ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

Rodney (Rod) J. Vissia

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

STATUS OF INTERVIEWS:
OPEN FOR RESEARCH

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Interviews Conducted and Edited by:
Brit Allan Storey
Senior Historian
Bureau of Reclamation

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Interviews conducted–1996
Interviews edited and published–2011

Oral History Program
Bureau of Reclamation
Denver, Colorado

SUGGESTED CITATION:

VISSIA, RODNEY (ROD) J., ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS. Transcript of tape-recorded Bureau of Reclamation oral history interviews conducted by Brit Allan Storey, Senior Historian, Bureau of Reclamation, in Ocean Shores, Washington. Edited by Brit Allan Storey. Repository for the record copy of the transcript is the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland.

Record copies of this transcript are printed on 20 lb., 100% cotton, archival quality paper. All other copies are printed on normal duplicating paper.

Table of Contents

(Intentionally blank)

Brief Chronology

1933-Born and raised in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where he graduated from Washington High School in 1951

1952-1954-Attended South Dakota School of Mines and Technology in Rapid City studying civil engineering

1954-1956-Joined the U. S. Air Force and earned his wings in F-94Cs

1956-1958-Returned to South Dakota working in the Air National Guard as a pilot while finishing his degree in civil engineering at South Dakota State University in Brookings

1958-Worked for Shell Oil Company and North American Aviation Incorporated at jobs he didn't find interesting.

1961-Joined Reclamation as an office engineer on the Collbran Project in Colorado

1961-After 9 months at Collbran, when construction closed down for the winter, Reclamation transferred him to Salt Lake City to the Colorado River Transmissions Office to lay out electric transmission line systems

1962-Applied for a job in the Water Rights Group of the Planning Division in Sacramento and went directly there from Salt Lake City

c. 1964 to 1965-Became project engineer for the Sespe Creek Project investigations.

–Entered Reclamation's Management Development program

Mid-1960s-Became branch chief for the Special Investigations Branch in the Planning Division in Sacramento

1970-1973-Chief of the Planning Division in Sacramento

1974-1980–Regional director of the Pacific Northwest Region in Boise, Idaho

January 1980-March 1982-assistant commissioner for engineering and research in Denver

1982-1985–Worked for the World Bank in Egypt doing a water master plan for the country

1986-1988–Worked for Reclamation in Brazil for two years.

1988–Retired from Reclamation.

1988-1989–Worked in Brazil under contract with the government of Brazil.

1990-1991–In Egypt for Morrison-Knudsen [Corporation] for about one and one-half years

About 1991 began to take on only short term assignments–taking assignments in Romania, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Malawi, the Phillippines, Pakistan, and Egypt working for various sponsors.

STATEMENT OF DONATION OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS OF RODNEY J. VISSIA

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, Rodney J. Vissia, (hereinafter referred to as "the Donor"), of Ocean Shores, Washington, 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 July 8, and July 9, 1996, at my home in Ocean Shores, 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.

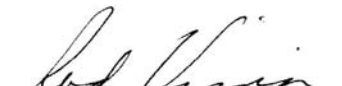
2. a. It is the intention of the Archivist to make Donated Materials available for display and research as soon as possible, and the Donor places no restrictions upon their use.

   b. The Archivist may, subject only to restrictions placed upon him by law or regulation, provide for the preservation, arrangement, repair, and rehabilitation, duplication, and reproduction, description, exhibition, display, and servicing of the Donated Materials as may be needful and appropriate.

3. Copies of the Donated Materials may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the National Archives, including the Bureau of Reclamation. Copies of Donated Materials may also may be provided to researchers. The Bureau of Reclamation may retain copies of tapes, transcripts, and other materials.

4. The Archivist may dispose of Donated Materials at any time after title passes to the National Archives.

Date: 7/9/96

Signed: 
Rodney J. Vissia

INTERVIEWER:_____
Brit Allan Storey

Having determined that the materials donated above by Rodney J. Vissia 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

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.

Brit Allan Storey
Senior Historian
Land Resources Division (84-53000)
Policy and Administration
Bureau of Reclamation
P. O. Box 25007
Denver, Colorado 80225-0007
(303) 445-2918
FAX: (720) 544-0639
E-mail: bstorey@usbr.gov

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

(Intentionally blank)

Oral History Interviews
Rodney (Rod) J. Vissia

Storey: This is Brit Allan Storey, senior historian of the Bureau of Reclamation, interviewing Rodney J. Vissia, former assistant commissioner for engineering and research and former regional director in Boise, Idaho, on July the 8th, 1996, at about ten o'clock in the morning, at his home in Ocean Shores, Washington. This is tape one.

Mr. Vissia, I'd like to ask you where you were born and raised and educated and how you ended up at the Bureau of Reclamation.

Born and Raised in Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Vissia: I was born and raised in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and I finished high school in Sioux Falls at Washington High School.

Attended the South Dakota School of Mines Then Served in the Air Force and the South Dakota Air National Guard

Then I went to South Dakota School of Mines and Technology in Rapid City for two years, and then I went in the Air Force for two years in the Air Force Cadet Program and became a fighter pilot.

Graduated from South Dakota State University in Brookings with a Degree in Civil Engineering

Through the Air National Guard of South Dakota, I came ***back*** to South Dakota to fly for the Air National Guard, and simultaneously I went to school at South Dakota State University in Brookings and graduated from Brookings with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering.

Worked for Shell Oil Company in Wilmington, California

From there, I went to work for the Shell Oil Company in Wilmington, California, and they stationed me in the drafting department to begin with at this refinery and indicated it was only part of my training program and after two or three months I would be put into the engineering section. About nine months later, I was still in the drafting department, drawing simple shop diagrams for the welders to assemble pipe in the refinery.

Moved to North American Aviation Incorporated at Los Angeles International Airport

And so I was pretty sick of that, so I started to look for a new job, and I found a job at North American Aviation Incorporated at Los Angeles International Airport. So I went to work there, and I was placed in the Loads Structural Group, and I was specifically working on the wing loads of the B-70 Bomber. I can still remember, it was wings divided up into about 317 grids, which you had to compute the load on each grid and

the moment about each axis, and most of it was done by computer, so that was pretty boring.

During a Vacation Stopped to Visit Friends at Reclamation's Collbran Office and Ended up Working in the Office

I probably stayed there approximately a year and a half, and then I took a vacation. And I was driving back to my home state, South Dakota, and I stopped to see two friends of mine who worked for the Bureau of Reclamation in Collbran, Colorado. One was Joe Cutchall and the other one was Duane Peterson. While I was there I was complaining to them about the lousy job I had in Los Angeles, and they said, "Well, we have an opening here. Why don't you apply for it?" I think this was during President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower's administration.

Lived in a Transa Home in Collbran

So I got back to Los Angeles. I did apply to the Bureau of Reclamation. They offered me an office engineering job in the Collbran construction office.[1] It was $100 a month cut in pay, and we would be living in a Transa Home, which is a portable unit, 15 x 30 feet, at about elevation 8,000 feet, quite a bit difference from Los Angeles. Anyways, I took the job, and we moved to Collbran, Colorado. So that's how I came to Reclamation. That was my very first job.

Storey: Tell me when you were born.

Born in December 1933, Graduated from High School in 1951, and Graduated from South Dakota State University in 1958

Vissia: In 1933, December '33. See, I must have graduated from high school about I guess it was '51. I graduated from South Dakota State University in '58.

Storey: So this would have been about '60, '61?

Joined Reclamation at Collbran in 1960

Vissia: Yeah, that I went to Collbran. It was 1960, I think. In fact, I got my résumé out just so I could check the dates on some of this stuff. Yeah, 1961 I went to Collbran. There, if you want to go on from there.

Storey: Sure, go ahead.

Detailed to Salt Lake City at the End of the Construction Season to Work on Laying out Electric Transmission Line Systems

Vissia: I went there, and then I worked about nine months. And they usually closed down

1. This construction office serviced the Collbran Project which was built largely in the period 1959 to 1962. The project originally projected water delivery to some 22,000 acres, most of it supplemental water. The project also includes two small high-head powerplants with an original and current combined capacity of 13,500 kW.

construction pretty much in the wintertime, so they detailed me to Salt Lake City, and I worked in the Colorado River Transmissions Office, and I worked on laying out electric transmission line systems.

Moved to a Job in Sacramento in the Water Rights Group of the Planning Division

I worked there about four months, and during the time I was there, there was a vacancy announced in Sacramento, California, in the Water Rights Group of the Planning Division, and I applied for that and I got that job, so I ***did not*** go back to Collbran. I went directly from Salt Lake City to Sacramento, and I worked in the Water Rights Division there.

Became Project Engineer for the Sespe Creek Project Study

I did that for a few years, I guess, and then I became a project engineer for the Sespe Creek Project, which was a very controversial project for the Bureau of Reclamation, and that must have been in the early sixties, because Sespe Creek runs right alongside the Sespe Creek Wildlife Area in southern California, which is the home of the California condor. The United Water Conservation District is located–let see, what was the town–a small town near Oxnard, up the river from Oxnard. Anyways, there's a small town there where this office is located.

This district wanted to build two reservoirs on Sespe Creek and a small diversion dam down below, and the water would be used to recharge the groundwater basin, because most of the water in the district was pumped from the groundwater. So I was the planning engineer in charge of that project.

Not too far into it, the Audubon Society basically became very concerned about the effect of the two reservoirs, the construction program, and so on, on the California condor, and pretty soon we began to get letters from all over the United States, from school kids, from adults, from all kinds of organizations, opposing the Sespe Creek Project. We did some environmental studies about it, but ***in the end*** the project was voted down by the water users because there was an overlap, as I recall, in two districts. The Metropolitan Water District and also the United District had some overlaps. The Metropolitan Water District had just built a large system to serve water to the Oxnard Plain, and so a lot of the Sespe Creek people were also there.

Anyway, the project was actually voted down by the water users. It was not defeated by the Audubon Society. Since then, now they've determined they can raise California condors in captivity, even, so it turned out not to be quite as serious as they thought at that time.

Became Chief of the Special Investigations Branch

After ***that***, I think I became a branch chief for it was called the Special Investigations Branch in the Planning Division of the region, and I think one of the things we worked on, at that time they were doing some national studies on river basins. I can't even remember what the name of it was. And so we did a lot of work,

even with the State of California Department of Water Resources, on gathering information and putting together sort of ***plans*** for all these basins in Region II at that time, the [Mid-]Pacific Region.[2]

Became Chief of the Planning Division

From there, under Bob Pafford, who was regional director, I became the Planning Division chief, and I was in that job for a couple of years. Let's see. I think it was probably two and a half or three years that I was Planning Division chief.

Promoted to Regional Director in Boise at the Behest of an Under Secretary of the Interior

Then in about 1975, we had a visit from the under secretary of the interior, and I can't even remember his name right now. At that time, the state of California and the Bureau of Reclamation were a little bit at odds about what the flow should be from the Delta through San Francisco Bay because of the fisheries and the water quality conditions in the bay. The Bureau and the state did not see eye to eye on how much that should be, and also there was always the problem of, is the Bureau required to have state's water rights? Even though we always applied for them and we always got them, our solicitor always maintained that we didn't have to by federal law. We ***did not have to apply for*** or ***get*** state's water rights, even though we always did.

Anyway, the reason for the under secretary of the interior to come out, he wanted to take a look at the Delta and the situation on the ground, and so Pafford asked me to take him around for about three days. I drove him around, and we talked a lot about the problem and I showed him a lot of things. It's my understanding that, based upon that trip, he told Gil Stamm that I should be considered for a promotion, for a regional director's job, and Gil Stamm didn't seem to be too happy about that, that this under secretary was telling him who he should promote.

Offered the Position of Regional Director in Either Sacramento or Boise

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

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

In an effort to conform to standard academic rules of usage (see *The Chicago Manual of Style*), individual's titles are only capitalized in the text when they are specifically used as a title connected to a name, e.g., "Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton" as opposed to "Gale Norton, 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 they are treated as a word. If they are spelled out by the speaker then they have a hyphen between each letter. An example is the Agency 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.

At any rate, Gil called me, and I think he's the one, in fact, that even told me that. He said, "Well, you have two choices. You can stay in Sacramento, because Pafford was retiring at about that time, or you can go to Boise, Idaho," because Harold Nelson, the regional director up there, had retired. So I selected Boise and went there, I think it was in '76. In '73, excuse me, 1973. So this trip would have been–I have to backtrack– would have been in '72 that the under secretary was out visiting the Delta, rather than '75. So it was 1973 is when I went to Boise and became the regional director, and I stayed there until 1980.

Became Assistant Commissioner for Engineering and Research in Denver

Then I went to Denver as the assistant commissioner for engineering and research, and I stayed there for about two and a quarter years.

Worked for the World Bank in Egypt on a Water Master Plan for Egypt

And then I went to work for the World Bank in Egypt under a program in which federal employees could work for a United Nations organization and still remain a federal employee by paying into their retirement fund, and they would still have reemployment rights when they finished the program. So when I went to Egypt, the original assignment was for three years, and then it was extended for a year and a half. So I was in Egypt for four and a half years at the World Bank, and I was called the chief technical advisor for the Water Master Plan of Egypt. What it was was to head up a group of expatriates ***and*** Egyptians in doing a national water plan for Egypt, in which we tracked where all their supplies were and we took account of what their ***present*** uses were and we estimated their ***future*** uses, and then we tried to assist them in coming up with some development programs, as well as some policies for how to manage the water resources, and did quite a bit of computer modeling as part of that work, also.

Back with Reclamation He Took a Job in Brazil

Then I tried to stay with the bank and go back to D.C., but they said they didn't have anything there. So, then I talked to Sammy Guy, who was in charge of the Bureau's foreign activities, and he said he had a position in Brazil, because I still had a couple of years to retire. So, he said he had a position in Brazil as the team leader for an activity down there, so I applied for that. I also applied, I think, for two regional directors jobs that were open, my old one in Boise and I think one other one at the same time.

". . . I committed to take the job in Brazil, and about a week after I committed that, the Bank came back and said, 'If you want to stay in Egypt for another two years, we'll extend the program.' Financially it would have been better for me to do that, but I had made the commitment to . . . Brazil . . ."

So finally I committed to take the job in Brazil, and about a week after I committed that, the bank came back and said, "If you want to stay in Egypt for another two years, we'll extend the program." Financially it would have been better for me to

do that, but I had made the commitment to Sam I would take the thing in Brazil, plus I was sort of interested in living in Brazil, anyway.

Worked Two Years in Brazil for Reclamation, Retired, and Worked over a Year More under Contract with the Government of Brazil

So I went to Brazil, and I worked for two years as a team leader in Brazil for the Bureau, and that's where I retired from the Bureau was in Brazil. Then I stayed there another sixteen months on contract with the Brazilian government directly, and then came back home. It was about ~~1960, I guess.~~

~~Storey: 1990?~~

~~Vissia:~~ 1990, excuse me, right. Since then–well, I should say, I was only home for a few months, and this house that you're sitting in here was under construction, and we had quite a cost overrun on it, so we decided it would be nice if we could get a little extra money and pay it off.

Went Back to Egypt to Work for Morrison-Knudsen

So we went back to Egypt for the Morrison-Knudsen Corporation as the team leader for a large AID [Agency for International Development] project there in which we were rehabilitating some of the irrigation systems in Egypt. So we went back for a year and a half.

After Leaving Egypt Began to Take Only Short Term Consulting Jobs

And since ***that time*** until now, I've been doing short-term consulting work for the World Bank, for Morrison-Knudsen, for the International Irrigation Management Institute, for Louis Berger, and various countries. I guess I've worked in at least a ***dozen*** developing countries in the last fifteen years on basically irrigation kinds of programs. Storey: Um-hmm. Okay. Good.)

Let's take a break for a second.

Storey: Sure. [Tape recorder turned off.]

You were saying you wanted to talk about why you liked the Bureau.

Vissia: Yeah. I had worked for Shell Oil Company, as I said, and also North American Aviation, Incorporated, and it seemed to me when I worked for them I was more like a, I don't know what you'd call it, a machine or just another digit in a ***huge*** organization. Also, the tasks that were assigned could have been done by any engineering tech, or even a high school graduate in some cases.

". . . the reason I liked working for the Bureau is it seemed to me they were willing to give you as much responsibility as you were willing to take, and they were always willing . . . to help you, help me, grow and to learn, and if I wanted to

proceed, all I had to do was apply for vacancies, and it seemed like I was well rewarded for the work that I put in. Likewise, I thought that the people that worked for the Bureau were, by and large, pretty gung-ho about the program. . . ."

But the Bureau, the reason I liked working for the Bureau is it seemed to me they were willing to give you as much responsibility as you were willing to take, and they were always willing, it seemed, to help you, help me, grow and to learn, and if I wanted to proceed, all I had to do was apply for vacancies, and it seemed like I was well rewarded for the work that I put in. Likewise, I thought that the people that worked for the Bureau were, by and large, pretty gung-ho about the program. I mean, they were reasonably excited about what they were doing and they enjoyed it. There wasn't that much complaining and griping that I remember, at least in those years.

". . . the program with the Bureau changes as new programs and projects come along, and it had a large variety of kinds of work. So I really enjoyed working for the Bureau for those reasons. . . ."

Again, the program with the Bureau changes as new programs and projects come along, and it had a large variety of kinds of work. So I really enjoyed working for the Bureau for those reasons.

". . . I've learned since working for the Bureau that it was probably one of the . . . better managed government organizations . . . compared to some of the other government agencies that I've run across . . ."

The other thing that I've learned since working for the Bureau that it was probably one of the, I felt, better managed government organizations that I've come across, because I worked closely with USAID and the State Department overseas for the last few years, and I have to say the Bureau looked like IBM or AT&T in terms of the way it's managed compared to some of the other government agencies that I've run across since that time.

". . . it seemed to me I was able to go just about as fast as I wanted to in terms of moving up in responsibility and tasks. . . ."

So I really did enjoy working for the Bureau, and it seemed to me I was able to go just about as fast as I wanted to in terms of moving up in responsibility and tasks. So that was good.

Storey: Yeah. Well, why don't we go back and start through this outline again. I'd like to talk about why you became an engineer. What caused you to choose engineering as a field?

". . . I wanted to be an architect. . . . in South Dakota, there are no schools . . . that offered architecture. . . . I couldn't afford out-of-state tuition. . . ."

Vissia: Well, I wanted to be an architect. I really wanted to be an architect. But in South Dakota, there are no schools, at that time, that offered architecture. The closest one is the University of Minnesota, and my family was poor, and I was poor. I couldn't

afford out-of-state tuition.

"I had worked at the Morrell's Meat Packing Plant for the last two years I was in high school to save money to go to school. . . . the closest thing to architecture, I thought, was civil engineering, so I enrolled in civil engineering at South Dakota School of Mines. I had enough money saved for the first two years. Then I went into the Air Force, and when I got out, I not only had the GI Bill, but I was also flying for the Air National Guard in Sioux Falls. . . ."

I had worked at the Morrell's Meat Packing Plant for the last two years I was in high school to save money to go to school. And so the closest thing to architecture, I thought, was civil engineering, so I enrolled in civil engineering at South Dakota School of Mines. I had enough money saved for the first two years. Then I went into the Air Force, and when I got out, I not only had the GI Bill, but I was also flying for the Air National Guard in Sioux Falls.

Drove from South Dakota State University in Brookings to Sioux Falls on Weekends to Fly for the Air National Guard

So I'd drive down on weekends from Brookings, because I was going to school ***then*** at South Dakota State.

". . . so a lot of time we would sit down in Sioux Falls on active duty there on the weekends, playing pinochle, until some Piper Cub or Cessna or somebody violated the AD Zone, and then we were scrambled . . ."

At that time they had in the United States what they called Air Defense Zones. I think there was four zones in the U.S., and all private aircraft, anytime they had to go from one zone to another, they had to file a report with the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration]. If they ***violated*** these zones without that report, we were scrambled from Sioux Falls in that area, just like a state patrolman would catch you on the highway. And so a lot of time we would sit down in Sioux Falls on active duty there on the weekends, playing pinochle, until some Piper Cub or Cessna or somebody violated the AD Zone, and then we were scrambled and we'd have to go up there and try to get their number off their tail and turn it in to the FAA.

So anyway, that's how I got through the second two years of school was because I was being paid for guard duty, as well as the GI Bill.

Storey: Why did you change schools?

Vissia: Because Brookings was close to Sioux Falls, where the guard unit was located. Rapid City's clear on the western side of South Dakota, and the guard unit in Sioux Falls, which is in the southeastern corner of the state, and so it'd be pretty difficult to get back and forth on weekends to fly. So I ended up at Brookings, which is sixty miles north of Sioux Falls, and finished school there.

Storey: So you would have been in the Air Force about '56 to '58, is that right?

Served in the Air Force 1954 to 1956 and in the Air National Guard from 1956 to 1958

Vissia: I was in the Air Force from about '54 til '56 on active duty, and then I was in guard duty from '56 til '58.

Storey: Where were you stationed?

Vissia: First, of course, at Lackland Air Force Base. That's where you go through the pre-flight training. And then I went to Moultrie, Georgia, for primary flight training, and then back to [Texas] ~~California~~ at Bryan Field, which apparently no longer exists. That's the home of Texas A&M, Bryan, Texas. I finished jet training there and graduated with my commission and wings. Then I went to Laughlin Air Force Base in–what's that little town [Del Rio] right on the border in Texas? Anyways, I spent a couple of months there in gunnery training, and then went to Las Vegas, Nevada, at Nellis Air Base for four or five months more training. I was flying F-86Fs there in gunnery training. And from ***there*** I went back to South Dakota and began flying for the Guard, and we flew F-94Cs Starfighters at that time.

". . . the Korean War ended just about the time I graduated, so our unit was never called up for that. . . ."

The reason that I didn't fly overseas is because the Korean War ended just about the time I graduated, so our unit was never called up for that. I didn't have to go overseas because the war ***just ended*** about the time I graduated.

Storey: Was it a stress pursuing a civil engineering degree and working for the guard?

Vissia: No, because I probably flew–we always had one full weekend a month, which is the regular guard program, plus two months in the summer, and then I flew maybe two nights a week or two days a week in addition. But no, it wasn't a problem. And besides that, I was even married the last two years I was in school. I got married about the time I got home from the Air Force and before I started the school.

Storey: You say you flew a couple of nights a week in addition. That was extra flying? That was part of your duty?

Vissia: It was part of the duty, right. In fact, I probably could have flown more if I had had the time, because we were paid, as I recall, by the day, and we could volunteer for more than–we had a minimum we had to fly, but you could volunteer for more days, and if they had the openings, the slots, you could go out there and fly.

Storey: When you went to Collbran, what does an office engineer do?

Working as an Office Engineer at Collbran

". . . primarily to figure quantities . . . to make sure that the contractors were turning in appropriate estimates of their own for payment, and also to prepare the

quantities that we thought they should be paid for. . . ."

Vissia: My job as office engineer was primarily to figure quantities, for a couple of reasons. One is to make sure that the contractors were turning in appropriate estimates of their own for payment, and also to prepare the quantities that ***we*** thought they should be paid for. So basically what I did for the nine months I was there was primarily to go through all of the designs and drawings and figure quantities–how much concrete is in this structure, how much re-steel[3] is in this structure, how much compacted fill are in these structures.

". . . the contractor . . . turns in what he says he's done . . . we always did our own anyway to make sure that we felt they were being paid what we thought they should be paid. . . ."

And, as these are being built, the contractor, of course, turns in what he says he's done, and we would have to make sure that, in fact, that was correct. Of course, we always did our own anyway to make sure that we felt they were being paid what we thought they should be paid. That's basically what I was doing, was working on figuring quantities on the different structures so that the contractor could get paid, and reviewing claims and that kind of stuff.

Storey: What project was this?

Vissia: The Collbran Project.

Storey: The Collbran Project.

Vissia: It had, I think its Mesa Dam[4] is the largest structure, and it has a couple of powerplants. There's a very steep penstock,[5] as I recall, that comes down the mountainside. I think Denver even designed a special–inside the pipe, I believe, they designed some kinds of fins or something to make the water travel differently down the penstock, as I recall. Then it was a couple of small diversion dams, and the project was power and irrigation. There's a little bit of irrigation that was used there in the valley. Most of the project was up at about, I suppose about 8,000 foot elevation, I guess.

It's a beautiful spot. The town is located just below the Grand Mesa in Colorado. In fact, we used to go up there and go fly fishing in the summertime and you could go up there and go sledding in the wintertime. It was a pretty nice area.

Storey: How did your figuring of quantities work? What were you working with in order to figure quantities to figure out whether the contractor's submitted figures were accurate?

Vissia: What do you mean, what was I working with?

3. Reinforcing steel.
4. Vega Dam is the primary feature of the project.
5. The penstock for the Upper Molina Powerplant has a maximum static head of 2,688 feet while the maximum static head for the Lower Molina Powerplant is 1,614 feet.

Storey: Well, let's see if I can phrase this question better. What was the process Reclamation was going through? I know you were on the end in the office figuring it. What was the process Reclamation was going through in order to double-check the contractor's figures for quantities?

Vissia: Well, take, for example, excavation for a canal. The inspector's reports from the field would come in, and they would report how much had been done over a certain period of time. Usually we used a monthly basis. So I would have to check the inspector's reports to find out how much the inspectors had reported how much canal had been excavated, and then I would have to take the plan and profile for the canal and I would calculate from there, using cross-sections and the distance between cross-sections to compute the volume. And then that would tell me how much ***dirt*** had been excavated for that length of canal, and then we'd compare that with what the contractor turned in. If there was a difference, then the engineer for the project, my boss, would have to sit down with the contractor, and they'd go over his stuff and my stuff and reach some kind of an agreement on payment.

Storey: Did that happen often?

"I can't remember while I was there any *major* differences, like would have gone into a claim. Usually claims were more based upon our inspectors didn't think they did it right . . . or they would say that we hadn't provided them with the right information before they started construction and they ran into additional work they hadn't anticipated . . ."

Vissia: They probably met, I suppose, probably every month, as I recall, but usually it was not anything significant. I can't remember while I was there any ***major*** differences, like would have gone into a claim. Usually claims were more based upon our inspectors didn't think they did it right and would write them up, or they would say that we hadn't provided them with the right information before they started construction and they ran into additional work they hadn't anticipated, and so then ***they*** would file a claim and say it was something they had to do in addition–they should be paid in addition. But normally we didn't have that much of a problem with the quantities.

A Problem Contractor

As I recall, and I guess we'd have to look at the records, but there was one really tough contractor on that job, and I forget, I think the Bureau even asked him to be removed from the project. They'd never contracted with this guy before, or this firm before. I don't know if I'm confusing this now with another program after I was in Denver, but I don't think so. But in this case, this guy was simply out–he had way, I guess, underbid the job, and he was simply out to make up for his losses, and so we had all kinds of problems with him and ended up in court and everything else.

". . . I only worked on construction for nine months, so I had relatively limited experience . . . in construction. . . ."

But, no, it was an interesting–I only worked on construction for nine months, so

I had relatively limited experience in terms of the Bureau's program in construction.

Storey: Did your work ever require you to go out in the field while you were there at Collbran?

Occasionally Went out into the Field Even Though His Job Did Not Require Him to

Vissia: No, but I did anyways, I mean quite often, because the office is close to the project. Sometimes, just to get a better feel for what was going on, what it looked like, I would go out, and the boss was always willing to let me do that.

Storey: Who was your supervisor?

Ross Billings Was Project Construction Engineer

Vissia: I'm trying to think who that was. I don't even remember his name now. He was a tall, slender guy with glasses. I do remember the construction engineer's name was Ross Billings, and as I recall, he was not a graduate engineer, but he had worked in construction . . .

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1. JULY 8, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JULY 8, 1996.

Storey: You were saying that Ross Billings was the construction engineer.

Vissia: Yeah, he was the construction engineer, and he had worked in construction a long time and had apparently been really good. He had been promoted to construction engineer for the Collbran Project. He's a strong, white-haired gentleman. I always thought he was quite fair, but he was tough, and I had a lot of respect for him. I cannot remember who the head office engineer was. I can't remember his name.

Storey: What about the field engineer?

Joe Cutchall and Duane Peterson

Vissia: I don't remember him, either. The two people that I remember the most, of course, are my friends, Duane Peterson and Joe Cutchall. Joe Cutchall later became the foreign activities officer for the Bureau. That's where he retired. Duane Peterson ended up in the Columbia Basin Project, and I'm sure he's retired by now. He worked in one of the field offices for the Bureau in the Columbia Basin Project as maybe a construction engineer, also. I'm not sure.

Storey: I've always been interested in the relationship between the field engineer and the office engineer and their staffs. Was that a smooth working relationship? Did it take a lot of effort? How did that work?

Vissia: Well, my only experience directly, of course, was on the Collbran Project, and as I recall, it worked quite well there. First of all, I guess the office wasn't that large. It wasn't a huge project office, and the two individuals got along relatively well.

". . . the office engineer's duties were to review designs, make the changes that were required, figure the quantities, pay the contractors, handle claims work; and the field engineer's basic job was to handle the geologic surveys, the other kinds of surveys, and manage the *inspectors* on the job. . . ."

Of course, the office engineer's duties were to review designs, make the changes that were required, figure the quantities, pay the contractors, handle claims work; and the field engineer's basic job was to handle the geologic surveys, the other kinds of surveys, and manage the ***inspectors*** on the job. Of course, what happens in the field does effect what goes on in the office and vice versa, but as far as I know, the two of them got along well and coordinated their work pretty well, and I think Ross Billings probably did a good job of making sure that that happened, too, as the overall construction engineer.

Storey: How would you describe Mr. Billings's management style?

Vissia: Since I didn't work directly for him, I'm speculating some, but he was tough. How participative he was in terms of asking his office engineer and field engineer for their ideas and for input in decisionmaking, I'm not sure. But I do know that he knew his stuff and he directed his staff well, and he seemed to schedule work quite well and was on top of things. But I really don't know how–I guess you'd have to talk to the people that worked directly for him. I didn't hear anybody complain about him.

Storey: How large was the staff there, as you recall?

Vissia: In the office, we had an office engineer and we probably had about four or five engineers in the office and maybe one or two technicians and a couple secretaries and inspectors and surveyors. There must have been maybe fifteen-, twenty, I suppose.

Storey: Had they worked in construction before?

Vissia: Who?

Storey: The other engineers in the office and the other techs.

Vissia: Duane Peterson and Joe Cutchall, that was also their first job with the Bureau, so they were brand new.

Storey: And they were both on the staff of the office engineer?

Vissia: Yeah, they were both on the staff of the office engineer. The engineers in the field I think were probably on their second job. There were some who were supervising some inspectors, and most of the inspectors that I know of on the job were people that had experience, that had worked on other jobs.

Storey: Let's see, I think there was a man named Vernon Powell who did engineering on the Collbran Project. Did you happen to know him?

Vissia: No. Was he in Denver or did he work on the project itself?

Storey: No, he came to the project and worked on the project.

Vissia: I don't know him.

Storey: What was your housing like?

Housing Provided to Reclamation Employees in Collbran

Vissia: We had a Transa Home, which was 15 feet by 30 feet. It had a small living room, small kitchen, a bath, and a bedroom. My son at that time was probably about two years old, my first son. So that was our housing. Ross had a little bit larger unit, but not much, but everybody else–unless they wanted to live in town. I guess some probably did. There was a small town there, but housing was essentially non-existent there. That's why they had to build a camp. The camp was just on the outskirts of Collbran, and we must have had, oh, I don't know, maybe twenty-, twenty-five of these units there.

Storey: And this was just for Reclamation folks?

Construction Camp Later Became a Job Corps Center

Vissia: Yep, just for Reclamation. It was a construction camp. And after that, I think they turned it into a Job Corps site. I'm pretty sure they did.

Storey: Yeah, I believe there was one there.

Vissia: Yeah.

Storey: Tell me more about what went on in the camp, who got the biggest house and how was it arranged and all that.

