained, a position of a reports coordinator in the Division of Planning in the Commissioner’s office. . . .”

Ervin: Yes. I had an assignment in the Planning Division and in the O&M Division in Washington while I was there. After I had completed my tour of duty, I applied for, and obtained, a position of a reports coordinator in the Division of Planning in the Commissioner’s office.

Pfaff: That sounds like a big switch from what you were doing. What was it about that that interested you?

Looking for a Change

Ervin: Well, one of the things that interested me is, the challenges and enjoyment of my job at McCook were not as much as they had been. I was interested in doing something different and, obviously, interested in promotions. Like I said, that caused me to move to Washington.

I kind of enjoyed my temporary assignment there. It didn't seem like Washington was that bad a place to be. But I was there by myself. My family was still in McCook. I didn't have to get out and commute to work. I lived close enough to walk to the office. I didn't assess all the impacts of moving to Washington with a family.

Pfaff: Which was very different, probably.

Ervin: The price of houses in McCook was much different than buying a house in Washington.

Pfaff: Even back then?

Ervin: Right. Although I don't believe the differential was as great then as it has been since then.

Pfaff: But you started looking around for other jobs?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: Washington, D.C., was really where you wanted to—at that point, you thought Washington would be the place to go?

Ervin: It was one of the places to go. There were positions in the [Pacific] Northwest Region and in the Mid-Pacific Region, in land management-related jobs, or work, that I was also interested in. But I didn't happen to get selected for those.

Pfaff: So you had a great opportunity to go to Washington.

Ervin: Yes, I did. You know, there was a period in the Bureau, I don't know when it started, I

think maybe it started when [Floyd] Dominy¹¹ became commissioner, where if you wanted to progress to management positions in the Bureau, you had to have a tour of duty in Washington.

Pfaff: I think that may still be true to some extent.

“ . . . I was working for the Planning Division, and I had been in the operation and maintenance most of the time, although I had done planning work . . . ”

Ervin: Well, there are some exceptions to it, where people have done real well. Yes, that was sort of my breaking out of Kansas River District, was moving to Washington. On top of that, I was working for the Planning Division, and I had been in the operation and maintenance most of the time, although I had done planning work actually. Land classification was planning work.

Pfaff: It kind of sounds like your reservoir . . .

END SIDE 2, TAPE 2. JULY 1, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 3. JULY 1, 1998.

Pfaff: July 1st. I'm interviewing J. Willis Ervin. This is tape three, side one.

We are talking about the switch from the McCook office to Washington, D.C. You were saying how you had come out of O&M Division and went to a Planning Division in Washington.

Ervin: Well, as I said, I had a good understanding of the development and operation of Reclamation projects, including some of the planning for them. But I certainly didn't have a working knowledge, or close association, with the administration of the Reclamation Program at the Washington level, the interaction with Congress and other agencies of the administration.

Pfaff: What were your first impressions going from the McCook office to the Washington, D.C., office?

Adjustments to Living in the D.C. Area after Moving There from McCook

Ervin: Well, one of my first impression was moving back there. I used to live about a mile

11. Floyd E. Dominy participated in Reclamation's oral history program.

from work, and it took me about five minutes to get there. Living was rather simple in McCook, in a city of 8,000 or so. But moving into the Washington area, first of all, the commute. Moved from about five minutes to forty-five minutes or an hour. More traffic than I was accustomed to. One of the other things was living in the urban area with a family, getting around to do the things that was necessary to live, and how much time it took.

Pfaff: Did Reclamation have a good relocation program at that point? Did they help you find a place and move and all of that?

Ervin: No. There was relocation benefits, yes, moving costs and that sort of thing. But I'm not familiar with any relocation program. Maybe they have it now.

Pfaff: No, that's what I'm [unclear].

Ervin: No, I think it was just a matter of moving expenses and some allowance for miscellaneous expenses, I think, associated with it.

“... living in the McCook area . . . You . . . worked together . . . at least some Reclamation people and you'd see them quite often [in the community]. . . . the Washington office . . . you went home, everybody . . . disappeared into the suburbs. You didn't have that personal association with many of them. I guess they didn't identify with Reclamation as much as you did in the field offices. . . .”

I think one of the real impressions I had, and maybe it's the contrast, but in living in the McCook area, of course, I had family there. But the Reclamation employees there were a significant part of the community. You may have worked together, but you may go to church together with somebody. You may work on a Boy Scout troop with at least some Reclamation people and you'd see them quite often.

When you go to the Washington office, then you went home, everybody everywhere, more or less, and they disappeared into the suburbs. You didn't have that personal association with many of them. I guess they didn't identify with Reclamation as much as you did in the field offices.

Pfaff: It's a much closer mix.

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: Closer association with your fellow employees.

“ . . . we lived in Virginia, and you put carpools together to drive into Washington. The carpool became the more significant social organization . . . ”

Ervin: Yes. Fortunately, we lived in Virginia, and you put carpools together to drive into Washington. The carpool became the more significant social organization, I guess.

Pfaff: So you became a regular old commuter there?

Liked the Job, but Not the Commute and His Family Didn't like Urban Washington, D.C.

Ervin: Yes. I didn't particularly like it. I did like the job. I found the job interesting. I just didn't like, necessarily, nor neither did my family, like living in urban Washington.

Pfaff: I can understand that. There's a difference between living in Denver and up here, too, probably, for you. Being a big city and a little outside of it.

“ . . . when we left Washington and moved out here, we took one look at the Denver area and came to the mountains. . . . ”

Ervin: Well, when we left Washington and moved out here, we took one look at the Denver area and came to the mountains.

Pfaff: You didn't want any more of that big city stuff.

Ervin: No. (laughter)

Pfaff: Tell me about your job in Washington. What was the office like there, coming from the McCook office, being in the Commissioner's office there?

“ . . . the Commissioner's office was, I think, a cordial organization . . . the administrative support people, had never lived in the West, and they didn't know what a Reclamation project was. That's not true of the professional people. Most of them had done their time in the West and were back there, maybe finishing off their careers. . . . ”

Ervin: Well, the Commissioner's office was, I think, a cordial organization, as far as that goes.

Dedicated Reclamation people. Many of them, let's say the administrative support people, had never lived in the West, and they didn't know what a Reclamation project was. That's not true of the professional people. Most of them had done their time in the West and were back there, maybe finishing off their careers. They were dedicated people to getting the job done. I think in Washington, although I found that true in the McCook area, they expected you to do what you had to do to get the job done, and that might not be an eight-to-five job.

Work as a Reports Coordinator Which Involved a Specific Procedure

The job I had back there was a reports coordinator. There, by that time, had developed a rather specific procedure for processing project reports, which detailed the features of a project and the various economic and other evaluations, up to what they call a feasibility report. These had to be reviewed, of course, at the local level by the various agencies in the Missouri River Basin Interagency Committee.

Reviewed reports “. . .for conformance with Reclamation instructions . . . and . . . administrative policy. . . [for] feasibility reports . . . on which the authorization of the project was made. The responsibility of the job was to get the report reviewed within the Washington office, but also at the other . . . affected agency levels . . . We would have to deal with those comments . . .”

But these reports came into Washington for review for conformance with Reclamation instructions, I guess, and policy, administrative policy. So when they came into Washington, at least at the feasibility level, feasibility reports, those were reports on which the authorization of the project was made. The responsibility of the job was to get the report reviewed within the Washington office, but also at the other agency levels, affected agency levels, such as Fish and Wildlife and National Park Service, EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], Corps of Engineers, and numerous agencies, to review the report and comment on it. We would have to deal with those comments or reconcile them.

Authorization Process for a Feasible Project

If the project was found feasible, then that report, feasibility report, was transmitted to the Congress, with a recommendation that it be authorized for construction. Getting that report to the Congress involved getting it approved by the Secretary of the Interior's office. It also involved concurrence by the Bureau of Budget, then ultimately transmitting it to the Congress.

The authorization process required usually was done in a couple of steps, a field hearing on it, in which the members of the Senate and House committees, appropriate committees, would have a hearing at the location project, so they could take comments from state and local people. I don't know whether the Senate had to have field hearings, just the House.

Then that would usually be followed, either in that session of Congress or the next one, with authorization hearings, or hearings to authorize projects, at the Capitol Building or the Senate and House committee rooms. Frequently, opposition would appear at those hearings.

“The reports coordinator’s job was usually reconciling the comments you got in from the various reviewing people, and preparing a shorter feasibility summary report to go to the Congress. . . .”

The reports coordinator’s job was usually reconciling the comments you got in from the various reviewing people, and preparing a shorter feasibility summary report to go to the Congress. Usually the congressional delegation where the project was located had an interest and they wanted information. You developed usually a working arrangement with the staff of the particular congressman or senator, in giving them information and providing them with the status of things.

“. . . when I went to the office in Washington, my responsibilities were the Missouri River Basin regions; it was the Upper Missouri and the Lower Missouri regions. . . .”

Incidentally, when I went to the office in Washington, my responsibilities were the Missouri River Basin regions; it was the Upper Missouri and the Lower Missouri regions. There were about four coordinators that covered the various regions.

Pfaff: All the reports that came in from the Missouri River Basin Region were assigned to you in that time period?

Ervin: That’s right. Of course, the hearing usually consists of a statement on the part, usually of the commissioner or an assistant commissioner. In some instances, an assistant secretary would appear at the hearings. It was the responsibility of the reports coordinator to prepare the testimony that they were going to give and get it reviewed within the Bureau and within the Department and the Bureau [of the] Budget. What they call it?– OMB [Office of Management and Budget] now.

That was interesting, usually nerve-wracking, because things usually didn't come to a head until a day or two before the hearing, as far as issues, when the commissioner or the congressman would focus on it.

Preparing a Witness Book for a Hearing

One of the more extensive exercises you had to do in conjunction with a hearing was preparing a witness book that would include the commissioner's statement, or Reclamation's statement—again, somewhat of a summary of the feasibility report. But then you tried to anticipate all the questions that the witness might be asked by members on the committee and prepare the answers to them.

Pfaff: That sounds a lot more extensive than the title would imply. (laughter)

Ervin: Preparing those statements and the witness book also included close coordination with the Associate Solicitor's office in the Department, along with the other agencies and offices in the Bureau.

“ . . . probably the next morning or at least the second morning after that, all the witness' testimony that had been taken down by clerical reporters would appear on your desk or would be sent to Reclamation for review and correction. . . . ”

After the hearings were over, probably the next morning or at least the second morning after that, all the witness' testimony that had been taken down by clerical reporters would appear on your desk or would be sent to Reclamation for review and correction. That's where you tried to straighten out all the boo-boos that may have been said, but you reviewed that. I don't know, you had twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours to get it back to the committee.

Pfaff: Would you actually go to the hearings then?

Ervin: Yes, you went to the hearings and operated the witness book and did everything else. You were the water boy. You did whatever needed to be done. Usually they had a session the night before, or the afternoon before, with whoever the principal witness was going to be. In my case, there was Floyd Dominy and [Ellis] Armstrong, I believe.

Pfaff: The commissioners were the witnesses?

Ervin: The commissioners, yes.

Pfaff: Now, which projects are we talking about here, that you were the reports coordinator for of your region?

Worked on the Narrows Project in Colorado

Ervin: Well, one was Narrows Project in Colorado. That was interesting in that Chairman [Wayne N.] Aspinall—it was located in his state. It was, I think, the first authorization hearing following the Environmental Policy Act. Was that the name of it?

Pfaff: That NEPA?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: Yes, the National Environmental Policy Act.

“I think I wrote the first environmental impact statement for a Reclamation project, which was the Narrows Project. . . .”

Ervin: Yes. The infrastructure, or whatever you want to call it, for administering that, hadn't really been developed. I think I wrote the first environmental impact statement for a Reclamation project, which was the Narrows Project.

Pfaff: I've looked at that E-I-S.

Ervin: You didn't look at mine. I wrote it the day before the hearings, and it consisted of eight pages. (laughter)

Pfaff: Oh, boy. Those were different times. (laughter)

Newly Enacted Requirements of NEPA Upset Congressman Wayne Aspinall

Ervin: And it disturbed Representative Aspinall greatly. He questioned whether this hearing should be held by his committee or by the committee handling environmental affairs. I think he was just frustrated, and he was sort of blustering.

Pfaff: Was he frustrated about this new process having to be observed and followed?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: That NEPA had to be complied with?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: That you had to do an environmental assessment?

Ervin: He lived by Aspinall's rules. In fact, Reclamation lived by his rules in authorization of projects.

Pfaff: Oh, that must have been so interesting.

Ervin: Where was I?

Pfaff: The Narrows Project.

Worked on the North Loup, O'Neill, and Garrison Extension Units

Ervin: That was the one with the authorization hearing. I handled the authorization hearings for the North Loup and the O'Neill Units and the one up in North Dakota. Was it called the Garrison Extension Unit? It was to get water to Minot, North Dakota. Maybe it was a Minot extension. But anyway, it was a small project to convey water to Minot, North Dakota, for municipal and domestic purposes. It was sort of an add-on to the Garrison Unit. It was probably the forerunner, however, of the municipal water, I guess, and municipal domestic water facilities that are now being built in North Dakota with Reclamation's participation, and, I presume, with water from Garrison.

Worked in the Washington Office a Little over Two Years

I was only in the Washington office two years and two months, I guess. A little over two years.

Pfaff: I wanted to go back to the Narrows Project, because that was one that was authorized, but it was never built. What were the hearings like that for, with the first E-I-S being presented? Do you remember that?

“ . . . I think progressively there turned up more hearings, more opposition . . . I suppose they didn't go earlier, because they didn't have much clout. But as environmental matters and water-quality things came along, and controversy about whether the Reclamation program was good for the country, more people

who didn't support the project appeared at the hearings. . . .”

Ervin: Well, yes, I remember it. Frequently I had attended some other hearings besides these, sometimes just as an observer. Many of the project hearings and authorization hearings, there wasn't any opposition there, but the project sponsors were there, usually. Possibly there wouldn't be any opposition. Well, I think progressively there turned up more hearings, more opposition, as time went along. I suppose they didn't go earlier, because they didn't have much clout. But as environmental matters and water-quality things came along, and controversy about whether the Reclamation program was good for the country, more people who didn't support the project appeared at the hearings.

I don't know whether I can remember the details of the Narrows hearing or not.

Pfaff: Was Dominy the chief witness there then?