Vissia: It was arranged in a U-shaped. As you came into the camp, the office was right there on your left. It was a white wooden building. It had one large room where we worked, and then it had, I think, three other small offices. Ross, of course, had an office, and probably the field engineer and the office engineer each had their office, and there was an area for the secretaries. So that's the first building.

And then you had a U-drive, and in the middle was the laundry room, laundry house. Everybody had to do their washing in the same place. There were two or three other Transa Homes in the middle. Mine was one of them. There were Transa Homes all around the outside of the road, and Ross Billings's house was the only one different from the rest. His was probably half again as big as the rest of our houses, and his was ***white***. The rest of them were salmon colored. And that was it. Sometimes there would be fights in the wash house. The ladies would get in a tiff about not following the schedule or using too many machines or whatever, so sometimes–I think we had an administrative officer that had to take care of those kinds of things at the camp.

I can also remember two or three of the guys were hunters. They loved to hunt. I remember one fall this guy had killed an elk and butchered it in his living room of this Transa Home. Some of these people, I mean they were used to a tough life, and I guess he really didn't have any other place to butcher it, because there wasn't any sheds or anything around, so he just butchered it in his living room and cut it up and then froze it. Right now I don't even know where he froze it, unless he could have hung it outside. I suppose it was cold enough in the wintertime, because we didn't have room for a freezer in those places. They were too small.

Storey: Did the camp socialize a lot?

Socializing in the Construction Camp

Vissia: Yeah. There was not always a group. Of course, I was only there nine months. As I recall, we had one huge camp party. It may have been for 4th of July or something, where everybody attended. But normally there would be two or three or four that were good friends that would socialize a lot, and there'd be another little group, because I remember personally there was probably about three families that we socialized with the most.

Storey: Play cards or--

Vissia: Yeah, play cards. Then also, I helped out the Scout leader there. One of the inspectors was a Scout leader, so I helped him out. In the wintertime, we'd take the Scouts up sledding in the Mesa or we'd take them up fishing or hiking or whatever, so there was that kind of activity. And drive down to Grand Junction, for example, to go to the local college football games or basketball games or whatever, go shopping down there quite often. That was about forty-five miles away.

Storey: What about movies and that sort of thing?

Vissia: They had an old movie house in Collbran, but I think it was only open on weekends. As I recall, it was an old wooden building. It had folding chairs in it. I didn't go that often, went a few times. Of course, Grand Junction had movie theaters. But up there, I think there was a café, a few stores, the movie house, and a couple bars, and the rest of the community was pretty much a ranch kind of a community, rancher-style community. They mostly grew hay and alfalfa and corn and stuff for cattle.

Storey: Was there any tension between the Reclamation folks and the town folks?

Vissia: No. Basically, the main beneficiaries were the people in town and in the valley there. It was of an agricultural-based little village. So, no, it worked pretty well together. There was an old doctor there. I forget what his name was. He was quite a character, also. He was pretty good. But I don't recall any tension.

Storey: Is there anything else about Collbran?

Vissia: No. That was my first experience, and it was a good one. I enjoyed it.

Storey: If I'm recalling, there were maybe two hydroplants on this project.

Vissia: I think so, yeah.

Storey: Do you remember the names of them?

Vissia: No, I don't.

Storey: So as they were closing down for the winter, they knew they weren't going to need you there, I guess.

"They didn't need all the people in the office. . . . So they detailed me to Salt Lake City, with the idea that in the spring I would be coming back. So I went to work in Salt Lake City in the Colorado River Transmissions Office. . . . laying out the Colorado River transmission lines . . ."

Vissia: Yeah. They didn't need all the people in the office. They only need maybe one or two, I suppose. So they detailed me to Salt Lake City, with the idea that in the spring I would be coming back. So I went to work in Salt Lake City in the Colorado River Transmissions Office. At that time, they were laying out the Colorado River transmission lines, and I was plotting plan and profile for transmission lines, as I recall.

Storey: Let's see, this would have been '61, '62.

Vissia: '61, I guess.

Storey: So Floyd Dominy was the Commissioner.

Vissia: Yes.

Storey: He was very interested in having government-controlled transmission lines, as I recall. So you were designing transmission lines or what?

Vissia: Well, it was more of a job of laying out the routes. Well, the route was picked, but I had to draw the plan and profile, as I recall, for the transmission lines. As I recall, we had these long pieces of graph paper, and we had to plot where they were located and get the station numbers and figure out what the elevation was at that point and so on. And I guess from there it probably went out to whoever was constructing it, and they would use that information.

Storey: As I understand it, you didn't have to go ***look*** for a job. They just said, "Well, we'll send you to Salt Lake."

Vissia: Yep.

Storey: And you were there for maybe four months, as I recall?

Applied for and Was Hired in Sacramento for Work in the Water Rights Group in

the Planning Division

Vissia: Four months, right. While I was there, then I found this advertisement in Sacramento, California, for working in the Water Rights Group in the Planning Division, and so I applied for that and they hired me.

Jim O'Brien

Jerry Renoe [phonetic] was the head of that particular branch, and my immediate supervisor was Jim O'Brien, who later became assistant commissioner and then went to the World Bank and now passed away.

Storey: That was in California, in Sacramento?

Vissia: Sacramento, right.

Storey: Who was your supervisor in Salt Lake?

Vissia: Good question. I don't remember his name, either. I don't remember who it was.

Storey: Tell me what was going on in your mind. You were, I guess, expected to go back to Collbran.

Vissia: Right.

Storey: Is there some reason you didn't want to go back to Collbran?

"I applied for it because it was a couple of grades higher than what I was doing, and it seemed like an interesting job. . . ."

Vissia: No, except that this was an opportunity for a promotion, so I thought, "Why not?" I applied for it because it was a couple of grades higher than what I was doing, and it seemed like an interesting job. And I liked California anyway, so I applied for it.

Storey: What was the grade you started at in Collbran?

Promotions in Reclamation

Vissia: Probably about a 5, I suppose, 5 or 7.

Storey: And Salt Lake would have been the same?

Vissia: Yeah. I think I went to Sacramento as a 9, so I was probably a 7 by the time I was in Salt Lake.

Storey: Tell me about moving. Did they pay your expenses? How did all this work?

Moving to Sacramento

Vissia: Yeah. As I recall, I think we were allowed to select the moving company. In those days, you could pick one and make the arrangements, and the Bureau paid for it. I didn't own any property at that time, but then later on they would also pay for the cost of buying and selling houses.

Storey: So all of a sudden you found yourself in Sacramento, a little different than Salt Lake and Collbran.

Vissia: Yes, quite a bit. At that time, the office was in the Town and Country Village,[6] which was a couple of miles removed from where it's located now. It wasn't originally built for the government. It was part of that complex there. I think the government just rented it. It was a large wooden building, Spanish style with a Spanish-style tile roof.

Began Checking Reclamation's Water Rights, Applying for New Water Rights, and Providing Assistance to the Solicitor's Office in Protecting Reclamation Projects

While I was in the Water Rights Group, the main job there was to apply for applications for new projects for the Bureau, new programs to the state. Another job we had was to check all of the water rights that were applied for or were in effect to make sure that they were not affecting the Bureau's projects, and also to help prepare information, technical information, for the solicitor, because quite often they had hearings before the State Water Rights Board on various applications. So whenever somebody would apply for a water rights, especially on the Sacramento River, usually our solicitor was in there opposing it or making sure that it wouldn't interfere with the Central Valley Project water supply, and so a large part of our job was to prepare information that he could use to appear before the State Water Rights Board. And sometimes even we were asked to testify in front of the board on technical issues, and our solicitor would just act like any other lawyer and he would ask you to get up there and ask you the questions to bring out the right information.

Storey: Was this the period when we were trying to quiet the riparian water rights on the Sacramento by issuing contracts to everybody?

Vissia: Yes. That was a large part of our job, also.

Storey: I think John Budd[7] was involved in that.

John Budd

Vissia: Yes, he was, that's right. I worked on it ***before*** John. When I left the Water Rights Branch, he got involved in it and in the contract parts of it, yeah.

Storey: Were you ever involved in that contracts negotiation?

6. Town and Country Village is located at the northeast corner of the intersection of Marconi Avenue and Fulton Avenue.
7. Reclamation's oral history program includes interviews with John Budd.

". . . we didn't have as much information as we thought we needed, especially about the Delta, about the diversions in the Delta, so we had a large field program in which we went out and located all the diversions in the Delta . . . [we were doing it] I guess to protect our own water right . . ."

Vissia: No, I wasn't involved in that part. The other thing that we did was, we didn't have as much information as we thought we needed, especially about the Delta,[8] about the diversions in the Delta, so we had a large field program in which we went out and located all the diversions in the Delta, placed them on maps as to what their geographic locations were, who owned them. We tried to estimate the size of the diversions that were being taken from the Delta and so on, because a lot of the Delta, of course, was below water level there so it was just a natural flow, and other places they had pumps. So we recorded all of that kind of stuff to try to get a handle on who was diverting what and how much.

Storey: The state didn't know that?

Vissia: Nobody really had all of that. I don't know why we were doing it. I guess to protect our own water right, I suppose. I mean, the state had some information that was furnished by the applicants when they'd go in for a water right. But as I recall, the reason we did it was there was probably a lot who didn't apply for water rights and were still diverting. I think that's probably why we were doing it.

Storey: And we were concerned about how much water flowed through the Delta?

Vissia: Uh-huh.

Storey: This would have been the period when we were constructing the Delta-Mendota, is that right? Am I thinking wrong? And the San Luis Project?

"The Westlands project was probably at that point under construction. . . . on the west side of the valley, when the state started to build the state project, and we had the San Luis Canal . . ."

Vissia: The Westlands project was probably at that point under construction. The Delta-Mendota Canal was finished at that point in time. This was on the other side, on the west side of the valley, when the state started to build the state project, and we had the San Luis Canal, which was a joint project between the state and the Bureau. All that stuff was going on in the sixties.

Storey: And the San Luis Dam was about to begin, I think.

Vissia: Right. Yeah, that was all going on in the sixties.

Storey: Well now, I'm confused. I thought Delta-Mendota was on the west side of the valley.

8. Referring to the delta of the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers–often referred to as the Bay-Delta. This is located on the northeast quadrant of San Francisco Bay (San Pablo Bay). The water from the Delta exits to San Pablo Bay through the Carquinez Straits.

There's the one that flows north out of Friant. I've forgotten the name of that one.

Vissia: Friant-Kern Canal. Oh, you're right. The Delta-Mendota goes through the Tracy Pumping Plant. But it was finished. It was operating. What we were doing was building the San Luis Canal as part of the state water project. But Delta-Mendota was finished.

Storey: So the Tracy Pumping Plant was there, and the water was flowing backwards.

Vissia: They had the fish screens and so on, yeah.

Storey: Were you involved in any of that down there?

". . . I never worked in the O&M side of the agency, except to supervise it as the regional director. . . ."

Vissia: No, I wasn't. In the Bureau, I never worked in the O&M side of the agency, except to supervise it as the regional director.

"I worked in construction . . . in the transmission business, and then basically in planning for about twelve years . . ."

I worked in construction at first, and then, of course, in the transmission business, and then basically in planning for about twelve years in Sacramento.

Storey: Do you remember any of the water rights cases particularly that stand out?

Vissia: Not really, no. It's been so long, I'd have to go back and review that stuff. No, I don't remember. There were some, though, because I can remember going to the State Water Rights Board and being present and listening to some of the testimony, but I don't remember what they were now.

Storey: After a couple of years, I gather you went off to Sespe Creek.

Became Planning Engineer on the Sespe Creek Project Study

Vissia: Yeah. Actually, I was still in the Water Rights Division, but the assistant planning division chief, his name was Shuckel [phonetic], Richard, was it Shuckel? Anyways, he asked me if I would take on the job of being head of the planning, the planning engineer for this project.

"The planning engineer's job . . . to work with the local people to lay out the project . . . lay out the basic plan and then work closely with the other units that did the more detailed work, like the Design Division . . ."

The planning engineer's job for a specific project was basically to work with the local people to lay out the project, find out what their needs were, what kind of ideas they had about what the project should look like, and then to lay out the basic plan and

then work closely with the other units that did the more detailed work, like the Design Division and with the Geology Branch, if there was groundwater involved, and then the Hydrology Branch, for doing operation studies and so on for the plan, and the economics.

". . . you have to coordinate all of these people to provide input to the plan. . . . lay out the basic plan . . . get somebody to design it and estimate the cost . . . get the geologist to give the designers information they need. . . . economists take the cost and they . . . generate the benefits and . . . feasibility. First . . . of course, a reconnaissance investigation and then a feasibility investigation, and then . . . write the report. . . ."

And so you have to coordinate all of these people to provide input to the plan. So you lay out the basic plan, and then you get somebody to design it and estimate the cost, and then you have to get the geologist to give the designers information they need. And then, of course, the economists take the cost and they have to generate the benefits and come up with the feasibility. First, we did, of course, a reconnaissance investigation and then a feasibility investigation, and then put together the report, write the report.

The Report Writing Branch Wanted to Polish the Engineers' Writing

We also at that time had a Report Writing Branch. The planning engineer for the project would write the initial draft, and then it would go to this branch and they would edit it and make the maps look pretty and the drawings and so on. As I remember, there was one lady in there, her name was Louella, as I recall. She and most of the engineers didn't get along too well because she didn't like the way engineers wrote up planning reports. She wanted them to flow better and sound better. She was probably right to some extent, because engineers aren't the best writers in the world. So there was always a lot of feuds with this lady before the final report came out. I can remember that particular little incident.

Storey: How do you spell Sespe?

Vissia: S-E-S-P-E.

Storey: Just the way it sounds.

Vissia: Yep.

Storey: Okay.

One Issue Was the Proximity of California Condor Range to Sespe Creek

Vissia: At that time, they estimated there were about forty condors left in California and that was all, and they were concerned about losing them, because the condor only lays one egg a year, and apparently if they're disturbed at any time during the mating season or the season of incubating the egg, they either don't lay an egg or the egg doesn't get

hatched. So the Audubon people were very concerned about, initially, the construction activities and how it might disturb the condor, and later on just the activity of maintenance and if there was going to be recreation people up around the reservoir and so on.

". . . the real reason it didn't proceed is because the voters in the district voted it down when it came up for vote on the contract for repayment . . ."

But as I said, the real reason it didn't proceed is because the voters in the district voted it down when it came up for vote on the contract for repayment for the Bureau of Reclamation. It may have not passed anyway because there was so much opposition for the bird that that may have also ended it had it passed.

Storey: Why do you suppose you were chosen to do this?

Vissia: I don't know. Maybe they thought I would be good at it. Maybe, I don't know, Jim O'Brien had talked to Shuckel about me, and so maybe they thought I could do a good job.

Storey: Mr. O'Brien was the Planning Chief?

Vissia: No, he was my immediate supervisor in the Water Rights Branch at that time. He worked, of course, with Dick Shuckel, and they knew each other pretty well. I think they may have even socialized, I'm not sure.

Storey: Did this require that you move?

Vissia: No. I traveled quite a bit to southern California, because Sespe Creek was ***right on*** the very southern edge of the region. The ***lower*** part of California below that belongs to Boulder City, to the Lower Colorado, but Sespe Creek was still in the [Mid-]Pacific Region.

Storey: So this would be down around Santa Barbara or something?

Vissia: It's southeast of Santa Barbara, and it's about straight east of Ventura. It's east and just a little bit north of Oxnard, which is right there on the coast. There's an Oxnard Plain that sits there south of Ventura. There's a nice plain there. And south of Ventura, maybe about twenty miles, is Oxnard. It sits right on the coast there.

Storey: It sounds to me like a lot of coordination work.

Vissia: Yeah.

Storey: Did that require a lot of meetings, or how was that handled in those days?

Vissia: Well, sometimes meetings, sometimes just informal. I mean, inside the Bureau, I would just go down and talk to the designers or I'd go up and talk to the hydrologists and see how things were going, or they'd come and see me. So it was sometimes a lot

of one on one. Sometimes we had special meetings when the agenda was larger.

Storey: And you would go down and talk to the local sponsors?

Vissia: Yeah, mostly to district personnel. That would be the general manager of the district. His name was Bill Price, and he had a small office staff, so I would go meet with them. I would also need to go meet with the board of directors for the district maybe once a month just to update them on where we were and what problems there were and what kinds of costs were coming out and to go over the plan with them to see if they concurred with the plan and so on.

Storey: Were they cost sharing the planning effort?

"They would have had to pay for all of the irrigation allocated costs on the project. Flood control, of course, would be non-reimbursable. . . . There was *some* recreation . . . But they would have had to pay for the bulk of the project, interest-free. . . ."

Vissia: They would have had to pay for all of the irrigation allocated costs on the project. Flood control, of course, would be non-reimbursable. There was no power. There was ***some*** recreation, which at that time, as I recall, was non-reimbursable. And there was some fishery, which they wouldn't have to pay for. But they would have had to pay for the bulk of the project, interest-free.[9]

Storey: So this was primarily an irrigation project?

The Project as Planned Would Have Provided Both Irrigation and Municipal and Industrial Water

Vissia: Yeah. Well, I shouldn't say primarily. It was irrigation and municipal and industrial. I forget the breakdown. But like I said, most of the water use was pumped from groundwater, and they already had some existing spreading basins. They had these large areas with dikes around them, and in the wet season, when the river was running during flood season, they would divert the water into these spreading basins, and the water would percolate into the underground; and then during the dry season, it would be pumped out through wells.

In order to ***save*** more of the water during flood season to be used in these groundwater percolating basins, they wanted to build these two reservoirs. That way they'd have some flood control, as well as have additional water to put in the spreading basins for putting into the groundwater basin.

Storey: Do you have any sense of what the dynamics were that caused Reclamation to study the project?

9. Reclamation law provides that irrigation components of projects are repaid by the water users with no interest. Municipal and industrial water supply projects require repayment with interest. Some benefits of projects, such as flood control and recreation are non-reimbursable.

How the District Went about Getting Reclamation to Study the Sespe Creek Project

Vissia: The district came to the Bureau and said, "We'd like to have you take a look at this." And so we told them what the steps were you have to go through. First of all, you have to get an authorization. At that time, I think we could spend money directly for reconnaissance studies. I don't think that was a special authorization. But after that, once the reconnaissance report came out and it showed that the project had some chance of being feasible, then you had to go to Congress and get an authorization of a feasibility study, which they did. They had their local representative get that authorized, and then we went into the feasibility level study. (Storey: Um-hmm.)

Excuse me, I've got to take another break here. [Tape recorder turned off.]

Storey: We were talking about Sespe Creek and the coordination and everything that went on.

Vissia: Yeah. Like I said, the local board of directors came to the Bureau and asked about the project, and they were successful in getting a feasibility study authorized by the Congress.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JULY 8, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JULY 8, 1996.

Storey: This is tape two of an interview by Brit Storey with Rodney J. Vissia on July the 8th, 1996.

Vissia: We finished the feasibility report and all the appendices, and it was at that time when actually public knowledge of the complete project came out and that's when we began to get opposition from the Audubon Society. But the district went ahead anyways and put it up for vote, because we knew about what the repayment contract would be at that time. They would have had to pay ***all*** the allocated cost for M&I, plus interest, and all the allocated cost of irrigation without interest, and a certain percentage of the project was written off for flood control and fisheries and recreation.

". . . it was voted down . . . there was an overlap between the two districts, and the Metropolitan Water District had just had a large bond issue which had to be paid back for the facilities that were being built into that area . . . the Oxnard Plain, where most of the agriculture people were located, and they all voted in favor of it. But the people that were in the urban areas down on the Oxnard Plain were the ones that voted it down. . . ."

But, like I say, it was voted down, because there was an overlap between the two districts, and the Metropolitan Water District had just had a large bond issue which had to be paid back for the facilities that were being built into that area, and so the people in the area, it was mostly the people that wouldn't necessarily benefit direct from the project that were still in the district, that voted it down, because the rural areas upstream, up the valley–what river was that, the Piru River? I forget. There was a small river that ran down the valley into the Oxnard Plain, where most of the

agriculture people were located, and they all voted in favor of it. But the people that were in the urban areas down on the Oxnard Plain were the ones that voted it down.

"It would have had a hard time probably getting authorized anyways because of the opposition due to the California condor. . . ."

It would have had a hard time probably getting authorized anyways because of the opposition due to the California condor. I'm sure that would have been a ***major*** obstacle in Congress if it ever came up for construction authorization.

Storey: Was there any congressional interest while you were running the project?

Vissia: Not that much, no, just the local congressman. He got it authorized, the feasibility study. Of course, as I recall, we began to get probably some letters from congressmen about the project and its effect on the condor, so I think we probably did have to answer some correspondence in that respect.

Storey: And that would have all been handled out of Sacramento?

Vissia: Well, some of the correspondence, I'm sure, came to the commissioner's office. They would, of course, buck it down to the region, and we would draft the information for it.

Storey: You mentioned you had to go down there quite often. How did you do that?

Vissia: Usually flew down from Sacramento to Ventura.

Storey: Commercial flights?

Vissia: Commercial flight, rented a car, and drove up to the district. I probably went down there monthly, I suppose, over a period of a couple of years, I suppose.

Storey: Was Sespe Creek the only thing that you were doing?

Worked on the Sespe Creek Study Full Time

Vissia: At that time, yeah. When I was on that, I was on it full time.

Storey: So what were you doing in the office for the rest of the month?

Vissia: Working with the people that were helping to put together the feasibility study and laying out the plans and getting it all put together.

Storey: How many folks do you suppose that would have involved?

Vissia: Well, there was probably at least a couple people on the design unit and there was a couple in the hydrology unit and a couple in geology and there was a couple in the economist unit, reports writing had a couple, even water rights probably had one. I'm not sure they were ***all*** full time all the time, but it at least involved that many people

and they would work on it as they needed to.

Storey: How would you characterize this project? As a large Reclamation project, small, medium, whatever?

Vissia: A small project.

Storey: So it would take eight or ten folks for a couple of years looking at feasibility?

"The other thing the planning engineer has to do, he has to coordinate with the other agencies, like the Corps of Engineers . . . [regarding] flood control benefits. . . . with Federal *and* state fisheries agencies, as well as the recreation agencies . . ."

Vissia: Not full time. The other thing the planning engineer has to do, he has to coordinate with the other agencies, like the Corps of Engineers has to be dealt with, because from them you get flood control benefits. You also get estimates of how much flood control can be provided. And you have to deal with Federal ***and*** state fisheries agencies, as well as the recreation agencies, for the same reasons, are there benefits, are there some problems that have to be mitigated. If so, what are they, and what kinds of mitigation plans do you come up with. You have to work with these people to do that, and they furnish information and studies and so on.

Storey: What grade were you when you were asked to do this?

Vissia: I think I was a GS-9 or 11, maybe, at the most.

Storey: You mentioned that you went into the Management Program about this time, too.

Management Training Program

Vissia: Yeah. The Bureau had a–what did they call it? I don't know what they called it. I think it was originally set up for the administrative staff mostly, for accountants and budget people and that kind of stuff. But I applied for it, because I thought it could help me. It really did help a lot. It was a good program, and it lasted about–I forget. It was almost full time for nine months, for sure, but probably broken up a little bit. We had quite a bit of class work in Sacramento. We had a training officer there. I'm trying to remember his name. He was a real character, too. Anyways, he provided quite a few sessions and classes on different aspects of management.

Then a part of the program was to go elsewhere in the Bureau and work as, I guess an understudy, you would call it, for different positions.

Spent a Summer in Training in Washington, D.C.

I went to Washington, D.C., for one summer and worked for–what was his name? He became the chief staff for the House Interior Committee.

Storey: Dan Dreyfus?

Vissia: No. That was Senate side. The House side, worked for Biz Johnson. He was quite the character. He was assistant planning division chief at the time I went to the Bureau and worked directly with him, and right after that he went to the House committee.

Storey: We're not talking about O'Brien?

Vissia: No.

Storey: John–well, I can't bring the name up, either.

Vissia: He was quite a character. What was his name? Anyways, I worked with him as his understudy for at least two months in Washington, D.C., and he pretty much took me with him to all the meetings and wherever he went, gave me special assignments. I went to Congressional hearings. So I really got a very good training program, background information, about how the commissioner's office worked, how politics affected the program, the path of legislation, and the kinds of things that they worry about at the commissioner's level. It was a excellent program.

Spent One Summer in Boise Working with Norm Moore, the Assistant Regional Director

Then I also spent one summer in Boise. I was directly assigned to Norm Moore, who was assistant director, regional director, for that region, and did the same thing, went to all the meetings with him. He gave me special assignments, learned about various programs in the Boise area and that region that were going on. So those were my two outside assignments.

Storey: Norman Moore? He was the regional director?

Vissia: Assistant regional director.

Storey: Under H. T. Nelson?

Vissia: H. T., yes. He was also under me when I went up there. He was still assistant regional director when I went back up there as a regional director.

". . . I also took a course at Sacramento State University in government administration. And I went to night school and did that as part of the program. Then we also went to some special training programs in participative management and sensitivity kinds of sessions . . ."

Then I also took a course at Sacramento State University in government administration. And I went to night school and did that as part of the program. Then we also went to some special training programs in participative management and sensitivity kinds of sessions in which we were put in with a group of people from other agencies and other locations, and as I recall, one of them was conducted by these two

guys. It was a Forest Service program, but these two guys were very good group leaders in terms of sensitivity training. They were so perceptive about what was going on in the group and about what feelings people were having and getting them to express those feelings.

During this time, usually the group was given different projects to work on as a group and also individually, and you worked together for approximately a week, and the last day or two there was a lot of feedback about each individual from all the other group members. That was quite valuable to me. I learned some things about myself that I had no clue about–how I came across, what my strong points were, what my weak points were, and it was very interesting.

Another program that was part of that training program was a week, I think it was an Air Force facility. And in that case, also, we did some role playing in different management situations, but they televised it. They took a video of it, and after you finished you could see on the screen how you participated, how you came across, what your body movements were, voice inflections, how you related to individuals, and that was also quite helpful to me in terms of being able to recognize some of my own possibilities as a manager or just as an individual.

". . . one of the most valuable parts of all the Bureau training programs I ever went through was the Bureau's Management Development Program, and as a result, I became convinced that participative management was the best way to go . . ."

I thought that was one of the most valuable parts of all the Bureau training programs I ever went through was the Bureau's Management Development Program, and as a result, I became convinced that participative management was the best way to go and, in fact, tried to practice that when I became a manager.

As I recall, also part of the program was the grid concept. I don't know if you remember, at that time they had an author that wrote about the grid concept. It was a grid with scales, I think, of one to ten, and on this grid were different styles of management. You learned about the different styles and the benefits and also the detriments of the different styles and how it affected the program and how it affected decisionmaking and morale and so on. I really enjoyed that a lot, and I felt I learned a lot from it.

Storey: Do you remember, was this before Sespe Creek, after Sespe Creek?

Vissia: I think it was after Sespe Creek. Lloyd Smith was the training officer in Sacramento at that time. In fact, he later wrote a little book himself about management theory and so on.

Storey: So you took off basically nine months to do this. Was it right after Sespe Creek?

". . . right after that I was promoted to branch chief for the Special Studies Branch . . ."

Vissia: I think it was pretty much right after Sespe Creek. Then, as I recall, right after that I was promoted to branch chief for the Special Studies Branch, or was I assigned there first and then–maybe I was assigned there first, after Sespe Creek, and ***then*** I eventually became the branch chief.

Storey: Well, I know time flies, but I've been here over two and a half hours now, I think.

Vissia: You're right.

Storey: Why don't we take a break for lunch and come back later?

Vissia: All right.

Storey: Thank you.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JULY 8, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 3. JULY 8, 1996.

Storey: This is an interview by Brit Storey with Rodney J. Vissia on July the 8th, 1996, resuming in the afternoon.

I think this morning we had just gotten to the point where you had been assigned to the Special Investigations Branch in the regional office in Sacramento.

Vissia: Right.

Storey: What were you doing there?

River Basin Studies

Vissia: At that time, they had some national river basin studies that they were doing. I don't even remember what they were called now. But that was one of the major tasks was to work on those studies. It was to look at what resources were available, what kinds of water uses would there be, and project what the future water uses would be, and develop possible plans for conserving water in those basins. So we were dealing with the basins in our region.

"Another activity we looked at was a project to take water from below the mouth of the Columbia River in an undersea pipeline all the way to southern California. . . ."

Another activity we looked at was a project to take water from below the mouth of the Columbia River in an undersea pipeline all the way to southern California. Somebody had came with this idea. Congress had authorized funds for it. And so we made some initial studies on trying to capture freshwater as it flows out of the mouth of the Columbia River into this undersea aqueduct, which, as I recall, was to be about 10 foot in diameter, anchored to the bottom of the Pacific coast, and would go down to

Los Angeles, but I forget how it was the water was supposed to get from there into a service system. I think we only did that for a year-, year and a half maybe, and the initial results were that it was highly infeasible financially, as well as maybe physically, so it was dropped.

"We even, I think, looked . . . at barging icebergs from Alaska down to the Los Angeles area for water supply, but that didn't go very far, either. . . ."

We even, I think, looked shortly at barging icebergs from Alaska down to the Los Angeles area for water supply, but that didn't go very far, either. So those were the kinds of things that were done in the Special Studies Branch.

Storey: Hmm. We were actually studying the feasibility of these things?

Vissia: Yes.

Storey: Let's see, that would have been–

Vissia: In the mid-sixties.

Storey: That was in Sacramento?

Served as Division Chief for His Last Three Years in Sacramento

Vissia: Yeah. Or late sixties. I think it was the mid-sixties, mid- to late sixties, because I left there in '73, and the last three years I was there I was the division chief. So it had to be prior to that.

Storey: What kind of effort would we put into a study like that, like the pipeline from the Columbia, for instance.

Elements of Special Studies That Needed to Be Coordinated

Vissia: We had one or two people in the Planning Special Studies Unit that were working on it, and we also had designers looking at it in a preliminary way and probably some input from geologists. I think we probably also got information from the whatever agency is concerned with structures in the sea. I don't know which. I don't even remember which state or Federal agencies we contacted, but I'm sure we got some information from them concerning tides and the forces of currents and what kinds of sediments and geology was there in the sea bed. We depended a lot on others for those kinds of information. And then economics, of course. We had some economists that would take the costs that were generated and compare that to some benefits that they generated. It was basically for municipal and industrial purposes for the Los Angeles basin.

Storey: Yeah. I think at that time there were studies going on called the United Western Investigations or something like that. There was a man named Parsons. Did you get involved with any of that?

Vissia: Was that the river basin studies, because I thought the river basin studies were nationwide.

Storey: I think the river basin studies were. I'm talking about moving water from the Columbia south and that sort of thing.

Vissia: It probably was part of that program. There were several ideas generated, and I think we looked quite seriously at the undersea pipeline and just a little bit at the iceberg theory. It may have been part of that same program.

Storey: Were there environmental objections that came up to any of these activities?

Vissia: Well, I don't think we were far enough along to even–I mean, I remember one or two newspaper articles that described what we were doing, but there wasn't enough done to really provide enough public information to raise anybody's hackles.

Storey: Did we ever do final reports or reports of any kind?

Vissia: I'm sure there was like a reconnaissance report which laid out the concept and the information that was put together. I'm sure they must have one in the Bureau file somewhere.

Storey: Any other kinds of special investigations that were going on?

". . . the idea of the Peripheral Canal was to try to get it in a more fresh state directly from the Sacramento River to the pumping plants, releasing freshwater along the way to keep the Delta in good shape. Of course, as you know, that was never authorized. . . ."

Vissia: I was trying to think what else we did there. We may have done some stuff in the Delta, because at that time there was still concern about the fisheries and the outflows and that stuff. But most of that was done in the Delta Branch, looking at the Peripheral Canal Project, which was a major activity at that time, to try and get freshwater more pure to the pumping plants instead of running it through the Delta, where it was, of course, mixed with some saltwater from the bay, and the idea of the Peripheral Canal was to try to get it in a more fresh state directly from the Sacramento River to the pumping plants, releasing freshwater along the way to keep the Delta in good shape. Of course, as you know, that was never authorized. There was objections to it, and it was never authorized for construction–a lot of study was done on that.

Storey: How did it look to Reclamation?

Reclamation Thought the Peripheral Canal Was a Good Idea

Vissia: Reclamation thought it was a good idea. Archie Hanson [phonetic] was the project engineer in charge of that, and Bill Manderscheid, who I think later became the division chief there–he's probably retired now, still living in Sacramento– also worked on it. Those two individuals spent a lot of time working on the Peripheral Canal.

Initially, I think the state objected to it. I'm not sure how the state feels about it now, but the state Department of Water Resources objected to it initially, also, and there was environmentalists that objected to it. But the Bureau thought it was a good idea. They felt it was a way to help the Delta, ***as well as*** improve the efficiency of getting freshwater southward.

Storey: Um-hmm. Was Auburn going on at that time?

Auburn Dam

Vissia: Yes, Auburn was going on at that time. In fact, it was going on–John Turner was the project engineer for Auburn the whole time I was in Sacramento. I mean, that was ten years. And then Auburn was ***still*** going on when I was assistant commissioner for engineering and research in Denver, because then we were even making some additional special geologic studies. And I noticed in last week's paper, why, the Congress considered it again, but did not authorize spending for it.

Storey: Most of these water projects don't die. They just go away for a little while.

Vissia: (Laughs.) They'll all come back again. Well, they had droughts, of course, in California recently, up until this last year, so that's probably why it got defeated again.

Storey: Yeah. You mentioned that there was some preliminary design work done on this underwater pipeline.

Vissia: Yeah, really reconnaissance-level stuff to lay out size, types of materials that could be used, how to anchor it on the bottom to keep it in place, how to design it such that it would be protected against currents and tides and that kind of stuff.

Storey: Where would that have been done? Would that have been done . . .

Vissia: It was done in Sacramento, I'm quite sure. I don't think Denver got involved in it. ***I think*** it was done in Sacramento, but I'm not positive, but I think it was done in Sacramento.

Storey: If I can get you to go back into the recesses of your memory, how was it decided who did which design work, what was done in the region, what was done in Denver, what was done out in the field?

How Design Work in Reclamation Was Assigned to Denver or the Regions

Vissia: For most of my career, Denver pretty much called the shots on that, and there were also some more or less standards. If something cost up to a certain amount or was certain types of structures, the region automatically took it. Anything that was ***outside*** of those guidelines, the region had to ask Denver for authorization to design it, and sometimes Denver would grant it, depending on their workload, and sometimes they wouldn't. Usually that was based on two things. Denver would say, "Well, we're busy, so, yeah, you can do it. We think you have the capability." Other times they'd say, "No, we

need the work," ***or***, "We think it's too complicated for you guys in the region," so they would take it.

But there were some–I think it had to be in writing, probably–that some guidelines as to the types of structures, and it had to do both with the complexity, as well as the cost, under a certain area the regions could do it automatically, but above that, they had to ask permission from Denver.

Storey: Of the chief engineer?

Vissia: Um-hmm.

Storey: So he could say yes or no.

Vissia: Yes, that's true.

Storey: Did the region have any recourse if they felt strongly about something?

Vissia: I suppose they could go to the commissioner, but I don't recall that was ever done. They pretty much accepted the chief engineer's decision.

Storey: Let's see, I'm trying to think, some of the work down toward Westlands would have been going on. San Luis.

Vissia: Auburn was, of course, in the planning stages at that time. Then we had the Consumnes Project, which was in the planning stages at that time.

Storey: Maybe Ventura, maybe Santa Maria, or were they a little bit earlier.

Vissia: No, they were already finished. Casitas was done. We had the Temecula Canal up north. I guess it was in the design and construction phases at that time, and also the fisheries channel. That's part of that system.

Storey: Out of Red Bluff Dam?

Vissia: Um-hmm.

Storey: How were relations between Denver and the regions? How did they look at one another?

The Relationship Between Denver and the Regions

Vissia: There was ***always some*** animosity. Sometimes the regions felt that Denver was too heavy-handed in making decisions on projects, especially in designs and in cost.

"A lot of the regions thought that Denver was too gold-plated in its designs. They *overdesigned* things. They went more towards high capital costs rather than maybe low capital costs and higher O&M costs . . ."

A lot of the regions thought that Denver was too gold-plated in its designs. They ***overdesigned*** things. They went more towards high capital costs rather than maybe low capital costs and higher O&M costs, and even though some of the regions, or at least one or two regions, would try to show that it might be more economic to build a less expensive structure but have a little higher O&M cost, because O&M costs are spread out over time, whereas capital costs you spend all initially, and so you have high interest rates.

". . . Denver would never seem to give much credit to the economics side. They always looked at it from a design standpoint. And you had some excellent designers there . . ."

But Denver would never seem to give much credit to the economics side. They always looked at it from a design standpoint. And you had some excellent designers there and they loved to design good stuff, and they did. But a lot of times the regions felt it was overdesigned.

"Regions would have tight deadlines and schedules, both in the planning program and in construction, and sometimes they felt that Denver took too long, and also that Denver didn't *include* them in some of the key decisionmaking . . ."

Another complaint was the amount of time it would take to get designs finished. Regions would have tight deadlines and schedules, both in the planning program and in construction, and sometimes they felt that Denver took too long, and also that Denver didn't ***include*** them in some of the key decisionmaking, because sometimes there could be structures that could be changed or altered to more effectively meet the water user's needs, as well as O&M needs, and sometimes the regions felt like Denver did not include the regional people in those kinds of decisionmaking processes. So those are, I would say, the major problems.

". . . sometimes the regions would be upset. . . . when people from the Construction Management Division in Denver would come out *unannounced* to a regional construction job, do their inspection, and talk to the construction engineer, and the region didn't know anything about it unless the construction engineer called the regional director . . ."

On construction, sometimes the regions would be upset. I'm not sure why, but they'd be upset when people from the Construction Management Division in Denver would come out ***unannounced*** to a regional construction job, do their inspection, and talk to the construction engineer, and the region didn't know anything about it unless the construction engineer called the regional director[10] and said, "I had these chief

10. Under Reclamation's programs until the late 1970s, construction contracting and oversight as well as negotiation of large construction claims were the responsibility of the chief engineer, director, or assistant commissioner for engineering and research in Reclamation's Denver office. (See the footnote on page 87 for clarification of when the various titles were used.) As a result of this arrangement the construction engineer was directly supervised from that office though technically worked for the region. Construction staff often felt little or
(continued...)

designers out or these guys out who said this and that and the other thing." So that was another problem.

"Denver sort of acted like they were in control. Regions were subservient sometimes, and so they said, 'Why should we have to tell the regional director? We go directly to the construction engineer.'. . ."

Denver sort of acted like they were in control. Regions were subservient sometimes, and so they said, "Why should we have to tell the regional director? We go directly to the construction engineer."

". . . that was always another friction point, was the construction engineer really had two bosses. He had Denver, because all of the construction was managed out of Denver, and he had the region, which had to deal with water users, political aspects, services, administrative services and all the other stuff that has to go on. . . ."

So that was always another friction point, was the construction engineer really had two bosses. He had Denver, because all of the construction was managed out of Denver, and he had the region, which had to deal with water users, political aspects, services, administrative services and all the other stuff that has to go on. So that was always somewhat of a conflict in the regions, and for a lot of years in the Bureau it was that way.

Storey: Who ***was*** in charge? What was the theory and what was the reality?

". . . the reality really was that Denver was in charge, unless it ended up being such a political hassle that the commissioner got involved. . . . Quite often, the region then had to become in charge, because they're the ones that were closer to the political issues. . . . Even all the negotiations with contractors, all the claims processes, all of that was under Denver's purview. . . ."

Vissia: Well, the reality really was that Denver was in charge, unless it ended up being such a political hassle that the commissioner got involved. Then, of course, it would depend. Quite often, the region then had to become in charge, because they're the ones that were closer to the political issues. But otherwise, Denver really was the boss. I mean, there was no two ways about it. The main decisions were made by the chief engineer and by the Denver office. Even all the negotiations with contractors, all the claims processes, all of that was under Denver's purview.

---

10. (...continued)
no loyalty/responsibility to the regional office. The regions, on the other hand, were expected to hire staff, provide administrative support, provide planning services, provide political liaison, and provide the budget for construction projects. This division of responsibilities and supervisory control caused a good deal of tension between the regions and the Denver office.

Later in his interviews Mr. Vissia discusses his role and some of the issues involved in transferring contracting responsibility to the regions. See page 88 *et. seq.*

For a construction perspective on the issue of transferring construction contracting and supervision to the regions see the oral history interviews of Andrew (Andy) Dolyniuk in Reclamation's oral history program.

Storey: I would think that would lead to some pretty tense times between the regional directors and the chief engineer.

The Way a Lot of Situations Developed Between Denver and a Region Had to Do with the Personalities Involved

Vissia: In some cases it did. A lot depended on the characters involved. I mean, some people don't get so upset about that kind of stuff, and other people really get upset about it. So you would have, perhaps, different situations in different regions because of the characters involved, the construction engineer who they were dealing with in Denver and also the regional director. So it had a lot to do with that. And some people in Denver were very good about communicating and setting things up and saying, "We're going to do this," and, "We'd like your input on this." But in other cases, they weren't.

". . . when Barney Bellport was chief engineer, every person that visited Denver from the region, if they were a technical person, whether it was a GS-9 engineer all the way up to a GS-15, he wanted them to visit him when they came; in fact, usually the *first day*. . . ."

The other thing I can remember at that time was, when Barney Bellport was chief engineer, every person that visited Denver from the region, if they were a technical person, whether it was a GS-9 engineer all the way up to a GS-15, he wanted them to visit him when they came; in fact, usually the ***first day***. I can remember I was a planning engineer. I came in to Denver not to deal with design people, to deal with the Planning Office in Denver, and I was told I needed to go check in with Barney Bellport, which I did. I talked to him, and he asked what I was there for, and what I was doing in the region, and so on and so forth.

Storey: Tell me about the different planning levels. There was a planning office in the region. There was a planning office in Denver. I believe there was a planning office in Washington.

Planning Functions at Different Levels in Reclamation

Vissia: And even in the region, we had one or two field offices. We had one down in Santa Barbara for a while, a small one. It had three or four people in it that was looking at I can't even remember what projects down there. Maybe that's the only one we had in California. Then, of course, you have the regional office. The Denver office was basically, you might say, a technical oversight office, and ***they*** would review the economics, they would review the hydrology especially, all the hydrology. They would review the geology that went in the report. They would review the technical aspects. And also, quite often even feasibility designs would be done in Denver, and so they were sort of the liaison for the region in Denver to deal with these feasibility designs.

The Washington office was primarily looking at–well, they would look at the economics, too, very closely, they would look at repayment very closely, and they were concerned about the politics and the legislation. So that was their role.

"Usually each regional report or study had to go through two levels of review, one in Denver and one in the Washington office. . . ."

Usually each regional report or study had to go through two levels of review, one in Denver and one in the Washington office.

Storey: So it was actually a process that was designed so there wasn't a lot of duplication?

Vissia: Yeah. I didn't think there was that much duplication, because the people in Denver, they had some real expertise there in hydrology and in geology and in economics, too. They basically didn't ***do*** the studies. I mean, we ***did*** the studies. They were just reviewing them to see if they were done properly, and sometimes they would say, "Well, have you tried this?" or, "This isn't correct, and you need to do it over."

". . . a lot of regions didn't care much for the Denver planning office. They thought it was superfluous. But I thought it provided the Bureau a pretty good technical check. . . ."

I didn't think it was a bad level of review. I know a lot of regions didn't care much for the Denver planning office. They thought it was superfluous. But I thought it provided the Bureau a pretty good technical check. And they also, I felt, were a fair amount of assistance in coordinating with the design staff in Denver to do those feasibility study designs that were done in Denver. I think they did a pretty good job of that, too.

Storey: In casting back in my memory, I think there was a guy named Will Reedy there.

Will Reedy

Vissia: Oh, yeah.

Storey: He might have been a little later.

Vissia: No, he was in charge of the Denver office, I think, when I was the regional planning officer in Sacramento. Again, it's a matter of personalities more than the actual activities and tasks. Some people found him hard to communicate with and to negotiate with and to deal with, and so that's why some people thought, well, that office is worthless, you know, because of this guy. But again, I think it was more personalities than tasks and actual duties.

Storey: You mentioned a little while ago that sometimes it was felt Denver over-designed and therefore was more expensive. Didn't the water users ever get involved in any of these discussions?

Water users were worried about repayment, "But here again, because Denver *was* considered so expert, even by the water users, it was hard for them to argue with Denver . . ."

Vissia: Well, of course, they're worried about repayment and sometimes they would ask, "Well, what about this cost and what about this cost?" But here again, because Denver ***was*** considered so expert, even by the water users, it was hard for them to argue with Denver, and so they more or less accepted the design.

Storey: What about taking too long to design things? You mentioned that the regions had deadlines. Now, if Denver's in charge, why did the regions have deadlines that would conflict?

Sometimes Denver's Decision to Do Feasibility Designs Conflicted with Tight Schedules Established for Regional Planning Studies

Vissia: Well, they weren't in charge of the planning program, for example, and there were a lot of times when Denver would say, "No, we want to do your feasibility designs." I don't know if it was because they felt they needed the work or what. Normally planning studies have very tight schedules, and the water users are always after you because they want to get the thing to Congress to get it authorized. And so that's quite often where the problem would come up would be that.

After Authorization, Any Necessary Updating of the Feasibility Report Had to Be Completed, and Then a Definite Plan Report Had to Be Prepared

Likewise, in the definite planning report. Once the project is authorized, you go back and review the planning report, the feasibility report, because it may have been a few years, and then you have to come up with a ***definite*** planning report, which is even more detailed than the feasibility report, and you have to update it for the time span that elapsed in between. There again, the water users, the constituents, are raring to go. They want to get on with it and get construction money flowing. So that was another area.

". . . you can't start anything unless the designs are finished. . . . but quite often the region would be upset because the work wasn't getting done on the schedule they thought it ought to be done. . . ."

Even during construction, or just prior to construction, you can't start anything unless the designs are finished. Here again, the regions are feeling the water users' pressure, and Denver's got this huge workload that covers ***all*** the regions, and I'm not sure how they always set their priorities, whether they liked one regional director better than another or if they actually took it as it came in or how they set their priorities, but quite often the region would be upset because the work wasn't getting done on the schedule they thought it ought to be done.

Storey: What kind of coordination was done? Probably there was more than one project from the region, for instance, that had a Denver component. How did the regions and Denver try to work this so that it came out properly?

Coordination Activities Included the Program Conference in the Sping and the Skull Session in the Winter

Vissia: The two main coordinating activities were the program conference in the summer and the skull session in the winter, in which all the R-Ds and Denver met with the commissioner and would go over the total program of every region and Denver's program.

During the program conference ". . .you laid out your program for the next year, but you also talked about things that were in the pipeline . . ."

". . . the skull session, of course, was to get the commissioner ready to go up to The Hill to testify for funds. . . ."

One was, of course, the program conference, in which you laid out your program for the next year, but you also talked about things that were in the pipeline that were ongoing. And the skull session, of course, was to get the commissioner ready to go up to The Hill to testify for funds.

Storey: For the budget hearings.

Vissia: So those were the two ***main*** periods. Later on, the Bureau then decided, I think, to have even one or two other meetings of all the R-Ds that got together, as I recall, with Denver.

But in between those two times, when I was a regional planning officer I would have like a weekly staff meeting, and every time somebody was complaining about something, I would talk to Denver. I'd either call the division chief who was in charge of that particular design, or even the branch chief if it happened to be a pipeline or a pumping plant. I would try to call the people that worked on it directly and talk to them about it and see what was going on, and if they would complain that, well, it was out of their hands and other priorities were set, then I would go up a notch or two, until I found somebody who I could talk to about it. So that was one way. Also, the design chief in the region would usually deal quite closely with the design people in Denver, so he was another direct contact.

If it got really political or really hot, the regional director would call up Barney Bellport or the chief engineer and say, "Hey, we got this group of people here in the region. They're going crazy, and we need some activity here." So you would get on that way.

Storey: The program session, I believe, was to establish the budget, largely.

Vissia: Yeah, to establish what funds would be requested and what should be in the program. And so all the regions would come in with their wish list, their program, and at the end of the week you would pare it down to what the commissioner's staff thought was a reasonable budget and the most important programs. So, yes, it was a preparation of the budget and the program for the next year.

Storey: When did you start attending those?

Vissia: As the regional planning officer in about 1969.

Storey: So when you were the chief of the Special Investigations Branch, you probably weren't going to those?

Vissia: No. Only the planning engineer goes, the program and budget officer goes from the region, and that's all from the region, except for the regional director. I think just those three people at that time. And from Denver, of course you had the chief engineer, his assistant, the program people from Denver, probably the planning chief from Denver, and maybe the chief of the design staff, and construction, too. So Denver would usually have a contingent of five or six people. Each region would have three, and then, of course, all of the commissioner's main actors were there.

Storey: I think you said before that you were assigned to the branch, and then ultimately you became chief[of the Planning Division].

Vissia: Yeah.

Storey: How long did that process take?

Vissia: I think I was in Special Studies probably no more than three years altogether. I probably was the branch chief for a year before I became the division chief.

Storey: Who was the branch chief when you first went there?

Vissia: I can see him. He's a little bald-headed guy, but I can't remember his name. I think he stayed in Sacramento most of his career. He may even have quit the Bureau after that, I'm not sure. But I don't remember his name.

Storey: Did you have to apply for the branch chief position? How did that work?

Vissia: Yes, I applied for that. I also applied for the division chief job.

Storey: And you were selected for the division chief?

Vissia: Uh-huh. Bob Pafford was the regional director at that time.

Storey: How many branch chiefs were there?

How the Planning Division Was Organized

Vissia: I think we had about–we had a bunch. We must have had eight or nine, because the region was divided up into sections for planning purposes, so you had one for the North Coast, you'd have one, maybe, for the Sacramento Valley, one for the San Joaquin Valley, one for the southern part of the region, and then we had a Hydrology Branch, we had a Water Rights Branch, at that time I think we even had a Groundwater Branch, Special Studies Branch, the Reports Writing Branch, and Economics. So there was quite a few, and some branches maybe had only three or four people in.

In some respects, I think it was done to give people increases in pay, especially the area branches. Usually they would have a branch chief and maybe two or three, at the most, or four, engineers, and their ***main*** purpose was to be in charge of coordinating the planning studies, doing a project engineer's planning job. And then the service branches would be Economics, Hydrology, Groundwater, Water Rights, Hydrology, and those people would provide services and input to these guys who were in charge of the study. Plus, you'd also get input from the Design Division. You'd also get input from the 400 Division, O&M, because there would have to be some repayment analyses done, and also some estimates on operation and maintenance costs came out of that division.

Storey: What grade level would branch chiefs have been then?

Vissia: 13s.

Storey: And then division chief?

Vissia: 15. No, 14. I guess 14. I don't know.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 3. JULY 8, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 3. JULY 8, 1996.

Storey: Did you ever get any insights into why Bob Pafford chose you to be the division chief? I presume there were other branch chiefs who had applied.

Vissia: As a matter of fact, all of the branch chiefs that I supervised once I became division chief were older than I was, so that was a little touchy at first.

I'm not sure why. I don't know. I don't even remember who applied for the job at the time. I know one of the key guys, who would have been good, who didn't even apply was the assistant, what's his name, LeMoyne Christianson [phonetic], who had been in charge of the Economics Branch. He was later promoted to the assistant division chief, and I don't think he even applied. I don't know why. He would have been a good one. But I'm not sure why.

Storey: How did your job responsibilities change?

Vissia: From?

Storey: From the branch chief to the division chief.

Changes in Job Responsibility Between Branch Chief and Division Chief

Vissia: As a branch chief, I supervised maybe four people directly, and I had to coordinate with other people in the regional office, and I had maybe three or four activities ongoing in the branch.

As division chief, you have now probably ten branches. They must have had

fifteen, sixteen activities going on, projects and programs. You had to coordinate ***all*** of these from a higher level with the other division chiefs. You also got quite a bit more involved in the political aspects of the activities, because you have all these water users groups that are interested in these studies. And so it ended up I met a lot with the regional director, I met a lot with water users, I met sometimes with Congressmen, congressional staffs, and coordinated more closely with the state at a higher level. So there was a lot more managerial/ communication/coordination activities and less technical, quite a bit less technical.

I also had to worry about program, figuring out priorities in terms of budget projects, staffing problems. You had to figure out how much staff you needed and what grade levels and so on.

Storey: And did you continue to have an assistant?

Vissia: Yes. In fact, LeMoyne Christianson remained my assistant for the two and a half years that I was in that job.

Storey: How would the responsibilities split up between you as the chief and the assistant?

Vissia: Sometimes, because, for example, he was an economist, I quite often would delegate a lot of the responsibility for supervising the Economics Branch, as well as reviewing the work that came out of there, to him. Also, I would have him do some of the administrative stuff or give him special tasks for specific situations. So that's the way I used him.

Storey: You would have been there from when to when, roughly?

Vissia: I left there in '73. From '70 to '73, I was the regional planning officer. I left in '73 to be regional director in Boise.

Storey: Were there any special projects going on that were requiring a lot of attention from you as the chief of the Planning Division?

Peripheral Canal and Auburn Dam

Vissia: Well, there's the Peripheral Canal was one big activity that was important. Auburn was also another activity.

Storey: Continued to be important.

Consumnes Project

Vissia: And the Consumnes Project was important at that time. You know Bill Plummer. Have you talked to Bill Plummer? He was the regional director in [the Lower Colorado Region.]

Storey: No, I haven't.

Bill Plummer

Vissia: Well, at that time, Bill Plummer worked for the Office of Management and Budget, and I can remember when I was planning chief, he came out to review it, and, of course, the Office of Management and Budget was always trying to sabotage whatever they could to keep the budget down. I can remember what a hard ass he was when he came to review the Consumnes Project. Later I grew to like him. Of course, when he came to the Bureau, then he had a different hat to wear, so he was then, of course, quite an advocate for the Bureau. But at ***that*** time, he was a reviewer for the Office of Management and Budget and a different character.

Studying Water Quality in the Delta

Those were the main activities, as well as at that time a major activity was trying to determine what were the water quality problems in the Delta. Then we had a special branch set up that simply gathered data from ***all kinds*** of points in the Delta concerning the water quality, and to try to, first as input to the Peripheral Canal Program, as well as to try to figure out how much freshwater should flow out and how much shouldn't flow out. And so we coordinated very closely with the state on that program, and Don Swain [phonetic] was the branch chief of that program.

Storey: That was a Planning Division branch?

Vissia: Yep, Planning Division branch.

Storey: How many staff people? What kind of budget?

". . . it had a *large chunk* of the budget during . . . those three years that I was division chief . . . because of all the equipment that had to be put in place and all the field staff to go out, and then computer database activity and so on. . . ."

Vissia: We must have had eight or ten people on that. We had a pretty large budget. In fact, it had a ***large chunk*** of the budget during the last–well, those three years that I was division chief, it had probably the largest chunk of the budget because of all the equipment that had to be put in place and all the field staff to go out, and then computer database activity and so on. It was a pretty major program.

Storey: Let's walk a circle around this activity to a different location and come into it again. ***Why*** was Reclamation spending so much money and energy and effort on it?

Vissia: On the Water Quality Program?

Storey: Yeah, on the Delta Program at that time.

The large delta program ". . . was to try to come up with a solution to save as much freshwater as possible for the project and for the water users, at the same time trying to appease the environmentalists and those that felt it was necessary to freshen up the Delta. . . ."

Vissia: Because it meant preserving water supply or just releasing it out to the sea. And so if you didn't preserve the water supply, first of all you had your constituents that were saying, "Hey, we need this water in the San Joaquin Valley. We don't want it running out through the San Francisco Bay." So, one was to try to come up with a solution to save as much freshwater as possible for the project and for the water users, at the same time trying to appease the environmentalists and those that felt it was necessary to freshen up the Delta.

"Of course, there wasn't any repayment, either, for the Bureau when you run water through the Delta out to the San Francisco Bay. . . ."

Of course, there wasn't any repayment, either, for the Bureau when you run water through the Delta out to the San Francisco Bay. That water was ***lost***, ***period***. There was no way to get any repayment out of it. So that was a primary. You had the water users, for one, and also the repayment aspects were a main emphasis to try to preserve as much of the project water as possible for the original project purposes.

Storey: But didn't we have water rights and water commitments to those water users? How would we be taking water away from them?

Reclamation Believed Water Saved Could Be Contracted

Vissia: Well, because there was still some water left that could be contracted, and agriculture was still spreading at that time on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley. That's the reason for the State Water Project and the San Luis Canal. So the more water that you subtracted, the less you'd be able to use over there on that side of the valley. The major, of course, contributors were Shasta and Folsom and Friant Dams were the three main storage–and Trinity Dam–four main dams on the Central Valley Project.

Storey: Was your time consumed proportionately by those projects?

Vissia: You mean, by the water quality thing?

Storey: Water quality, Consumnes, and the Peripheral Canal.

Vissia: Yeah, the more important the program was, the more time, as division chief, you spend on it. Whatever happens to be ***hot*** at the moment you spend the most time on.

Storey: We built Consumnes, didn't we? Or did we?

Vissia: No.

Storey: We didn't build it?

Vissia: It was never built.

Storey: How about other projects that we didn't build? Were there a lot of them that we looked

at?

Projects Reclamation Studied but Never Built

Vissia: All the North Coast projects, none of those ever were built. There were several rivers on the North Coast that ran westward into the Pacific Ocean that were studied ***both*** by the state and by the Bureau, and none of those were built. The only one was, of course, the Trinity Dam, and that was during President [John F.] Kennedy's time when it was constructed.

Storey: Trinity and Whiskeytown. I've forgotten the name of that other one.

"If you looked at an old planning map of that region–and they always put these reservoirs in red–there was just all kinds of red running along the North Coast of California. . . ."

Vissia: None of the other ones were ever–and there was a lot of them. If you looked at an old planning map of that region–and they always put these reservoirs in red–there was just all kinds of red running along the North Coast of California. All these reservoirs, ways to try to save water and store it, never came about.

Storey: And that was going on at this time?

Vissia: Yeah.

Storey: The late sixties, early seventies.

Vissia: That was part of those river basin studies, for one, and some of it even got, I think, into the reconnaissance stage of study. But most of that North Coast stuff was pretty much ended by the time I was division chief. It was pretty much out of the loop by then.

Storey: And you weren't involved before that?

River Basin Studies

Vissia: Only in the river basin studies, looking at identifying sites and trying to estimate the potential yield and so on.

Storey: Do you remember what triggered those river basin studies?

Vissia: No, I don't. Was that when we had–what was that national body we used to have back there.

Storey: The Water Resources Council, was it?

Vissia: Yeah. Weren't they responsible for starting those? They wanted to get a better idea of what existed.

Storey: I've forgotten exactly why.

Vissia: I can't remember, but that may have been the impetus of that.

Storey: But it was a national effort, as I recall.

Vissia: Yes, it was, and all of the various agencies were involved. We used to go to these interagency meetings. It seemed like there was fifty people at the damn things.

Storey: Did we do reports?

"There are reports of all the basins in California that show, at that time at least, what the resources were, the main rivers, the potential reservoir sites, the potential yields, even projected uses. . . ."

Vissia: Yes, we did do reports. There are reports of all the basins in California that show, at that time at least, what the resources were, the main rivers, the potential reservoir sites, the potential yields, even projected uses.

The California State Water Plan Seriously Looked at the North Coast Rivers But, Because of Opposition, Ultimately Turned to Oroville as the Main Source of Water in the System

It was sort of a prelude to the State Water Plan. When the state of California did the State Water Plan, they put out some appendices that used a lot of that information. Their appendices to the State Water Plan include a lot of the same kind of stuff–the different basins, where the potential water supply is–because the state was very seriously looking at the North Coast as the water supply for southern California, and then they ran into a buzz saw, of course, with the environmentalists and others, and they ended up building Oroville Dam, of course, and the state aqueduct. But they were looking seriously at the North Coast at that time.

Storey: Do you have any sense of how many projects we would study as opposed to how many we would build in the period that you were in the Planning Division?

Few of the Projects Studied While He Was in Sacramento Were Ever Built

Vissia: Well, I'm trying to think in California of any that we actually studied that ***were*** built, because Santa Barbara was finished. The southern California projects down there were already in place. I guess the Tehama-Colusa Canal[11] may have been one that was studied when I first got there that was finally constructed. Auburn was never done. Sespe Creek was never done. Consumnes wasn't done. None of the North Coast was done. Peripheral Canal wasn't done. So it had to be a very small percentage in California that were actually authorized and built at that time, because most of the stuff had already been done–Trinity, Shasta. Folsom was a Corps project, but turned over to the Bureau for operation. And then you had Friant and you had the Friant-Kern Canal.

11. Construction begin in 1965 and continued into the mid-1970s.

All that stuff was already finished.

So during the period that I was there, which was twelve years, maybe one or two, I suppose, at the most out of all the stuff we were looking at, and we were looking at various things. In fact, maybe the Crosscut Canal, maybe that was constructed later on after I left. That was a canal down at the bottom of the San Joaquin that connected the two sides of the valley. We were studying that.

Storey: I think it was built. There was some version of it built.

Vissia: So that was one that we started when I was there and finally got built. Not many others. San Felipe got built.

Storey: Yeah, San Felipe was built.

Vissia: That was studied while I was there, so that one was authorized and constructed.

Storey: Maybe it was Santa Maria I was thinking of.

Vissia: That was already done.

Storey: That one was done?

Vissia: Yeah. Lake Cachuma was done.

Storey: Tell me about going to the program conferences and the skull sessions. You did that for maybe three or four years as the planning chief?

Attended program conferences ". . . for three years as planning chief and seven years as the regional director and about three years as the assistant commissioner. . . ."

Vissia: I did that for three years as planning chief and seven years as the regional director and about three years as the assistant commissioner.

"I thought they were really invaluable to the Bureau. That was one of the management techniques that I thought was quite important that the Bureau did. It was a way in which everybody could see what the total program was . . . coordinate its activities . . . try and iron out some difficulties in the program between the various offices, especially between Denver and the regions and the commissioner's office and the regions, and also to get a sense of the political climate. . . ."

I thought they were really invaluable to the Bureau. That was one of the management techniques that I thought was quite important that the Bureau did. It was a way in which everybody could see what the total program was, and also give the Bureau a chance to coordinate its activities of all the different regions, and a place to try and iron out some difficulties in the program between the various offices, especially

between Denver and the regions and the commissioner's office and the regions, and also to get a sense of the political climate.

". . . it was a good way to coordinate the budget, rather than for each region to send all this *stuff* into the Commissioner's office and then somebody in the Commissioner's office puts together the budget. This way, everybody is involved pretty much in the decisionmaking process, because I felt that you got a chance to tell your story . . ."

And it was a good way to coordinate the budget, rather than for each region to send all this ***stuff*** into the Commissioner's office and then somebody in the Commissioner's office puts together the budget. This way, everybody is involved pretty much in the decisionmaking process, because I felt that you got a chance to tell your story, to tell the commissioner what you thought was important and where the priorities should be and the money should be in your region, and you could even question the other regional directors when they were talking. You could say, "Well, what's so big about that?" or, "Why is that more important than this?" It was a chance for some interchange and a chance to put together a program that was based upon input from all the main players in the Bureau. So I thought it was quite important.

The way it was done was handled pretty well. I thought it was organized pretty well.

Storey: Now, we're talking about the program sessions?

Vissia: Both of them, both the skull session and the program conference.

Storey: How did this work? Did you all sit in the same room all the time and talk to one another until you'd hammered out a . . .

Vissia: No. The way it worked was, each region ***and*** Denver were given a specific slot of time to present their program, and everybody else was in the room, and that included ***all*** of the people from each office. Not just the head guy, all the people. So quite often you would have people sitting away from the main table. But the main table was quite large, because usually when the region made its presentation, you always had three people from that region. Then the rest of the regional directors would be there, plus some key people from Denver and key people from the commissioner's office. The rest of the staff that were there would sit on the outside.