Ervin: I don't remember whether it was Dominy or whether it was Armstrong. Armstrong was O'Neill, North Loup, I think. It may have been Dominy for Narrows. I would think I would remember, but I don't, because you don't forget Dominy very quick.

Pfaff: Tell me about working with him. What was that like?

Did Not Work Closely with Floyd Dominy

Ervin: Well, I didn't work that close with him, other than when it came hearing time, maybe. Well, you wrote a lot of letters that went up for him to sign. That reports coordination job was a lot of letter-writing. You answered congressional mail. All the mail, at least concerning projects, that came in out of the Missouri River Basin, I handled it, if I could, with some help. As I said, my association with Dominy wasn't very close.

Pfaff: What was your impression of him?

Ervin: Well, he was in charge of things. He was very supportive of Reclamation programs. He was it. He took pride in it and took pride in getting things done. He might have been a little rough at times, but he was also diplomatic at times, I presume. He worked well, I think, with the congressmen, with Senator Hayden and Aspinall.

Pfaff: He sure got things done.

Ervin: Yes, he got things done. (laughter) Out in the halls in the seventh floor of the Interior Building, you could tell when somebody was going to Dominy's office, because he was in a hurry, he or she, rather. You got up there right away when you were called.

Pfaff: Is that right?

Ervin: Yes. But of course, he was insulated from the rank and file, not only, like in my case, my division chief.

Pfaff: Who was your division chief?

Dan McCarthy Was Chief of the Planning Division

Ervin: Dan McCarthy. He'd been chief of planning for several years. Quite an individual.

Pfaff: In what sense?

Ervin: Oh, several, I guess. But he was kind of a walking encyclopedia of Reclamation laws and planning, policies. Passable sort of a fellow. Then the Commissioner also, you didn't get correspondence in to him that didn't go through an assistant commissioner.

Pfaff: It went through him first?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: By the assistant commissioner?

Ervin: Yes. So probably if I were going to get called on a letter I wrote, would be to the assistant commissioner.

Pfaff: So you never got called up to his office?

Ervin: Not very often. Not very often. We staged our pre-hearing meetings in his office, but occasionally you'd go in with an assistant commissioner.

Pfaff: Brief him on something?

One Part of the Job Was Briefing Reclamation and Secretarial Staff Members on Issues

Ervin: Yes, brief him on something. That was another part of this job, you did briefing to the commissioner or anybody in the commissioner's office, particularly assistant commissioners that were going out to the Reclamation states and in your area of responsibility. You briefed them on the issues that were currently going on.

Pfaff: So you would brief the assistant commissioner more so than the commissioner.

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: That was part of your job?

Ervin: But another area that you did briefing was in the assistant secretary's office. The assistant commissioners in Reclamation were fairly familiar with what was going on in Reclamation out there. You'd probably give them an update, but when the assistant secretary of the Interior, or his associate was going out, he didn't know that much about what was going on. He had other responsibilities in Interior besides Reclamation, so it was necessary to brief them. Usually they were written. You had sometimes fifteen minutes or you might even have a day. But quite often these things came up last minute.

Pfaff: So the pace was just—it sounds [unclear].

Ervin: Sometimes it was. If nothing was happening, it was kind of slow. (laughter)

Pfaff: I bet there were some long hours there, too, trying to meet all these deadlines that came up.

“ . . . the carpool ritual became valuable and came into play. ‘I’ve got to go home. The carpool’s ready to go,’ . . . ”

Ervin: Yes, I worked more hours in the field than I did there. But, yes, you took stuff home with you. But the carpool ritual became valuable and came into play. “I’ve got to go home. The carpool’s ready to go,” you know. (laughter) Reclamation maintained a nice . . .

END SIDE 1, TAPE 3. JULY 1, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 3. JULY 1, 1998.

Pfaff: This is side two of tape three. We're continuing our discussion of Willis' experience in Washington, D.C., with the carpool and the schedule with Reclamation.

Ervin: Well, the schedule, and it's being used elsewhere now, and maybe it was then, and I just didn't know it. Didn't need it in McCook. But I could go in at 7:30, early, and I got to leave at four o'clock, which was just a little ahead of the rush hours. It wasn't peak rush hour. You'd get in a little ahead of rush hour and get out a little ahead of it. It made driving a little easier.

Pfaff: Yes, that is nice.

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: So the reports, were these coming from the regional office, and from the . . .

Ervin: They came out of the two regional offices.

Pfaff: The two regional? They were all recorded from the regions. They were coming to you. Would you review them before they went out for comments to the other agencies?

Review of Reports in the Washington, D.C., Office

Ervin: The drafts would come in earlier, we'd review those. Hopefully, when they came back in to go out, you didn't need to review them.

Pfaff: So you actually saw them twice. You saw them in draft form, and then they'd come back after your comments would have been incorporated?

Ervin: You might see them more than twice, draft, redraft, and re-redraft. Yes.

Pfaff: Then they would go up to the other agencies for comments, and come back again to you, and you would have to address those comments from the other agencies?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: Did the system work well, did you think?

Ervin: Oh, I think so. It was kind of laborious, kind of time-consuming. And you'd get comments that seem, at least to me, would seem to be petty or irrelevant, but to

somebody else, I guess, they weren't, so you had to deal with them.

Pfaff: What was the most interesting part about that whole experience for you?

Ervin: You mean the Washington experience?

Pfaff: Well, being a report coordinator.

Most Interesting Aspect of the Job Was the Hearings

Ervin: Well, the hearings, I think. The preparation of stuff for the hearings, and the hearings.

Pfaff: I imagine that would have been fascinating. Were any of them controversial that you . . .

The Narrows Project Hearing Was Somewhat Controversial

Ervin: The Narrows hearing was somewhat.

Pfaff: Was it?

Ervin: Yes. Water quality, and whether it made sense to inundate irrigated land, irrigate some more land, and whether there was a real need. Water quality for water contact sports. A whole mirage of considerations that weren't thought about, weren't dealt with, certainly in the original authorization of the Missouri River Basin Project.

One of the big questions, I think, on Narrows, was we were claiming recreation benefits, and there were people who were contending that the water quality would be such that you couldn't have water contact sports, which would knock a hole in the recreation benefits. I don't know whether it ever got settled. Well, a lot of those got settled when it died on the vine.

Pfaff: It was authorized, though.

“. . . midway or so through the Missouri Basin development, you know, we always contended these projects were authorized and we didn't need to go back to the Congress, except for appropriations. I don't know, somewhere, maybe around, I think maybe in the 1960s, Congress directed that all future projects in the Missouri Basin would have to be re-authorized. So the original authorization didn't carry you through. . . .”

“ . . . midway or so through the Missouri Basin development—you know, we always contended these projects were authorized and we didn’t need to go back to the Congress, except for appropriations. . . . I think maybe in the 1960s, Congress directed that all future projects in the Missouri Basin would have to be reauthorized. . . .”

Ervin: It was authorized. It was re-authorized. In fact, midway or so through the Missouri Basin development—you know, we always contended these projects were authorized and we didn’t need to go back to the Congress, except for appropriations. I don’t know, somewhere, maybe around, I think maybe in the 1960s, Congress directed that all future projects in the Missouri Basin would have to be reauthorized. So the original authorization didn’t carry you through.¹²

Pfaff: For each of the particular individual unit or project?

Ervin: Yes, projects. Yes, units. See, Narrows was authorized in the original plan.

Pfaff: In ‘44, when all that was passed.

Ervin: Yes. I don’t remember what the time was, but probably in the sixties, and it may have been— well, I think the big factor that caused that was whether we could start construction on the Garrison Project in North Dakota or whether the plan had to be reauthorized. I’m not sure how it come about, but Congress directed that any future development had to be reauthorized.

Pfaff: What killed the Narrows Project then?

Opposition Killed the Narrows Project and “. . . largely the criteria, the change in what was acceptable criteria for determining the feasibility of a Reclamation project. . . .”

12. Note that during his oral history interviews with Reclamation Edward Weinberg talked about authorization of Pick-Sloan projects in his oral history. He said:

“. . . it was those hearings that . . . removed any question of the law. They were astounded, Senator Anderson, Senator [Francis H.] Case, were astounded to learn that Congress, in these few lines in Section 9 of the Flood Control Act of 1944, had authorized the Secretary of the Interior to spend \$6 billion building this project without any congressional oversight. . . . Well, they didn’t like this. They swallowed hard . . . That testimony of mine became the basis later on for what’s known as the Holum Report of 1963, which was accepted by Congress in reauthorizing the Garrison Project in 1965 . . .”

Ervin: Opposition, I guess. Local opposition, and maybe not a good demonstration of need for the water. I think largely the criteria, the change in what was acceptable criteria for determining the feasibility of a Reclamation project. I don't really remember everything. But increased the discount rate. In other words, more realistic, a higher interest rate in figuring benefits. Maybe some reduction in benefits, even, that no longer met the one-to-one criteria, that benefits equaled or exceeded costs. There were changes in evaluation of benefits, and there were changes in evaluating costs, incurred in the project construction and operation.

Pfaff: Do you think that the introduction of these funds and the greater public involvement that occurred at that time, did that impact this project in the fact that it didn't get authorized?

“ . . . it's easy for opposition to raise questions, and it's time-consuming. It takes a lot of effort . . . So you can oppose a project by just asking lots of questions. It was sort of a change in attitude, I think, not only locally, but in the Congress, towards the Reclamation program. . . .”

Ervin: Well, something impacted the whole Reclamation Program. It was one of those earlier projects that didn't make it, or incurred opposition. Yes, it's easy for opposition to raise questions, and it's time-consuming. It takes a lot of effort to answer a lot of those. So you can oppose a project by just asking lots of questions. It was sort of a change in attitude, I think, not only locally, but in the Congress, towards the Reclamation program.

Pfaff: During this time period that you're there?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: You were seeing this happen?

“ . . . the bigger picture, was Glen Canyon was going on then and the Central Arizona Project. . . . I don't know what had brought on the change in the attitude toward Reclamation. . . . the question of how water should be committed . . .”

Ervin: Yes, it was going on while I was there. I guess the big thing going on, the bigger picture, was Glen Canyon was going on then and the Central Arizona Project. Those were some. I don't know what, somebody surely studied this. I don't know what had brought on the change in the attitude toward Reclamation. I guess, mainly, the better

projects had been built, the question of how water should be committed, irrigation, particularly in the plains area, and I think several areas in the West. Maybe irrigation was developed extensively from groundwater by private individuals. That aspect was sort of reduced in stature, the need to irrigate.

“ . . . I don’t know whether all the objections that are raised to Reclamation projects are valid or not, but there are a lot of them out there now, and the impacts. When we thought we used to be doing good, now some people, at least, say we weren’t. . . .”

The flood control is still there, but I don’t know whether all the objections that are raised to Reclamation projects are valid or not, but there are a lot of them out there now, and the impacts. When we thought we used to be doing good, now some people, at least, say we weren’t.

Pfaff: It’s easy to say that in hindsight, too, isn’t it?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: You were there during the transition from Dominy to Armstrong. Was there a big change in the Washington office with the turnover of the commissioners there?

Ervin: Not really. Armstrong, he liked to travel, I think, a lot more than Dominy. He seemed to be out of the office quite a little bit, but that may have been just getting reacquainted. Armstrong was also a detail man.

Ellis Armstrong Was Detail-Oriented

We had a draft feasibility report, I think it was on the Jefferson Whitehall Unit, that was sent in by the region for our review. I don’t know how Armstrong found out about it. It had been sent in. Maybe we’d been sending it out. No, it was internally, we were reviewing. Well, Armstrong came back. You’d see him walking, he was more apt to come in your office than Dominy. (laughter) But anyway, he wanted a copy of that report one Friday night. So I got it up to him.

When he came back in Monday, he had edited that report. And I mean it was, I don’t know, three or four hundred pages. He read that thing word for word. That’s right. He had questions and marks all over it. (laughter) I don’t know whether he continued to do that or not. Maybe he just wanted to find out what a feasibility report

looked like, but he sure tore that one apart. (laughter)

Pfaff: So you went in and talked to him about it?

Ervin: Dan McCarthy did. I don't think I did. (laughter) He didn't think we ought to be putting that kind of a thing on the street, or he thought it wasn't done well.

Pfaff: So did he do that future . . .

Ervin: I don't know. That was the only one I had experience with him.

Pfaff: So his management style was very different from Dominy's.

Ervin: Yes, I think so. Although that was when he was just in the job. If he'd been in it longer, it might have been—that's one way of getting acquainted when you first get in, is to jump in the middle of something, and you find out how things work. I don't think he kept up that—or could have, that degree of involvement.

Pfaff: So, after two years, you started looking for other opportunities?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: What was your deciding factor to leave Washington?

“ . . . I didn't want to live there, and my family didn't. We stayed there long enough to get our daughter started in college back there . . . ”

Ervin: I didn't want to stay there, didn't want to live there. Mostly I didn't want to live there, and my family didn't. We stayed there long enough to get our daughter started in college back there, so we ended up both of them took their four years back there at Madison University, I believe, in Virginia.

Moved to the Lower Missouri Regional Office in Denver in November of 1970 to Do Report Coordination

But there was not a reports coordinator in the Lower Missouri Regional Office in Denver. That was done by, I guess, the Economics Branch. Their workload was such that they didn't need that responsibility. Then the coordinator, if you're reviewing something and going to be objective about it, it's a little hard to be objective if you

wrote part of it. So I got the opportunity to move out here, and did, in November of 1970, I believe.

Pfaff: What position did you . . .

Ervin: It was reports coordinator, in the Planning Division.

Pfaff: So you said there hadn't been one before?

Ervin: No, it was being done by, I think, the Economics Branch.

Pfaff: So they created a new position, then?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: And you were it. There was just one of you?

Ervin: That's right. I got a lateral transfer out. I told them I'd rather have a lateral transfer to Denver than a promotion in Washington.

Pfaff: But I bet you thought your Washington experience must have been invaluable, as far as seeing first-hand how things worked.

Ervin: Yes, I knew the people in Washington. They weren't untouchables. I mean, they weren't awesome. You can talk to them.

Pfaff: So you had good contacts. You had established good contacts when you were there?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: What division then was the reports coordinator in?

Ervin: Planning Division.

Pfaff: Who was your boss at that point?

Ervin: Morey Droskin. M-O-R-E-Y.

Pfaff: Droskin?

Ervin: D-R-O-S-K-I-N. He lives in Lakewood.

Pfaff: So how did you feel about coming to Denver then?