You were given a specific time to present your program. Anybody could ask questions of the whole group. Some decision were made ***there***, but not all. Then at the end of the week, the program people would get together, and they would put together a program. This included all the regional program officers and the guys from Denver program officer and the one from the commissioner's office. They would put together a program, and then, as I recall, based upon the week's work, that would be the program. And I forget if there's one last crack at that or not. I forget how that happened. There was probably not a last crack, but if something was going on in that group–for example, if my program officer thought that we were getting screwed, he'd

come to me and talk to me about it, and then I could go deal with somebody if I felt it was necessary and get some more input in there.

But, it was a good process. I thought it worked quite well. I thought it was a good way to do business.

Storey: The commissioners, who was the first commissioner you attended a meeting with, do you remember?

Vissia: As a trainee in Washington, D.C., I attended–you mean program sessions or are you talking about any kind of meetings?

Storey: Yeah.

Vissia: Program sessions? Gil Stamm was the–no.

Storey: Before Gil was Ellis Armstrong.

Vissia: Ellis Armstrong. Who was before Ellis?

Storey: Floyd Dominy.

Vissia: Oh, okay. Ellis Armstrong was probably the first one. I guess I was the planning officer at that time. Then Gil Stamm was commissioner when I was regional director, and then there was Higginson and Broadbent. I guess that was the only ones, those four.

Storey: Tell me about them. What was Ellis Armstrong like, and what did Reclamation think of him? Of course, he was a Reclamation guy, but he'd left, gone to the St. Lawrence Seaway Commission, the Bureau of Roads.

Ellis Armstrong

Vissia: I didn't think he was a very strong commissioner in terms of the Bureau's program. I also didn't think he was that great of a manager.

Gil Stamm

Of the four commissioners, I thought Gil Stamm was the best in terms of an advocate for the Bureau's program, as well as managing the agency. I thought he was the best of the four.

Keith Higginson

And then I would have to say probably Higginson was second, then Broadbent and Ellis.

Bob Broadbent

Maybe Broadbent's a little ahead of Ellis. I didn't really care much for Ellis. Of course, he was the first one, so maybe I was young and naïve and didn't know enough, I don't know.

Storey: I presume you probably also met Floyd Dominy.

Floyd Dominy

Vissia: Oh, yeah. I was just a young engineer in the Bureau when he was the commissioner, and my first experience with him was as a trainee when I was on that Management Training Program in the mid-sixties.

". . . I was invited by the assistant division chief to go to a meeting in which Dominy was–and it was several division chiefs in the Washington level were there, and I can remember that Dominy, I felt, treated those guys like children. I mean, he just chewed their butts, and he was *really* hard on them. I thought he was out of line. He was really upset about something. . . ."

I went to Washington, D.C., and I was invited by the assistant division chief to go to a meeting in which Dominy was–and it was several division chiefs in the Washington level were there, and I can remember that Dominy, I felt, treated those guys like children. I mean, he just chewed their butts, and he was ***really*** hard on them. I thought he was out of line. He was really upset about something. I forget what it was or what happened. But, my God, he must be tough to work for. So that was my very first impression of him in terms of face to face. Fortunately, I wasn't on the end of his firing line.

". . . from most people's accounts . . . they thought he was one of the most effective commissioners. Of course, at that time was the heyday of Reclamation anyway, and so perhaps other people would have been as effective . . . he *was* quite influential, and he was able to push the Bureau's program and get congressional approvals and so on. . . ."

But from most people's accounts, even though they may not have liked necessarily to work for him, they thought he was one of the most effective commissioners. Of course, at that time was the heyday of Reclamation anyway, and so perhaps other people would have been as effective, I'm not sure. But he ***was*** quite influential, and he was able to push the Bureau's program and get congressional approvals and so on.

"Nowadays, I doubt that Dominy would do well at all . . ."

But at that time it was the development era anyway, and who's to say that some other guy in the job might have done just as well, because at that time the constituency and the Congress was eager to do that kind of stuff. Nowadays, I doubt that Dominy would do well at all because of the atmosphere and the aura.

Storey: What about the regional directors in Sacramento? Who was the first one you met?

Ed Sullivan

Vissia: I don't remember who was there in front of–who was there before Pafford? Ed Sullivan was the assistant regional director. I remember working with him.

Storey: I'll have to use my cheat sheet.

Vissia: Basie [phonetic] was another assistant in charge of administration. I remember him.

Storey: Hugh Dugan. Pat Dugan.

Pat Dugan

Vissia: Pat Dugan, right. Yeah, I liked Pat Dugan. I wasn't the division chief, so I didn't have all that much to do with him, but I liked him. As I recall, there weren't too many bad thoughts about him.

Storey: You don't happen to know where he is now?

Vissia: No. I don't even know if he's alive. I have no idea.

Storey: That's the way everybody is, I'm afraid. What about Pafford, then?

Bob Pafford

Vissia: I liked Bob Pafford. Some people didn't like him because he was–well, he talked very rapidly and he had very–I mean, he made his ideas known. He told you what he wanted, and it was pretty clear about that.

". . . he came from the Corps. He wasn't a Bureau. I think that rubbed some people the wrong way. But I thought he was a fairly effective regional director . . ."

Also, the fact that I think he came from the Corps. He wasn't a Bureau. I think that rubbed some people the wrong way. But I thought he was a fairly effective regional director, and I got along fine with him. I always found him very willing to listen to me, even if I disagreed with him. He would never take it out on me later. I mean, he would listen, and sometimes he would accept it and other times he'd say, "No, I don't agree with you. We're going to do it this way." But he would never hold it against me that I disagreed with him.

Gil Stamm

And that's the way I felt about Gil Stamm. I liked him for that reason, too. He sometimes could be a very stern guy, but I always felt you could be open and honest with Gil and he wasn't going to be upset with you about it.

Bob was there. I don't know how long he was regional director, because he was

there--

Storey: '63 to '73.

Vissia: Oh, was he? That long, huh?

Storey: Uh-huh.

Vissia: So Dugan was only there a couple years when I was there.

Storey: Yeah, '60 to '63.

Vissia: Bob left–yeah, because I was offered his position or the one in Boise.

Storey: There was a guy named Ed Horton who was acting regional director.

Ed Horton

Vissia: He was on the Auburn Project at first, until it stymied, wasn't he?

Storey: I don't know.

Vissia: I think he was the construction engineer. Ed Horton, right? He was a quiet, gentlemanly kind of a guy, not forceful at all. I always liked him. He was okay.

Ed Sullivan

Ed Sullivan, he was a pretty forceful guy. He went, of course, from Sacramento up to Boise to become regional director.

Storey: After you?

Vissia: No, before me. He was just before me. You had Nelson, Sullivan, and then me. And then Sullivan went from there to the commissioner's office to be assistant commissioner for O&M.

Storey: Tell me more about your tour with the under secretary of the Interior.

Touring the Delta with the Under Secretary of the Interior

Vissia: I think I spent a couple of days with him, and we drove around the Delta and looked at–well, just looked at the geography, went to places like the Tracy Pumping Plant and looked at some of the diversions. He talked a lot about the state's position and the Bureau's position, and he asked me what my opinions were, and then I would tell him.

Felt There Were Areas Where Reclamation and the State Water Project Could Work Together

I wasn't a die-hard. There were some real die-hards in the Bureau that didn't want to compromise whatsoever with the state. I was never in that position. So I told him I felt there were some places where the state and the Bureau could get together and come up with a solution, and I told him what solutions I thought they were and where they might get together on some agreements. He, being a political animal anyways, I suppose probably liked that. I wasn't coming across as some of the die-hards in the regional office that he had talked to. For example, Archie Hanson, who was in charge of the Delta Branch. It was like no way he would want to compromise with the state. I don't know who else would have been at that time really involved in that.

". . . there was no way that the Bureau was going to get out of this without losing some water. . . . You could see the handwriting on the wall that *eventually* some of the project water was going to have to be used for this purpose. . . ."

Even the solicitor's office was pretty hard-nosed when it came to coordinating with the state and compromising and coming up with some solution, because there was no way that the Bureau was going to get out of this without losing some water. I mean, there was no way. You could see the handwriting on the wall that ***eventually*** some of the project water was going to have to be used for this purpose.

Storey: For the Delta?

Vissia: For the Delta, for flushing the Delta. So why fight it all the time? Why not reach something that will work for both? And that's pretty much what I told him, I guess, on the trip.

Storey: How long did it take before you got this call from Gil Stamm?

Vissia: Let's see. It wasn't too long. I don't remember when that guy was out, but it must have been in the third year as regional planning officer. It must have been in '72 or '73. It was, I think, very close to those two vacancies occurring.

" Gil called me, and he wasn't very happy. He said . . .'I don't really think you're qualified . . . they said you can have your choice of two places.' So I thought, well, I'd like to try something different, so I chose Boise. . . ."

I think what happened was is, when Gil sent names up for regional directors to the secretary's office, this guy probably certainly reviewed it, and that's probably when he said, "Well, I think this guy ought to be on the list, and maybe you ought to do that," because Gil called me, and he wasn't very happy. He said, "I don't want to–how did he put that? "I don't really think you're qualified or I don't really want to do this, but I've been ordered to by so-and-so, and they said you can have your choice of two places." So I thought, well, I'd like to try something different, so I chose Boise.

". . . after that, I think he was impressed enough that we got along swell after that. In fact, it was my first program conference as a regional director that any regional director had ever used visual displays for his presentation, and I didn't use any big deal. I just used a flip chart . . . I asked my two guys, my planning guy to do

the planning part and the program guy to do his part, and then I handled the political stuff and the overview. . . ."

But after that, I think he was impressed enough that we got along swell after that. In fact, it was my first program conference as a regional director that any regional director had ever used visual displays for his presentation, and I didn't use any big deal. I just used a flip chart, and I had stuff already prepared to present my program. Another thing I did which wasn't very commonly done at that time, I asked my two guys, my planning guy to do the planning part and the program guy to do his part, and then I handled the political stuff and the overview. So that was a little new, and I think he liked that. I think he appreciated that.

". . . the next year . . . Bob McPhail came back with slide programs and all kinds of shit, and he caught hell for his. I mean, he had *overdone* it to the point where the commissioner was upset with him . . ."

Then, unfortunately, the next year a couple of the other R-Ds, especially Bob McPhail, decided, "Well, by God, if that works, I'm really going to do it." So Bob McPhail came back with slide programs and all kinds of shit, and he caught hell for his. I mean, he had ***overdone*** it to the point where the commissioner was upset with him for doing that big of a grandiose show, by trying to put on a big show instead of just do a program exercise. That's all we were doing was a program exercise. Here he was doing slides and this and that.

Storey: He was regional director in Billings?

Vissia: Um-hmm.

Storey: It's amazing the way things go sometimes.

Vissia: But Bob was really a go-getter as a R-D. He probably still is a go-getter. But he wanted to really do it up fine, but unfortunately the commissioner thought he did it too well, I guess.

Storey: Tell me more about why you chose Boise instead of Sacramento.

Why He Chose to Go to Boise Rather than Stay in Sacramento

". . . I'd been in California for twelve years, and frankly I was tired of working on the issues and problems of the Delta . . ."

Vissia: Well, I'd been in California for twelve years, and frankly I was tired of working on the issues and problems of the Delta and I felt that I really needed to get out of there. I was getting burnt out on it. There didn't seem to be any major give between the two agencies in terms of trying to resolve this. And so I guess I just decided I'd like to try something new and something different.

Storey: When you got up there, when I was talking to . . .

END SIDE 2, TAPE 3. JULY 8, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 4. JULY 8, 1996.

This is Brit Story with Rodney J. Vissia on July the 8th, 1996.

In his first interview, Floyd Dominy told me, "Well, I went in and replaced the regional directors." And I got to looking at the list, and there was one regional director who wasn't replaced, H. T. Nelson.

Vissia: Right.

Storey: Known by a nickname that I'm not too sure is affectionate, as"High Tension" Nelson. I asked Dominy about it in the second interview, and he said, "Well, he had too many political connections. He wasn't touchable."

Vissia: I thought there was more than one that he didn't replace. I think there was one also in Salt Lake City.

Storey: I think there may have been another one, but it was somebody who had just been appointed, I think.

David Crandall

Vissia: [David L.] Crandall, I think, was not replaceable by Dominy, either.

Storey: Did you find that there was a lot of political interest in that office when you got up there? A long preface to a short question.

How Political Interest in Reclamation Changed Between California and Idaho

Vissia: I can't–no. Compared to California, I would have to say no, because at the time ***I*** was in California, Biz Johnson was the chairman of the committee in Congress, and so we had a ***lot*** of direct connections with Congress through Biz Johnson in California. So compared to that, when I went up there, I didn't think so.

We did work quite closely with Senator [James] McClure's office, because he seemed to be more interested in Reclamation than [Senator Frank] Church. And then we had a couple of Congressmen. One was Hansen,[12] who ended up in jail finally because of some irregular campaigning activities. We had, he later became a senator, the one that had the apple orchard over there in the slope. He was a congressman from

12. George Vernon Hansen. "In 1984 Hansen was reprimanded by the House for failing to include transactions on federal disclosure forms. He was defeated for reelection . . . He was convicted of failing to file full disclosure forms and spent 15 months in prison. His imprisonment allegedly included torture through medical neglect and subjection to 'diesel therapy,' a form of punishment in which prisoners are painfully shackled and then transported for days or weeks without respite. The conviction was overturned in 1995 as a result of the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Hubbard v. United States*. . . ." Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_V._Hansen on November 17, 2011, at about 11:50 A.M.

Idaho. I forget his name. He was pretty active, too.

But no, I can't say it was that–but, you know, I'm sure Harold Nelson had close connections. It was probably Senator McClure, I would guess, because I think McClure was also on the committee. He was a committee member on Biz Johnson's committee. So it was probably Senator McClure, I would guess.

Storey: Yeah. What were the major projects that you walked into when you went up there?

Third Powerplant at Grand Coulee

Vissia: We had the Third Powerplant, of course.

Storey: At Grand Coulee.

Teton Dam

East Green Acres Project

Vissia: At Grand Coulee. And then we had Teton Dam, and then we had a small East Green Acres Project up in northern Idaho.

Chelan Project

We had the Chelan Project up in northern Washington.

Second Bacon Tunnel and Siphon

We had the second Bacon Siphon and Tunnel, which was a joint project with the state of Washington.

Work to expand the Columbia Basin Project ". . . because only half of it is developed. . . ."

And then we were trying to expand the Columbia Basin Project to develop the rest of it, because only half of it is developed. We were trying to develop the eastern part.

Rehabilitation and Fisheries Work in the Yakima Valley

And then we had some small activities in the Yakima Valley on rehabilitation and fisheries and stuff, as I recall.

Planning and Projects in Oregon, Including the Tualatin Project

Then we had some planning activities in the state of Oregon, a couple of projects over there. I don't even remember the names now. We had the Tualatin Project in Oregon, which is near Beaverton, Oregon.

Those were the main projects, either in the planning or construction stages. What else? I guess those were the main activities.

Storey: What was the region responsible for doing on those projects?

". . . the regions at that time were responsible for fielding the construction crew. Denver still was in charge of construction and most of the designs, but we managed the other parts of it. . . . they're regional employees, so we would work with Denver to decide the size of the office and the types of people that should be there, and then we would work with Denver on selection. But the regional director was the one that selected them. . . ."

Vissia: On the East Green Acres and the Chelan Project, they were under construction. Of course, the regions at that time were responsible for fielding the construction crew. Denver still was in charge of construction and most of the designs, but we managed the other parts of it. And that was the same with Teton, with the Chelan Project, with the Tualatin Project.

Storey: I'm not following what you mean by fielding the construction crews.

Vissia: Well, they're regional employees, so we would work with Denver to decide the size of the office and the types of people that should be there, and then we would work with Denver on selection. But the regional director was the one that selected them.

Storey: Not the construction engineer?

The construction engineer ". . . had a lot to say about it, and quite often the regional director would agree with him. *Usually* they would agree with him, because after all, he knew who was available and who had what experience, so the regional director put a lot of confidence in what he had to say about the guys. But the regional director . . . hired all the staff, and we had to support them administratively and we had to deal with the water users and the politicians on the project. . . ."

Vissia: No. He had a lot to say about it, and quite often the regional director would agree with him. ***Usually*** they would agree with him, because after all, he knew who was available and who had what experience, so the regional director put a lot of confidence in what he had to say about the guys. But the regional director was still the one that hired them, and we would call around and find out about him from his previous supervisors and so on. So we hired all the staff, and we had to support them administratively and we had to deal with the water users and the politicians on the project.

Storey: What about budgeting?

Budgeting for Construction Projects Was Also a Regional Responsibility

Vissia: The same way, budgeting.

Storey: Budgeting was a regional responsibility?

Vissia: Right.

Storey: Who hired the project construction engineers?

The Region Hired the Project Construction Engineer

Vissia: The region.

Storey: So they're a part of that construction crew that's being fielded?

Issues about Hiring and Supervising the Construction Engineer

Vissia: Yes, right. That's why I say the chief engineer often, or the head of the Construction Division in Denver, often had some pretty–he'd usually give you names or inputs or strong points, and he might even recommend one that he thought would be best, so the regional director would have that input.

The other thing that was always interesting, too, was, of course, the regional director, because he was a supervisor, had to do his performance evaluation. Well, a lot of times the construction engineer, a lot of his activities are more direct with Denver than they are with the regional director, so there you had a little bit of a– if you wanted to do it right, you really should have somebody from Denver come and help you do it, or at least get input from Denver when you're doing the performance evaluation on these guys, because there was so much close contact between the Denver construction group and the construction engineer in the field.

Storey: Was that done?

Vissia: I tried to do it when I was the regional director. I tried to get some input as to–and usually I would ask the construction engineer to evaluate himself, first of all, and then I'd do my evaluation with input from wherever I could get it, including Denver, and we'd sit down and talk about it.

Storey: So how many construction engineers were there?

While Regional Director He Had Five Construction Offices at Various Locations

Vissia: At that time, we had [Robert R.] Robison at Teton, I forget the guy's name at Green Acres, and we had one at Tualatin and one at Chelan. Out on the Snake River we were replacing a small dam there, or rehabilitating it. So I probably had ***five*** construction offices. Oh, the Third Powerplant. That makes six.

Storey: What was his name there?

Vissia: Well, [Donald J.] Duck was head of it for a while.

Storey: Well, he worked for the construction engineer, I think.

Vissia: Then Granger.

Storey: Yeah, Mr. Granger.

Third Powerplant ". . . could have been or should have been just directly out of Denver, because it was so mammoth and Denver had so much control on that that the regions were always basically safety and deal with employee problems and trying to coordinate between the construction staff and the O&M staff that existed up there . . ."

Vissia: That project especially was, I suppose, could have been or should have been just directly out of Denver, because it was so mammoth and Denver had so much control on that that the regions were always basically safety and deal with employee problems and trying to coordinate between the construction staff and the O&M staff that existed up there, because we had a major O&M staff up there on the old dam, and they were working.

Storey: What kinds of issues came up between the O&M staff and the construction staff, do you remember?

During Construction of the Third Powerplant Coordination of O&M Activities with Construction Was a Major Activity

Vissia: Well, you had to schedule construction to not interfere with the key O&M, and likewise you didn't want some O&M that could be changed to interfere with construction. So you had to really coordinate the programs to do both efficiently, and so there was a major program of doing that.

"A lot of times . . . especially O&M employees were trying to get on the construction job because of higher pay. . . . So you'd always have this business . . . you'd have to replace them or make up for them until you could find a replacement. . . ."

Plus, there was ***always*** the issue of employees. A lot of times employees would be, especially O&M employees were trying to get on the construction job because of higher pay. They had a little better grades and so on. So you'd always have this business of these guys in O&M would be applying for some of these jobs on the construction crew, and then you'd have to replace them or make up for them until you could find a replacement. So you had ***that*** kind of issue.

Dealing with the Local Community to Assure the Influx of Construction Staff Did Not Cause Issues

And then you had all kinds of administrative issues because of things like housing. You had a whole new input of people, and so you got housing issues in the small community there, and you had to coordinate closely with the community people

to make sure that the Bureau was behaving itself and it wasn't causing problems to them. Those kinds of issues were between the two groups.

Storey: Did it ever get very tense, or how did this work out?

Vissia: I thought it worked out pretty well. I don't remember any great tense issues now.

Storey: How far along was the design and the sort of philosophic decisions about the Third Powerhouse when you arrived?

Vissia: Well, it was already started.

Storey: They were already building? So they'd decided on the size of the generation units and all of that kind of thing.

Proposal to Put Art by Wayne Graham in the Spillway at Grand Coulee since it Wasn't Expected it Would Be Used Much after Completion of the Third Powerplant

Vissia: Yes. That was a major program, quite a tremendous project. One of the interesting parts of that is, when I first got up there, the first or second year I was there, because spills were going to be virtually eliminated on Grand Coulee Dam– that was, the spillway was not going to be used anymore, just because all the water was going to go through the Third Powerplant.

We got a letter and a proposal from this artist. He's a Western artist. In fact, he's the artist that did those two paintings there, Walter Graham, who lives in Wenatchee. Two ladies in Ephrata, Washington, ran a small art gallery, and they represented him, and they sent us a proposal. They'd already been to Senator [Henry] Jackson in Washington, sent us a proposal to build these horses stampeding down the spillway at Grand Coulee to designate horsepower. I have the photograph for the sketch up in the office. I'll show it to you. So at that time, we sent a polite letter back and said it was totally out of the question, that the U.S. taxpayer probably wouldn't stand for it, and we didn't think it was a good idea anyways, because we may have to use the spillway someday or whatever.

Well, a few years later I married one of the two ladies that had sent in the proposal. That's Ruth Ann. I had divorced my wife when I was in Boise, and I met Ruth Ann afterwards, and we got that sketch for a wedding present from her other partner at that time, who still lives in Wenatchee.

Storey: So they wanted to paint the spillway?

Vissia: Not paint, like a sculpture, actually sculpt horses. Well, let me go get it, and I'll show it to you, because it was quite the proposal.

Storey: Okay. [Tape recorder turned off.] So this was a proposal by Walter Graham.

Vissia: Right.

Storey: That's quite an impressive picture, with all those horses coming out of the spillway and down at the bottom and everything.

Vissia: It would have been a major–well, it would have been like building Mount Rushmore, except you're not carving it out of anything. You have to actually manufacture the statue.

Storey: I can imagine what it would do to the hydraulics of the structure.

"Of course, now they spill on purpose just for the light show. They don't really need to. . . ."

Vissia: Yeah. Of course, now they spill on purpose just for the light show. They don't really need to. But that was the idea. He knew that the spillway wasn't to be necessarily used as a spillway anymore hydraulically, so he thought, well, why not make a major show out of it, so he proposed this thing.

Storey: Well, at that time I would expect Coulee was a major power producer, revenue producer for the Federal government.

Vissia: It was.

Storey: What kinds of pressures and interests were involved there that you saw as the regional director?

Vissia: You mean, in terms of the Third Powerplant?

Storey: No, in terms of the power production.

". . . BPA was the main federal power marketer for the Northwest. The main issues there were that the BPA, the Corps, and the Bureau had to work closely together on the whole Columbia River system, because you had powerplants at almost all the dams and you had flood control operations, and then you had water supply. So there was a very close coordination . . ."

Vissia: Well, of course, BPA [Bonneville Power Administration] was the main [federal] power marketer for the Northwest. The main issues there were that the BPA, the Corps, and the Bureau had to work closely together on the whole Columbia River system, because you had powerplants at almost all the dams and you had flood control operations, and then you had water supply. So there was a very close coordination between the three agencies to operate the river to meet most efficiently all of those functions.

". . . they were starting to be concerned about fisheries, and so *now* that's taken the spotlight in terms of river operations. . . ."

Then, of course, later on, even when I was there, they were starting to be

concerned about fisheries, and so ***now*** that's taken the spotlight in terms of river operations. I think now they're losing around $2 to $3 million a year in power revenue just for additional fish releases to try and get the small ones downstream when they're migrating out.

But that was a major pressure, was to coordinate between the three agencies to get all these functions met properly.

Storey: Did BPA present any particular problems? This, of course, would have been before the Western Area Power Administration was created.

Vissia: Oh, but BPA continued to exist, because the Western Area Power Administration only covered other states. BPA still exists.

Storey: Yeah. They were sort of the model, I think, for Western Area Power.

Vissia: Right, exactly. No, I thought it ran pretty smoothly. It ran pretty well.

Storey: Um-hmm. Was there a lot of coordination with the administrator in Portland?

Vissia: Yes, with his office, right, because that's where their main operational headquarters was. Our regional people would deal with them a lot on the operation, and also the Coulee people would deal with them a lot. There was close coordination between the offices.

In fact, once a year there was a major water group, the Northwest Waterways Association? Maybe that was the name of it. They used to have an annual convention every year, and they would always invite all three agencies to that. Each agency was supposed to make a presentation about their program and what was going on, and they always had a big social event one of the nights, which was usually a two-day affair, as I recall, two- or three-day affair. I would always go, as regional director, and the chief of BPA would be there and the general from the Corps would be there.

Storey: From the division?

Vissia: The division, right.

Storey: You mentioned a tunnel that was a joint project.

Bacon Siphon and Tunnel Number 2 on the Columbia Basin Project

Vissia: The Bacon Siphon Tunnel parallels–well, there was one built by the Bureau to start with. That's a major tunnel that diverts–after water is pumped out of Coulee into the lake there, then there's a major tunnel that takes it down into the Columbia Basin Project area, and from there it goes into the canal system.

". . . to develop the second half of the project, you had to increase the capacity of the existing tunnel or build another one, because you had another 500,000 acres

you were talking about. . . ."

In order to develop the second half of the project, you had to increase the capacity of the existing tunnel or build another one, because you had another 500,000 acres you were talking about.

Reclamation and the State of Washington Built the Bacon Tunnel and Siphon, but it Is Unused Because the Farmers Didn't Want to Use the Water

So the Bureau was trying to, and the state also was interested in getting the farmers on the east side signed up to develop the rest of that project in irrigation, because presently it was all dryland wheat farmers. So the state said, "Okay, if we"–I forget if there was any repayment capacity, any repayment to it at all. But the state said, "We'll come in and help finance, or finance, the second Beacon Syphon Tunnel, and it will be on easy terms over a long period, and maybe that will be an impetus to get these guys to sign up for the rest of the project."

So the thing was designed, and it was built. Nobody ever signed up. So that tunnel is sitting there, unused, and those guys decided wheat farming was better.

"A lot of them were pretty large landowners, too, and I don't think they wanted to sell off under the Reclamation law to smaller farms. So it's never been developed, the rest of the project. . . ."

A lot of them were pretty large landowners, too, and I don't think they wanted to sell off under the Reclamation law to smaller farms. So it's never been developed, the rest of the project.

Storey: So this was a situation where we didn't require them to sign in advance?

". . . the *state* was willing to do this up front as an impetus to get the thing going, so the state essentially financed it without any strings attached to it at the time. . . ."

Vissia: Well, this was the state that was financing it. At Reclamation, we dealt with them in terms of trying to give them enough information about what it would cost them to develop the rest of the project in terms of all the canals and tributaries afterwards in their area. We did come up with numbers, and we told them what the repayment stipulations would be. We had some meetings about repayment contracts and so on. But the ***state*** was willing to do this up front as an impetus to get the thing going, so the state essentially financed it without any strings attached to it at the time.

Storey: And they've never gotten any repayment on it? Hmm.

"You drive through there and there are all these wheat farms, and then all of a sudden you get into the project area and you change to all irrigated stuff. . . ."

Vissia: No. And even today, it's still a wheat country. You drive through there and there are

all these wheat farms, and then all of a sudden you get into the project area and you change to all irrigated stuff.

Local Irrigation Districts on the Columbia Basin Project Sabotaged a Wildlife and Fisheries Joint Project of Reclamation and the Nature Conservancy That Would Not Have Cost Them Anything

Another interesting activity at that time was–of course, there was a lot of concern about the environment at that time, as there is today. There was a large rancher that owned I don't know how many acres it was. It was very large, but most of it was in, like, stone quarries and sloughs and a lot of water stuff. It really wasn't any good for irrigation, but it would have made an excellent wildlife area.

The Nature Conservancy was interested in doing something there, and the project officer, Jim Cole, ***and I*** were interested in doing something there, too, to add to some of the other things in terms of wildlife and fisheries that had already resulted as a result of the project. Like Moses Lake is an excellent fishery and recreation area. So I met with the Nature Conservancy, and they said they could put up half the money to buy this ranch and to help develop it into–set it aside as a wildlife fisheries area. And so we put into our program for Congress some money to buy the other half, specifically for fish and wildlife purposes.

It was supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state Fish and Game Department, but the water users shot it down. They went to their Congress, because they were so upset with environmentalists at that time. I forget what the reasons were. But, there were three districts in the Columbia Basin Project, the North, South, and Quincy Districts. Some pretty conservative farmers and hard-nosed boards of directors. They didn't really tell us at that time that we were putting it in there about their opposition. They just sort of quietly went to their congressmen from the area and said, "We don't want to spend the money on this," even though they didn't have to ***pay*** anything for it. They just said, "We don't want it," and they ended up sabotaging it so it never got passed.

Storey: Something that would not have been a reimbursable project for us?

Vissia: No.

Storey: They were just so upset with environmentalists in general and stuff that was going on in those days about Reclamation projects and stuff, so they shot it down.

". . . they had nothing to scream about. Of all the water users in the Bureau of Reclamation, they had one of the sweetest deals of all. . . . As I recall, the power from Grand Coulee subsidized the irrigation program by as much as 80 percent, maybe 90 percent, and the rest was paid for by the water users. They had some *really good* contracts with the Bureau. . . ."

Vissia: I felt they had nothing to scream about. Of all the water users in the Bureau of Reclamation, they had one of the sweetest deals of all. When I was there, I don't think

they paid more than two and a half bucks an acre-foot for water. In fact, as I recall–you'd have to check the numbers. As I recall, the power from Grand Coulee subsidized the irrigation program by as much as 80 percent, maybe 90 percent, and the rest was paid for by the water users. They had some ***really good*** contracts with the Bureau. The power benefits from Grand Coulee are enormous, and paid for most of the irrigation part of the project, too.

Storey: You mentioned Chelan, I think. What were we doing there?

Chelan Project Was Trying to Deal with a Silt Problem in a Sprinkler System

Vissia: We were putting in a pressurized system for basically sprinklers, serving sprinklers for apple orchards and orchards in that area. In terms of design problems, that was one of Denver's major design problems, because there was a lot of silt and sand in that particular watershed, and I think Denver went through two or three different designs. Maybe they're still looking at it, I'm not sure, but they could never seem to resolve the problem of getting this silt and sand into the system, which would, of course, ruin the sprinkler heads because it was abrasive. And the farmers were complaining, and I know we had designers a lot of times to try and get that straightened away. I don't know if they ever got it straightened out fully, but that was a major problem for Denver in its design program.

Storey: Dropping out all the grit.

Vissia: Yeah.

Storey: What were they trying when you were there?

Vissia: Sediment basins, I think. What they were trying to do was put in a sediment basin at the intake there so that it would drop out before it got into the system, as I recall.

Storey: You mentioned a number of other projects, I believe.

Tualatin Project

Vissia: The Tualatin Project was a project just outside of Portland, Beaverton, Oregon. I guess it was basically irrigation, a little flood control, and I can't remember if it had municipal-industrial. It may have had some municipal industrial, too. It was just a nice little reservoir and some other little facilities to distribute the raw water supply.

Storey: Pretty small project, as I recall.

"The problem we had on that project . . . the road around the reservoir, because it also had a nice recreation area . . . inside of two years it sort of just crumbled into like popcorn. . . ."

Vissia: Yeah, it was pretty small. The problem we had on that project, the only one I can remember is the contractor who built the road around the reservoir, because it also had

a nice recreation area, put in this blacktop road, and inside of two years it sort of just crumbled into like popcorn. I mean, it just disintegrated. So we had to go in and replace the road. That was one of the issues there. And the construction engineer, what was his name, on that job ended up spending quite a few years in Saudi Arabia after that, working on I think the saltwater plants there.

Storey: Desalting.

Vissia: Yeah, desalting plants there.

Storey: Now, are you saying that because the road fell apart he was sent, or you're just saying that he moved on in his career.

Vissia: In fact, I think initially even the Bureau was involved. I think it was a Bureau program over there, and he may have then stayed there with the contractor or something, I'm not sure.

Storey: There were some other small projects you mentioned, I believe.

Vissia: We had on the Snake River in Idaho near–what's that town down there in the middle of the state, down on the river? Anyway, there was an old reservoir there that had some safety problems that we had to do some work on.

Storey: Oh, out toward Burley?

Vissia: Yeah. And so that was a small project, to rehabilitate that thing.

Jackson Lake Dam

Then we also had the one in [Grand] Teton National Park that we were working on the designs for replacing it, because it was sitting on sort of a, I guess you would call it, Denver would call it Jell-O, that if they ever had a major earthquake it would collapse.[13] And so Denver looked at several designs for solving that problem, because that's in [Grand] Teton National Park there.

Storey: Yeah, it's on [Jackson] ~~Teton~~ Lake there. It increases the height of the reservoir.

Vissia: It controls the Snake River at that point down. And so that was another project that was in the design phases when I was regional director, and they started construction before I left, I think. Or was I in Denver by then? I don't remember. But that was another program.

Storey: Jackson Lake, I think it's called.

Vissia: Jackson Lake and Dam, right. That was, outside of Teton, which we haven't talked about, were the major construction programs going on.

13. Referring to a phenomenon called liquefaction or soil liquefaction where some soils in an earthquake would lose their ability to support a structure.

Storey: Now, are we talking about rehabbing American Falls?

American Falls Dam

Vissia: Yes, American Falls, that's what it was. That was going on.

Drainage on the Columbia Basin Project

There were some construction activity on the Columbia Basin Project in the irrigation part, too, but nothing major. It was mostly putting in drainage. We put in quite a few field drains, so a lot of drainage program going on on the Columbia Basin Project at that time, too.

Storey: What kind of issues would we have had to face if we had opened up another half million acres of land to irrigation?

Issues Reclamation Would Have Had to Deal with If it Expanded the Columbia Basin Project

Vissia: We certainly would have had environmental issues to face. You would have had repayment issues that might have been more strict than the first half, I mean the second half. That's probably another reason it probably failed is they didn't feel they were getting treated fairly. Why should these guys in this half have this kind of a deal, and now we have to pay more money, because they would have had to pay more.

You would also have had excess land issues to face, water quality issues in terms of runoff from the project. Those are probably the major issues. Also, the whole issue of subsidized water growing subsidized crops would certainly have been an issue, because at that time they grew a lot of the things that weren't considered high value crops–alfalfa and grain and that kind of business.

Storey: Was acreage limitation an issue that you had to deal with?

Vissia: It would have been, yeah, because there were large holdings on that side. Still are.

Storey: But what about in the existing projects? Did that issue come out?

Acreage Limitation Was an Ongoing Issue on the Columbia Basin Project

Vissia: Yeah. In the Columbia Basin Project, it was sort of an ongoing issue, because some of the people there, like Pete Degaris [phonetic], for example, a large landowner there who sort of tried to circumvent the law in a way by the way he dealt out his properties, so we had those kinds of issues. And you had other people that had maybe signed the ten-year thing that then had to get rid of their land after the ten years. So there was an ongoing activity in excess lands on the Columbia Basin Project. It wasn't anything so controversial as it was [that] you just had to keep track of it and make sure that everybody was being legal and so on.

". . . a lot of the lobbying to change the law came from the Columbia Basin Project farmers and districts. . . . Because they wanted to maintain larger acreages. . . ."

Also, a lot of the lobbying to change the law came from the Columbia Basin Project farmers and districts. A lot of the lobbying came from those areas.

Storey: Why would that be?

Vissia: Because they wanted to maintain larger acreages.

Storey: Did they already have larger acreages?

Vissia: Some of them did, yeah, and some wanted to buy more.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 4. JULY 8, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 4. JULY 8, 1996.

Storey: You were saying a lot of the projects . . .

Vissia: The project, when it was first set up, a lot of it was already plotted in 160-acre parcels because it was–I forget if it was up for draw. I think so. I think you could put your name in and you could just go there as a homesteader and start farming. The Bureau has that whole history. A lot of it was already set up that way, but a lot of them wanted to increase their acreage. They wanted to buy more. There were some, apparently, areas in there that had not been plotted out that were still pretty large. So a lot of the emphasis to change the law came from people in that project.

I don't know if you ever knew Jack Unbewust [phonetic].

Storey: No.

Vissia: He was Jim Cole's predecessor, and I think he lives in that little small town up in the mountains just outside of Wenatchee. I think he's retired up there. But if you talk to Jim Cole, he can give you a really good summary of the Columbia Basin Project and all the problems, because he's ***still*** the manager there and has been for some time. He lives in Ephrata, but his office is in Yakima, and I can give you his number before you leave.

Storey: Did acreage limitation occupy a lot of your time?

Vissia: Not much, no.

Storey: So it was pretty much under control, from your perspective?

Montour, Idaho

Vissia: Yes. We had another little project that I forgot about. It wasn't a construction project necessarily, but it was a little reservoir north of Boise on the Payette River that had

been there a long time and had silted up quite a bit. And so when the floods came, the surrounding area would be flooded, and so a lot of the landowners were really getting upset, because we couldn't operate the dam anymore as it was really designed because it had a lot of silt in it, so flooding was a problem.

We set up a public relations program in which we talked to them about what their problems were and what our problems were, and then we came up with some possible solutions. One was to buy their land from them so it could be flooded, and it would be Bureau land. That eventually received most of the support in the area, and except for two landowners, it was well received, and the Bureau ended up buying all of those lands around the reservoir so it could be flooded without affecting people. We had two lawsuits, I think were basically over price. One may have been that he didn't want to leave. I mean, that was his homestead. His family had lived there for years and years, and he didn't want to leave, and it was probably condemned. And one was probably over price. But that was another little kind of an issue we had.

Storey: This wasn't at a little town called Montour, was it?

Vissia: Yeah.

Storey: Oh, it was?

Vissia: Yes.

Storey: I'd forgotten the name of the project there.

Vissia: Yes, that's the Montour Program. A guy by the name of Erickson [phonetic], who was my real estate guy, he did a really good job, I thought, of getting all the stuff together and dealing with the people there, a pretty good job.

Storey: Was the Park Service managing Lake Roosevelt as a recreation area at that time?

Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation Claims to a Portion of Power Revenues at Grand Coulee

Vissia: Yes. And, of course, the Colville Indian tribe[14] was highly involved in their side of the lake.

Lucy Covington

During the time I was regional director, the issue came up that their old treaty had entitled them to part of the power revenues, and I began to meet with Lucy Covington, who at that time was the tribal chief, and she was a very interesting character. I met with her maybe seven-, eight times.

". . . she would spend about fifteen to twenty minutes berating the white man and all the evils of the white man on the Indians and all that stuff, and then we'd

14. The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. Twelve tribes share this reservation.

finally get down to business. . . . usually that's the way she started her meetings with government bureaucrats was just trying to wear them down by making them feel guilty right off the bat so she could get her points in. . . ."

The first two meetings we had, she would spend about fifteen to twenty minutes berating the white man and all the evils of the white man on the Indians and all that stuff, and then we'd finally get down to business. The third time she started in, I said, "Lucy, I've heard this, I've gone through this. Let's just get to the issue." She just smiled, and we got to the issues. But usually that's the way she started her meetings with government bureaucrats was just trying to wear them down by making them feel guilty right off the bat so she could get her points in.

But she was quite sharp, and I enjoyed meeting with her, and I guess eventually they did get–when was it? A few years ago, I think, they were allotted part of the power revenues from Grand Coulee. But it first came up then, and we could find no evidence of it, to start with, but they had some evidence, and I guess later on some more was probably found in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, I suppose, somewhere.

Storey: Were there any other issues with the Colville? Fishing issues or anything like that?

Franklin D. Roosevelt Lake and Other Issues with the Colville Reservation Tribes

Vissia: There were some issues, I think, about recreation and about what they would allow on the lake, and we didn't want it to interfere with operations and stuff. There were some issues there. They weren't too major. I think we resolved most of those pretty easily. But I can remember there were some reservoir land-use issues, or reservoir issues and land-use issues ***adjacent*** to the reservoir that we had to deal with.

Storey: On the Colville side?

Vissia: Yeah, on the Colville side.

Storey: What were the kinds of problems that were going on?

Vissia: Probably the kinds of recreation they wanted to put in and whether it would cause siltation in the lake or whether it would cause problems in terms of operating the reservoir or whatever. I don't recall exactly. They weren't so major, but there were some.

Storey: What about the Park Service? Were there any issues with them that you recall?

Most National Park Service Issues at Franklin D. Roosevelt Lake Never Rose above the Staff Level in the Region

Vissia: No. I don't ever remember even any one issue that I ever dealt with with them. It was usually handled pretty easily by our regional staff, whatever it was.

Storey: What about trespass? Did you have any situations where you had cabins or homes or

anything going on?

Cascade Dam and Lake

Vissia: On, what's the lake?[15]

Governor Cecil Andrus's Cabin Deck Was on Federal Land

There's an old reservoir on which at that time Governor [Cecil] Andrus had a cabin, and his ***deck*** was on Federal land. What's the name of the reservoir that's north of Boise?

Storey: Well, there's Arrowrock up there.

Vissia: No. It's . . .

Storey: Oh, the one up--

Vissia: Warm water.

Storey: What's the name of that? It's a real small reservoir with a small generating unit on it, if it's the one I'm thinking of.

Vissia: It's not up in the mountains. This is more in the valley. The one you're thinking of is–no, it's not that one. I'll have to look at a map and get the name, but I can tell you the story.

He had a cabin on the lake, and at that time I think there was only thirty feet of shoreline that the Bureau owned. There were some erosion problems along that stretch, also. But anyway, part of his cabin was on Federal land, and so we talked to him about it. He said, "Well, when I planned this cabin, laid it out, I met with Regional Director [H. T.] Nelson and he said it was fine. He said you can build your cabin exactly like this, and he personally approved my program." Of course, Nelson was dead, and there wasn't any documentation. We could find no documentation in the records that he and Harold Nelson had ever talked. There was nothing on paper. So here we had this governor, with his cabin partly on Federal land, and it was a political issue. We didn't know ***exactly*** how to do it.

Dealing with Erosion on Cascade Lake

So we ended up, there were some other cabins there, also, along that stretch that weren't on Federal land. They were legal. But there was also some pretty major erosion problems, and they were beginning to ***lose*** some of their land. I forget exactly all the details, but we offered them to buy a flood easement from them and pay them money if we could buy this property along the front of their cabins to maintain, and we would take care of the erosion. So they had the option of doing that, or they could use

15. This likely is Cascade Lake, a reservoir behind Cascade Dam. There are still issues with private holdings at this lake.

all their land, but they had to worry about the erosion. They all opted, except, of course, Andrus, to do that. We went over this plan with him, too. He opted to stay where he was, and he ended up having to spend a fair amount of money putting in a lot of riprap to protect his land because of the erosion problems there.

Again, this Lloyd Erickson, who was my guy who did a good job of coming up with the solution to this problem, because it was a ticklish problem. We only had one landowner that was unhappy, and that was one whose cabin was built– I guess we gave them the option of actually, how was that, actually taking part of the Federal land for their cabin. I forget how. Anyway, somehow he had already built his cabin, and so if these people took this option, they would actually be in front of him, but off to the side. He would still have a view of the lake, but these other people would be just up a little bit further than he would, and he wasn't very happy about it. But he didn't raise too much stink.

A White House aide ordered reclamation to do something illegal at cascade lake "And so we stonewalled on it for about a year . . . Then finally, Watergate came up and solved the problem for us. . . ."

We had another situation on the same lake, and I really should get out the Bureau records to talk about these because of the nature they are. During the Nixon administration, we even got an order from one of his White House aides, I forget which one, [H. R.] Haldeman or one of those guys, that we were to do this thing. It was for a lawyer who was illegal on this lake who was a friend of Haldeman's, and it was strictly against the law to do it. And so we stonewalled on it for about a year and just kept saying, "We're working on it." Then finally, Watergate came up and solved the problem for us. We didn't have to worry about it anymore.

But again, I can't tell the details. I don't want to tell it inaccurately, but it is in the Bureau files. Not all of it's in there, because a lot of it was on the phone. So that was a typical regional director problem, dealing with that kind of stuff.

Storey: How did you spend most of your time in your early years as regional director? What were the issues that reached your attention?

". . . the first couple of years . . . I spent a lot of effort and a lot of time on trying to introduce participative management approaches to the region. . . ."

Vissia: Well, the first couple of years, I would say I spent a lot of effort and a lot of time on trying to introduce participative management approaches to the region. We hired consultants. We set up a major program in developing our ***team*** into a regional team that would really function well. And so we had a lot of joint training sessions, a lot of joint working sessions. We also used the consultant during our working sessions to help us with communicating and providing input, because after Harold Nelson, and even Ed Sullivan, it was pretty much of a very strong regional director dictating what should be done and how it should be done, and I felt, even when I was the planning officer, I did the same thing. I felt that I'm younger than most of these guys. They know their programs better than I do. They've got good ideas. How can I benefit, how

can the region benefit from these guys to help me make decisions that are appropriate? I don't just want to listen to two or three guys and make a dictatorial decision. So we spent a lot of energy and a lot of time on training and developing the managerial staff in the region the first two years to develop this team where we had a lot of trust with each other that they were ***willing*** to argue with me, they were ***willing*** to give me input, and that we would try to resolve problems as a team rather than as just an in-line sort of a thing. So I spent a lot of time doing that, and I think it really worked out well. You'd have to talk to some of the managers, I suppose, in the region to get their opinions, too, but I thought we had a well-functioning group in our region, and I was there another five years to benefit from that effort. So I thought it was a pretty well-functioning team and, by and large, we did a reasonably good job of managing the region. So that was quite a bit of time spent there.

Managing Program Issues and Dealing with Water Users and the Public

But a lot of time just managing program issues on all fronts–O&M issues, construction issues, planning issues, dealing with staff, dealing with water users groups. You'd go out and make lots of presentations, do a lot of meeting with people, trying to find out what their interests are and trying to also explain what the Bureau's role is, what it can do, what it can't do, and helping to resolve problems on existing projects.

Had to Coordinate with Denver on Issues like the Third Powerplant

And, of course, did a lot of coordination with Denver on issues like the Third Powerplant, all the coordination that's required there with design and construction.

There was ". . . a lot of contact with the congressional and the senatorial offices in Idaho to make sure they knew what we were up to and why we were doing it . . ."

Usually, like when there was the Montour issue, very sensitive politically, a lot of contact with the congressional and the senatorial offices in Idaho to make sure they knew what we were up to and why we were doing it, and I think they appreciated that. We didn't get too much static from them as long as we kept them advised. We'd usually do it before we–sometimes we'd go up and say, "This is what we would like to do and what we plan to do," and get their input, even, before we would go too far. So that took some time. And just personnel issues, staff, budget, program kinds of things.

Storey: Um-hmm. Well, we spent another two hours.

Vissia: We sure have.

Storey: I'd like to ask you now whether you're willing for the information on the tapes and the resulting transcripts from today's interview to be used by researchers.

Vissia: Sure. Why not?

Storey: Good. Thank you very much.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 4. JULY 8, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 1. JULY 9, 1996.

Storey: This is Brit Allan Storey, senior historian of the Bureau of Reclamation, interviewing Rodney J. Vissia in his home at 479 Sand Dune Avenue, Southwest, Ocean Shores, Washington, on July the 9th, 1996, at about ten o'clock in the morning. This is tape one.

Yesterday we had just gotten to the point, I think, of talking about Teton Dam and the project there. What was going on when you came to the region as far as Teton was concerned?

Teton Dam Construction

". . . construction started in . . . 1970, and I arrived in '73, so it was about halfway completed when I arrived . . . It was completed in November of '75, and that winter was a very wet winter. . . . and it failed on June 6th, as I recall, 1976, the following spring. . . ."

Vissia: Let's see, construction started in, I believe, 1970, and I arrived in '73, so it was about halfway completed when I arrived. [Robert R.] Robison was the construction engineer. It was completed in November of '75, and that winter was a very wet winter. So the reservoir filled, and we controlled the filling at, I think, 3 feet per–I forget what the rate was, 3 feet per day, because it was a new structure, and it failed on ~~the~~ June 6th, as I recall, 1976, the following spring.

Anyway, during the time of construction, things were going fine. The project was on schedule, and we had a very good construction team up there, had a good contractor, so there weren't any really things that were outstanding in my mind concerning the period of construction. It's only after the 6th of June '76 that, you know, some other things began to happen.

Storey: When you came, do you remember what the sentiment was about the project? Was it a good project, a bad project, an indifferent project?

". . . it probably should have never been authorized. I think it was more of a political project. It was a project that the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District wanted, and they were influential with their local congressmen and senators, and both senators, Church and McClure, supported it. . . ."

Vissia: Well, it probably should have never been authorized. I think it was more of a political project. It was a project that the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District wanted, and they were influential with their local congressmen and senators, and both senators, Church and McClure, supported it.

". . . I've talked to economists since then that either worked on it or reviewed it,

and they said that the benefit-cost ratio was very tight. . . . and indicated that they really had to stretch benefits to make that project feasible. . . ."

I think the feasibility study was finished sometime in '67, probably, and I've talked to economists since then that either worked on it or reviewed it, and they said that the benefit-cost ratio was very tight. It was 1.1-, 1.2 to 1, and indicated that they really had to stretch benefits to make that project feasible.

". . . water use in that area at that time–maybe even today–was very high already. It was up around 10-, 15 acre-feet per acre, which is extremely high for an area. . . ."

For one thing, water use in that area at that time–maybe even today–was very high already. It was up around 10-, 15 acre-feet per acre, which is extremely high for an area. The project was supposed to provide supplemental water to about 112,000 acres and a ***new*** supply, ***full*** supply, to 37,000 acres, and it had a small powerplant and some flood control. But it probably should have not been built.

". . . there was also mostly fishermen, like Trout Unlimited and those people, that really opposed it, because it was considered a blue-ribbon trout stream . . ."

Of course, there was also mostly fishermen, like Trout Unlimited and those people, that really opposed it, because it was considered a blue-ribbon trout stream and they didn't want to see it dammed up, so there was that opposition. But at that time, it wasn't as strong as environmental groups are today, because they were not able to stop it. It was authorized by the Congress.

Storey: Do you remember where you were when you heard that Teton had failed?

Was in Ephrata, Washington, Helping His Fiancée Move to Boise When Teton Dam Failed

Vissia: Yeah. I was in Ephrata, Washington. That was a weekend, and I had gone up, I think, on a Friday night. I think that was the 5th, probably. I went up there because I was packing up my fiancée to move her from Ephrata to Boise. And I didn't tell anybody where I was going. We didn't listen to the news all day, so I had no idea what was going on. And then somebody, I think it was probably Harry Stivers [phonetic], guessed at where I probably was, and he called Jim Cole, the project manager in Ephrata, who then came over in the afternoon and told me that the dam had failed, and also told me that Harry and my public relations officer were already in the area and they were reviewing the situation with the construction engineer and the local authorities to make sure that the warnings got out and all of that kind of stuff was taken [care of]. So I told him I would not be home ***that*** day, but I would be home the next day, since they'd already had things under control.

That day, it was already late in the afternoon, late in the evening, so we took off. I think we stayed in the tri-cities, because we had a U-Haul truck full of ***stuff*** and a couple of kids with us. And then the next day we drove to Boise, and I checked in with

Harry, and it wasn't much that I could do that day. So we unloaded all of our furniture into storage. We had two apartments rented.

It must have been about eleven o'clock at night. My two oldest stepsons wanted to go see what Boise looked like, so they took the car and went out about eleven-thirty or twelve at night, and an hour later we got a call from the hospital that they were in the hospital. A drunk had broadsided them. So we went to the hospital, and fortunately they weren't hurt badly, got them home, and so I went to bed about two or three in the morning.

Met with Governor Cecil Andrus at Six in the Morning on Monday after Teton Dam Failed

And I had a meeting with Governor Andrus at six, so I got up at five, went to meet the governor at six, and then we talked about the situation and what were our plans to do what and how could the state cooperate and work with us. And then Gil Stamm arrived at ten in the morning that day, so we met with him most of the day. I think he only stayed that day and part of the next and left. So it was a tough weekend.

Storey: Yeah, it sounds like it.

Vissia: A lot of personal, as well as work-related, activities going on.

Storey: What did Governor Andrus have to say, besides what you've outlined? Was he upset?

". . . I wouldn't say he was upset. . . . he wanted to know if we knew why or what was going on. Of course, at that time we had no idea, because the contractor had done a good job, the work had been certified by the Bureau inspectors, and so we had no idea why it happened. . . ."

Vissia: No, I wouldn't say he was upset. It was a fact that it had happened, and he wanted to know if we knew why or what was going on. Of course, at that time we had no idea, because the contractor had done a good job, the work had been certified by the Bureau inspectors, and so we had no idea why it happened. We had already taken care of notifying the local authorities to make sure everybody in the path of the flood was warned that it was coming and for their safety, they should evacuate. No, I don't remember him being angry at all. I mean, he was really concerned, of course, extremely concerned, and wanted to know how we could work together to make this thing easier on residents in the area.

Storey: How did Mr. Stamm react?

Gil Stamm ". . . was very serious, and he was kind of distraught, I guess, is the way I would say it, really concerned, because the Bureau had never lost a major structure like that before. . . ."

Vissia: He was very serious, and he was kind of distraught, I guess, is the way I would say it, really concerned, because the Bureau had never lost a major structure like that before.

They came close once, I guess, in Wyoming,[16] but as far as I know, they had never lost a major structure, so I think it was kind of a blow to him that, here he is, the leader of Reclamation, and we've had a major failure. So he was really concerned from that standpoint. But then we quickly went on to, okay, what do we do about it, and how do we handle this, and worked on plans for rectifying the situation.

Storey: How did the people in the Boise office react?

In the Boise office ". . . it was total devastation. It was like a death in the family. Poor Robison, the construction engineer, I don't think he was ever the same . . . when he came to Boise, it was like he was just mourning a death and he was deflated, and he retired as soon as he could. . . ."

Vissia: Well, it was total devastation. It was like a death in the family. Poor Robison, the construction engineer, I don't think he was ever the same since, because after that he became the chief of the Construction Division in Boise, and he used to be a really gung-ho, energetic, fiery guy and extremely good employee. I mean, he was a topnotch individual, a topnotch engineer. But when he came to Boise, it was like he was just mourning a death and he was deflated, and he retired as soon as he could. After that, I think he went into business for himself for a while on a couple of ventures in Utah, and I've sort of lost track of him since then. But it really did affect him a lot.

It was a project in our region. The employees felt it was a good program, and everything was going fine. They liked the staff there. It was just pretty devastating.

". . . when we put together the program to repay for the damages, we asked for volunteers from all over the Bureau to come and assist, and it was *amazing* the amount of help we got and the amount of offers. . . ."

In fact, I think a lot of the Bureau felt that way, because when we put together the program to repay for the damages, we asked for volunteers from all over the Bureau to come and assist, and it was ***amazing*** the amount of help we got and the amount of offers. I mean, people came and stayed for long periods of time and assisted us in the claims program.

Very Proud of the Way Reclamation Responded to the Disaster and to Establishment of the Claims Program

Even though it was a disaster, that was one of the things I was most ***proud*** of in terms of the Bureau was the ***way*** the Bureau responded, the way the staff from all over the Bureau responded in coming and putting together this program to work this out, and also the way management responded at the higher levels, because in the claims program they essentially said, "We want this to go well.

16. Referring to a similar issue on another embankment dam– Fontanelle Dam, on the Green River (Seedskadee Project), in southwestern Wyoming which began to show a wet spot September 3-4, 1965. By September 6th the leak was quite serious and piping. Barney Bellport, chief engineer, set about draining the reservoir. By the evening of the 6th enough water had drained to make the situation safe. Reclamation subsequently corrected the issue.

". . . they pretty much gave us the freedom to set up the program the way we thought was *best* and to handle it the way we thought was best, which was quite unlike most government programs. . . ."

We don't want you to be pickayunish," and they pretty much gave us the freedom to set up the program the way we thought was ***best*** and to handle it the way we thought was best, which was quite unlike most government programs. You have a lot of rules and regulations you have to follow. In this case, they said, "It's up to you. You need to do what you think is best to get this thing done."

". . . the original estimates by newspapers . . . said, 'Damages have got to be in the order of $1 to $2 billion, maybe up to 3.' I think at the end of the program we settled the whole thing for a little over . . . $300 million . . ."

And the original estimates by newspapers–and I don't know where they got their estimates, but they said, "Damages have got to be in the order of $1 to $2 billion, maybe up to 3." I think at the end of the program we settled the whole thing for a little over $300,000.

Storey: Three hundred ***thousand***?

Vissia: Excuse me, $300 million, I'm sorry. $300 million. Basically what we did is, we laid out some guidelines to our people in the field that were handling the claims and said, "If it sounds reasonable to you from your inspection, from your interviews, pay it. Don't quibble about it."

". . . most of the people there, I thought, were, even though they had been damaged, they were very straightforward and, I thought, quite fair. They weren't trying to steal from the government. We only had, I think, two or three cases where we ended up questioning, and maybe one or two we actually went to court with because we felt that the guy was trying to gouge Uncle Sam. . . ."

And in most cases, most of the people there, I thought, were, even though they had been damaged, they were very straightforward and, I thought, quite fair. They weren't trying to steal from the government. We only had, I think, two or three cases where we ended up questioning, and maybe one or two we actually went to court with because we felt that the guy was trying to gouge Uncle Sam. All the rest of them, we pretty much accepted what the people gave us. A lot of them had some verification in terms of paperwork and receipts, but a lot of it was not. It was just their word. So we told our people in the field, "If it sounds good to you from your inspection and conversations, accept it, pay it."

"So we had very little trouble, and I think we made a pretty good name for the Bureau in the area just because of that. Even though it was a catastrophe, it was still the fact that we treated them properly, and we did it in a pretty rapid manner. It didn't take long to get payments done, either. . . ."

So we had very little trouble, and I think we made a pretty good name for the

Bureau in the area just because of that. Even though it was a catastrophe, it was still the fact that we treated them properly, and we did it in a pretty rapid manner. It didn't take long to get payments done, either. So the legislation that was set up, and the delegation of authority to the region to handle it the way we thought best, and the speedy payment was a success of the program for rehabilitation.

Storey: At first, I suppose there were a lot of reporters and things.

Vissia: Oh, yeah.

Storey: And that would have been before Congress had authorized any payments, I presume. What was that like?

Dealing with Media and the Press over Failure of Teton Dam

Vissia: Well, it wasn't too bad, depending on the reporters. As you know, some reporters have their own agendas. And I was on one or two television programs, and one was a local reporter that was not anti-Bureau. He was probably neutral, so it wasn't too difficult. He just asked questions about a lot of people wanted to know ***why*** and whose fault was it, of course, and that kind of stuff.

A couple of other reporters, who were anti-Reclamation, they asked some tougher questions. You had to be quite careful about how you answered that. A lot of them tried to sort of like blame it on the Bureau, why did you ever authorize to build this project? Our response is, we didn't authorize it. Congress authorizes. All we do is carry out Congress's will, and we were trying to follow the law and build it according to the authorization. And I think some reporters maybe don't even ***know*** that process. I don't know, but it was sort of like the Bureau of Reclamation was the one that dreamed it up. Somehow we were able to get the money on our own and to construct it, like there wasn't any other people involved in the process. So there was that kind of thing to deal with. They all, of course, wanted to know estimates of damages and how many people died and all that kind of stuff.

Senators Church and McClure Held a Hearing on the Failure of Teton Dam in Idaho Falls

Then there was also a congressional hearing not too long afterwards. There was one in Idaho Falls conducted by Senators Church and McClure, and I thought Senator McClure was the better of the two in terms of the questions he asked, because I was put on the hot seat and had to answer quite a few questions. He was mostly asking questions about how it happened and why it happened and how we dealt with it afterwards and so on.

". . . even though Church had supported the project originally, it was sort of like he was trying to place the blame elsewhere. He didn't want to be associated with it. . . ."

But ***Church***, even though Church had supported the project originally, it was

sort of like he was trying to place the blame elsewhere. He didn't want to be associated with it. He asked me one question, as I recall, that said, "Well, maybe because the Bureau can't do things properly, maybe we ought to take total responsibility away from the Bureau, that these kinds of structures should be designed and built by other people, by private sector or whatever."

I did not want to be trapped into being defensive, so I said, "Well, that's an option. It could be looked at, I'm sure," was my response, because I didn't want to get into the–he was just there to, I think, try to get the Bureau to be defensive and to make us look like the bad guys, and I wasn't going to be trapped into that. So I didn't care much for the way he handled the hearing, but McClure, I thought, did a pretty good job.

Investigations into the Failure of Teton Dam and Trying to Assess Blame

Those kinds of things are the result. Then, of course, we had two teams of technical people to come and review the dam and what happened. I remember also, getting back to the interviews, one of the questions was, "Well, whose fault is it? Did the contractor screw up, or the Bureau, or . . .?"

I said, "Well, we don't know exactly the cause, but at this point we certainly can't blame the contractor, because we, the Bureau, have approved everything he's done so far. We've said they've done everything so far and according to specifications, so you certainly can't pin it on them, unless we find something new. We'll have to wait until there's an investigation to see what the cause is."

"But a lot of times you get these kinds of questions before you even had a chance to review the situation–whose fault is it and who's to blame and so on. You have to think about how you respond to those things when you go through those interviews and hearings and so on. It's tough. . . ."

But a lot of times you get these kinds of questions before you even had a chance to review the situation–whose fault is it and who's to blame and so on. You have to think about how you respond to those things when you go through those interviews and hearings and so on. It's tough.

Storey: What kinds of investigations were started? Did you start an investigation? How did that work?

Investigations into the Failure of Teton Dam

Vissia: The Bureau had one, and then there was the independent panel of experts. I guess that was probably set up by–who? The Secretary of Interior, maybe. I don't recall now. Bob Jansen, I think, was on that one independent panel, and then we had some university professors. They were organized basically, I guess, by the Department of Interior, and the Bureau organized one itself, and they looked at everything. They looked at all the construction records, they looked at the designs, they, of course, reviewed the site physically and did some additional, I think, even some additional maybe field work, gathering data and so on.

"They both put out reports in which they– essentially it was a Bureau design issue in the way that the right key way was excavated from the canyon wall and the way the structure sat in and related to the key way. . . . it made some adverse pressures at a particular key point which caused the core to crack . . ."

They both put out reports in which they– essentially it was a Bureau design issue in the way that the right key way was excavated from the canyon wall and the way the structure sat in and related to the key way. I guess it made some adverse pressures at a particular key point which caused the core to crack, the compacted earth core of the dam to crack.

Storey: That's the impervious core?

Vissia: Um-hmm. Yeah. Once the water starts, I mean, you know, with that much pressure, you know how water erodes. It doesn't take long for it to erode. And we lost a large Cat, because there was a guy out there trying to fill up the hole as water was coming through the other side, and he had to abandon the Cat and the Cat went down in the hole and down the river. It was tough. I think that was one of the toughest parts for Robison, too, that he was there and he was doing everything he could to try to stop it, but the reservoir was so full of water, there was no way to evacuate it in time to get it down because it eroded so quickly. So they had machines out there trying to stop it, and poor Robby was out there watching all this. It was just a total devastation for him, I'm sure.