“ . . . another different experience. I dealt with reports coordination at the Washington level. I hadn’t dealt with it at a regional level and in close association with the project level. Between the region and the project, you were at the formulation level . . . ”

Ervin: Well, it [was] another different experience. I dealt with reports coordination at the Washington level. I hadn’t dealt with it at a regional level and in close association with the project level. Between the region and the project, you were at the formulation level, you were formulating the projects and the reports. The reports coordinator was involved in looking at the pieces, I guess, from the various aspects of the project, and putting it together in a draft feasibility report, whereas in Washington that had all been done, and you were picking it apart. Here you’re putting it together.

Pfaff: So, before you got there, there would have been different people assigned to put different pieces together?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: The person in the economics group, I think that you mentioned, would have actually compiled the whole thing and sent it to Washington?

Ervin: Yes. There was a reports coordinator, but he had retired and they hadn’t filled the job when I came out. Ray Ahlberg preceded me.

Pfaff: So you were putting together mainly feasibility reports.

Ervin: Also doing appraisal reports. Any report.

Pfaff: Did you do more E-I-Ss?

Ervin: No, I didn’t write any more E-I-Ss. (laughter)

Pfaff: Your eight-page . . .

Ervin: That got lost in the shuffle, that eight-page one.

Pfaff: I'm going to have to look for that. The first E-I-S coming out, that's pretty historic.

Ervin: It maybe didn't even qualify as an E-I-S. That's what the title was on it. It was to accompany the feasibility report for the authorization hearings. They decided, the powers-that-be, that since the NEPA had been instituted, or the act had passed, that we shouldn't seek authorization without an E-I-S. So that was to accompany the authorization.

Pfaff: So somebody else was doing the E-I-Ss in Denver?

Ervin: They hadn't been started yet, even.

Pfaff: When you came they weren't?

Ervin: No.

Pfaff: They weren't doing anything? That came later then?

Ervin: Oh, wait a minute. No, I don't think they hadn't got into E-I-Ss much then.

Pfaff: Probably not. It was just starting out.

Ervin: Yes, just starting.

Pfaff: So you would work with people from different disciplines then to get the components for a report together?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: You would pull the economic section together, the groundwater section, the hydrology?

Reports Were Reviewed at the Regional Level—including Other Agencies, but That Review Was at the State or Regional Level

Ervin: Whatever went into it. And get it reviewed at the regional level. You went through about the same review process at the regional level that you did in Washington, as far as involving other agencies, only you involved them at a state or regional level, as opposed to the national level in Washington.

Pfaff: Then you would send your finished feasibility draft report back to Washington for review, and it would come back to you again?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: With or without comments, whatever? So that whole process continued?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: Do you remember any of the reports that you were working on at that point?

Continued to Work on the Narrows Project

Ervin: Well, we continued to work on Narrows, as I recall, I believe. What was the dam out here on--for the water supply for Denver that got finally shot down?

Pfaff: Two Forks.

Had Worked on Two Forks on the South Platte River in Colorado

Ervin: Two Forks, yes. We were processing a report on Two Forks.

Pfaff: Oh, really. So Reclamation looked at it as a possible project back then?

Ervin: Oh, yes. It was a major project for Reclamation, or would have been.

Pfaff: They considered it a feasible project?

Worked on the O'Neill and North Loup Authorizations on Detail in D.C.

Ervin: I don't know whether they ever got to the feasibility level on it. We were doing a status report on it. Yes, it was considered feasible, yes. We did a status report, I think. I said I worked on O'Neill and North Loup authorizations. I didn't do that when I was in Washington. I went back on assignment, I think, to do those.

Pfaff: Once you moved to Denver?

Ervin: Yes, I think I went back on an assignment to do those. We were doing the O'Neill and North Loup at the region during that two-year period, some finishing touches on it, I

guess.

Pfaff: Then you went back to Washington to work on that?

Worked on Detail in D.C. on the Southwest Energy Study That Related to the Secretary's Responsibility Regarding Coal Mining Permits on the Kaiparowits Plateau in Utah

Ervin: On the hearings, yes. A detail, I guess, to the Washington office to do them. There were some special things came along, a special report for the secretary's office. I was detailed to that group for a while. It was the Southwest Energy Study.¹³

Pfaff: I'm not familiar with that.

Ervin: Well, not too many people are, I don't think. I think the secretary was faced with a determination of whether to allow mining, coal mining in the Kaiparowits Plateau in Utah. Before doing that, he wanted a thorough evaluation made of power requirements and power resources, probably in a four state area out there, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, I guess, and maybe New Mexico. New Mexico and Colorado were in there. Anyway, they put a task force together to make that evaluation and prepare a report. I got assigned to do the report.

Pfaff: So you actually wrote it?

Ervin: Oh, I put it together from other people, yes. It was a whole new experience. I wasn't familiar with the power structure and agencies, electric power.

Pfaff: What happened with this study?

Ervin: I think he declined. He didn't issue the permit, or the license, whatever it was, to mine the coal.

Pfaff: And "he" would have been?

Ervin: Was that Rogers C.B. Morton? I don't believe so. Maybe [Cecil] Andrus. No.

13. Southwest Energy Study Study Management Team, *Southwest Energy Study: An Evaluation of Coal-fired Electric Power Generation in the Southwest* (Washington, D.C.: Southwest Energy Study Study Management Team, November 1972).

Pfaff: You're talking about the secretary?

Ervin: Secretary, yes. What was his name?

Pfaff: Andrus, he's one.

Ervin: Yes, I think he was Secretary then.

Pfaff: I'm not sure.

Ervin: I'm not sure either.

Pfaff: So he declined. Did you say he . . .

Ervin: Yes, he declined to issue the permit. I don't know that he did that on the basis of the study. All I'll say is, we did the study and he declined to issue the permit. I don't know what factors went into that.

But the Kaiparowits Plateau, in that same area, came into being in President [Bill] Clinton's designation of the—is it the Staircase National Monument?¹⁴ They're still talking about that same . . .

Pfaff: Is that the area?

Ervin: . . . that same coal resource out there. That's right. Now it's locked up.

Pfaff: So that's the area that would have been mined under this study?

Ervin: Yes. There had been a major steam generation plant built out there, and you had the whole issue of air quality, the deterioration of air quality in the area and in the national monuments and parks, was one of the questions.

Pfaff: This would have been a real switch from what you had been working on before.

Ervin: Yes. (laughter) It was a short-term. I don't know, maybe we were in it three months, something like that.

Pfaff: How long were you the reports coordinator?

14. Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

Ervin: About two years.

Pfaff: Then in 1972 you switched?

John Jensen Served Briefly as Chief of the Water and Land Operations Division in the Lower Missouri Region Before Ervin Took the Job

Ervin: June, July of '72, I think. The person who had been in the position, I think, John Jensen. The person before him was Nat Tolman. John Jensen was there for not too long, I don't know, a couple of years or so. He transferred to Salt Lake office, or region.

Pfaff: He was the head of Water and Land Operations Division?

Ervin: He was, yes. When he went out there, he went back to planning. He had been in planning before. Here, before he became the regional supervisor of Water and Land Operations.

Pfaff: That's when you moved into that position in 1972?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: You took over his position as the head of that Water and Land?

Ervin: Yes. Jim Ingles was the regional director then, who had been the project manager in McCook when I was there part of the time.

Pfaff: Oh, he was part of that "McCook mafia." (laughter)

Ervin: Yes. (laughter)

Pfaff: Was that a big transition for you, moving from the reports coordinator back into this job, Water and Land Operations?

“ . . . there's a considerable difference in the jobs, but I'd been in operations in the McCook office for nearly twenty years, so it was kind of a return to my grounding. . . . ”

Ervin: Well, not really. I guess there's a considerable difference in the jobs, but I'd been in

operations in the McCook office for nearly twenty years, so it was kind of a return to my grounding. I'd been educated a little bit in Washington, how things happened and the like.

“ . . . you were dealing with operating projects, real things. In planning, you were dealing more with things that might be in the future . . . ”

It was, I shouldn't say hands-on, but you were dealing with operating projects, real things. In planning, you were dealing more with things that might be in the future, or something like that.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 3. JULY 1, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 1. JULY 8, 1998

Pfaff: This is Chris Pfaff. Today is July 8th, 1998. I'm continuing an interview with J. Willis Ervin. We're at his home in Evergreen. This is tape one, side one.

Last time we met, we finished up our discussion talking about when you became the head of the Water and Land Operations Division, I guess it would be, in Region Seven in Denver. As I recall, that was in 1972, July of 1972, that you took over the position from John Jensen.

Ervin: That's right.

Pfaff: Maybe you could start by just telling me a little bit about what the function of that—was it a division?

The Work of the Division of Water and Land Operations

Ervin: Yes, it was Division of Water and Land Operations. That term doesn't necessarily cover all of it, I guess, or describe all of it. There were four branches.

Water Operations Branch

The first was Water Operations, which concerned itself with not only the water operations, but the structural maintenance of what we called “constructed facilities,” which were divided into “reserve works” which were retained and operated by the Bureau, and “transferred works,” which were operated by usually the water-user entity. That was that field, or the capsule of what the branch responsibilities were.

Repayment Branch

We had a Repayment Branch, but that branch was responsible particularly for the formulation and negotiation of water service and repayment contracts with all the water-user entities.

Lower Missouri Region Administered about Sixty Repayment Contracts

As I recall, we had about sixty or sixty-five contracts to administer.

Pfaff: Within the region?

Ervin: Within that region, yes. I can't remember, it seems like the value was somewhere around four hundred million dollars, it seems. That's what I recall, anyway.

Land Use and Recreation Branch

One of the other branches was, I believe, Land Use and Recreation, which dealt essentially with the public use of reservoir areas, as well as ensuring the maintenance of the land resources around these reservoirs. This particular function would be the original planning and construction of the recreation, the public-use facilities at the reservoirs, and then the negotiation of the administration of administering agreements, normally with the State Fish and Wildlife or a recreation agency, whichever particular state the facility happened to be located.

Land Acquisition Branch

The last branch was the Land Acquisition Branch. I presume that was located in the Division of Operation and Maintenance, for perhaps lack of a better place to put it. Principally the Land Acquisition Program was tied to the construction program. That was the principal area of their work and the timing. There were some needs for acquisition in ongoing projects, but the predominant need was associated with and timed with the construction program.

Pfaff: How many people would there have been altogether then in the division at that point?

Ervin: Oh, it was not a large division. I think maybe twenty-five.

Pfaff: It sounds like they had very diverse functions, though, within the division, ranging

from the recreation use to repayment and land operation.

“ . . . one of the interesting parts of being regional supervisor, was the diversity of activities. . . . ”

Ervin: Well, the Water and Land Operations Division had a diversity of functions, yes. They were kind of broke out in those four branch designations. But I think that was one of the interesting parts of being regional supervisor, was the diversity of activities.

Pfaff: Did you feel that your career, to that point, had prepared you well for administering this group?

Ervin: Yes, I think this was the place for me, where I was supposed to be. I had experience at the project level with hands-on experience, I guess, in operations and reservoir administration. The Washington experience in the Planning Division exposed me to the planning process, as well as the legislative process associated with project authorization, which gave me a pretty good background, I thought, for the regional supervisor job.

Pfaff: What were the main construction projects at that point that the Land Acquisition Branch would have been dealing with?

Construction of the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project Was Going on at That Time

Ervin: Well, I think the major program at that point was construction of the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project. It was not a big land acquisition program. Many of the facilities were located in national forests. It didn't have an extensive canal system. So while there was some acquisition, it was not a huge program.

Construction on the North Loup Project

That was followed by construction on the North Loup Project, which was a storage reservoir. In fact, there are two storage reservoirs and an extensive canal and lateral system, which was a large land acquisition program.

Pfaff: Was there a lot of overlap between the branches then, of the different branches?

Ervin: No.

Pfaff: They functioned pretty independently?

Ervin: Well, their functions were quite separate, or quite different, but that's not to say that they didn't impact other functions in other branches.

“ . . . I expected the branch chiefs . . . to have the experience to . . . carry out their program . . . without a lot of . . . individual direction. . . .”

Yes, I expected the branch chiefs in those branches to have the experience to go ahead and carry out their program largely without a lot of, at least, individual direction.

In His Time as Division Chief the Branches Were Interacting Well with One Another

But by the same token, and I think that I accomplished some of this in my twelve years there, and that was the interaction between the branches and appreciation for what the others were doing, and working out those kind of problems before they became real problems on the ground, anyway. I think I had a staff that worked well with each other. I don't remember any real rhubarbs. There was personnel, or personal, differences from time to time, but not necessarily program-related.

Pfaff: There were probably changes in personnel over those years that you were there, too. Was there a turnover in your branch chiefs?

Two of the Branch Chiefs in the Water Operations Branch Became Regional Directors, Charles Calhoun and Roger Patterson

Ervin: There was particularly in the Water Operations Branch. Two of those branch chiefs are now regional directors.

Pfaff: Who are those people?

Ervin: Charles Calhoun¹⁵ was a Water and Land Branch Chief, who's now the regional director in Upper Colorado Region. The other was Roger Patterson,¹⁶ who worked for Charlie Calhoun in the branch, and later became branch chief, and is now the regional director in the Mid-Pacific Region. Is that what they call it?

15. Charles (Charley) Calhoun participated in Reclamation's oral history program.

16. Roger Patterson participated in Reclamation's oral history program.

Pfaff: Right.

Ervin: Some project managers used to work in that branch, too.

Pfaff: These folks got started in their careers, and their career ladders, under you?

Ervin: I wouldn't say they got started. Most of them had probably ten-, fifteen years' experience in the Bureau before they became a branch chief there. So they furthered their careers. I don't know if they started them.

Pfaff: You were telling me earlier about, as you were showing me some photographs from the Fryingpan-Arkansas, the Ruedi Reservoir, of contract negotiations with the water users.

Ervin: Well, that was during the period of time that I was the regional supervisor. There were several major contracts negotiated towards fulfilling the project purposes.

The Repayment Branch Handled Both Repayment Contracts and Water Service Contracts Which Required Payment of O&M Costs

Incidentally, the terminology used often is that they are repayment contracts with the water-user entity. They may be a repayment contract for repaying construction costs of facilities, or they might be a water service contact which was payment for service. Well, the revenue would be applied to operation and maintenance of the facility, as well as construction, but I guess they weren't considered as a repayment contract, as such. They were used in cases where you may not have constructed a facility specifically for that water user's organization. But whereas it seemed more appropriate that the users pay an ongoing annual charge for water service.