Storey: Did both the Reclamation and the independent panels arrive at the same conclusions?

Vissia: I think so. I think they did, but, again, I'm not sure. Well, the independent panel, that's where they arrived.

Storey: Did you have any reason to think they went astray?

Vissia: No. Well, first of all, I'm not a design engineer; and, secondly, I thought they had done quite a thorough task of reviewing everything that was available and talked to lots of people. They had various expertise on their panel. They had geologists, they had designers, they had all of the experts that you normally have when you are concerned with the construction and design of a dam. So I felt they had considered all the material, all the evidence they could find, and they spent quite a while going over it. So, no, I had no reason to doubt what they came out with. I don't think anybody else did. I don't know of anybody that's argued with it. Did Denver argue with it?

Storey: Well, I had heard that there were individuals. I think John Keys told me there were individuals who thought there was an earthquake.

Vissia: An earthquake?

Storey: That had caused the problem, in Denver.

Vissia: There certainly wasn't any evidence of it that I know.

Storey: When they went in to salvage the generation units, that these folks came up from Denver to check out the seismographs that were in there, but the materials had been destroyed by the damp and the flooding.

Vissia: Well, but there are other seismographs in the area that they certainly could have checked. If there had been one, certainly the panel would have found it.

Storey: It should have shown up, yeah.

Vissia: Yeah. Sure.

Storey: Mr. Robison was an older gentleman at that time?

Vissia: No, he wasn't. He was a young man. He must have been in his forties.

Storey: But you said he retired, I think.

Vissia: Yeah. He must have been in his late forties, I suppose, and then he retired just as soon as he– maybe even took early retirement, I don't know. I know he retired just as soon as he could, so he had to be fifty-five or less. Maybe it was even early retirement, I'm not sure. But he was not an older guy, no.

Storey: Was that after you left? That he retired, I mean.

Vissia: No. I think he probably retired around 1979-, '80, maybe, three or four years later or so. He must have been close to fifty, I guess. That's not old.

Storey: Yeah. It's all relative.

Vissia: Yeah, right. At least he certainly didn't act like an old man. I mean, he really was a very energetic, topnotch employee, one of the ***best*** ones we had in the region.

Storey: Let's talk about setting up the claims process. As I recall, there were three offices. Who was running those offices, and how did they get selected?

Reclamation's Claims Offices

Neil Stessman

Vissia: Let's see. Neil Stessman[17] was one. I think he had the Idaho Falls office. And then we had an administrative officer from Coulee, whose name I can't remember, ran one of the smaller offices. I forget who the third person was.

The reason they were selected was because–well, the one from Coulee was an excellent administrative officer, and he was trained in administrative affairs. He'd also worked in contract administration, so he had that kind of a background, and he was a

17. Reclamation's oral history program includes interviews with Neil Stessman.

good employee.

"Neil Stessman was selected because he was one of the best managers that we had in the region, and we felt that he could do a good job. . . ."

Neil Stessman was selected because he was one of the best managers that we had in the region, and [we] felt that he could do a good job. They wanted to put the best people there who, one, could relate to the public, could relate to employees from all over the Bureau that were coming to be there, and were good managers in order to manage and coordinate the program.

Storey: I think Frank Dimick[18] was one of them.

Vissia: Okay. Probably was.

Storey: Yeah. Do you remember any of the stories about claims, claimants? Were you personally involved in any of that?

Vissia: Well, no. I probably heard stories and I met with them frequently and I went to the field several times during that, but I can't recall any specific stories that are outstanding in my mind. I'm sure the people that were there in the field certainly can remember.

Storey: What about meetings? Did you go out and do public meetings or anything after this?

Vissia: In concern with the claims program?

Storey: Yeah.

Vissia: Not too many. I mean, we pretty much announced the program through the media and to organizations in the area, and laid out what the procedures were, and invited them to come to the offices. I can't remember that we had any. I may have gone to a couple of meetings. I don't remember now, again. See, twenty years ago. I can't remember any. There may have been one or two that I could remember where we had public meetings in which we explained the situation.

A lot of it was just done locally with local organizations through the news media and setting up the offices and keeping the whole area informed as to where ***we*** were going, what we were doing, and what ***they*** should do to put forth their claims.

Storey: How did Keith Higginson figure into all of this, as the state engineer?

". . . once the claims program got started, the state wasn't really that involved. . . . they were satisfied that we were doing a good job and they weren't getting any complaints, so they really didn't see a need to get involved. . . ."

Vissia: Well, once the claims program got started, the state wasn't really that involved. I mean, they didn't get that involved, because they were satisfied that we were doing a

18. Reclamation's oral history program includes interviews with Frank Dimick.

good job and they weren't getting any complaints, so they really didn't see a need to get involved. I suppose if we had screwed up and we weren't doing a very good job, they would have got a lot more involved. We kept the state informed in what was going on, but otherwise . . .

Storey: Do you remember anything about sort of immediate concerns Reclamation might have had for restoring water service downstream? Of course, a flood like that takes out a lot of the irrigation works and so on.

Vissia: We may have even had some emergency work going on. Again, my memory is bad in that respect. But I think we probably did have some emergency construction work going on to repair some of the key canals or water facilities to maintain service. I'm sure we did.

Storey: While you were there, did anybody come back and say, "Let's rebuild Teton?"

"The Fremont-Madison Irrigation District came back and they wanted to get going again right away, *but* it just wasn't in the cards at that point. . . ."

Vissia: Yeah. The Fremont-Madison Irrigation District came back and they wanted to get going again right away, ***but*** it just wasn't in the cards at that point. In fact, I don't think they could even [get] the support of their local congressman anymore.

Storey: Was there a particular person involved, that you remember?

Vissia: There was an old guy who was the, I think he was actually the chairman of the board, and I can't remember his name. He was a very strong personality in the area, a rancher. I don't remember his name, but he was probably in his seventies, a white-haired gentleman. He was a pretty strong proponent. He wanted to get going again.

Storey: Did they take any of the heat for the failure?

Vissia: No. I mean, they weren't in any way responsible. It was a project being built ***for*** them, but they weren't in any way responsible for the failure.

Storey: What about the money situation? First, I presume there was a repayment contract for the project.

Vissia: Right.

Storey: But, what, we never delivered water, so there was never any collection.

Vissia: Yep, null and void after that.

Storey: But they wanted to rebuild. Were they thinking about how the money was going to work then?

Vissia: Well, I don't recall, because it probably didn't get that far in terms of, "Okay, if we

rebuild, your repayment contract is going to change." I'm sure their position would be, "Well, it wasn't our fault it failed, and so we should be able to get the water for the same price as our original repayment agreement."

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1. JULY 9, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JULY 9, 1996.

Storey: So they were hoping . . .

Vissia: It's like buying a new car. You buy a new car and you're essentially under warranty and the engine blows up, you shouldn't have to buy another new car. The company should make it good. In fact, that even was their position, as I recall. They said, "Well, you guys are the ones that screwed up. You owe us this project. We agreed to pay for it, and you should rebuild it. I mean, we're under contract." I think they may have–I don't know if they ever went to court or if they simply went to Congress, I forget. As I recall, that was one of their positions, that, "You owe us this project. It was being built for us. We signed an agreement. It wasn't our fault it failed, so now you need to replace it. I mean, that's part of the agreement."

Again, my memory is hazy. I'd have to check the Bureau records. You probably know more about it than I do at this point, if you read the records.

Storey: Not really.

Vissia: If you went through the records, especially in the region, I'm sure you could get some details on that. Or if you talk to–I'd suggest you talk to Harry Stivers. He might have a better memory than I do. He seems to on stuff like that. Or even Bill Lloyd.[19] Well, of course, he was there afterwards. He probably doesn't recall that. Neil Stessman might also be a good one to ask about that, if you haven't talked to him yet.

Storey: Yeah, I have talked to Neil.

Vissia: He might remember some of those characters and some of the details, too.

Storey: What was happening to Reclamation as a result of Teton, that you saw as regional director?

Vissia: As a result of Teton?

Storey: Yeah, if anything.

The Effects of the Failure of Teton Dam on Reclamation

Vissia: Well, the Bureau at that time had essentially accomplished its main goal. That was to develop the West, and they essentially had ***done*** most of that. I mean, let's face it.

19. Reclamation's oral history program includes interviews with Lester (Bill) W. Lloyd, regional director both in the Upper Missouri Basin Region in Billings from 1978 to 1980 and then in the Pacific Northwest Region from 1980 until 1986.

Most of the reservoirs had been ***built*** that could be built and major systems had been ***built*** and the West had been ***won***, and the Bureau's role was changing.

"Even though the Bureau didn't recognize it as quickly as they should have, the Bureau's role was changing, and Teton certainly wasn't, I don't think, a big factor in that particular change in the environment and in the role of the Bureau. . . ."

Even though the Bureau didn't recognize it as quickly as they should have, the Bureau's role was changing, and Teton certainly wasn't, I don't think, a big factor in that particular change in the environment and in the role of the Bureau.

"It may have tarnished the Bureau's image a little bit . . . Even today, when you go overseas . . . the Bureau still has a *lot* of respect in countries that I go to because of what they did in the field of irrigation, and quite often, just because I worked for the Bureau a lot, I have a better chance of getting a job sometimes . . ."

It may have tarnished the Bureau's image a little bit because they were known–still are– worldwide as one of the premier agencies in the field of irrigation. Even today, when you go overseas–because I do work overseas a lot–the Bureau still has a ***lot*** of respect in countries that I go to because of what they did in the field of irrigation, and quite often, just because I worked for the Bureau a lot, I have a better chance of getting a job sometimes in foreign countries than other engineers might who never worked for the Bureau, just because they have that much respect for what the Bureau's done. I don't think Teton had that big of effect on things, I really don't.

Storey: It didn't change the way things were done internally or anything?

". . . Denver immediately started to . . . set up some new review procedures of all of their major designs to try and avert something slipping through the cracks. . . ."

Vissia: Well, Denver immediately started to set up different review procedures. They had procedures then, but they decided that they needed to tighten them up. And so, yes, the Denver office set up some new review procedures of all of their major designs to try and avert something slipping through the cracks.

"In this case, Harold Arthur was the one that got pinned for this, but I'm not sure that is appropriate, because as you know, later on I had that same job, and there's no way that the assistant commissioner for engineering and research can check all the designs of major structures. I mean, all he can do is rely on his staff to do it properly and the senior technical staff check it. . . ."

In this case, Harold Arthur[20] was the one that got pinned for this, but I'm not sure that is appropriate, because as you know, later on I had that same job, and there's no way that the assistant commissioner for engineering and research can check all the designs of major structures. I mean, all he can do is rely on his staff to do it properly

20. Reclamation's oral history program includes interviews with Harold Arthur who also discusses this situation.

and the senior technical staff check it.

"Sure, the boss is always responsible, but nevertheless, when you really think about it, the guys that are responsible for the actual technical design are *those* that design it and those that check the *actual* technical design. . . ."

Sure, the boss is always responsible, but nevertheless, when you really think about it, the guys that are responsible for the actual technical design are ***those*** that design it and those that check the ***actual*** technical design.

"So the process, yes, was changed and made more–well, it was more time consuming, naturally, because you had more checks along the way, but that's probably appropriate . . ."

When I was there, perhaps one of the things that came out was they would have meetings, technical meetings, at different points along the process in which various experts in the Bureau or in Denver would sit there and they'd go through what was being done, how it was being done, and anybody could ask questions and they would check things, or they'd say, "This isn't right," or "You need to look at this," or whatever. So the process, yes, was changed and made more–well, it was more time consuming, naturally, because you had more checks along the way, but that's probably appropriate, you know.

Storey: You were there for four years after Teton, roughly?

Vissia: Yeah. It failed in '76, the spring of '76, and I left in the spring of '80.

Storey: In the meantime, Bob Jansen was appointed as "chief engineer," assistant commissioner for engineering and research,[21] to replace Harold Arthur. What was that like, and how did people in Reclamation react to that? He was an outsider becoming the guru.

Vissia: I don't know how the people in Denver felt about that. I guess you'd have to ask them. In the region, I don't remember any big outcry, either. I guess they would have rather seen somebody from Reclamation selected, but I don't remember any great groundswell of emotion about it.

Storey: How did his term as chief engineer go?

Vissia: In what respect?

Storey: In any respect.

21. Reclamation created the position of "chief engineer" in 1902 and abolished its successor position in 1994. From August 1948 until February 1963 the chief engineer also carried the title "assistant commissioner." February 1963 to February of 1978 the office carried the official title of director, Office of Design and Construction. In February of 1978 the title changed to "assistant commissioner for engineering and research" (ACER), and that title was abolished in October of 1994 and not replaced with a comparable title or position. Regardless of the official title, the position, within Reclamation, was commonly/colloquially referred to as "chief engineer."

"I had a hard time communicating with him [Bob Jansen] personally. I thought he was a difficult person to communicate with. He seemed to be–he just didn't express himself very much. I always felt like I never really knew what he was thinking or what his position was . . ."

Vissia: Well, I suppose he was probably responsible for setting up some new guidelines and rules for reviewing designs so that Teton kind of thing didn't happen again. Again, I don't know how the people in Denver thought about him. I had a hard time communicating with him personally. I thought he was a difficult person to communicate with. He seemed to be–he just didn't express himself very much. I always felt like I never really knew what he was thinking or what his position was, and if his staff felt that way, it must have been a little difficult for them, too, I'm not sure.

In terms of how it affected the region, I don't think it necessarily slowed down Denver's output to the region or created any other problems.

". . . there was some major reorganization reviews and efforts, and I was involved in those efforts . . . Keith Higginson was the one that required it . . . one of the very key issues, that I suppose still upsets or concerns a lot of people, is the whole issue of the function of construction and who should be responsible for it, and that's when it changed. . . ."

What did happen in those four years, however, was the fact that there was some major reorganization reviews and efforts, and I was involved in those efforts, along with others. Keith Higginson was the one that required it, and, of course, at that time one of the very key issues, that I suppose still upsets or concerns a lot of people, is the whole issue of the function of construction and who should be responsible for it, and that's when it changed.

". . . the responsibility for construction and all of its activities was delegated to the regions. Design basically stayed in Denver. Denver became more of a service unit rather than a line type of a activity . . . Research could be considered as a service, and the other functions in Denver were either services or technical reviews for top management. . . . dam safety . . . was set up, and that was still a responsibility in Denver."

Because during those four years, the responsibility for construction and all of its activities was delegated to the regions. Design basically stayed in Denver. Denver became more of a service unit rather than a line type of a activity, because they were furnishing designs as a service. Research could be considered as a service, and the other functions in Denver were either services or technical reviews for top management. And then, of course, dam safety came up, and that was a new organization that was set up, and that was still a responsibility in Denver.

So during those four years, a lot happened. There was new procedures set up in Denver as a major reorganization in terms of delegation of authority for construction, which was still pretty large and pretty important at that time.

Storey: I thought you told me the other day that the delegation of construction responsibility to the regions came while you were chief engineer. Did I misunderstand?

". . . the Senior Executive Service was instituted, and . . . Keith Higginson decided that one of the aspects of the senior service people is that they should be able to be transferred wherever the boss wanted them to go . . . so he decided to make a major transfer of people around, and that's the time Joe Hall left and went to WAPA because he didn't want to leave Denver . . . and I was told that I should move to Denver and become the engineering chief. . . ."

Vissia: Just before I became chief engineer. I was one of the persons on whatever group we had that were reviewing all that, and we made the recommendations while I was still regional director that that's the way it should be. Also about that time, as I recall, the Senior Executive Service was instituted, and also during that four years is when Keith Higginson decided that one of the aspects of the senior service people is that they should be able to be transferred wherever the boss wanted them to go, and Keith Higginson wanted to exercise that. And so he decided to make a major transfer of people around, and that's the time Joe Hall left and went to WAPA [Western Area Power Administration] because he didn't want to leave Denver, and Billy Martin, he didn't want to move, and I was told that I should move to Denver and become the engineering chief.

". . . the actual delegation of authority for construction was done just before I went to Denver. That's one of the reasons Don Duck left . . ."

But, no, the actual delegation of authority for construction was done just before I went to Denver. That's one of the reasons Don Duck left, because it had already been done, and when I got there, I think he was already shopping around for other jobs to get out, because when I got there, he was my assistant and he asked me, "Would you help me get out of here if I want to get out of here?"

I said, "Sure." Because he wasn't eligible to retire at fifty-five, but one thing we could do was abolish his job and he could take early retirement, which when he finally–[Tape interruption.]

". . . Don was talking to various companies, and when he finally worked out a deal with Harza, why, I abolished his job, because I really didn't care too much to have assistants anyway. I always felt that the division chiefs, who reported to me anyways, was a better mode of management to deal directly with them rather than through an assistant or with an assistant. . . ."

At any rate, Don was talking to various companies, and when he finally worked out a deal with Harza, why, I abolished his job, because I really didn't care too much to have assistants anyway. I always felt that the division chiefs, who reported to me anyways, was a better mode of management to deal directly with them rather than through an assistant or with an assistant. I always felt that the division chiefs are responsible for their jobs, and I'm supervising and managing them, so let's have direct contact.

Well, anyway, the job was abolished and he went to Harza as the head of their Construction Division to start with, ended up as president of the board.

Storey: The four years that you were still in the region, was a lot of your time devoted to Teton or were there a lot of other activities, also? How did that work in that period?

During the Remainder of His Time in Boise, a Good Deal of Time Was Devoted to the Claims Program

Vissia: Well, yeah, a lot of time was devoted to the claims program, because there was always–the management tasks after Teton was to make sure that we could get people from throughout the Bureau, and we would select the people. We would set up their assignments in terms of assignments, and we'd have to give them a little training, we'd have to give them some job descriptions, and, of course, all these people are away from home. So just the personnel management aspects were pretty intense.

". . . make sure that the claims were being handled properly, that the local citizens were being handled appropriately, and that they were getting a fair shake, but at the same time, the government wasn't being taken advantage of. . . ."

Then to make sure that the claims were being handled properly, that the local citizens were being handled appropriately, and that they were getting a fair shake, but at the same time, the government wasn't being taken advantage of. And so you had those kinds of things, plus trying to also keep the media happy when they would ask about what was going on, and to make sure that when you prepared the budget for the next year or so that you had in there appropriate funds. You have to estimate what the claims are going to be and make sure the funds are in there; also, to insure that the process for repaying went rapidly so that people didn't have to wait for the money. Yeah, there was a lot of effort put into that claims program.

Storey: When the SES came up, my understanding is you were given a choice of staying under the old system or joining SES. Was that true in your case?

Went into the Senior Executive Service Program

Vissia: Well, I don't recall. I don't recall.

Storey: But you went SES?

Vissia: Oh, yeah.

Storey: What grade were you before that? What was a regional director's grade?

Vissia: I think I was a 16. Yeah, I'm sure I was. I was a 16 when I went into SES, and then I went in at Step 4 in the SES program.

Storey: Which is the highest or the next to the highest or the lowest?

Vissia: No. One is the lowest, and I think six or seven– doesn't it have seven steps?

Storey: I've forgotten, to be honest.

". . . *I* liked it for a couple of reasons. . . . salaries were supposed to be higher. . . . there was also the opportunity that if you really did a good job, you could be rewarded with a cash award, and I always felt that that was a good incentive as part of the program. And I didn't have any problem with moving. I never had a problem with moving. . . ."

Vissia: It was halfway, I guess. No, ***I*** liked it for a couple of reasons. One is, naturally the salaries were supposed to be higher. It didn't turn out to be as great as they had preached it would be. But there was also the opportunity that if you really did a good job, you could be rewarded with a cash award, and I always felt that that was a good incentive as part of the program. And I didn't have any problem with moving. I never had a problem with moving. That wasn't a deal with me. Some regional directors, that was a stickler with them. They didn't want to move.

Storey: Do you remember how you were approached about moving to Denver? Did you get a telegram?

Keith Higginson Called Him about Moving to Denver "'Do you want to do this?' I'm hazy again on the details, because Jansen was still there. He had to be moved out, and he was put into a new position that was created called the assistant commissioner for dam safety. . . ."

Vissia: No, a phone call. Keith called me up, I'm sure, talked to me and said, "Do you want to do this?" I'm hazy again on the details, because Jansen was still there. He had to be moved out, and he was put into a new position that was created called the assistant commissioner for dam safety.

Why He Thinks He Was Chosen to Be Assistant Commissioner for Engineering and Research

I guess as part of the reorganization, the part of changing construction and so on, it was decided that he should not, that maybe he should be a regional director or somebody else should be the assistant commissioner for engineering and research to make sure that the new organization worked according to the plan, because if you left the old guy in, who, I'm sure, favored the original program of construction being handled by Denver, it would never work. You have to have somebody there who agrees with the concept to make it work. So I think the rationale was, probably, "Okay, we'll put somebody who's a strong advocate of construction being in the regions in there to try to make this program work." And I was a strong advocate of it. I thought that at that point in time in the Bureau that the regions should have the line authority for ***all*** activities, not just some of them, and that Denver should be a service center, serving the regions. So I'm pretty sure that's the rationale, and so that's the way Keith presented it.

Storey: Tell me more about why you were such a strong advocate for the regions.

Why He Was Such a Strong Supporter of Construction Contracting Going to the Regions

Vissia: Well, I guess because of my background in management training, and it's just natural that you have sort of clean lines of authority and clean lines of delegation, but also to try to reduce some of the problems that did exist between Denver and the regions in terms of making the construction program fit with the other issues and problems that regions have in terms of the politics, in terms of personnel, in terms of the local water users, and so on. So, I guess those were the primary reasons.

Storey: So in '80 you moved to Denver.

". . . moved to Denver, *early* in 1980. . . . one of the first things I did was to try to do what I did in the region, and that was to try to again institute a participative management approach. . . . one of my guilty feelings about leaving when I did was I hadn't finished that process. "

Vissia: In 1980, moved to Denver, ***early*** in 1980. Don Duck left. I remember one of the first things I did was to try to do what I did in the region, and that was to try to again institute a participative management approach. I had lots of meetings with staff, and we had a consultant come in and we tried to get their input as to how they felt about the way things were going, the organization, their work process. In fact, one of my guilty feelings about leaving when I did was I hadn't finished that process. I was still in the midst of it, and I thought I at least should have had some closure on that before I left, but it didn't work out that way.

". . . Denver had really a lot of talent, but some of the complaints of people in Denver are that they're stuck in these little technical boxes here, and a lot of the designers, even the researchers, were never able to go to the field. . . ."

I felt that Denver had really a lot of talent, but some of the complaints of people in Denver are that they're stuck in these little technical boxes here, and a lot of the designers, even the researchers, were never able to go to the field. They had very specific work. In fact, it reminded me of the jobs I had in the Shell Oil Company and North American Aviation. You're sitting in this very confined little group, doing the same very technical job every day, and I thought there's got to be a way that somehow we can give these people a little more incentive or a little more way to improve their job and the way they work, and I'm sure they've got some ideas about that.

Is that thing annoying? [Tape recorder turned off.]

Storey: You were talking about the Denver office and its compartmentalization, I think.

Tried the Idea of Setting up Teams to Work on Some Projects

Vissia: Yeah. We had a lot of good ideas out of the employees. In fact, as a result of that we

even did set up some team kind of arrangements. We tried to do that when we had a project that had several kinds of disciplines that had to go into it. We tried to set it up so that people would be assigned to a team according to their expertise. They didn't work on the team full time necessarily, but when they were needed, we expected them to provide their input to that particular activity.

It has its problems, too, because if you have an organization with these different boxes and now you're taking people from underneath ***these*** managers and you're assigning them to a team leader part time, and yet the managers of those boxes still are the employee's main supervisor. So it's got some wrinkles in it, but we did try that, and it seemed to work reasonably well. And we made some other organizational changes in terms of trying to put functions together a little better.

Storey: What other kinds of issues did you have to deal with in the Denver office?

Issues Raised by the Commissioner's Decision to Create an Assistant Commissioner for Dam Safety

Vissia: Well, immediately there was the issue of the dam safety thing. It was a little bit embarrassing, actually, because when I came there Jansen was still in the office which they said ***I*** was supposed to have, so I sat in a vacant office there for probably a week while he moved his stuff over to a ***new*** office they were fixing up for him in the opposite corner of the 14th floor, and then he moved there.

Then there was, of course, the issue of how do these two assistant commissioners coordinate their work activities, because dam safety is closely related to engineering and research and the design section, and also what staff do you assign to him and what staff stays with the [assistant] commissioner for engineering and research. So that was a thing. But that only lasted, as I recall, less than a year, because Jansen left. They abolished the position, and they made dam safety a division underneath the assistant commissioner for engineering and research.

Moving the Safety of Dam Program Back under the Assistant Commissioner for Engineering and Research

That was another new program, a major program, and so there was quite a bit of time spent on dam safety when I got there to get it up and running and organized. I mean, Jansen did quite a bit of that when he was there, but then when he left, of course, it was then folded in under me, and so I got that responsibility and it became a pretty major program. As you know, the results of that have been some new authorizations for rehabilitation of dams, like the ones down in the Salt River Project and so on.

Storey: And they were, I think, surprised to find out what a high percentage of the service center's work the dam safety was in the last reorganization.

Vissia: That was a pretty major workload, because there was a lot of stuff that needed to be done.

Storey: A lot of things that needed to be looked at. Anything else that was going on?

Yuma Desalting Plant

Vissia: Oh, another thing that was going on was the desalinization plant down at Yuma to honor the Mexican treaty by trying to provide freshwater into the Colorado River to satisfy the water quality requirements of the treaty.[22] We spent a lot of time on ***that*** because of the technology, the contractors involved, and the amount of money that had already been spent, and the slow process. That thing took years and years.

". . . at that time we were trying to get it completed and to get it operating, and we had all kinds of problems with the membranes that were to be used in it . . ."

I don't even know what the status of it is now, but at that time we were trying to get it completed and to get it operating, and we had all kinds of problems with the membranes that were to be used in it, and we did different kinds of tests.

"It was the largest one ever built in the world at that time, and it was a real technical problem, as well as a contractual problem . . ."

It was quite a technical problem. It was the largest one ever built in the world at that time, and it was a real technical problem, as well as a contractual problem with the contractor to try to get that thing designed and going and finished, constructed, because it had already been started, but it was having problems. That took quite a bit of time.

Storey: I would think that's sort of out of the normal line of Reclamation expertise.

Vissia: Yeah, it does.

Storey: Did we have to do something about that?

There Was Also a Lot of Central Arizona Project Work

Vissia: Well, of course, we hired a contractor for it who did both, I think, some of the design, ***as well as*** the construction program, and we worked with them, because it certainly wasn't in our expertise very much. Also at that time, the Central Arizona Project was going strong, so a lot of Denver's design activities were aimed at that, keeping that program going.

Developing a Computerized Tracking Program for All Design Activities in Denver

22. The Mexican Water Treaty and Protocol is a treaty relating to the utilization of the waters of the Colorado and Tijuana Rivers and of the Rio Grande. (Signed at Washington, February 3, 1944; Protocol signed at Washington, November 14, 1944; ratification advised by the Senate April 18, 1945, subject to certain understandings; ratification by the President November 1, 1945, subject to said understandings; ratified by Mexico October 16, 1945; ratifications exchanged at Washington, November 8, 1945; proclaimed by the President November 27, 1945, subject to said understandings; 59 Stat. 1219.) Source: United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation. *Federal Reclamation and Related laws Annotated, Volume II* of IV, 1943-1958. ed. Richard K. Pelz. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972, p. 750 *et. seq*.

The other thing I tried to do–and I worked with Bill Cowan. What was he? He was kind of assistant to the Design ~~Chief~~ Division chief, I think.[23] He and I worked together to try and work up a tracking program of all the design activities in Denver so that we could try to meet the regions' schedules. The tracking program was so that we could ***check*** weekly or monthly what the status was of the various design programs in Denver, the various activities, and if there was a snafu, what was the problem. Can we resolve it and still keep it on track or do we need to talk to the region and say, "Hey, we're not going to meet your schedule," or "We're going to move it up," which seldom happened.

We did try to put together a computerized tracking program, and we did put it together. It probably only got to actually use it for six or eight months in a finished form before I left, so I don't know if they maintained that afterwards or not. But, I did try to set it up as a service to the regions.

"I felt Denver should be a service center to the regions, and as that we should provide what they needed, when they needed it. . . ."

I felt Denver should be a service center to the regions, and as that we should provide what they needed, when they needed it. And that's the reason that we set up this tracking system and the reason that we looked at reorganization and to try and get ideas from employees to get the design program accomplished, because construction basically was now in the region. We still had a small staff left in construction in Denver, but they were basically to provide advice and guidance and maybe make some reviews if necessary. But the ***main*** program was design and research, of course.

Storey: Were the regions using Denver for all of their design work? How was that working?

While Assistant Commissioner for Engineering and Research the Regions Still Had to Use Denver for Design Work Unless it Met Certain Guidelines

Vissia: Well, like we talked about yesterday, there were some guidelines for the more simple designs and lower cost facilities. The regions could do them automatically. But anything outside of those guidelines, they had to request authorization from Denver, which was still the same, and we could either say, yes, you can do it, or, no, we're going to do it.

Storey: What about going outside and contracting for design?

Private Companies Have Argued They Should Be Able to Do Reclamation Designs and Planning Studies

Vissia: That's always been an issue with not just contracting. Even doing planning studies, that's always been an issue with the Bureau of Reclamation all the time ***I*** worked for them. In fact, even some of the private engineering group societies would go to Congress and ***lobby*** for that. They wanted the work, and they said, "Why should they

23. According to telephone directories for Reclamation in Denver from 1980 to 1982 William C. Cowan was "special assistant to the assistant commissioner and was housed in the office of the assistant commissioner for engineering and research.

have huge government work force doing this kind of stuff when you can do it in the private sector?" And it was tried. It was tried on planning studies a few times, it was tried in some designs, and sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't.

Writing the Specs for a Design or Planning Contract Is Difficult

One of the problems was, in the Bureau's work it was difficult to write a complete set of specifications for planning or for a design that a consultant could do. You know, from start now, you got the contract, and you finish it out here. Because usually as you go through these processes, you have to change things and other things happen. You have the public's involved in the planning process specifically, and that affects the contract. So then you have to go back and you have to renegotiate the contract, you have to change its terms, and you have to worry about more money or whatever, or you get claims. So it's not as easy as it sounds. There are some that are pretty cut and dried, and a private firm could do it–no problem. But in other respects, because of the size of some of the projects, it's not that simple. So it's . . .

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1. JULY 9, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JULY 9, 1996.

Storey: This is an interview by Brit Storey with Rod Vissia on July the 9th, 1996. [This is tape 2.]

You were saying that one of the arguments was that it's going to be less costly to go outside.

Vissia: I don't really think that's been proven, if you take all of the costs into consideration and also the timeframe into consideration.

Storey: Yeah.

How Reclamation Might Effectively Use Private Consultants

Vissia: But I suppose the way I think that private consultants and engineers could be used most effectively for organizations like the Bureau is, the Bureau's workload, of course, varies from year to year, depending upon what the authorizations are and where you are in particular things, so it doesn't make sense to have this huge staff which may not be fully employed, say, next year when the program's down. It would be better to have a tighter staff, and then when you have a couple of blips in the program where program activities increase, you could hire somebody to take care of those. You could siphon off some of the work that your core can't finish on time and contract for it.

I think that's a more logical way to use it, rather than to do it totally privately, because when I worked in Brazil for the Bureau, that organization did ***all*** of their planning and design studies by private, and you had a very small staff in the organization that were responsible for managing the contracts, as well as to try and review technically what these people did. They simply didn't have the technical expertise to do that. They could manage contracts, but they really didn't have all of the

expertise they needed to make sure that these guys were doing a proper technical job. So that was a problem there, I felt. There needs to be some core group of people, if you're going to be in that business, to be there.

Storey: How did that office relate to the international activities that Reclamation was involved in?

Vissia: The Denver office?

Storey: The assistant commissioner for engineering and research.