“The term, ‘repayment contract,’ is . . . used to describe the contractual arrangements between the water users and Reclamation, but it's much more than a repayment contract . . .”

The term, “repayment contract,” is kind of a—it isn't a misnomer, but it's used to describe the contractual arrangements between the water users and Reclamation, but it's much more than a repayment contract for repayment [of] project costs. It allocates water to the project water users and many other provisions that relate to the operation of a project, such as excess lands, the delivery of water to excess lands, and, more recently, anti-discrimination and equal opportunity provisions, which, by virtue of this being a Federal project, became applicable to the operating entity, mainly the water

users' district.

“One of the . . . most interesting . . . was the contract for water service from Ruedi Reservoir in the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project. . . .”

One of the major contracts, and most interesting, I guess, although we had several interesting ones, was the contract for water service from Ruedi Reservoir in the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project. Ruedi Reservoir was located on the Western Slope. In fact, to put it in perspective, the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project was a project that its water supply was largely obtained by the diversion of flows from the West Slope through a tunnel to the East Slope and into the Arkansas River, and ultimately down to Pueblo Dam.

“. . . [Reclamation] constructed [Ruedi Reservoir] on the West Slope, as a sort of payment in kind, I guess, so that there was some benefit to the West Slope in the projects, which, in fact, diverted water from the West Slope to the East Slope. . . . what some West Slope entities called ‘compensatory storage.’ . . .”

But it had become a practice, at least, or it was established, at least, in the construction of the Colorado and Big Thompson Project, that a reservoir, or reservoirs, would be constructed on the West Slope, as a sort of payment in kind, I guess, so that there was some benefit to the West Slope in the projects, which, in fact, diverted water from the West Slope to the East Slope. Ruedi Reservoir on the Fryingpan River was one of those reservoirs which was constructed to provide what some West Slope entities called “compensatory storage.”

The Colorado River Water Conservation District was a district. I think it involved fourteen counties on the West Slope in Colorado, and its purpose was not only water conservation and water projects, but protection of the West Slope's water supply. So Ruedi was constructed in what they called, or they termed, compensatory storage. What the Bureau people looked at it as, was replacement storage. In fact, it did both, I guess. It provided replacement when water was diverted from the West Slope to the East Slope. Out of priority, water could be released from Ruedi then to serve the existing rights downstream. It also included more storage than necessary for replacement, and that storage could be used for new uses on the West Slope, which probably the term “compensatory storage,” is more applicable to those.

Marketing of Water out of Ruedi Gained Impetus in the 1970s During the Oil Shale Boom on the West Slope

Of course, I think the impetus behind the marketing of water through water service contracts from Ruedi, the impetus of that came in the 1970s with the development of the oil shale program on the West Slope. There was considerable effort by oil companies, petroleum companies, to explore a method, financially feasible, at least, of extracting oil from oil shale, of which there are enormous quantities in western Colorado. The extraction process, of course, required water, and it was critical that that water supply be dependable, that there would not be shortages in it which could shut down their plant operations without adequate water.

There were also some minor irrigation projects. I guess I should say “potential.” Some were existing, some were potential. And some municipalities who also looked at Ruedi as a source of water.

Working with the Colorado River District and State of Colorado to Develop Water Service Contracts for Ruedi

So there developed in the seventies an active interest in Ruedi, water service from Ruedi, and to some extent a competitive nature of these uses. Working with the Colorado River District and the state of Colorado . . .

Pfaff: The state of Colorado?

Ervin: Yes, the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, I guess. We took applications from people who thought they had need, and some approximation of the amount and the time frame in which they would need water service.

Exxon Corporation Wanted Water for its Oil Shale Program

One of the principals turned out to be the Exxon Corporation, who probably had the most ambitious plan and commitment of financial resources to its program, oil shale program. In addition, they also constructed the town of Battlement Mesa. There was lack of housing for that big of an operation. They were constructing a community, which needed water. I suppose the negotiation process went on for probably a couple of years.

Pfaff: Was this prior to the actual design of the reservoir?

Ervin: Oh, no, it was in place. It was constructed. It had to be in place before any water could

be diverted from the West Slope to the East Slope. It had to be in place and operating. It was one of the first features constructed. The competition for this water and its value to the processing of oil shale was much greater than it was if the water were to be used for irrigation, so you were marketing, out of the same reservoir, water for irrigation which would probably be a lower value, water for municipal use, which would be higher than that, and then ultimately, water for industrial use, which it was hard to put a value on it. It was considerably more valuable to the industrial users.

As Interest in Water Service Contracts for Ruedi Developed, NEPA Planning Processes Were Also Developing

At this same time, of course, the National Environmental Policy Act, was coming into being, and being used, and the process of involving the public in contract negotiations, which was a new experience. Normally, my experience was, you met with the boards of directors from the water-user entities, and they were probably the only people there, although other people weren't excluded. But we didn't have an effort to notify the public of those things and invite them to be in.

Ruedi Service Contract Negotiations Were Public and Attracted Many Parties Interested in Such Issues as Recreation, Endangered Species and Other Environmental Issues, and Fisheries

So, the Ruedi negotiations involved public negotiations. There might be twenty-five or more people attend these contract negotiation sessions.

Pfaff: Were there environmental representatives?

Ervin: They represented a whole scheme of people, but particularly environmental people were there. Other oil companies were there. Of course, they wanted to know what was going on. The irrigation and municipal entities were there to see what was going on and to ensure that there would be some water left for them.

Pfaff: What were the concerns of the environmental representatives there at that point?

Ervin: Well, I believe at that point the principal concern was Ruedi Reservoir had been built earlier, and it hadn't been operated for compensatory storage or for releases, replacement releases, because we weren't diverting. So it became a rather stable reservoir. It was located in the national forest, and the Forest Service provided the public-use facilities around it. But it became a favorite boating reservoir, particularly

sailboating, and particularly for interests in Aspen.

Their big concern was that if we started operating the reservoir, making replacement releases, it would spoil it as a recreation lake, because the fluctuations would perhaps leave the shoreline unsightly and something like that. A very materialistic viewpoint, I guess, from Aspen's interest.

Fishery people were also interested in the effect that it would have on the downstream fisheries. At that time, I guess, they were just starting to consider the Endangered Species Act. Then there was concern for the endangered species of the fish in the Colorado River in that area.

Pfaff: Was their concern over the use of that much water for the oil companies for the oil shale development?

Ervin: Well, I guess they were concerned. Yes, there were environmental concerns about the effect of the oil shale development itself. In fact, I believe the Bureau of Land Management did an E-I-S on that, I believe, at least at the outset. As I recall, the impact on Ruedi Reservoir was covered in that E-I-S.

“The oil shale industry was not a huge user of water, but the quantities were critical to the operation. They couldn't tolerate a lack of water. . . .”

The oil shale industry was not a huge user of water, but the quantities were critical to the operation. They couldn't tolerate a lack of water. It would shut down the operation because of the billions they would have invested. We attempted several ways to establish a price for water service from the reservoir for these various uses. The oil companies probably had two or three alternatives for water. The first, and perhaps the cheapest for them, would have been the acquisition of existing irrigation rights which would have adversely impacted the agriculture of the valley, and was something that we didn't think they . . .

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1. JULY 8, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JULY 8, 1998.

Pfaff: This is side two of tape one on July 8th, 1998. We are continuing our discussion of the development of the contract for the Ruedi Reservoir. You were talking about the oil companies.

Ervin: The second alternative for acquiring water would have been to construct storage facilities to provide that water, which would probably be the highest cost for the oil companies. I think we considered that it would cost them something in the neighborhood of 150 dollars per acre-foot to construct new facilities. Of course, that would give them exclusive use of that water.

“ . . . we approached . . . Exxon, with the price of about 150 dollars an acre-foot for Ruedi water. That was sort of an unheard-of price up to that time, at least in Reclamation. They were not receptive . . . ”

So, in our initial negotiations, we approached the oil companies, or the oil company, Exxon, with the price of about 150 dollars an acre-foot for Ruedi water. That was sort of an unheard-of price up to that time, at least in Reclamation. They were not receptive to that amount, which we sort of expected. There would have also been new environmental impacts on constructing a new reservoir for the oil shale, and they'd have to find rights that would allow them to exercise their storage.

Ultimately, we arrived at sort of a two-price structure. It seemed that that would ensure some return of revenues to the United States. One of the things was the critical nature of a reliable supply. It seemed that Exxon was contracting as much for an insurance policy, to make sure they had water that they could get if they needed it, as they were for actual water service. So we entered into sort of a two-tiered contract, one in which they paid an annual standby charge to provide them a smaller quantity of water, the most likely amount they'd need. Then the remaining water was, I believe, priced on the per-acre-foot basis. I don't really remember that too well. But the upshot of the Ruedi contract was that Exxon would pay a standby charge of somewhere around 300,000 dollars a year, I think, whether they used any water or not.

“About the time we were ready to . . . execute the contracts, Exxon abandoned its oil shale development. However, because of their interest in the oil shale and their investment they'd already made, they opted to go ahead and complete the contract. . . .”

About the time we were ready to complete, and we'd completed contract negotiations for all practical purposes and we're getting ready to execute the contracts, Exxon abandoned its oil shale development. However, because of their interest in the oil shale and their investment they'd already made, they opted to go ahead and complete the contract. We put in a provision that if other needs developed, but they hadn't developed their oil shale, that the Secretary of [the Interior,] Reclamation, could

amend the contract, or cancel the contract, and provide service to other bona fide users.

Pfaff: Did they do that?

Ervin: I've lost track. I assume Exxon is still paying the government 300,000 dollars a year for standby charge for water service in Ruedi.

Pfaff: Whether they use it or not?

Ervin: Whether they use it or not. I think they're still paying that bill. I don't know. Battlement Mesa, their town, of course, has been converted into a senior living community, I guess, and they take some of their water service. There were other contracts, not only with Battlement Mesa, there was with two or three other conservancy districts. I'm not familiar with whether they were taking their water, but I assume they were, because they weren't entirely based on the oil shale development. They were based on irrigation needs.

Pfaff: In that case, did all of the varying interests get the amount of water that they wanted to, the municipalities and the irrigators? Did that all work out to everyone's satisfaction?

Ervin: Well, the contracts were negotiated to the extent that people wanted water. At least that was the first round of contracts.

There Was Still Water Available at Ruedi, but a Second Round of Contracting Went on Hold for Various Reasons

We went into a second round of contracts, since there was still available water. We considered and were starting to implement a bidding process where particularly the industry users would bid for the quantity of water they wanted. If they'd give a dollar figure, they would pay. But unfortunately, about that time the Endangered Species Act and the provisions of it being important on the Colorado River came into being, those concerns, and the negotiations for additional water service out of Ruedi, as far as I can remember, were put on hold, if not terminated. I'm not aware of any new contracting procedures or new contract negotiations under way.

There was a naval oil shale reserve . . . They wanted the commitment of water to their needs, should that eventually be developed. By the time I retired, we had entered into a memorandum of understanding to do that. . . ."

There was a naval oil shale reserve over there. They wanted the commitment of water to their needs, should that eventually be developed. By the time I retired, we had entered into a memorandum of understanding to do that. But I don't think that's ever been completed.

Pfaff: It sounds like this process took years to get through it, is that right?

Ervin: Two or three years, I guess, from the time we started on Ruedi.

“Until the oil shale came along, there wasn't any demand for Ruedi water . . . on the West Slope. . . .”

Until the oil shale came along, there wasn't any demand for Ruedi water, any real demand for it on the West Slope. The demand for it, the impetus for that, was the oil shale development. Then it's either dead or doing a—who's the guy who went to sleep for twenty years?

Pfaff: Rip Van Winkle.

Ervin: Yes. It's either doing a Rip Van Winkle or it's dead, I don't know. (laughter)

Pfaff: So what was unique about this repayment contract, the fact that the pricing structure with the Exxon? Was that a unique . . .

“Water service charges [for Exxon], I think, were the highest, at least for industry . . . that had ever been negotiated for a Reclamation project. . . .”

Ervin: I think that was probably the more—yes, the unique part of it. Water service charges, I think, were the highest, at least for industry, were the highest that had ever been negotiated for a Reclamation project.

Pfaff: I'm not that familiar with these contracts, but I assume that the Exxon use of the water, “industrial use,” that would have authorized in the legislation for the reservoir [unclear]?

“. . . conservation storage in Ruedi was authorized for essentially any useful purpose on the West Slope. . . .”

Ervin: Yes, that was one of the problems, I guess, in developing water service out of Ruedi,

was the fact that the conservation storage in Ruedi was authorized for essentially any useful purpose on the West Slope. Some mention was made, including oil shale development, but there wasn't any specific users identified or uses. It wasn't replacement storage. That was specific, of course; it was authorized for replacement storage. But the new uses were pretty general—beneficial use in the state of Colorado, more or less.

Pfaff: Did that give you more latitude then in negotiating with these different projects?

Ervin: Yes, it did. But until OSHA came along, there weren't very many people, or users, interested in acquiring the reservoir.

“We attempted to contract that water by some kind of an agreement with the Colorado River Water Conservation District . . . but they were reluctant to enter into anything other than a nominal contract, because they hadn't identified any particular users that they could, in turn, market the water to. So they weren't willing to obligate themselves to the government . . .”

We attempted to contract that water by some kind of an agreement with the Colorado River Water Conservation District, which embodied the fourteen counties, but they were reluctant to enter into anything other than a nominal contract, because they hadn't identified any particular users that they could, in turn, market the water to. So they weren't willing to obligate themselves to the government or the Bureau. So we never did really involve them in the contracting process, although they were consulted and they participated in the public meetings, or public negotiations.

Pfaff: Would you have been personally involved in the negotiations, or was your Repayment Branch chief?

Ervin: Whether it was a good use of my time or not, I was involved in most of the major contract negotiations. The Bureau used the process of designating a negotiating team, and that team usually consisted of the regional supervisor of Water and Land Operations, the Repayment Branch chief, the project manager in which the project was located, and a legal representative from the Solicitor's Office, the lawyer.

Pfaff: The regional director was not involved directly?

Ervin: Most usually he was not involved. If he became involved on a day-to-day basis, then the effectiveness of the team was reduced considerably. “Why deal with this team

when I can go see the regional director and get this settled?”

Pfaff: Were there other unique or unusual contracts that you negotiated while you were the division chief there?

“ . . . even if it’s the same basic contract, which many of the irrigation contracts were, you’re dealing with different personalities. . . .”

Ervin: It seems like every one is unique. It’s got its own peculiarities. I guess one of the uniqueness things of it is, even if it’s the same basic contract, which many of the irrigation contracts were, you’re dealing with different personalities. You’re dealing with a different board in each case and a different lawyer.

Bonny Reservoir on the South Fork of the Republican River in Eastern Colorado

I think one of the other things that we had done was somewhat unique. The Missouri River Basin Project authorized the construction of Bonny Reservoir on the—I believe it’s the South Fork of the Republican River in eastern Colorado. It was constructed early, one of the early reservoirs constructed in the Missouri River Basin Project. While no specific irrigation plan had been identified, some storage capacity was provided in Bonny for future irrigation purposes. I think maybe a couple million dollars of the cost was allocated to the irrigation purpose.

Bonny Operated Largely as a Flood Control Structure, and a Regional Study Concluded There Was No Viable Irrigation Project

Over the years, and that must have been, oh, goodness, for about thirty years, the reservoir was operated much like Ruedi had been. It stored water, but there were really never any releases made for beneficial purposes. It was operated largely as a flood-control structure. The Bureau had done at least probably two studies on the irrigation potential. In the late seventies, the Planning Division concluded that there was no viable irrigation project that could be developed from Bonny.

Bonny Became a Popular Recreation and Fishing Reservoir, and Eventually the State of Colorado Repaid the Irrigation Component of the Project in Order to Keep Water in Bonny for Recreation

In this interim period of operation, the reservoir was relatively stable, and it became a popular recreation and fishing reservoir. It was administered by the Colorado

Division of Wildlife and the Division of Recreation, which I think are now combined into one. They were particularly interested in maintaining that reservoir. The use of water out of it was further limited by the provisions of the Republican River Compact. They offered, or they approached the Bureau on how they could acquire the water, or the rights to the water, that had been stored or in the irrigation storage. We proposed that to the Commissioner's office and received their approval. The bottom line is that then we entered into contracts with the state of Colorado through the Division of Wildlife and Parks and Recreation, for the use of the conservation storage in Bonny Reservoir, for which they paid the United States something like two million dollars, I think, which what they paid was the cost of the reservoir that had been allocated to irrigation and to that water supply. So they paid off the irrigation obligation and obtained the water supply, and they operate the facility for the recreation and fish and wildlife purposes. I don't mean they operated the physical structure; the Bureau maintains the operation of the dam. But the use of the water supply determined by the state of Colorado for those purposes, which I think is probably unique, at least as far as I know, in committing the water supply to fish and wildlife and recreation purposes.

Pfaff: Rather than irrigation?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: You mentioned your Water Operations Branch was responsible for structural maintenance. Was that O&M?

Ervin: O&M, yes.

Pfaff: And facilities within the region that was their responsibility?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: Was there ever difficulties in prioritizing these, based on budgeting?

“ . . . most of our facilities were relatively new . . . so there weren't any major problems, in terms of maintenance of facilities. . . . ”

Ervin: Oh, there was always problems with that, but I don't know we had any major ones. Of course, most of our facilities were relatively new in the history of Reclamation, so there weren't any major problems, in terms of maintenance of facilities. Well, Reclamation has the policy of transferring facilities to the user organization. They came by that after

some experience in the early projects, I think the early 1900s and twenties, of operating facilities and delivering water, and determined that it would be better for the Federal Government to be out of that business, and the facilities operated by the water users.

“The works in the contracts were defined as reserved works, which are those facilities reserved for operation by the Federal Government, and transferred works, which were operating by the water users organization. . . .”

The works in the contracts were defined as reserved works, which are those facilities reserved for operation by the Federal Government, and transferred works, which were operating by the water users organization. For the most part, the reserved works consisted of the major storage reservoir, in some instances major canals or diversion works. But by and large, in the projects that I was familiar with, that were relatively small, the Bureau retained just the storage reservoirs.

Pfaff: Would this have been a part of the Thompson Project and Fryingpan-Arkansas? Are those the two major ones?

Ervin: Those were the two majors ones that were going on then, but there were ten or fifteen other storage reservoirs that had been constructed in Nebraska and Kansas and Wyoming.

Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District and Operation of the Colorado-Big Thompson Project

You mentioned the Colorado Big Thompson Project. At the time I retired, there was an effort in the Bureau, and the policy of the Federal Government, to reduce the government’s involvement in the operation of the projects and to transform more works. In the case of the Colorado Big Thompson Project, there were facilities both on the East Slope and the West Slope. There were pumping and storage facilities on the West Slope and power facilities, and storage and conveyance and power generation on the East Slope, major facilities.

Windy Gap Project of the Northern Colorado water Conservancy District

The contract was with the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. They had become a pretty competent organization and with financial resources. In fact, they had constructed a project on the West Slope to pump water up and store in the Big Thompson storage facilities and convey it through the tunnel system and deliver it on

the West Slope to municipalities.

Transfer of West Slope Facilities to Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District for Operation and Maintenance

One of the last efforts I made before I retired was to sit down and recommend a process of transferring [operation of] more facilities, the pumping facilities, on the West Slope. Since the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District was the sole user on the West Slope and they had constructed the Windy Gap facility, which was a major pumping facility, it seemed that we could transfer the collection and storage and pumping facilities on the West Slope to the district, reducing the Bureau's involvement. That was ultimately accomplished after I retired.

Pfaff: I think was like in 1986 or something like that.

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: [unclear].

Ervin: Right. As far as I know, it's working great.

Pfaff: Yes. Anything else about the various branches? We didn't talk about your Recreation Land Use Branch at all. You had mentioned earlier, when you were in McCook, how the whole recreation planning effort changed over the years to include more public involvement. By this time, in the seventies, you probably had a lot of public involvement then in your recreation planning efforts.

There Was a Lot of Public Interest in Planning Use of Reservoirs, and That Complicated Reclamation's Work

Ervin: Well, I don't know that it was explicit policy, but the planning and development of the use of the reservoirs seemed, at the outset, to stimulate public involvement. The public insisted on being involved, without our encouragement, I guess. I suppose at the time we were prejudiced a little against it, because it complicated the job. It made it more time-consuming. But we overcame that.

Reclamation Would Have Liked to Avoid Dealing with Recreation by Passing the Work off to Others, but Several Things Prevented Reclamation from Doing That

With all the reservoirs and all the administering agreements with the state agencies, there was kind of an ongoing workload of just administering those administering agreements. There was talk, and there was a desire on the part of administrators, that when you transfer the works to a state agency to operate the public-use facilities, then Reclamation should be able to wash its hands and walk away from it.

Two or three things seemed to keep that from happening. First, the government owned the land and had a responsibility to manage and conserve those resources. The state agencies weren't compelled to respond to congressional inquiries to the extent that Reclamation people were, and those were two major deterrents, at least, to getting out of the recreation business, or were the source of the activities and responsibilities of that Land Use Branch, or Land Management Branch. Of course, whenever we constructed a new reservoir . . .

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JULY 8, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JULY 8, 1998.

Pfaff: Today is July 8th, 1998. I'm continuing the interview with J. Willis Ervin. This is Chris Pfaff. This is tape number two, side one. We'll pick up where we left off.

You were talking about the planning process for the recreation areas of the reservoirs and how Reclamation had to stay involved because we own the land and we couldn't always turn facilities over. We still had an obligation.

Planning for Facilities at Reservoirs Was Done with Other Agencies and Bureaus

Ervin: We had an ongoing program, of course, constructing new reservoirs, at least up until the seventies. So each new reservoir had need for the planning of the public-use facilities. These were usually done in conjunction with the state agency, State Recreation and Wildlife agencies, the National Park Service, and the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service, to evaluate the reservoirs, the capabilities, the prospective public use, and what facilities should be constructed to meet that need.

Authorization of the Pick- Sloan Missouri Basin Program Included Authorization for Minimal Recreation and Fish and Wildlife Activities

I think earlier in this interview I had mentioned that, at least in the beginning, although fish and wildlife and recreation were purposes authorized in the Missouri River Basin Project, the interpretation of that, at least particularly as far as recreation

was concerned, was, we were limited to the construction of facilities to protect the health and welfare of the public, and not to construct enhancement facilities for either recreation or fish and wildlife. Sometimes in areas, or reservoirs, which perhaps had a higher public-use potential, specific authorization was included in the authorizing act for enhancement facilities.

This was the case in the case of Fry-Ark Project and the public-use facilities at Pueblo Reservoir, which are extensive. Certainly it has the most recreation enhancement facilities of any reservoir in what used to be the Lower Missouri Region. Some impetus, or some enablement, was provided by the Federal Project Recreation Act. I believe that's the name of it. It passed in the early seventies, which provided the intent, if not the authority, to construct enhancement facilities at Federal reservoirs.

Pfaff: There was plenty of funding available at that time?

Ervin: Toward the end of it, yes, toward the end of my career. At the outset of the program, there was limited funding generally used to perhaps build a boat ramp, to make it safe for them to launch a boat, perhaps a couple of hand-pump wells, to provide a potable water supply, an outdoor privy maybe on each side of the reservoir, and maybe some limited tree plantings, but that would be getting into enhancement. But most of those facilities were deemed necessary for the health and safety of the user.

Pfaff: Later on there was more funding?

Ervin: Pueblo Reservoir, there was more money spent there on recreation enhancement than, I think, had been spent on all the other reservoirs. I don't recall, it seems like the recreation facilities at Pueblo cost ten or fifteen million dollars.

Pfaff: All that planning was done while you were the division chief there?

Ervin: Right, yes. One of the reasons, I suppose, it was also authorized as non-reimbursable costs.

Pfaff: Reclamation paid for all of that?

Ervin: Yes, we weren't obligated to achieve a repayment on it.

Pfaff: Was there a lot of public involvement with that one, with the Pueblo Reservoir?

Served on the Public Involvement Task Force Which Drafted the Original Public Involvement Reclamation Instructions

Ervin: Yes, public involvement by that time had become a way of life. Incidentally, I served on the Public Involvement Task Force, the draft of the original public involvement instructions, Reclamation instructions, over a period of nine months or so. Nearly a year, probably, involved in that.

Pfaff: Those were, I guess, in effect, until quite recently, we had the Reclamation Instructions.

Ervin: Yes. Well, I don't know what's happened to it since, but it was our first effort, anyway, at it.

Pfaff: How did that go? How was that, as a first effort of doing something like that?

Ervin: Well, I suppose, and maybe one of the reasons I was on it as I had been at the Washington level for a while, but I served to kind of represent the operation and maintenance. Well, work on that, I suppose it's inherent in most of our beings to avoid change. Or if you're comfortable and familiar with doing something some way, that you don't necessarily relish changing it. I think we also kind of develop a shell around ourselves, perhaps, in Federal service, to avoid the wrath of the public, not so much their interest, but their criticism.

I suppose this come about because of, largely, the way we dealt with them, or quite often was through the congressional inquiry process, in which a citizen writes to their congressman and tells them they're not being treated right by the Reclamation people. Seldom do they write a letter saying they appreciate what the Reclamation people are doing. So I suppose there was some reluctance to tread out into that water, because we didn't know how deep it was, I guess. We knew what the intent was, I guess, from the administration, in terms of the public side. We didn't have definition of what the intent was, or how far, how extensive, the public involvement was going to be in the administrative processes in the Reclamation in-house activities, but we put out something and it was adopted, I think. I suppose it's been improved since then.

Pfaff: So this was a Reclamation, like, team then, that was involved in developing the instructions, Reclamation instructions for public involvement.

Ervin: Yes. Yes, I don't remember who all was on that. Somebody from Washington. Some people from another region or two, I think, were on it.

Pfaff: How would you describe your management style when you were the division chief here?

Management Style as Division Chief

Ervin: Well, I don't know that I had a definable— somewhere between autocratic and participative, I guess. I think I was perhaps more of a participative management on the part of the people that worked for me. They might not see it that way. I guess I kept myself involved and informed of what they were doing, as opposed to telling them what they ought to be doing. I think we developed what needed to be done cooperatively. Maybe as a guidance manager, although in the repayment field, I did involve myself directly in the contract negotiations. I probably involved myself directly in that more than in any of the other branch activities. I had had [unclear], for instance, in land use and management. I knew enough about that I didn't need to learn any more or much. I knew enough to supervise it.

I tried to learn as much about water operations as I could, but that's heavily, heavily an engineering activity. Not being an engineer, I didn't get involved in the details. Provided overview, I guess.

Land acquisition, they were in my division, and I tried to keep track of what was going on, but that was pretty much, you know, largely independent. It was related to construction; it wasn't related much to the operation and maintenance of existing facilities.

Pfaff: How did you relate to the other division chiefs? Did you work closely with the other division chiefs in the region?

Ervin: I probably didn't work as close as some people. I guess I look at the operation and maintenance as sort of the end product, when you get done with construction and so forth. It was kind of a full-time job, administering that program, although I developed working relationships with the planning people, because they provided information to us at times, and with finance people, and definitely with the environmental people and public involvement people. You couldn't be in that job without--or you wouldn't have been in it twelve years, I guess, without having a reasonable working relationship with the other division chiefs.

Pfaff: Was there an Environmental Division already at that time?

Ervin: About the time I entered the job in '72, about that time, they created a position of environmental coordinator, or something like that, yes.

Pfaff: In the region?

Ervin: Right, in the regional office.

Pfaff: Did you deal at all with cultural resources?

Ervin: Yes. Maybe not as much as some others. The cultural resource, I think, in the region, those contracts and so forth, interests, were done by the environmentalist, the regional environmentalist. If there were cultural resources affected on an operating project, we became involved. But, again, it was largely done through the environmental specialist.

Pfaff: So they would coordinate the cultural resources and coordinate with you where they needed to?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: The public involvement, that was out of a different division then?

Public Involvement Was Handled by the Public Affairs Officer and Whoever Was Responsible for the Activity Involved

Ervin: That was administered largely by the public affairs officer, I guess, although I think the way we wrote the instructions were applied, as I recall, they were somewhat self-directed. The response for public involvement was incumbent upon whoever was responsible for the activity, so there was some coordination, I'm sure, involved, whether you complied with the provisions. But they were intended to be self-implementing.

Pfaff: So there was not a public involvement staff at that time?

Ervin: No, although public involvement plans were required, and so those came in at the regional office, at least, and were reviewed in some field offices. I don't know whether it's still being done or not.