The Denver Office's Involvement in International Affairs Activities

Vissia: Probably the main way it related was when they wanted staff, when the international office wanted staff to fill out these teams that went overseas. They would usually come to us and say–of course, you have to advertise the position, but they'd also want to know who would be some good people and would we be willing to encourage them to join the international team. Likewise, T-D-Ys[24] were often sent from the Denver office. You'd have a team in the field, say, in Brazil or wherever, Peru. If they needed some expertise that wasn't on the team, you could send somebody down there for two or three months to assist, and so Denver often did that. Likewise, Denver could ***review*** some of the activities that the team did to make sure they were okay. For example, if you were putting together construction specifications or standards for preparing designs and construction specifications, those could be sent to Denver from the field or from that country and Denver could review them and edit them and correct them and assist in that way. So there was that kind of support that Denver provided.

Storey: But didn't control the program or anything like that.

Vissia: No. The program was controlled by the foreign activities office.

Storey: In Washington?

Vissia: Initially it was in Denver. Then later it was moved to Washington. But when I was assistant commissioner, it was in Denver, and I guess not too long after that it was moved to Washington, within a couple of years.

Storey: But it wasn't under the assistant commissioner for engineering and research's control?

Vissia: Where did it fall? I don't think so. I think it was– I'm not sure which assistant commissioner it was under right now, but I don't think it was under–was it? Boy, I don't know. That's a good question. I don't know. Maybe it was, but I didn't think it was. When I went to Washington, D.C., I'm quite sure it wasn't there. There it was put under Bill Klostermeyer, and he was assistant commissioner for administration. But in Denver, I'm not sure. It may have been under Engineering and Research. It may have been. I'm a little hazy right now about that.

24. Referring to employees of Reclamation on "temporary duty."

Storey: What about the hydraulics lab? What was the intent of that lab over there?

The Research Laboratory

Vissia: The research lab?

Storey: Um-hmm.

Vissia: Well, one was to test designs, for one thing. Another was to test situations in the field to see– if you'd model what the field situation was and then try to duplicate that in the lab, then you could try to design to fit that situation. Like I said, the other opportunity is to try new designs on things to see how it would work and to get information about it and just to determine various characteristics of water and control structures, how they worked, to improve them. I suppose you had two basic kinds of research, some that were general in nature that would affect all hydraulic design and construction situations and others were project-specific. You would have a specific project that you would try to model in the lab and then try to make a design to fit that specific project.

Storey: Were we then modeling for foreign projects?

Vissia: I don't think so. I don't remember that we were. We may have been, but I don't recall right now. I know there was a major liaison between the Soviet Union and the Bureau at that time in research, and we exchanged papers and information and even staff, as I recall, on trips and so on that went there.

". . . I was on one team the Bureau sent [to Russia] in 1971. Gil Stamm was the team leader . . ."

In fact, I was on one team the Bureau sent in 1971. Gil Stamm was the team leader, or the group leader. Jim O'Brien was on it and I was on it and there was a construction engineer on it. I don't remember his name. There was another Bureau employee, and we had one employee from the Department of Agriculture, SES I think. I think we had a team of seven, and we went to the Soviet Union and stayed there almost a month and traveled quite long distances. We visited several of the republics and reviewed their programs and their projects and talked to their people and learned about what they did.

They, in turn, then sent a team either the following year or two years later to the U.S., and I was involved somewhat then in California in taking them around, or at least setting up the program for them to go see things in the Central Valley. So there was that kind of activity out of the Bureau in addition to the normal foreign activities. I think when I first went to Denver maybe it was under the engineering and research, because as I recall, Joe Cutchall was the head of it at that time, and I think he was one of my employees.

Storey: Who were some of your other employees?

Reclamation Employees in Denver

Vissia: Well, there was Jim Green [phonetic],[25] who was in charge of the Design Division. Oh, what was–I'll think of his name, the head of the Construction Unit. [William R.] Groseclose left either when I got there or just before I got there, and what was his name took over there. Sammy Guy was there as part of the Contract Administration Unit, which essentially was highly depleted because the regions were doing that. He wanted to go to Washington, D.C., anyway, so we arranged for him to go there, and he became a liaison for Engineering and Research in the Washington office, and later he took over, of course, foreign activities.

I didn't have any assistant anymore. H. J. Cohan was the head of research[26] at the time when I got there, and then I hired a guy from the Corps of Engineers–I don't even remember his name now–to replace him when Cohen retired,[27] and I don't know if he's still there or not. Probably not, I don't know.

Storey: It's been a while.

Vissia: Yeah. Of course, I never have been that good–I'd be a lousy politician, because names often escape me.

Storey: Who did you report to as the assistant commissioner for engineering and research?

Vissia: Directly to the commissioner. When I went there initially, it was Higginson, and then Broadbent came in while I was there. Broadbent must have come in the second year I was there, I suppose.

Storey: Yeah, about '81, '82.

Vissia: Right.

Storey: What was he like as a commissioner?

Issues with Staff of Commissioner Bob Broadbent

Vissia: I don't know. I didn't have that much actual experience with him, except maybe a year and a few months, I suppose, and I didn't really have any problem with him. I did have a problem with a couple of the young guys that he hired out of Las Vegas that came to work as his staff assistants. I don't even remember their names now. One later became a regional director.

Storey: Oh, David Houston [pronounced how stun].

Vissia: Yeah. I didn't have so much trouble with him as the one that became the head of the mining group. What was his name? He was in the department. He later became the

25. There is no Jim Green/Greene in Reclamation's Denver telephone directories for the period 1980 to 1983. J. D. Brown was the chief of the Division of Design during that period.
26. H. J. Cohan served as chief of the Division of Research.
27. Referring to F. G. McLean who became the chief of the Division of Research.

Bureau of Mines.

Storey: I guess I don't know him.

Vissia: A slender little guy. I forget what his functions were then in Interior. It was mine safety. I did see him on TV later on because of some problems they were having in West Virginia in terms of mine disasters. Anyways, I had a couple of problems with them because, for example, somebody in the Washington office was complaining about some stuff that was going on in Denver, and instead of talking to me about it and getting my side of the story, he simply said, "This is what's going on. Fix it." Well, he only was listening to somebody in the Washington office. He didn't ask me my side of the story. It was sort of like we were wrong, so fix it. So I did have a problem with that kind of stuff. I don't care for that. People ought to look at both sides before they make a decision as to what's right or what's wrong.

Storey: This was one of Broadbent's right-hand people?

Vissia: Um-hmm. This guy had been the accountant or something for the Las Vegas, what is it, the Airport Authority, I think, Broadbent came from.

Storey: Um-hmm.

Vissia: As far as I was concerned, he didn't have too much skill in terms of how to deal with people in situations like that in a large organization, so I had that problem.

". . . I later heard that when I did leave Reclamation to go to the World Bank . . . some people . . . thought I had left because I disapproved of or didn't like working with Broadbent and his people, and that had *nothing* to do with it, and I don't know where they got that. . . ."

Otherwise, I can't say–I later heard that when I did leave Reclamation to go to the World Bank, I did hear from some people that they thought I had left because I disapproved of or didn't like working with Broadbent and his people, and that had ***nothing*** to do with it, and I don't know where they got that. They said, well, the reason I left was because I didn't agree with the administration's policies and programs, and so I left.

Storey: People always speculate on why people–you know, that looks like sort of the pinnacle of achievement to a lot of people.

Vissia: It had nothing to do with it.

Storey: Well, tell me why you did leave.

"Because of the trip to the Soviet Union clear back in '71, I had always said, 'Well, in the future, when my kids get a little older, I would really like to work overseas and travel. That seems so interesting.'. . ."

Vissia: Because of the trip to the Soviet Union clear back in '71, I had always said, "Well, in

the future, when my kids get a little older, I would really like to work overseas and travel. That seems so interesting." Because that was the first time I'd ever been out of the U.S., and it was so interesting to me.

". . . while I was assistant commissioner, I went to Joe Cutchall and I said, "Well, in about a year from now I'd like for you to start looking to see if there are some opportunities where I could go overseas . . ."

So while I was assistant commissioner, I went to Joe Cutchall and I said, "Well, in about a year from now I'd like for you to start looking to see if there are some opportunities where I could go overseas, either with the Bureau or without," but mostly with the Bureau is what I had in mind.

". . . 'Well, there's one right now. The World Bank is looking for this person to go to Egypt and be the chief technical advisor to the Egyptian government to lay out a national water plan. Your background is planning. Why don't you apply?'. . ."

He said, "Well, there's one right now. The World Bank is looking for this person to go to Egypt and be the chief technical advisor to the Egyptian government to lay out a national water plan. Your background is planning. Why don't you apply?"

"I said, 'That's about a year or two early, Joe.'. . ."

I said, "That's about a year or two early, Joe. My daughter is still in high school, and it would be better if she were probably out and in school–university."

But anyway, I did go home and I talked to my wife and my daughter, and my two sons were still home, but they were graduating that year and would be in universities, so that wasn't such a big deal. I said, "It's up to you. If you would prefer not to, forget it, we'll wait. But if you think you'd like to give it a try, fine."

So my daughter took a week, and she said, "Yeah, I'd like to try it." So I applied for the job and was hired by the Bank.

"So I did leave about a year earlier than I had planned . . . because I was really interested in overseas work, and I've enjoyed it ever since. . . ."

So I did leave about a year earlier than I had planned to. That was the reason. It was basically because I was really interested in overseas work, and I've enjoyed it ever since.

Storey: What happened to your salary?

Salary with the World Bank

Vissia: My salary when I first went to the Bank was about the same as I was making with the Bureau, but within a year it was at least 30 percent more, for several reasons. One is, the Bank improved its overseas differential payments, because in addition to your base

salary, you get overseas differential payments, depending on the country. You also get free housing, you get free utilities, they buy your furniture. And then if you stay overseas for 330 days out of the year, you get a huge tax break on your income tax, because you get $70,000 written right off the top if you stay out of the country for 330 days out of the year. So the first $70,000 is essentially tax free. Anything over that, you pay taxes on.

Storey: That is quite a tax break.

". . . for me, financially it was quite lucrative working in Egypt . . ."

Vissia: Yes. So, for me, financially it was quite lucrative working in Egypt, because I did stay out every year for the time I was there, which was four and a half years, and fortunately for me that I did that at that time, because one year I had four kids in university.

". . . they also paid for about two-thirds of the university costs for my kids. . . ."

In addition to the other perks the World Bank has, they also paid for about two-thirds of the university costs for my kids. There were some things I didn't realize I was going to get into when I got with the Bank, and they were all positive. I mean, those kinds of things I didn't even know about until I got with the Bank, and it turned out really good for ***me*** that right when my kids were in university, I had some major financial assistance.

Storey: Tell me why the World Bank would hire an irrigation specialist to help with a water plan in Egypt.

". . . in Egypt 90 percent of the water supply is used for irrigation. . . ."

Vissia: Because in Egypt 90 percent of the water supply is used for irrigation. ***All*** of the agriculture in Egypt is irrigated because it's such a dry country. So at least 90 percent of the water is used for irrigation, and all of the facilities in Egypt are essentially irrigation facilities except for what the various communities and industries pump out of the Nile River. And so basically, when you're looking at the water needs and development in Egypt, it's oriented highly towards agriculture and hydropower because they have, of course, a huge hydropower plant at Aswan.

But basically it's an agricultural society, and irrigation is the main water user and that's where most of the facilities are constructed, and they were attempting to ***expand*** their agriculture, so that meant more irrigation facilities and more water requirements.

Storey: And the World Bank was financing them?

Vissia: The World Bank was financing–actually, the program was under the United Nations Development Program, but the World Bank financed it, and they hired me. They also hired Fred Jemke [phonetic], who was a Bureau employee at that time who was an expert in computer modeling of projects and hydraulics, so he was also hired by the

[World Bank.] ~~Bureau.~~ And then we hired an AID–U-S-A-I-D had, I think, two agricultural economists from the Bureau which they financed and were on my team. So we had a mixture of–I was the team leader, and we had another World Bank employee, expatriate. Then we had the Egyptian staff we worked with, and we had two people that were financed by U-S-A-I-D to do this.

Storey: So you closed down with Reclamation in Denver.

Vissia: Closed down for four and a half years, yeah. I closed down in Denver and left Reclamation for four and a half years, and then came back to Reclamation in Brazil for two years, and then I ***retired*** from the Bureau.

Storey: What was it like moving to Egypt?

Moving to Egypt

Vissia: Well, it's quite a culture shock. I mean, we had never lived anywhere except the U.S. Cairo is a huge city, 12-, 14 million people, extremely crowded, dirty, smoggy, lots of traffic, people everywhere. Arabic is a difficult language to learn and understand. Fortunately, most of the people I worked with spoke reasonably good English.

Living in an Apartment in Cairo

I mean, you had to change your whole lifestyle. We didn't live in a house anymore. We lived in an apartment, 5th floor, no elevators, because in Egypt, if your apartment house is five stories or less, you don't need to have an elevator, and so most of them don't, because they don't want to pay for it. So, you'll see a lot of five-story apartment houses in Egypt. Now, of course, they're getting more modern, and you have tall ones with elevators. But at that time–so we had to walk up five flights of stairs all the time to our flat.

Shopping in Egypt

You had to change your way of shopping. You don't have supermarkets there. You have to go to individual stores for different products. For example, the meat market is outside. The stuff is hanging all outside, flies all over it, and you have to get used to buying your stuff, going home and cleaning it. For example, vegetables, fresh fruits and vegetables we would soak in a mixture of Clorox water for five minutes and then rinse it with soap and water and then clear water. You had to learn to drink bottled water at all times because tap water wasn't safe.

Electrical Outages in Egypt

At that time, you had major electrical outages. Usually daily you'd have at least an hour you wouldn't have electricity.

"Telephone service at that time was terrible. . . ."

Telephone service at that time was terrible. If I wanted to talk to A-I-D, it was easier to get in the car and drive through town to their offices to meet with them, because you couldn't get through on the phone. It was just about impossible.

U.S. AID Programs in Egypt Have Improved Infrastructure

Now a lot of that's changed because of the ***huge*** U-S-A-I-D program in Egypt since the peace treaty. U-S-A-I-D has improved the phone system in Egypt ***tremendously***. It works fine. They've also assisted in building a new major fossil fuel powerplants, so you don't have the big power outages anymore. They've helped in building schools. They've helped in doing some stuff on irrigation systems. Roads. New, I guess you'd call them freeways or bypasses or whatever. AID's done a lot in Egypt. I'm not saying ***all*** the money's well spent, but there's been quite a bit of good stuff done there by the AID program.

Storey: You weren't in an American compound or anything?

Vissia: Oh, no.

Storey: Did you find your own apartment? Did somebody else find it?

"When I got there, the Bank says, 'You find your own apartment. You find what furniture you want. You send us the bills, and you have a certain limit.'. . ."

Vissia: When I got there, the Bank says, "You find your own apartment. You find what furniture you want. You send us the bills, and you have a certain limit." So I had a limit on how much I could spend for an apartment and more or less a limit on what the furniture ought to cost.

Finding an Apartment

So, I went to a so-called real estate agent in Egypt, and took me around and I found this apartment. There were certain things the Bank wanted in a contract, so that was a little bit of a negotiation process, because the guy who ***owned*** that apartment building wasn't too sure about some of the clauses in the contract. There are certain escape clauses the Bank wanted, and he wasn't too sure he wanted to give those escape clauses. But we finally got it ironed out, got the lease contract signed. He was a difficult landlord. He was a retired police chief, had been high up in the police organization in Maadi, which is a suburb of Cairo, and he's an extremely hard man and rich. I think he had used his position as the police chief to gain a lot of money, and he was very, very tight with his own money, because normally he was supposed to pay for minor repairs and stuff in the apartment underneath the lease, but he never would. So I'd go down and find an electrician or a plumber and say, "I need to have this done." They would ask my address, and I would tell them what the address was, and they'd say, "Who's paying for this, you or Dr. Handy, your landlord?" I would say, "I'm paying for it," and then they would come. If I would say that he was paying for it, they'd say, "No, you better find somebody else," because he would often get guys there, they'd do the work, he wouldn't pay them, just send them on their way, and

because of his power as an ex-police chief, they didn't want to mess with him. So there was all those kinds of things.

I had a car and a driver furnished by the Bank, also, and it would take me to work and home again. I didn't use it for personal stuff. We had our own personal car which we shipped over there.

Storey: How did you store it?

Vissia: Which?

Storey: The car.

Vissia: Store what?

Storey: Your personal car.

Vissia: Well, we had it shipped from Denver to Egypt, and we used it there. Then when we left, we sold it.

Storey: Did you just park it on the street?

Vissia: Oh, yeah. There's certainly no garage space. There was very, very few private residences in Cairo. Most of it is apartment houses. In Maadi, there were probably the most private residences, and also maybe Heliopolis. Most of those private residences were used by embassies to house their employees, their high-level employees, or by companies, like oil companies and so on, would rent the houses.

Storey: What was your apartment like?

Vissia: It had a huge L-shaped room that was sort of a dining room/living room area, a very small kitchen, and I guess two bedrooms, two baths, and a office space. I forget what we paid, maybe $1,100-, $1,200 a month, I think, or was it pounds, which was close to the dollar at that time. I think it was maybe around a thousand a month for that apartment. You had to pay for your own utilities, which were really cheap.

Servants in the Apartment

We hired a maid. She did cleaning. But eventually we had to get rid of her because she kept stealing all the time. So we then hired a man, who was from Sudanese extraction, but he had grown up in Cairo, but he was black, and a excellent cook. He could speak Arabic and English very well, but he couldn't read or write. He had worked for Americans before. But he was an excellent cook. Even if we had a group of twenty, he could prepare the whole thing and get it all set up, did all of our shopping and cleaning and washing and all that stuff.

"That's another perk of living overseas is you are able to hire help for a good price, and because your income is higher, you can afford it. And sometimes it's

really necessary. It helps a lot in getting along in those countries . . ."

That's another perk of living overseas is you are able to hire help for a good price, and because your income is higher, you can afford it. And sometimes it's really necessary. It helps a lot in getting along in those countries, because my wife was working. She got a job initially with the International School there as the administrative assistant to the superintendent, and then eventually she got to work for the embassy. She was in the housing office, and she was in charge of finding housing for all of the embassy employees when she was there. So with both of us working, and we had a daughter in high school there–she went to the school for two years–why, it was good to have help.

Storey: What were the major things that you were doing in Egypt?

Putting Together a Master Water Plan for Egypt

Vissia: We were trying to put together what they called a "master water plan," and what we were doing was assessing all of the existing water uses in Egypt, being mainly irrigation, municipal, industrial, some flood control, navigation, and hydroelectric power, not very much recreation or fisheries. And then we were trying to estimate in the future, in terms of five-, ten-, fifteen-, twenty-year time spans, what new uses could be expected. We were also reviewing what lands were irrigable, and then we looked at where those lands were and what it would take to get water to them.

Then we started to look at the resources, what are the resources for Egypt. It's very limited. You have the Nile River. That's essentially it. Even the groundwater basin is essentially Nile water, because it's a closed basin.

"You have eight countries upstream of Egypt who are on the Nile River. Sudan is really the only one that uses a major chunk of the water, and Egypt did have a compact with them in which they split up . . . the safe annual yield of the river as it flows into Aswan Dam. . . ."

You have eight countries upstream of Egypt who are on the Nile River. Sudan is really the only one that uses a major chunk of the water, and Egypt did have a compact with them in which they split up the water, the safe annual yield of the river as it flows into Aswan Dam. I think Sudan– let's see, what's the numbers again? I forget. They get about maybe a third to 40 percent of that water supply, and Egypt gets the rest. The other counties upstream really weren't utilizing much water.

Opportunities for Increasing Water Supply on the Nile Were Very Limited

The only opportunities for increasing their water supply was to try to, one, reduce the evaporation on the reservoir behind Aswan; two, was to make channels through the huge swamps up in Sudan, where the Blue and the White Niles join. If you channel the water through the swamps and dry up the swamps, you reduce a huge evaporation and you could gain a couple of million acre-feet that way. Projects were actually started up there, until the unrest in Sudan closed it down, so they've never been

finished.

So that's basically what we were doing, trying to put together a national plan that said, "Okay, here's your needs now. Here's what we think they will be. Here's your opportunities for further development. Here's your water supply, and here's potential new water supplies."

END SIDE 1, TAPE 2. JULY 9, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 2. JULY 9, 1996.

"Unfortunately, presently Egypt is trying to expand their irrigation beyond their resources. . . ."

Unfortunately, presently Egypt is trying to expand their irrigation beyond their resources. And, I don't think those projects in Sudan will ever be completed, and even if they are, at the rate they're expanding new agriculture in Egypt, they're going to have some serious problems. They already have serious water quality problems in some areas.

"They haven't really followed the Master Water Plan as they should. . . . It should be updated by now, and I think if they were to update it, they would find out they're heading for serious problems. . . ."

They haven't really followed the Master Water Plan as they should. Even though it was made, it's still there. It should be updated by now, and I think if they were to update it, they would find out they're heading for serious problems.

Storey: That was about ten years ago, I guess, that you completed it.

Vissia: I was there from '82. I was there in '82 and left there at the end of '85, four and a half years, yeah.

Storey: So it would have been about eleven years ago.

Has Worked in Egypt Twice since Working on the Water Master Plan

Vissia: But I've been there twice since that time. My second job is about 1990, I think, I went there for a year and a half. I worked for Morrison-Knudsen on a AID program. And then I was there ***last*** year for about five months, working on a major organizational review of the Ministry of Public Works and Water Resources. It used to be Irrigation. Now they call it Public Works and Water Resources.

Storey: How did the predictions in the water plan pan out, as it were, ten years later?

". . . the projections we made for [the water master plan for] municipal/industrial uses were low. . . ."

Vissia: Actually, the projections we made for municipal/industrial uses were low. They

actually are now expanding at a higher rate, which is why they're going to be in trouble on their agriculture. So from ***that*** standpoint, those were low.

"Our population projections are pretty close. . . ."

Our population projections are pretty close. It hasn't changed much in ten years. They're running at the rate of 2.5 to 2.8 percent per year in population growth, which is quite large. Even though A-I-D and the World Bank have financed birth control programs, it hasn't slowed it down very much in Egypt. So that projection–and, of course, population is one of the ways you project future municipal and industrial uses, or mostly municipal and domestic uses. So that part was good. But industry is expanding a little more rapidly, so those uses are increasing.

Storey: So now, while you were working in Egypt for the World Bank, you were able to retain your Federal status?

While Working for the World Bank He Still Kept His Status as a Federal Employee

Vissia: Yeah. I think the program is still valid. You can go to a United Nations organization as a government employee for a maximum of five years. You can extend that to eight max, but five is the initial furlough. You pay into the retirement fund, the Bureau retirement fund, at the same rate you were paying when you left. So every year I would send a check to the Bureau for my retirement program, and you retain employment rights. Other than that, everything else, you're an employee of the Bank. Your salary and your benefits and all that stuff are set by the Bank. So the only connection, then, with the Bureau is the fact you're paying into the retirement fund and you retain your employment rights.

Storey: And at the end of four and a half years, the program was completed?

After four and one half years in Egypt ". . . I still had two years before I could retire from the Bureau. I would have liked to have extended with the Bank for those two years and stayed with the Bank and then simply retired . . ."

Vissia: Yeah, and I still had two years before I could retire from the Bureau. I would have liked to have extended with the Bank for those two years and stayed with the Bank and then simply retired from–like Jim O'Brien did. He came back for about two days or three and worked and retired, because he worked for the Bank at the end of his career.

". . . the Bank decided they didn't want to extend the program anymore. They felt it was far enough. . . ."

But at the end of four and a half years, the Bank decided they didn't want to extend the program anymore. They felt it was far enough. And so I called up the Bureau. First, I went to Washington and tried to find a Bank job in Washington, but at that time they frankly told me their allotment for Americans was filled. Even though it's not an official allotment, they had an allotment for Americans, and they were hiring Indians and Pakistanis at that time. So I called up Sammy Guy, and I asked him what

the Bureau might have in terms of foreign assignments, because I really wanted to stay overseas, and also as a backup, applied for two vacancies, regional director vacancies.

"*Then* about a month after I had made a commitment to Sam Guy to go to Brazil, the Bank said, 'Well, if you want to stay, we'll extend this for another two or three years.'. . ."

Then about a month after I had made a commitment to Sam Guy to go to Brazil, the Bank said, "Well, if you want to stay, we'll extend this for another two or three years." I didn't want to back out on Sam, for one thing, and number two is, I really was interested in going to Brazil. I thought that would be interesting. I had never been there before.

"So I went to Brazil as a team leader for a Bureau team on a program that was financed by the World Bank. . . ."

So I went to Brazil as a team leader for a Bureau team on a program that was financed by the World Bank. The way the Bureau got involved in Brazil was, the Bank told the Brazilian government that, "If we loan you this money to develop these projects in the Northeast, we want you to have either an outside foreign firm or organization to work with you and to assist you in this program." So they were given the option of hiring a private consultant from Europe or the U.S. or an organization like the Bureau, and they chose the Bureau, because, again, of the Bureau's reputation. They felt that, number one, the Bureau has a great reputation, they've got a lot of expertise; number two, their main goal is not to make a profit. The Bureau, they're going to get paid according to what their expenses are and that's it. They don't make a profit.

So they selected the Bureau to be this group, and so the Bureau fielded a team of about– initially, I guess, we had six or seven guys, had a couple designers and a economist. I guess we had three designers, a planning guy, soils guy, an economist, and an O&M guy, so we ended up probably with maybe seven or eight people altogether in Brazil, really good team. Mel Carter [phonetic] was our soil scientist guy, and Doug Olson [phonetic] was the planning guy and also my assistant. He now works for the Bank. Let's see, there was Dick Simons [phonetic] Cotto Eskevell [phonetic] were the two designers, and Peter Radlick [phonetic] was another one, and he was up in Fort Lays [phonetic] at a field office. And then we had Elwood Clark [phonetic] was one of the economists, and I can't remember the name of the O&M guy we had.

"The Bureau's job was to assist the government of Brazil to plan new irrigation projects in the arid Northeast part of Brazil. . . ."

The Bureau's job was to assist the government of Brazil to plan new irrigation projects in the arid Northeast part of Brazil. Everybody thinks that Brazil as the Amazon, but the Northeast arid triangle there, or quadrangle there, is ***extremely*** dry, but they do ***have*** some rivers that run through there with perennial flows, and they do have some arable lands. And so the idea was to plan projects–and it is the poorest area in Brazil besides–to plan projects that would provide agriculture and also to assist those

people in that area to get some economy going and further benefit their lives by improving their standard of living. So we worked with them on planning programs, designs, construction specifications, and manuals to assist them with design, construction, and O&M while we were there.

Storey: What was the source of water going to be?

Vissia: There were several rivers that ran through that area. The São Francisco River was one, and there were several small ones that were north of there that ran through the area. Most of the time it was by pumping from the river rather than reservoirs, setting up pumping plants and distribution systems.

Storey: How long were you there?

". . . with the Bureau, I was there two years as team leader. I retired *there* in Brazil, but I stayed on, working with the government, for another sixteen months under a separate contract with the government. . . ."

Vissia: Well, with the Bureau, I was there two years as team leader. I retired ***there*** in Brazil, but I stayed on, working with the government, for another sixteen months under a separate contract with the government.

Storey: Were you in Northeastern Brazil?

Vissia: No, we were in Brasilia, which is sort of central Brazil, because that's where the capital was and that's also where the Ministry of Irrigation was, was in Brasilia. But we traveled a lot to the Northeast to towns like Recife and Fortaleza and some of those areas.

Storey: What was Brasilia like?

Headquartered in Brasilia

Vissia: It was a planned city, as you know, planned in the thirties, and it was set up so you had, sort of in sectors. You had the government sector and then you had the hotel sector and the Bank sector, and then you had major sectors of apartment houses that all pretty much looked the same, and about every other street or so, you had a small commercial sector in each of these places. Then on the other side of the lake, they had a dam there and a lake there, and on the other side of the lake were private residences. So it was quite a pre-planned organized city, and a lot of concrete. Most of the stuff was made out of concrete there.

Brasilia is in sort of a semi-arid area, also. The area around there has a lot of brush. In the summertime when it's dry, it reminds me of maybe some places in Texas, I suppose, where you still have . . .

Storey: You mean West Texas or East Texas?

Vissia: Not that barren, but maybe in between the two. But it's certainly not jungle. Now it's becoming more and more irrigated, too. There's a lot more development going on, and they pump well water for irrigation. They have some large farms there that either pump well water or pump out of the rivers now.

Storey: Well, now you were working for Reclamation.

Vissia: Right.

Storey: Maybe we better break for lunch. Thank you.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 2. JULY 9, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 3. JULY 9, 1996.

Storey: This is [a continuation of] an interview by Brit Storey with Rod Vissia on July 9, 1996. [This is tape 3.]

You were saying you wanted to go back and talk about Teton a little more.

Hearings Regarding Replacement of Teton Dam after the Failure in 1976

Vissia: Yeah. Before, I indicated that I wasn't positive about whether we had public hearings concerning the replacement of Teton, and my wife reminded me, yes, we did have some. She didn't remember the number, but it was at least one or two, and I can now remember one in Idaho Falls in which we had a public hearing. The proponents for replacement were primarily the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District personnel and any other beneficiaries in the area. Those who opposed the replacement were primarily the sports fishing groups that wanted to return the Teton River to blue-ribbon trout stream status.

As I recall, we said from the Bureau's standpoint it looked rather doubtful that the thing would be replaced, that the chances were pretty slim, but, of course, that depends on the Congress and the support that could be generated for it. I think we were pretty open about the fact that based upon the new opposition and the fact that it failed once, that the chances were pretty slim for its replacement. So I just wanted to clarify that part.

Storey: Yeah. Good. Now, before lunch we were talking about your work in Egypt and then in Brazil. How did you relate to the governments when you were on those projects? Was there a ***lot*** of interaction, or were you just given an assignment and told, "Go do it"? How did that work?

Interaction with Government Offices in Egypt and Brazil

Vissia: There was a considerable amount of interaction. In fact, we worked right in their offices. In Egypt, the head of the Water Master Plan, his name was Serwat Fammi [phonetic], he was in charge of the program and he supervised the Egyptian staff, and I

would meet with him daily. It was some very, very close coordination.

We also worked very closely with the Egyptian staff, because we were trying to train them to do some things, as well as to use ***them*** to do the study. We had to instruct them on what should be done and what data to be gathered, what projections to make. We taught them how to use computer models, and we had them gather all different kinds of data we needed. They also, of course, helped introduce us to sources of data in Egypt because we didn't know all the places where it existed. A lot of data existed in the Ministry of Agriculture, for example, or with the Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of Planning. So, that was a very, very close relationship, and they not only were learning from us, we were learning from them to some extent, and we were using them. I mean, we were trying to get them to do most of the work, and so we had to work closely with them to get them to do that and to help them to do it.

In Brazil, it was also close, but not in the same respect. In Brazil, we primarily did a lot of the work because of the way they were set up. They used private consultants, as I indicated before, to do most of the planning and design work, so they didn't have their own staff to do a lot of that, so a lot of our work with them was liaison with the people that had to control these contracts.

"It was probably at a higher level in Brazil than it was in Egypt . . ."

We also worked closely, in terms of policy matters and program issues, with the–as a matter of fact, we worked closely with the minister himself and with his assistants. It was probably at a higher level in Brazil than it was in Egypt, actually, because in Egypt the person that we related to daily, the head of the Water Master Plan, was probably two levels below the minister. But in Brazil, we worked directly with the minister and his assistants and his division chiefs.

". . . there were actually three organizations in Brazil that we worked with . . ."

In fact, there were actually three organizations in Brazil that we worked with–the Ministry of Irrigation, then there was one up in Fortaleza which was called DNOCS (that's the synonym D-N-O-C-S), and there was D-N-O-S. DNOCS up in Fortaleza was an organization that was established to, sort of like Reclamation was, to develop that area. It was sort of an older organization that then became associated with the Ministry, but not necessarily under the Ministry, as I recall. D-N-O-S was more related to municipal and industrial kinds of activities, and they were located in Rio de Janeiro.