Pfaff: How did you relate to the E&R Center, the engineers?

How the Division Worked with the Engineering and Research Center in Denver

Ervin: Well, the E&R Center had a couple of functions that related to us. Well, maybe several. But the Water Operations Branch, which had the responsibility for operations and maintenance of facilities, were more directly involved with the Bureau's construction people, or design and construction, although the E&R Center had established through experience, I guess, the need for an operation and maintenance group in the E&R Center. Unless the project was under construction, they were in operation and maintenance status. Most of our contact, our principal contact, was with the chief of the O&M Technical Services, for lack of a better term.

Pfaff: Within the E&R Center?

Review of Maintenance Activities

Ervin: Within the E&R Center, yes. They were responsible then for contacting appropriate people within the E&R Center for expertise or whatever we needed. The Bureau established, again through experience and perhaps the need for a systematic and reliable way to keep informed on the status of project facilities, and they established the review of maintenance process. It really wasn't considered inspections. It wasn't considered inspections, because inspections were reimbursable by the water users, so they were review of maintenance. They were a review. These occurred periodically at the project level. I think they reviewed the irrigation systems annually. But the regional people would participate less frequently than that.

The E&R Center people, particularly out of this Operation and Maintenance Division, would participate on some of those major reviews. Occasionally, people from the Construction and Design Division would participate. It was a matter of going over this facility with the people particularly who'd operated them, and determining whether the maintenance program was adequate, and if it had deficiencies, they were identified and a time frame put on them for remedial action, either by Reclamation or by the water users organization.

Worked in Pakistan after Retiring

I think that Review of Maintenance Program was used, or at least that example was used, in foreign activities. While I have only been on one foreign assignment, and that was after I retired, but many of the problems with irrigation systems in other parts of the world is that they were not really constructed too well. Although where I was in

Pakistan and the English were there, the standards for design construction were better. But the facilities aren't maintained. This was probably one of the major contributions of Reclamation people in the foreign activity field, was to try to ensure that facilities, once constructed, they were maintained to extend their useful life.

Pfaff: There was a Foreign Activities Group at that time?

Ervin: There was a Foreign Activities Division, or group, in the commissioner's office and in the E&R Center. I don't recall any people that worked for me that went on any of those, but many Reclamation people did.

Pfaff: Your water operations people had a good working relationship then with the E&R O&M group?

Ervin: Yes. In fact, Mr. Calhoun, who worked for me, came to me from the E&R Center. One of the reasons for choosing him, he had a working relationship in the E&R Center. I don't think it was a mistake, because he now is regional director. (laughter)

Pfaff: In general, what was the relationship between the region and the E&R Center, being so close to each other, but having the same functions?

Relationships Between the Lower Missouri Region and the E&R Center

Ervin: Yes. The Lower Missouri Region, being located on the Federal Center in a different building, that proximity had its benefits, I guess, as well as its downside. It was very convenient to go to the E&R Center, perhaps on an informal basis, and sit down and talk to somebody about what they thought or work solutions to problems. On the surface, I guess, it looks like that would be perfectly reasonable to do that. However, in administering an organization, it can get out of hand.

Pat Dugan

When Pat [Hugh P.] Dugan was Regional Director in the Lower Missouri Region, it would have been Region Seven at that time, I believe he attempted to restrain that informal coordination, or informal discussions, with the E&R Center people, to the extent, I think, that telephone calls were restricted. You couldn't pick up the telephone and call somebody in the E&R Center and talk to them. I'm sure his concern was that the E&R Center was influencing the administration of his program, or interfering with his authority to make decisions, or what ought to be done, or recommendations. I think

that relationship went up and down. Of course, the structure in the Denver Center now, I guess, is considerably different.

Pfaff: Yes, very different.

Ervin: And this informal communication is encouraged, I guess. Of course, there's more autonomy in the regions, I believe, and even the project offices. But, yes, there were problems associated with being in that proximity.

“... regional people had better opportunities, I guess, to fill positions in the E&R Center. . . .”

The other side of it is that certainly the regional people had better opportunities, I guess, to fill positions in the E&R Center.

Pfaff: You mean to move over there if they wanted?

Ervin: To move over there, yes.

Pfaff: Did that happen a lot?

Ervin: Quite a lot.

Pfaff: The engineers would want to move over to the E&R Center?

Ervin: Yes. Administrative people. I believe in cases of reduction in force, we fell within the same competitive region, or area, or whatever it was.

Pfaff: Did you relate at all to the chief engineer then in your position?

Ben Prichard and Kerm Kober in the E&R Center

Ervin: Not my position, no. I related mostly to the chief of the O&M Division over there. When I was there, most of that time it was Ben Prichard, who has since retired. Prior to that was—I just saw his name here on a picture. Kober. Kober, was that his name? K-O-B-E-R? Kerm Kober?

I think one thing that I might mention, I don't know whether this is necessarily unique to Reclamation, but it may be. That is, particularly it relates to irrigation

projects, the close involvement of the water user organization, or the creation of it, is the establishment of associations, organizations, of the water-user entities. Of course, Reclamation projects covered the spectrum from small to large, and from irrigation to power generation.

John Spencer

But in the Lower Missouri Region, or at the time it was Region Seven, early on, I think, in the fifties, ~~the regional director, John Spencer, or maybe he was the supervisor--~~ he was also the supervisor of Water and Land Operations. I think they called it supervision of Operation and Maintenance. He undertook an effort to upgrade the capability, professionalism of the operating entities. In many cases, these were small irrigation districts, limited financial resources, and they were reluctant, if not unable, to secure superintendents, or operating superintendents, with professional capability. There weren't people necessarily in their areas that had experience in operating and maintaining irrigation projects.

The region, at that time, Mr. Spencer, I think, called together, or talked with some of the irrigation districts, particularly the older ones, and with the land-grant colleges in the states. As a result, called . . .

END SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JULY 8, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 2. JULY 8, 1998.

Pfaff: This is side two of tape two, July 8th, 1998, of an interview with J. Willis Ervin.

We'll pick up with discussing the region made an effort to talk to the irrigation districts to bring up what you called their professional standards.

Four States Irrigation Council

Ervin: Right. Well, I think that it resulted in the organization, in the region, of the Four States Irrigation Council. I think there are similar organizations in most of the other regions. This was sort of a three-party program, although Reclamation took the lead role at the outset. But it was an effort involving Reclamation people in the regions, and even in the E&R Center. The irrigation and conservancy districts' boards of directors and their managers and the representatives of the land-grant colleges in the three states, Normally in their extension program many of them irrigation specialists, and they participated in the Four States Irrigation Council.

It evolved into a more formal organization in the early years, or in several years. Reclamation took the responsibility of conducting the council's annual meeting at the Federal Center. As time went on, it evolved into an organization with a board of directors, and Reclamation became more advisory. The meetings moved around to other locations out of the Federal Center. Summer tours were instituted about every other year, which the participants would tour different projects to observe methods being used in operation and improvements and that sort of thing. I think it turned out to be a beneficial organization.

For the most part, the districts and the land-grant college people stand their own expense, so there wasn't any transfer of funds involved. There has been some criticism of it, but there usually isn't. The Four States Irrigation Council avoiding being political activists, and they dealt more with the technical, practical aspects of operating the project. Some other water users organizations are more politically active. There was some criticism of that, I think. But the council now is operating pretty independent from the Bureau.

Pfaff: What are the four states that are represented on the council?

Ervin: Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming.

Pfaff: When they formed, what was the stated purpose for the organization?

Ervin: Well, I don't know that. I sent all my Four States proceedings back to the E&R Center, but basically to conserve for irrigation and conserve water and land resources, I'm sure, and to contribute to the successful operation of irrigation projects.

Pfaff: Water conservation was considered part of their mission?

Ervin: Yes, as well as the facilities. Each year there would be what you might call a seminar. It was an annual meeting, but it's along seminar lines. There'd be some speakers, but there'd also be some workshops dealing with, for instance, setting up an accounting system for a district, public involvement, the district directors in management of dealing with their water users. Of course, the directors of a district are kind of unique. They're the management of the district, but they're also the water users. They are water users in that district.

Since Four States was inaugurated, one of the needs of an irrigation district in operating and maintaining a system is certain goods and services that are provided by

the private industry, or the private sector. There are businesses in the private sector that support the irrigation program. Over time these private companies—I think they call them commercial companies—first became exhibitors at these Four State Council annual meetings. They had booths, and they would be there to provide information on their products. They're sort of self-regulating. They have a member, I think, on the board of directors of the council. It's worked out to be a pretty successful program with their participation.

Pfaff: Was that a unique feature of the meeting?

Ervin: I don't think it is necessarily. It sort of resulted in an evolution process. As I remember, the water users organization in the Mid-Pacific Region had commercial interests involved in it, but they were really quite valuable, because you could talk to the districts about you need to do things a certain way or you need to use this equipment, and the people who handled that, the private sector, were there for them to talk to. It sort of brought them together.

Pfaff: When would they have started? When was this formed?

Ervin: I think around early 1950s.

Pfaff: Oh, that early?

Ervin: Yes. Now, in addition to the council, one of its purposes was to recognize individuals in the four-state area who had contributed successfully, or significantly, to irrigation, project irrigation, or any irrigation, I guess, to the general irrigation picture. At each of the annual meetings, they recognized an individual from each state with what they called a Head Gate Award. They also recognized, particularly when the Reclamation people were involved in helping develop the programs and run the organization, they gave a Ditch-Riders Award to someone other than the directors that contributed significantly to the council's activities. I have one of them over there on the wall. The small one. (laughter)

Pfaff: What did you receive that for? Was there a special thing that you had worked on?

Ervin: As regional supervisor, you were involved in facilitating and putting the programs together, helping the organization to operate.

Pfaff: You helped put the conference on?

Ervin: Annually, yes.

Pfaff: Your group?

Ervin: Well, I involved myself some, but the main people were the Water Operations Branch people, although we brought in weed control from the Land Management Branch. We talked contracts, too, contractual procedures, excess land. It was an opportunity to discuss, think, talk about the problems of operating a system, without it being in a confrontational setting as you might get into in contract negotiations, or something like that.

Pfaff: That was pretty well attended then?

“It was held . . . so . . . you could attend the last session of this and go to the opening session of the National Western Stock Show. . . .”

Ervin: Yes, we could have from a hundred to hundred fifty, I guess, participants. It was held in conjunction, at least in terms of time, with the National Western Stocks Show, so, if the water users, and frequently they were farmers or ranchers, they would like to come to the stock show, so this usually occurred just before the stock show, and you could attend the last session of this and go to the opening session of the National Western Stock Show.

Pfaff: It was always bad weather.

Ervin: Yes. (laughter)

Pfaff: Always bad weather for stock show. (laughter)

Ervin: Yes. However, that’s when the meetings were in Denver. They still follow that practice, but the meetings haven’t been held in Denver for several years now. They’re held, it seems like Fort Collins and Cheyenne, and maybe in North Platte once.

Pfaff: Would there be like a keynote speaker?

Ervin: Oh, yes. Frequently we’d try to get the commissioner to be a keynote speaker, or the governor, or some water official in the state.

Pfaff: Do you remember having the commissioner there? Any of the commissioners?

Member of Congress Virginia Smith Spoke at One of the Meetings

Ervin: Oh, I'm sure we did have, but I don't really recall them right now. I remember we had Mrs. [Virginia] Smith from Nebraska. I believe she was a congressman. Yes, in the Third District. She was there. Other congressional people were there, keynote speakers. There was usually a keynote speaker at the Head Gate Awards banquet. Wives usually attended. There was a women's program that developed. That was probably where some people cast a critical eye, whether Reclamation should be involved in organizing such a thing.

Pfaff: To have a separate women's program, you mean?

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: They would have sponsored their own activities, tours, their own tours, and things like that?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: In conjunction with your meetings?

Ervin: Right. I think some women looked forward to the meetings as much as the men. (laughter)

Pfaff: A chance to get together and have fun.

Ervin: Yes. In fact, I recall one of the district managers was a woman. There may be more now. But I recall Mrs. Sitzman [phonetic], I think, was the manager for the Frenchman Valley and the H&RW¹⁷ Irrigation Districts.

Pfaff: Judging by the photos you showed me earlier, it didn't look like there were any women in your division, except for maybe your secretary.

Ervin: Well, that was probably true part of the time. Well, there was a woman in land acquisition. I call them aides, I guess. They weren't stenographic in nature, but they were technical people, dealt with the acquisition program. Then we had a woman in the Water Operations Branch. She was kind of the editorial type.

17. Hitchcock and Red Willow.

Development of a Plan to Deal with Emergencies at Each Reclamation Reservoir

About the time I was getting ready to retire, a program, I can't recall the name of it, but it was preparing a manual for each of the reservoirs to deal with emergencies. I don't remember the name of it. Was it emergency preparedness plan? Anyway, these documents were prepared for each major reservoir.

Pfaff: Was that new then?

Ervin: That was new then, yes. It sort of grew out of the safety-of-dams program, operational procedures to use, warning procedures to use, those sort of things. This lady, at least, handled the preparation of those handbooks.

Pfaff: What branch was that?

Ervin: Water Operations Branch.

Pfaff: Water Operations Branch was responsible for these plans?

Ervin: Yes. The Repayment Branch had a woman. I don't recall her title, but it maybe it was a repayment contract specialist. I think when I was there, she was doing power repayment studies, I think as a GS-9. She is now a GS-14, the top Bureau employee dealing in repayment and water service contracts.

Pfaff: Who is that?

Ervin: Sandi Simons.

Pfaff: Oh, Sandi, yes. In Denver.

Ervin: Yes. So we had some women. They've done well.

Pfaff: Yes, a small minority at that point, compared to today.

Ervin: Right.

Pfaff: Did you relate to the regional directors? Did you interact with them frequently, when you were Division Chief?

Worked Daily with the Regional Director

Ervin: On a daily basis. Yes. I suspect, I don't know whether a day ever went past, if I was there and the regional director was there, that we didn't talk. Almost daily. I suppose there were some we didn't. But, yes. When I left McCook to go to Washington, Jim Ingles was the project manager. When I came from Washington back to the region, he was the regional director. I served under him. Joe Hall¹⁸ followed him, I believe. Billy Martin¹⁹ followed Joe Hall. So those were the three Regional Directors I worked with.

Pfaff: Did they all have fairly different styles?

Jim Ingles

Ervin: Yes, they had their individual styles. Ingles had been head of the Fresno office in the Central Valley Project, which was an operating office. So he had a lot of operating experience in dealing with individuals. Easy to talk to. I don't know what his style was. It was kind of loose in a way. It wasn't military style, for sure. He didn't look at himself as being the commander. But he had good contacts throughout Reclamation, having worked in the region out in California.

One of his characteristics, I think, was to not stir up trouble, if it didn't need to be. Let sleeping dogs lie. I guess if you wanted to get on the wrong side of him is if you were a party to stirring up a situation that maybe was controversial, that didn't need to be stirred, in his opinion. He retired, as I recall, on his fifty-fifth birthday, or shortly thereafter.

Joe D. Hall

Joe Hall was, I think, more of an organizational person, involved himself more in the regional activities on an organizational basis. He was probably more inclined to have staff meetings and have seminars of the managers in the region, maybe had pretty good political savvy. He had worked in construction on the Bureau in Texas. Then he was the Kansas Reclamation Representative in Topeka. It was sort of a coordinating position.

“Most states wanted a Reclamation office in their state. . . . a state Reclamation representative was stationed, usually in the capital. . . .”

18. Joe D. Hall participated in Reclamation's oral history program.

19. Billy E. Martin participated in Reclamation's oral history program.

Most states wanted a Reclamation office in their state. Sometimes you couldn't warrant a full-blown office. So a state Reclamation representative was stationed, usually in the capital. Wyoming had a Reclamation representative, and Kansas had one.

Pfaff: I'm not familiar with that.

Ervin: Oklahoma, I think, has one now. I think most of the rest of the states have a Reclamation office, either a project or a regional office in their state.

Pfaff: These would have been where there were no project original offices, they have state representatives?

Ervin: Yes. Sometimes a project manager maybe will carry the dual title of a project manager/state representative. Didn't change what he did.

Pfaff: You were talking about Joe Hall's management style.

Ervin: Thank you for getting my memory back.

Pfaff: More politically savvy maybe?

Ervin: Yes. I think he dealt more with the organizational structure in the Bureau, and a participant in changing it. He worked well with state officials and representatives.

Pfaff: How about Billy Martin?

Billy Martin

Ervin: Well, I'd known Bill. When I was in the Washington office he was there. In fact, I took over the job. He left when I went there. He went to another one, in the Reports Coordination Branch. I don't think Bill is quite as comfortable, or didn't appear to be quite as comfortable, in dealing with people in water users organizations, although I must say that his interest in people is genuine. He came up through the Bureau in the planning process, and was an economist by training. He moved around a lot and advanced rather rapidly in the Bureau.

I was surprised, but apparently he impressed the Washington office and the

congressional delegations, because he went from the Washington office, I believe he was assistant chief of planning, assistant chief of the Division of Planning in Washington, when he left. He didn't stay in those positions very long. He was appointed to regional director in the Mid-Pacific Region without ever having had any managerial experience, or much, particularly at the project level. Most of his work was related to economic studies, that sort of thing. He didn't go to that job with a lot of, at least, project manager experience. But they must have had a lot of confidence in him to send him to probably one of the toughest regions to administer, as opposed to say, Ingles, who would prefer that you not disturb him with problems, Bill was real conscientiousness. If something needed to be done that was distasteful, that didn't have any effect on whether he ought to do it. If something needed done, you did it. He held you accountable for what you did. I think perhaps I found him maybe more helpful in helping you resolve issues. I think he gave a person more guidance than the other two directors did.

Pfaff: So you could go to him and ask for advice?

Ervin: Well, I could. I did. I was kind of a personal friend of his, but I don't think that had anything to do with our personal relationship. He was knowledgeable about what was going on in the office, he wanted to know about it, and he wanted to know about problems and he wanted to get them fixed.

He had a lot of experience in the Bureau from his days at Grand Island as an economist, and in the region, and then at Pueblo, and then Washington. Those were all planning experiences. Then he was a regional director in Sacramento, Mid-Pacific Region, and in the Lower Missouri Region, and ultimately, in the [Great] Plains Region when they were combined. Then I think about the last year or so, he was Assistant Commissioner for [Resources Management] ~~Operations and Planning~~ in the ~~E&R Center, or the~~ Denver Center.

Pfaff: Did these three different Regional Directors have their own individual—I don't want to say pet problems.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 2. JULY 8, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 3. JULY 8, 1998.

Pfaff: This is tape three, side one, on July 8th, 1998, of an interview with J. Willis Ervin.

I just asked whether the three regional directors that he worked for, Ingles and

Billy Martin, each had their own priorities, I would like think is a better way to put it, while they were regional directors?

Ervin: Well, I presume each one of them brought their own experiences and their own individual interests to the position. However, I think the priorities of the program, as it related to the region, of necessity, I think, dictated their interests and participation. If you have one major project, or a project or activity, that has high priority within the administration or within the region, that became their priority. I don't think I saw any of them with individual projects very much. I think Joe Hall was interested in doing something with the organizational structure, including the organizational structure within the Bureau.

Jim Ingles, as I recall, I don't know that he was interested in examining the Bureau for changes. As I recall, he was regional director when an effort was started by assistant commissioner Ed Sullivan, I believe, and somebody in the commissioner's office. It dealt with the process of OD seminars, organizational development and management seminars. They were unstructured meetings. I recall the one we had in the region, these people had arranged it, we knew they were coming, but they didn't have an agenda, and they wanted to meet with the director and his principal staff officers. I recall we met off-site. The thrust of Mr. Sullivan's presentation, and some people with him, was, "What do you think about the Bureau of Reclamation?" It was nebulous.

Pfaff: There were broad questions?

Ervin: Yes. How to make it function better, how it functions. It was sort of a free-form, I guess you'd call it, brainstorming or something, and that disturbed Mr. Ingles. I think he thought they were about to find out, they got some dirt on him or something, I don't know. (laughter) He didn't participate verbally much in it, as I recall. That sort of went, I guess, without being derogatory, or not intending to be derogatory, he was sort of a member of the "good old boys' Reclamation club." That's the way he operated. And this meeting on OD was starting to examine the "good old boys' club." (laughter) Whether that was the way to do it.

Pfaff: Anything else on the regional directors before we move on. Your interaction?

Ervin: No, I don't think so. I felt privileged to serve under them. They belonged in the regional director job. They weren't misfits. They were competent.

Pfaff: It sounds like it from your description. I want to ask you about Teton Dam. Do you remember where you were when that all happened, hearing about that? Did you have any involvement at your division?

Failure of Teton Dam

Ervin: Well, Teton Dam was in the [Pacific] Northwest Region, so I didn't have any involvement in it. When Teton Dam broke, the failure, I was in the Commissioner's office in Washington.

Leadville Drainage Tunnel

It was a Saturday. Assistant Commissioner Ed Sullivan and I and Roy Boyd were working, preparing testimony for a congressional hearing on the Leadville Drainage Tunnel to occur on Monday.

The commissioner was not in Washington. Mr. Sullivan, I presume, was acting commissioner. We got hour-to-hour minute-to-minute reports on it.

Pfaff: A phone call came in while you in the meeting?

Ervin: Right. This was a Saturday. The office was empty. There were just us three boys in there working on getting testimony put together for a hearing.

Pfaff: But somebody called in?

Ervin: Oh, yes, a regional director out there, I guess, did. No, he was gone.²⁰ Somebody called in. Maybe it came in through the construction E&R Center. Well, it probably came from the assistant director, too. But as I recall, the regional director was not in Boise.

Pfaff: What was the reaction of Sullivan when the news came in?

Ervin: Very calm. Very calm. I was impressed how calm he was about it. Well, I'm sure he got on the phone and called some senators and congressmen. Well, I don't know whether he went to any of the committee staff or not, but I'm sure he kept them involved. But I suspect he—"I'm here. I can't do anything about it." I think maybe the

20. The regional director at the time was Rodney Vissia. Mr. Vissia participated in Reclamation's oral history program.

time we knew about it, nobody could do much about it. It was out of hand, other than deal with warnings and that sort of stuff.

Pfaff: So you continued with your meeting and got updates?

Ervin: Yes. We had the hearing on Monday, too. I must say that there was more interest by the committee members probably in Teton Dam than there was the Leadville Drainage Tunnel.

Pfaff: Slightly higher priority at that time.

Ervin: Right. But the hearing, and some subsequent ones, provided the authority for rehabilitating and providing water treatment from the Leadville Drainage Tunnel into the waters of the Arkansas River and the Fry-Ark Project area.

Pfaff: Still an ongoing issue.

Ervin: Well, we apparently got money and constructed and are operating a water treatment plant there, out of a facility that we didn't construct. It was constructed by the Bureau of Mines. We looked at the facility, because it yielded somewhere around four or five cubic feet per second of water. The Bureau of Mines had declared it, I guess, surplus, or were going to. We decided Reclamation should take that over, if for no other reason than the drainage water that was provided, without apparently ever having looked into what the quality was.

So as a result of taking that, I might say what we thought would be a transitory interest in the—we were interested in the water, we got the tunnel. We got a big headache, and we still are with it. But I think the result of having constructed and operating the water treatment plan has contributed significantly to upgrading the water quality in the river environment. Whether Reclamation should have done it or whether we got our money's worth are other questions, but we were there and did.

Pfaff: What were the highlights of your career at Reclamation, looking back?

Looking Back at His Career

Ervin: Well, I don't know as I have—I kind of look at my Reclamation career as being the highlight. I mean, the whole thing.

Pfaff: Do you?

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: You really enjoyed it.

Ervin: I enjoyed my work. I started out dedicated to trying to provide some improved agriculture, improved quality of life, if you want to call it that, for farmers. I just kind of look at it as a great career, and that's sort of the highlight. The career was the highlight. I got the Department's Meritorious Service Award and Distinguished Service Award, which I presume are a sort of culmination of that career.

Pfaff: Well, you obviously have many successes to it.

Ervin: We tend to forget the failures, I guess. (laughter) I had the opportunity to, I feel, operate rather freely, develop or implement the programs as you saw it. I guess it's implementing them maybe more than developing them, although there was some of that, too. I found it interesting and challenging. There were special assignments and this that came along that kept it interesting.

I suppose, as I look back over it, and I hate to call it the low point, but I, at McCook, had kind of reached maturity. The work there was sort of becoming repetitious to some extent. I was ready for a change, and getting into the Manager Development Program and going to Washington and back to the region was the result of that.

Pfaff: What would you consider your biggest achievements for Reclamation?

Ervin: Well, the operation of bringing these irrigation projects, new ones into successful operation. They're all successful ongoing projects. I was involved in the authorization of the Narrows Project. That was an achievement, although it didn't go very far after that. The Ruedi water contracting process and end product was a highlight.

I think the Bonny Reservoir was a highlight, where we finally marketed, or committed, the water to recreation and received a couple million dollars in repayment. In fact, the commissioner came out, I don't remember, I think it was the one from Las Vegas. [Robert N.] Broadbent. He came out, and we met with the state of Colorado people, and he accepted the check for a million dollars. It was a real check cut on the Colorado Treasury or something.

Pfaff: It's like winning the lottery. (laughter)

Ervin: Yes. But I think the development and management of the reservoirs for public use is a highlight, too.

Pfaff: A wide variety of accomplishments.

Work in Pakistan for the World Bank and USAID

Ervin: I didn't highlight—after my career was a short assignment to Pakistan, but I wouldn't have been there had it not been for my Reclamation career. Pakistan had asked the World Bank for about a four-hundred-million-dollar loan to rehabilitate their irrigation systems, and I went over on a team to review that proposal.

Warren Fairchild

The team leader was Warren Fairchild²¹ from the World Bank, who had been active in, I guess, he'd been director of the Nebraska Water and Soil Commission or something, a Nebraska agency for water and land conservation, anyway. Then he had been assistant commissioner of planning for the Bureau for a couple of years. I believe that's when Armstrong was there. When he left, he went to the World Bank.

I teamed up with him in Pakistan. But I don't know what happened to that project. I think U-S-A-I-D was in, and I think—I believe, well, in fact, I think I was working for them. They provided technical support to the World Bank. About a year or two after that, I think the United States declined to certify Pakistan as a nuclear-free country or something, and their aid was cut off, foreign aid to Pakistan. Most of it, I think. So I don't know whether the project proceeded or didn't.

Pfaff: It must have been an interesting experience for you.

Ervin: I won't say it was enjoyable, but it was interesting, yes.

Pfaff: What were the biggest changes that you saw at Reclamation over the years? How would you describe those?

Changes at Reclamation During His Career

21. Warren Fairchild participated in Reclamation's oral history program.

Ervin: Well, I guess one was the controversies, or the opponents, to the Reclamation program, that growing group of people and interests, and, I think, perhaps a decline in the support for irrigation development. Many people, political people particularly, criticized the Bureau's projects of irrigation, because we already had surplus crops. I think they tended to overlook, maybe, the purpose of the irrigation in stabilizing a community. They sort of overlooked the social aspects.

I know, myself, as I said initially I was interested in getting into Reclamation because of my experiences in the drought and Depression as a kid. Because they had plenty of corn in Iowa, didn't support a farm family in Nebraska if they didn't have sufficient water to irrigate. I looked at the Reclamation program, particularly the irrigation program, as involving three basic resources in a community: one was the water, and one was the land, and one was the people. And all are essential ingredients. I think when you didn't support the irrigation program, or were opposed to it, you were sort of saying the people don't count. But they're an essential ingredient to an irrigation project, or a Reclamation project. So that was a change I saw.

Of course, the advent of environmental concerns. Here, again, based on my growing up and experience of crops drying up and burning up, I thought and felt that a dam and a canal and some water growing luscious corn and alfalfa and sugar beet crops was an improvement in the environment. And it was to the farm families and the communities.

Pfaff: Do you see an ongoing role for Reclamation in the future?

Ervin: I don't know for sure. They have a big inventory of facilities that they're responsible for, the operation of powerplants and the like. They can't walk off and leave those facilities. I don't know who would take over those responsibilities, and whether it would be any better arrangement than what you now have with the people who know about the design and operation of them. I presume somebody like Bonneville Power Administration could take over powerplants. Some of the cooperatives now, or electric utilities, could probably operate those facilities. But I see the need for some governmental entity, or public entity, being responsible for the various project features.

Most of the water users, mainly the water users, are small organizations. These facilities, particularly reservoirs, dams, and flood control, are beyond their capabilities not to operate, but to manage or to repair. So, somebody's going to have to do that, I think. The Federal Government is probably the only person that can stand the liability associated with them. If I were sitting in a board of director's chair, I wouldn't want to

assume the liabilities for my district for a major dam.

I'm really not hung up that the Bureau has to live forever. I'm open to the fact that it might be transitory if other suitable arrangements can be made for these facilities. I'm afraid if a new organization was created to do that, it would start to look like the Bureau of Reclamation.

Pfaff: Taking on the same responsibilities.

Ervin: Yes.

Pfaff: Is there anything that I have not asked you about in our interviews that you would like to talk about? Have I missed anything?

Paul Byrd

Ervin: I think you've got the gist of my career, I guess, or at least my perspective on it. As just kind of a side note, one of the things, when I was in McCook, the project manager that followed Hub Robinson was Paul Byrd [phonetic]. He was out of Idaho, I think, grew up in Idaho, had been in the Planning Division, or planning part of the program. But when I think about the Bureau people, and I think of them in terms of a Reclamation family, I recall that when he was project manager in McCook, that he took it upon himself to teach a course. I don't know whether you'd call it a course, but maybe an extended seminar.

He taught us about Reclamation. He taught us about the organization of the Bureau, the Reclamation Act of '02, and several laws since then. He gave us a thorough understanding of the organization, how it came about and what and why, and developed a certain amount of pride in the organization among the employees. It was, I thought, kind of unique. It wasn't anything dictated by procedures. He felt very proud of the Bureau, I'm sure, and he wanted to convey it on to those people that worked for him.

Pfaff: He would do this for the new employees, give this orientation?

Ervin: Well, no, as I recall, he did it once, one spring or something. It probably lasted—we'd take out a few hours. As a matter of fact, I think he didn't even teach it on Reclamation time entirely, but maybe an afternoon a week, or part of an afternoon, for a couple three months.

Pfaff: Every week?

Ervin: As I recall it, yes, he talked to us about it, anyway.

Pfaff: I think that's missing with a lot of employees that are new to Reclamation now. They don't get that background. They don't have any sense of the history.

Ervin: Yes. Well, we didn't either, that's why he did it, I suppose.

Warren Jamison

I had another person, who was Chief of the Water Operations Branch. My memory fails me more and more. Not Fairchild. Warren Jamison. He was project manager up at the Garrison Unit. Then he was project manager of Grand Coulee, and then he came back to the Western Power. I'd mentioned to him about Paul Byrd and this course on history. He felt that was a good idea, and he was going to do that same thing in Western Power.

“ . . . Western [Area] Power Administration was part and parcel, at least, part of the Reclamation program, a good share of the power program. . . . ”

Of course, Western [Area] Power Administration was part and parcel, at least, part of the Reclamation program, a good share of the power program. So they had many of the same organic acts of Congress, or legislative actions, that applied to them, too, in the projects that had power capability.

Pfaff: He went ahead and did that?

Lower Missouri Region Staff Meet Quarterly at a Lakewood Restaurant

Ervin: Yes. Well, the other thing, since I've retired, and the Lower Missouri Region moved to Billings, people who worked in it informally get together four times a year to have lunch.

Pfaff: In Denver?

Ervin: In Denver, yes. We currently, at least, are at a café [Café del Sol] at Sixth Avenue and Garrison. We've been meeting there for two or three years. That kind of speaks for the type of relationships that went on between the people that worked with the Bureau and

how they feel about each other.

Pfaff: You had some real strong ties.

Ervin: Yes. I think, from what I've seen, that's true throughout the whole Bureau organization. On a bigger scale it wasn't as close, but . . .

END SIDE 1, TAPE 3. JULY 8, 1998.

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 3. JULY 8, 1998.

Pfaff: This is side two of tape three, continuing.

You said that there was a closeness among fellow employees in Reclamation That speaks to the organization.

Ervin: Well, it may not be unique to Reclamation. I notice it, but I really spent my whole career in Reclamation, so I don't know how some other agencies—whether they had that same camaraderie or dedication as Reclamation employees did. Did. I think there may not be as much dedication by the employees to the Reclamation program as there was fifty years ago. But that may just be an old man's perspective on younger people. We always kind of tend to think they're not doing it right, or as good as we did. But there is obviously a lot of capability in the Bureau, and a lot of new disciplines that contribute to the Reclamation program.

“ . . . at the outset of Reclamation . . . Reclamation engineers were uniquely qualified to design and construct major water facilities. . . . I don't think . . . They . . . [now] have the exclusive expertise. There are many national, international engineering organizations that can, and have, constructed major water facilities. . . . ”

You were wondering about the need for continuing the Bureau. It just occurs to me that, I guess, the Design and Construction Group in the Denver Center has been reduced in numbers, I guess, maybe not in function. But we aren't building that many new facilities. But I think at the outset of Reclamation in the teens and twenties, and maybe even the thirties, that Reclamation engineers were uniquely qualified to design and construct major water facilities. That I don't think is any longer true. They don't have the exclusive expertise. There are many national, international engineering organizations that can, and have, constructed major water facilities. So that part is not essential to a Reclamation program.

Federal Financing and the Pool of Federal Engineering Expertise Were the Key Reasons People Wanted Reclamation Projects

Of course, one of the other reasons, or maybe in many cases the principal reason, for having the Reclamation and the Federal Government construct water projects was the financial incentive. For instance, people who were interested in power would like to see Federal facilities generating power, because it was low-cost electricity. Irrigation interests were interested in the Federal construction because of the repayment arrangements and the interest-free construction money. I think it became more or less of the dominance of the engineering expertise and experience that the financing and repayment aspects were critical to people wanting a Reclamation project. Without them, they probably couldn't construct it with private financing.

Pfaff: That was really the whole basis for creating Reclamation at the beginning.

Ervin: Right, and settling the West. That's pretty well settled.

Pfaff: Are there any subjects that you want to return to that we discussed?

Ervin: Doesn't occur to me now, no.

Pfaff: Okay. Well, if it does, you can let me know and we can continue.

Ervin: One thing that, I guess it relates back a ways, what we talked about, the activities when I was the regional supervisor of Water and Land Operations and the contracting procedures. That's also one of the highlights, I guess, the contracting. A member of the team, the negotiating team, as I mentioned, would be a person from the Regional Solicitor's office, which, of course, was the field office for Department's Solicitor's office. I think I had noted in the earlier negotiations, and as I observed some of them, in fact, I may have taken part in some of them, but there was a tendency on the part of the Solicitor's representative, I thought, to take a more dominant role, a lead role, in the negotiations, based, I guess, on the fact that lawyers know more about contracts than anybody, so they should do the negotiating, I guess. This is my perception, at least, some that I'd seen and some of the first negotiations that I got into as I got into the job.

But I took the position that the regional team leader, which was me, the regional supervisor, was the leading negotiator, and the regional solicitor, the lawyer, was there to provide legal support, because there are many factors that went into that contract that were not, I shouldn't say not legal, but that the legal aspects of it wasn't the

predominant factor. I don't know whether this is true throughout the Bureau or not. That was the feeling I had, at least, and I tried to make the Reclamation representative the lead of it, the more predominant negotiator.

Pfaff: How would you do that?

Ervin: Well, one was the designation of the negotiating team. That designation designated me, or the regional supervisor, as the team leader. Well, another way I did that was not referring non-legal questions to the lawyer.

Pfaff: You were able to change the balance, or whatever, on the team, so that the Reclamation representative had more?

Ervin: Well, I thought so. (laughter) That was not to the detriment of my relations with the Regional solicitor's representative, either. Maybe I was fortunate. The solicitor's representative that was on most of our teams was Ralph Canaday [phonetic]. His father, I believe, was the Chief Engineer on the Tri-County Project. He knew irrigation projects. He came from Nebraska and knew farming to some extent. I think he recognized what were legal questions and what weren't, what was the Reclamation policy or something. We had an excellent working relationship, I thought. Now, I don't think he was of the type who wanted to—he was comfortable in providing legal support, as opposed to that being the driving force in the negotiations. He would have probably been uncomfortable on the other side, if he were asked to do it, although I suppose he could have.

Pfaff: Anything else?

Ervin: No, let's call that quits.

Pfaff: Well, I want to thank you for all your time and all the really valuable information and interesting stories.

Ervin: Well, that's as much as my recollection--I don't remember everything.

Pfaff: Well, thank you very much.

Ervin: You're welcome.

Pfaff: We will end our interview here. If you do think of other things, we can always pick up

again.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 3. JULY 8, 1998.
END INTERVIEWS.

Appendix: J. Willis Ervin's Distinguished Service Award



Secretary of the Interior James Watt presents J. Willis Ervin with his Distinguished Service Award in September of 1983.



THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON

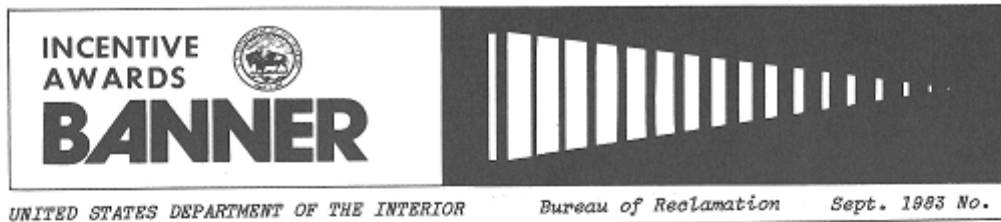
CITATION
FOR DISTINGUISHED SERVICE

J. WILLIS ERVIN

In recognition of eminent and innovative achievements obtained in water and land resources development activities for the Bureau of Reclamation.

Mr. Ervin's 34-year career with the Bureau of Reclamation has been distinguished by his broad and comprehensive approach to water resource problems. He has supervised and negotiated precedent-setting contracts for several major projects providing contract language acceptable to all parties while obtaining the best possible agreement for the Federal Government. Through his innovative resolutions, he has played key roles in the formulation and implementation of major water resource development policy. He was instrumental in developing new methodology for price structuring resulting in repayment terms more commensurate with the benefits of water resources projects. This approach to water contracting assures maximum value received for public resources, increases water conservation, and supports high priority energy development. Under his direction, a novel water conservation plan was developed for Casper, Wyoming, that provides additional water to meet that city's growing demands, accelerates the repayment provisions under previous contracts, and provides increased revenue for the United States. His untiring efforts in finding solutions to problems and acceptable areas of compromise have earned him high respect as an administrator and public servant. For his outstanding contributions to the performance and prestige of the Bureau of Reclamation, J. Willis Ervin is granted the highest honor of the Department of the Interior, the Distinguished Service Award.


SECRETARY



THE FORTY-NINTH DEPARTMENT HONOR AWARDS CONVOCATION

On September 20, 1983, the Department of the Interior held its 48th Convocation Awards Ceremony. This prestigious event was held in the Department's auditorium in Washington, D.C. The Bureau of Reclamation was represented in three categories at the assembly. The first was the Distinguished Service Award of the Department of the Interior which is given for an outstanding contribution to science; outstanding skill or ability in the performance of duty; an eminent career in the Department; an outstanding record in administration; an outstanding contribution to equal opportunity in Government; or any other exceptional contribution to the public service. The second was the Valor Award which is given to those employees who demonstrated unusual courage involving a high degree of personal risk in the face of danger. The final category is the Public Service Award which recognizes private contributions. These esteemed awards reflect admirably on the Bureau of Reclamation and on the awardees themselves.

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD RECIPIENTS

*J. Willis Ervin
Regional Supervisor of Water
and Land Operations
Lower Missouri Region
Denver, Colorado*

*Henry Johns
former Materials Engineer
Applied Science Branch
Division of Research
Engineering and Research Center
Denver, Colorado*

*William Lange, Jr.
former Chief, Division of Management Support
Engineering and Research Center
Denver, Colorado*

VALOR AWARD RECIPIENT

*Carl W. Davis
former Police Officer
Hoover Dam Police
Lower Colorado Dams Projects Office
Lower Colorado Region
Boulder City, Nevada*

PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

*Lee D. Olson
Senior Editorial Writer
The Denver Post
Denver, Colorado*



J. WILLIS ERVIN

In recognition of eminent and innovative achievements obtained in water and land resources development activities for the Bureau of Reclamation, Department of the Interior.

Mr. Ervin's 34-year career with the Bureau of Reclamation has been distinguished by his broad and comprehensive approach to water resources problems. He has supervised and negotiated precedent-setting contracts for several major projects, providing contract language acceptable to all parties while obtaining the best possible agreement for the Federal Government. Through his innovative resolutions, he has played key roles in the formulation and implementation of major water resource development policy. He was instrumental in developing new methodology for price structuring resulting in repayment terms more commensurate with the benefits of water resources projects. This approach to water contracting assures maximum value received for public resources, increases water conservation, and supports high priority energy development. Under his direction, a novel water conservation plan was developed for Casper, Wyoming, that provides additional water to meet that city's growing demands, accelerates the repayment provisions under previous contracts, and provides increased revenue for the United States. His untiring efforts in finding solutions to problems and acceptable areas of compromise have earned him high respect as an administrator and public servant. For his outstanding contributions to the performance and prestige of the Bureau of Reclamation, J. Willis Ervin is granted the highest honor of the Department of the Interior, the Distinguished Service Award.



HENRY JOHNS

In recognition of over 38 years of outstanding service to the Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of the Interior during which he has made important contributions to the development and widespread use of polymeric construction materials for water control structures.

Mr. Johns has had a large impact on Bureau adoption of new and improved protective coatings; canal, tunnel, and building sealants; concrete curing compounds; reinforced plastic mortar piping; and plastic drain tubing. He investigated many new products acquired through extensive industry contacts, and developed ingenious test methods to define their engineering properties and potential applications to Reclamation work. The resulting definitive data and specifications on the best materials technology can offer have done much to enhance the reputation of the Bureau of Reclamation. Mr. Johns' contributions are not limited to Bureau work. In conjunction with a Department of Transportation/Transportation Systems Center study he developed the first comprehensive standard specifications in the United States for segmented concrete tunnel lining sealants benefiting both the Bureau and the engineering community. The complete study will influence the construction of vehicular tunnels throughout the United States as well as Bureau water conveyance systems. He is influential among manufacturers of sealants and plastic piping through extensive industry contacts in the course of his developmental studies which have led to upgrading and standardizing of their products. For his valuable achievements in applied research and development of materials and methods for their use, Henry Johns is granted the highest honor of the Department of the Interior, the Distinguished Service Award.