". . . most of the high-level work was with the ministry itself in Brasilia, and that created a little problem for me because I did not speak Portuguese when I arrived and the minister didn't speak English. . . ."

We related to all three agencies, but most of the high-level work was with the ministry itself in Brasilia, and that created a little problem for me because I did not speak Portuguese when I arrived and the minister didn't speak English. Fortunately, on the team, Mel Carter spoke both Portuguese and Spanish fluently, Doug Olson spoke

Spanish fluently and quickly learned Portuguese, Cotto Eskevell spoke Spanish fluently and he quickly learned Portuguese, and Peter Radlick spoke Spanish fluently and he quickly learned Portuguese.

When I went to a meeting in the first year or two, the first year I was there I'd always have to take Doug Olson with me, my assistant, and consequently he probably generated a better rapport with the minister than I did because of the language. When he took over as team leader, there was no problem for him when I retired, and he became team leader, because he could communicate in their language much better than I could, because even after I was there for a couple of years, I was learning Portuguese as rapidly as I could, because very few of them spoke English, but still, it wasn't like speaking like Doug could or Mel Carter, because they'd been speaking it for some time. Because Mel Carter had lived in Brazil before. He also had lived in Peru before. Doug had worked in Peru, plus he was married to a Costa Rican. Peter Radlick was married to a Chilean lady, and Cotto Eskevell was Hispanic. So they came by it more naturally, and had some experience, than I did.

". . . fortunately, the Bureau had very good language capabilities on its team down there. We only had maybe three or four people in the ministry that could speak English with us. Otherwise, everything was–in all of our reports and all of our correspondence with the ministry all were done in Portuguese . . ."

So fortunately, the Bureau had very good language capabilities on its team down there. We only had maybe three or four people in the ministry that could speak English with us. Otherwise, everything was–in all of our reports and all of our correspondence with the ministry all were done in Portuguese, and that probably was the biggest help, because I learned to read it much quicker than I learned to speak it because everything we got was in Portuguese and we had to write all of our reports in Portuguese. We wrote all of our manuals in Portuguese for them. That's just one little wrinkle when you're working overseas is the language issue.

Storey: Were there other cultural issues like that?

Cultural Differences in Egypt

Vissia: Cultural issues? Not in Brazil so much. Brazil doesn't have some of the–like in Egypt, for example, when you first come into a manager's office, you don't start right with business. You sit down and you have a cup of tea or a cup of coffee and you talk generalities for the first ten minutes or so or fifteen minutes.

The other thing that's difficult in Egypt is that you may have a scheduled meeting. You'll be sitting there. But if the phone rings or anybody else walks in, they take priority. So meetings are always disrupted, and they last longer than they should. That's a cultural thing in Egypt that is difficult for some Americans to get used to. First you have to socialize, and then you start to get down to business. But then the phone might ring or then one of his people come in or some people from the political arm might come in or some ***farmer*** might come in or ***whatever***, and that takes precedence. That person then gets the attention, and you sit around and wait until that

is over with. The same way in India. The same thing happens there.

Storey: How did you learn this?

Vissia: Learn what?

Storey: How did you learn that this was going to happen? Was it just experience?

Vissia: Yeah, just experience.

Storey: Nobody said, "Now look, this is the way it's going to be"?

Vissia: Well, I suppose I asked a few people how things were and I had some indication, but you really don't learn about it and learn to cope with it until you're involved in it. That's all there is to it.

". . . in Egypt . . . most of them could speak English pretty well, but *often* they would revert to Arabic, especially if they didn't want you to know what they were talking about. . . ."

The other thing in Egypt is, most of them could speak English pretty well, but ***often*** they would revert to Arabic, especially if they didn't want you to know what they were talking about. So you could be talking with them in English, and then they would revert to Arabic if they felt it was something they didn't want you to hear. So, you have those kinds of things to put up with.

Storey: It sounds like having a meeting with Indians in the United States.

Vissia: Yep.

Storey: Speaking of that issue, did you have any Indian issues when you were in Boise?

Contacts with Indians in Boise

Vissia: In Boise, no.

Storey: We talked about the Colville.

Vissia: The Colvilles. We had some with the Yakimas on two issues. One is, we had a very dry year. Well, there was a couple of years in a row, but one dry year we had the project manager overestimated the drought, and consequently, at the beginning of the irrigation season said, "You people really need to cut back. We're only going to have so much water." And so a lot of farmers didn't even plant or changed their type of crops of completely.

Well, it turned out later that–it wasn't in time to rescue it, but my regional people, they said, "Well, we don't agree with the project manager on this. We don't think it's that severe. We think it's going to be better than that." But unfortunately,

they were a little timid about coming to me at first and it was already too late, and the supply ended up being–I think he was estimating it was only going to be like 20-, 30 percent of the normal supply, and that's a pretty drastic reduction. It ended up being about 60 percent, and consequently we were sued by some of the farmers, and some of the Indians also complained because they had changed their cropping patterns in order to accommodate the drought.

Fisheries Issues

The other issue with the Yakimas was fisheries. They were always trying to find a way to keep ***more*** water in the river for fisheries, for salmon, and the Bureau subsequently later on did work with them to build some facilities on the river which actually helped the fisheries program there.

The Spokane tribe, hardly anything there on the upper end of Lake Roosevelt, and I don't remember ever having any issues with them. It was basically the Colvilles, a little bit with the Yakimas, nothing in Idaho or Wyoming or Montana or Oregon.

Storey: Jumping back now to Egypt and Brazil, did you see other Reclamation employees working in those countries, outside the projects you were working on?

"In Brazil, we were the only Bureau people there. Usually that's the way it is. There's never more than one activity in a country at a time. . . ."

Vissia: Let's see. No, I think when I was in Egypt with the Bank, the only Reclamation employees were two hired or financed by USAID were on my team. They were economists. And then we later on got an operation and maintenance guy also on the team from the Bureau, financed by U-S-A-I-D. I don't remember any others. In Brazil, we were the only Bureau people there. Usually that's the way it is. There's never more than one activity in a country at a time. At that time, I think the Bureau had some activity in Saudi, maybe Sri Lanka, Brazil. It must have been about three or four programs going on. I guess there was also some activity in I think it was Uganda on a transmission line there. The Bureau was helping them with that. Usually just one team at a time in a country.

Storey: What was the time period that was planned for the project in Brazil?

Vissia: You mean, the Bureau's contract?

Storey: Yeah. How long was the study to take?

Vissia: The assignments for the staff were two years, extendable if needed. I kind of think it was probably more of a three- to four-year time frame, perhaps, but then it kept getting extended. In fact, I think Peter Radlick may still be there. I think he's the only one left. I think he may still be there following up on some of the stuff. The World Bank programs quite often are long term, because you start with planning, and you get into the designs, and then the construction program may take quite a long time, especially when you have a lot of projects, and there were quite a few projects in Brazil.

After I retired, like I said, I stayed there another sixteen months and then left, and Doug Olson took over as team leader. They were still there when I left. Then Doug stayed probably at least another year or so, and then he went to, for the Bureau, went to Venezuela to work in Venezuela for the Bureau on some program. In fact, recently I think Cotto Eskevell went back as a Bureau retired annuitant to Brazil to work on the same stuff. So, I think there's still activity there that's under the Bureau program. It started in '86, so ten years later there's still some activity there, maybe a couple of man years.

Storey: But there weren't any proposed major dams?

Vissia: No. When I was there, the only activity we had with a major dam was in relationship to one that had already been financed by the Bank. It was being constructed, and it was primarily a power dam, but it would also perhaps provide some water for some of these projects. So, we were involved by trying to figure out what's the best way to use this reservoir storage to get water for some of the small irrigation projects we were looking at, but we did not look at any reservoirs while I was there. It was all pumping plants and distribution facilities.

Storey: What happened to your pay scale when you went from the World Bank back to Reclamation?

Vissia: I went back to Reclamation as a GS-15. I think it was pretty much the same salary that I had with the Bureau when I left as a senior executive. When you're overseas ***with*** the Federal government, you get free housing and utilities and your furniture is there, and you also get, I believe, an overseas differential, as I recall. But you don't get the tax break. As a Federal employee overseas, you pay incomes taxes. Whether you spend 330 days or 365 days there, you pay income taxes. That's the difference between the two.

Storey: Better to work for the World Bank.

Vissia: Yeah, absolutely, or any private organization overseas. I would say I probably made a little less than I was with the Bank in Egypt, but it was certainly not a major difficulty.

Storey: Why did you decide to retire?

Retired for Financial Reasons

Vissia: Primarily for financial reasons. I mean, why continue to work for that pay scale when you can get retirement at half your pay and you can work for somebody else for equal or more? It was primarily financial.

Storey: Had somebody approached you?

Vissia: No. I started looking around, but then when I told the ministry I was going to retire, they said, "We want you to stay around."

Worked for Brazil for Sixteen Months after Retiring

I said, "Well, that's fine. We can enter into a contract." I think it was the Organization of American States that actually financed my contract with the ministry, and so I worked under contract for sixteen months.

". . . when I came back here, we were in the process of building this house, and I planned to stay here a little bit and just work short-term assignments. But then, like I said, we had a cost overrun on this house, and I got a call one time at three o'clock in the morning from Egypt . . ."

Then when I came back here, we were in the process of building this house, and I planned to stay here a little bit and just work short-term assignments. But then, like I said, we had a cost overrun on this house, and I got a call one time at three o'clock in the morning from Egypt, and Adrian Hutchins [phonetic], who used to be with the Bureau of Reclamation as an engineer, was working over there for Louis Berger. Louis Berger and Morrison-Knudsen had a consortium to do a project for A-I-D in Egypt, and the project manager, which was an M-K employee, was not doing a good job. And so the Egyptians wanted to get rid of him and AID was unhappy with him, and so they were looking for a new team leader, project manager. Adrian suggested to AID, "Why don't you call up Vissia. He's home."

Stayed in Egypt for Eighteen Months That Time

So they called me up, and I said, "Okay, I'll go, but for a limited time. I don't want to spend two or three years in Egypt again. I'll go for a year max." And so I took the job under those circumstances, but I did stay eighteen months, and we were able to make the Egyptians happy again.

". . . when I left we even were able to extend the program and increase the contract for M-K and Louis Berger by another $3 or $4 million . . ."

In fact, when I left we even were able to extend the program and increase the contract for M-K and Louis Berger by another $3 or $4 million, because a lot of the work still needed to be done. So I was only there for a year and a half.

Storey: Doing what kind of work?

"The project was basically a modernization and rehabilitation of selected areas in the irrigation system. . . ."

Vissia: The project was basically a modernization and rehabilitation of selected areas in the irrigation system. I think we had five or six different areas, which amounted to about 300,000 acres, and what we were doing was changing the system from a pumped system to a, I guess you'd say, more or less a gravity system. Well, I wouldn't say a gravity. It's from one kind of a pump system to another kind of a pump system, ***and*** from a rotational irrigation delivery supply to a ***constant*** demand-type irrigation supply, because in Egypt the system was designed by the Brits. All the water has to be

pumped at least about three feet to get to the farm levels. I think their rationale was that they would save more water that way. If people had to pump it, it takes more effort, and especially when they designed it. You had the old water wheel kind of things called sakias [phonetic], in which you hooked up an animal to this pump. The animal walks around in a circle, and this big wheel with buckets on it dips into the waterway and splashes water on the field or into a ditch. So first of all, every farmer had to get his own water that way.

Secondly, the way the system was set up, you would get water for eight days, and then you'd have eight days there was no water, and so you had to schedule your irrigations all within those eight days. So eight days on, eight days off. In some areas, it may be five and five or ten and ten. It just depended on the area.

"So what we were doing was switching those systems to continuous flow, and we were putting in facilities to make the water available all the time . . . We also went from an individual farmer pumping his water to a *group* of farmers using one pump. . . ."

So what we were doing was switching those systems to continuous flow, and we were putting in facilities to make the water available all the time, and rotation, then, out of a canal came according to the distributaries that came off of that canal. We also went from an individual farmer pumping his water to a ***group*** of farmers using one pump. So wherever there was a farmer's ditch, which may serve anywheres from fifteen up to 100 farmers, we would put one pump. It was a raised what they call meska [phonetic], but it's a raised ditch. This one pump was used to pump water into this ditch. That required organizing farmers, and they'd never been organized before. So we had two sociologists on our team, also, and their job was to organize farmers to operate and maintain the pump, to schedule their individual farmer's diversions, to maintain their ditch, to make sure that any repayment necessary would be obtained from the farmers, and so on.

So, it was a program of doing the planning studies to see if they were feasible. We had to do a little report on each little project, and AID would have to approve it. And then we'd have to assist the Egyptians in design and in construction specifications, and we also had to organize the farmers, ***and*** we also had to try to help them come up with a repayment scheme, which still is not in place. So even though these things are going on, the farmers are still getting it for free.

Storey: From the Egyptian government.

Vissia: And, of course, supplemented by U-S-A-I-D, essentially, yeah.

Storey: Were there other Bureau of Reclamation employees that you brought over?

Vissia: On the team, the only Bureau of Reclamation employee on my team with Morrison-Knudsen was Adrian Hutchins, an economist.

Storey: Who was already there.

Vissia: Was already there. Later on, I brought over Don Clay as an area engineer, because we had area offices, and he was an area engineer in a little town called Zagazig. So I brought him over. That's the only one. We had an ex-SES employee there as another area engineer. In fact, we may have had two of them. But the other ones were just people who had worked for the contractor previously and were put on that job, engineers.

In fact, I don't know if you've ever heard of Max Lowdermilk. He was a professor at Colorado State University but spent a lot of time overseas, and he was a sociologist. He was our head sociologist. In fact, he just retired from that project last year, but I understand he's now back there on a six-month detail again. In fact, we had two people from Colorado State University over there.

"Two universities that are really strong overseas are Colorado State University and Utah State University. . . ."

Two universities that are really strong overseas are Colorado State University and Utah State University. They've been able to have very strong overseas programs and to obtain contracts with the governments on AID or Bank-funded programs. So you'll find a lot of people from those two universities that worked overseas. Not only that, you'll find a lot of foreigners that were trained in those two universities in the field of irrigation, because most of these programs have training components, as we did.

". . . we also had at least two trips a year which we'd send up to fifteen guys over here for a month basically on a study tour. . . ."

We had a large in-country training program, but we also had at least two trips a year which we'd send up to fifteen guys over here for a month basically on a study tour. They'd go around and look at projects and go to places like to E&R Center and give presentations there.

". . . they always had to go to Boulder City to see the dam because they *all* wanted to go to Las Vegas, and you always had to find some reason for them to go through Los Angeles because they wanted to go to Disneyland. . . ."

Then, of course, they always had to go to Boulder City to see the dam because they ***all*** wanted to go to Las Vegas, and you always had to find some reason for them to go through Los Angeles because they wanted to go to Disneyland. A lot of these tours, even though they're supposed to be technical and training, you had to work in the social aspects, too.

The other thing we had was, normally about two people a year were sent to long-term degree training, and both Utah State and Colorado State had specific programs for foreigners in which you could get your master's degree ***and*** your doctorate's degree in the field of irrigation, and so when you travel overseas, you'll always find somebody–in fact, I was in Malawi this year in February, and the head of the unit that I was working with was a graduate of Colorado State, of all things, and he

had gone during the time when U-S-A-I-D had a stronger program there in the past. In Egypt, you'll find all kinds of people that graduated from Colorado State, and in India you'll find a lot and Sri Lanka, Pakistan, because when I was in Pakistan last year, there was several that were from CSU.

Storey: I didn't realize that aspect of CSU.

Vissia: Ev Richardson [phonetic] was one of the–I don't think he's involved. He's, I'm sure, retired, but he was the head of the foreign activities program at CSU for a long time, and he has quite a bit of experience in Egypt and set up some major programs in Egypt with CSU.

Storey: Well, let's see, you spent eighteen months in Egypt the second time. Then what happened?

After Egypt, ". . . I just began to do short-term assignments. I guess that was in '91-, '92 I finished that, and basically have worked anywhere from a couple of weeks up to a max of five months on any one assignment. . . . I've worked in Romania, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Malawi . . . Philippines . . . and Egypt. . . ."

Vissia: After that, I just began to do short-term assignments. I guess that was in '91-, '92 I finished that, and basically have worked anywhere from a couple of weeks up to a max of five months on any one assignment. Since then, I've worked in Romania, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Malawi. I was in the Philippines. I guess those were the primary places I worked. And I worked for Morrison-Knudsen. Again, later on I worked for Louis Berger in Malaysia. I worked for the World Bank in India. I worked for the International Irrigation Management Institute in Pakistan and Egypt. So those are the main people I've worked for.

I've been on proposals of lots of other firms, but they haven't gotten the jobs. I'm on proposals for at least five different activities right now, one in Jamaica, one in Pakistan, one in Vietnam, another one in Egypt. There's about three-, four different companies involved, all private companies in this case.

Storey: What's it like working for a private company as opposed to the Federal government overseas or the World Bank overseas?

Working for Private Companies Overseas

Vissia: Well, when I worked for Morrison-Knudsen, of course working on an A-I-D program is a little bit different than some other overseas work for these people, because A-I-D, usually the way they'll let a contract is, you put in what your salaries are and your benefits for employees and your costs and so on, and there are certain limits.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 3. JULY 9, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 3. JULY 9, 1996.

Vissia: So that the way it's set up is, the contractor is going to get those costs regardless, and

then on top of that, he has a profit factor and also an overhead factor, which is set, so it's sort of cut and dried. When you bid these programs, you have to say, "Okay, these are my employees, and here's what their salaries are." And employees are allowed free housing under those programs, which is an AID rule, and I think free utilities, as I recall, and transportation to and from work.

All of that is part of the standard part of the contract, so where the company makes its money is on the overhead they tack on to it, which is agreed to at the beginning of the contract, ***and*** the profit factor. But, of course, you have to do a good job, and you try to hold your costs down, also. You try to keep your costs low, because if you have to spend more than what you're allotted under the contract, it comes out of your profit. I mean, that's all there is to it. So you have to try to stay ***within*** what the budget was originally set.

". . . working for a private company, like in Egypt, for example, if you worked straight for the Bureau and you worked in Egypt, you would have a lot more trust and probably more respect. They are very suspicious of private companies in Egypt . . ."

The other aspect of working for a private company, like in Egypt, for example, if you worked straight for the Bureau and you worked in Egypt, you would have a lot more trust and probably more respect. They are very suspicious of private companies in Egypt, and for some good reason in some cases. They know that companies are there to make money, and their main objective is the profit motive. Whereas with the Bureau, it never was. You're there to do a job, and you get paid whatever the expenses are. But when you're with a private company, you have that extra little burden to get over. You have to earn the trust of your client and show him that you ***are*** doing a good job, that you are trying to help them, and you're not just there to fill up your coffers back home in San Francisco. So that's one of the differences.

Morrison- Knudsen Was Very Fair

Morrison-Knudsen was quite fair with me. As a matter of fact, they also had an incentive program, that if you increased their profits or you cut costs or whatever, you would get a bonus. And because I was able to get the project turned around, and extended as a matter of fact, and increased the contract value by another $3 million, after I left Egypt, about six months later they asked me to go to Romania, M-K did, to finish off a project for them there, and while I was there, one of the vice presidents came to visit me, and he said, "Does M-K owe you anything?"

I said, "Not that I know of."

He said, "Do you remember a program you entered when you were in Egypt that if you met certain goals you would receive an award?"

I said, "Yeah, but I thought the goals were so lofty I didn't have a chance."

He said, "Well, you met those goals, and here's your check–$15,000."

And really, they didn't ***have*** to do that for me, because I had actually left M-K after Egypt and was re-hired later, so they probably could have said, "Well, you know, he's not even an employee anymore." But they said, "No, pay him. He did a good job. He's now under our employ again for a couple of months." So they paid me. Maybe that's why they almost went bankrupt recently.

Storey: Yeah. They didn't? I know they were real close.

Vissia: No, they were very close, but there's a guy in Montana who bought M-K. They kept the name M-K, but he owns now more than 50 percent of the stock in M-K. He owns the major railroads in Alaska and the Northwest, and he also had his own construction company. He's quite a rich guy and has quite a few things going on. And so he bought M-K and then trying to get it turned around.

Storey: I understand Harza came close.

Vissia: Yes, they did, too.

Storey: Or actually did, I don't know.

Vissia: No, I don't think they did. I think they're still in business. I was in Egypt I think at the time that Don Duck left Harza, and the guy I talked to ended up being the next president of the Board. I don't think he was at the time I talked to him, but he was there because Harza had a project in Egypt.

"Under the AID program overseas, all of the money has to go to American companies and to American equipment. The percentage has to be up around like 80 percent . . ."

Under the AID program overseas, all of the money has to go to American companies and to American equipment. The percentage has to be up around like 80 percent or whatever. Some equipment isn't ***all*** manufactured in the States. It has foreign components. But you have to prove that a certain percentage of the components is manufactured in the States. So in places like Egypt, where they have a huge AID program, you have a major American community of several thousand Americans living in Egypt because of that. Whereas with the World Bank or any other international bank, you open up the bidding to everybody in the world, and so you have a lot of competition from Europeans when you go on a World Bank project. But on AID programs, American companies are the ***only*** ones that can bid.

Storey: How would you characterize these last four years or so on these small projects? What kind of projects are they?

Vissia: Well, the kind of work I did in Romania, we were doing a feasibility study for the Department of Commerce to try to encourage selling pumping and sprinkler equipment to the Romanians. So what we were doing was looking at their old existing pump sprinkler systems that were all old Eastern Bloc and Russian equipment and to– would it be feasible to replace all those with new American pumps and sprinkler equipment.

So we were doing a feasibility study for that.

It was feasible. The next problem was for the country to find funding to finance it, because the Department of Commerce was mainly interested in seeing if it was feasible and if there was a market there, and if there was, to encourage that market. But while I was there the government changed, and the government went in that was essentially a lot of the old Communist cronies were back in control. So they lost their favored-nation status for loans, and it was very difficult for them, then, to get money from anybody. Consequently, as far as I know, they probably haven't done much with that.

How Communist Collectivization Caused Issues When Romania Decided to Return Farmland to the Original Owners

The other unique problem with that was that, because they were communist, they had taken over all the private ownerships years and years ago and built these projects as one huge state farm. So it was all laid out as a large state farm, and that was operated essentially by employees of the state. ***Now*** they decided, the new government decided, "Okay, we're going to give the land back to the original owners." So you had the first the problem of finding who they were. Secondly, was digging up all the old land ownership records to see where the ownership lines were, and then try to make the system fit that, because the system didn't fit individual ownerships like you'd build it here in the States. So that was a very unique problem, and in one case they decided it was impossible to do, so what they did is they left the system as it was and they sold stock in a so-called private company to all of the original owners of that area, and they became a stockholding company for that area. That was the plan they were going to try to do. I don't think they had implemented it yet when I was there, but that was their proposal.

In India, I was hired by the World Bank to do an institutional study of the Department of Irrigation for the state of Haryana. The state of Haryana needed to rehabilitate their existing irrigation system. This was the second time around, so the Bank wanted to make sure that, if they were going to spend ***more*** money on doing the same thing again, they wanted to make sure that other things were changed so that the system didn't fall apart again, so it was managed properly.

So they hired me to do an institutional study, which is essentially to look at the way it was managed, the way that department was managed, how it was organized, to look at legislation, to look at relationships with water users, whether they should be organized more or less. Then they hired Larry Simpson from the Northern Colorado District, who was a manager at that time, to do a review of their operation and maintenance procedures and try to help them come up with new manuals, new procedures, and so on. We hired somebody, a computer specialist, to help them try to set up some more modern systems. I guess those were primarily the main people.

We had to do these studies first. Oh, they also had to help them with a state water plan. We had to go through these studies first, and then if they met the conditions of the results of these studies, they could get the loan. And so I must have

spent thirty months–thirty months? No, not thirty months. Over a period of a couple of years, or three years, I probably spent, I don't know, it must have been maybe thirty weeks would be more like it, thirty weeks of time in India on several trips, working with their staff to do an institutional study, and then we came up with some recommendations about management, about organization, about legislation, about water users, about repayment. Then the operation and maintenance guy came up with recommendations about some new manuals, new procedures, and so on.

India was ". . . pretty backward, because it's a poor country to start with, and it's the most governed country I've ever been in. I mean, government is so pervasive throughout the whole system that it's *over-governed* in terms of the effect on people's lives there. That and Pakistan are one of the most, what do I want to call it, corrupt. They don't necessarily look at it as corruption . . ."

They were pretty backward, because it's a poor country to start with, and it's the most governed country I've ever been in. I mean, government is so pervasive throughout the whole system that it's ***over-governed*** in terms of the effect on people's lives there. That and Pakistan are one of the most, what do I want to call it, corrupt. They don't necessarily look at it as corruption, but everybody's on the take for everything. Even if you're a young man and you want to become a policeman, you have to pay to get certain things even to be considered, and then even after you become a policeman, why, you have to pay your superiors if you collect things. Even in the department, all the contractors would contribute to the field engineers a certain percentage under the table, and that moved on up the system, until finally the department chief got his share of the thing.

And they all complained about it. That was the major complaint of all of the people we interviewed was the amount of corruption and what it did to the organization and to management, and yet most of them participated in it, because they had no alternative. If you didn't, you were looked on as an outsider and you were ostracized. So to survive, you participated in the system, called oiling the palm. It's just pervasive there. Even with the farmers. The farmers would come to the ditch rider or to the local superintendent and they'd want more water, and whoever paid more, got more, stuff like that.

Storey: Did that cause problems for your project?

Vissia: Well, of course, we weren't necessarily working– I wasn't working directly on the project, but the Bank knows that stuff goes on. They're not oblivious to it. What they try to do is set up systems that reduce its effect. I mean, the Bank has been in this business for a long time. In fact, most of the employees in the World Bank are not Western anyway. An awful lot of them are from these countries, so they're not blind to this. So what they try to do is set up programs to improve the systems to reduce the effect of this stuff.

"Another major problem is like overstaffing. There were 6 million acres in Haryana. Had *20,000* employees in the Department of Irrigation. It has to be at least 50 percent or 100 percent overstaffed, but you couldn't fire anybody

because a lot of these jobs were perks from the politicians. . . ."

Another major problem is like overstaffing. There were 6 million acres in Haryana. Had ***20,000*** employees in the Department of Irrigation. It has to be at least 50 percent or 100 percent overstaffed, but you couldn't fire anybody because a lot of these jobs were perks from the politicians. The politicians said, "You vote for me, I'll get you a job." So the guy votes, and he gets a job in some government agency.

So the Bank's approach was, "Okay, that cuts into the money you have for O&M. Can't we set up a system whereby you, the government, and we'll help you with World Bank funds, but you, the government, say, 'Okay, if you want to run this kind of a system, you recognize that 40 percent of the costs of your agency is basically a welfare program. Call it what it is, but then dedicate the funds you need to do good O&M, because that's why your systems keep falling apart.'" So the Bank was trying to encourage them to do that. In the end, they did get an agreement that over a period of ten years they were going to reduce their staff I think by maybe 40 percent or so, basically through attrition and retirement and that kind of stuff.

Working to Get India to Modernize and Buy Computers and Modern Communications Systems

So we had some very unique problems working with these groups. Likewise, they never had money to try to modernize. I mean, when I went there, the department had one old, old, old computer, and the guy that was in charge of it sort of used it as his own little power tool and wrote a lot of little programs which nobody ever used. All of the administrative work was done by typewriter or by hand. So we were trying to get them into the Twentieth Century by setting up computer training and providing funds so they could buy computer systems and do both their administrative and their technical work on computers. But that again, it's a major program to try to train these people to do that, to get the equipment in the right places, to set up the right systems, and so on. You're dealing with a whole different situation when you work in countries like that compared to if you're working for the Bureau of Reclamation.

Storey: Especially the computer thing, I would think.

Vissia: Yeah. They have very little concept of it. Like I say, the guy that was in charge of it, he was a smart guy, but he basically used it as his own little toy and his own little power tool, and there wasn't really any programs that were used to any extent from that one computer. There was no word processing done. The stuff he did was sort of track some things in terms of costs or maybe some hydraulics.

So we were trying to get their–likewise, communications systems for operation and maintenance. Here you have a system of 6 million acres, and they tried to send communications in terms of instructions of when to release and when to open this gate and when to do that all by telephone. The telephone system ***often*** doesn't work, and there aren't that many telephone stations in the field anyway. So you've got a lot of guys riding around on bicycle out there that maybe come into the office once or twice a day to get their instructions. If the telephone's not working, just leave the setting

where it is, even though you may have a flood upstream somewhere or people aren't taking their water so you got this big slug coming down and there's no way to control it. So we were trying to set up a radio system whereby they could have proper communications and they could send out the instructions that are required. So you're sort of like starting back in the early 1900s, I guess, of the Bureau of Reclamation with some of these countries.

Storey: Any other projects you remember?

Vissia: In Pakistan, I was writing a work program for a research program in institutions at all levels, all the way from the farmer's level up through the government level. The International Irrigation Management Institute is essentially a research institute, and the World Bank wanted to do some major funding of drainage systems and rehabilitation systems in Pakistan, but they also wanted to have more background data and more research data before they made some major investments. And so they were financing a three-year study at the tune of $2.5 million to review and research, find out as much as you can about all of the various institutions that affect the irrigation system in Pakistan, so it's all the way from the agencies that control it to the farmers and the way they operate, to any other agencies that are involved, and legislation, all those kinds of things.

A proposal was written by the Institute. The Bank said, "Okay, it looks like it's pretty good, but we want to see a work plan." So I laid out a work plan on how to go about conducting this research in Pakistan, so that was the program there.

In Malaysia, I was hired by Louis Berger to write a proposal for a project that was being financed by the Asian Development Bank, and it was a project that was to turn some of the swampy areas on the island of Borneo into oil palm plantations to manufacture palm oil. Louis Berger was interested in getting this job, which would have been studies and designs and so on, and so I was just writing the proposal that they would put forth.

In the proposal, you have to tell how you're going to go about it, how many people you're going to hire. You have to schedule those people out on who does what when and what the costs are and so on. So I spent a month. I started in the Philippines because that's where the bank is located. I spent three days there. Then I went to Malaysia. Louis Berger was joining up with a Malaysian engineering company that was basically Chinese and Indian people. There weren't any Malays that I know of in the management, and worked with them to gather all the field information and to put together the draft proposal. Then I went to Bangkok, where Louis Berger has an office, and spent the last four or five days there finishing the final proposal, working there.

Another Stint in Egypt Was to Look at Why AID Projects Didn't Seem to Produce Results

Then last year in Egypt I worked again for the International Irrigation Management Institute, and we were doing, again, a major institutional study of the Ministry of Public Works and Water Resources, as well as looking at their operation

and maintenance of their systems. This was financed by AID. AID was concerned that for some reason they'd been pouring all this money into the ministry on all new various modernization techniques, but they didn't seem to be receiving any benefit. They didn't seem to be working.

They had spent millions of dollars on a ***large*** system to gather data automatically in the field and have it radioed into headquarters. It still wasn't being used to actually operate the system. They had spent a lot of money on this rehabilitation program that I was on previously, and it was way behind schedule and had some problems. So IIMI was hired to take a look at why was it that some of these AID programs weren't working as well as they should and what changes should be made to make AID more influential and to be more successful for this ministry. So that was our main task.

One of our main conclusions was that there needed to be a major change in the environment of the ministry itself and the way they did business and in the culture of the ministry, and we recommended some major management programs in which they would begin to look at what their existing program is now, what their future problems are going to be, and how they are managed now and the way they're organized, and sort of set up some programs similar to what we had in the Bureau in which we had these training sessions and planning sessions that were guided by consultants and have the ministry go through that. In fact, I used some of the stuff that the Bureau had done, I guess it was in the late eighties, to redefine their goals and to take a look at where they were and where they're going and what their problems are and set priorities and that kind of stuff. So we designed a program for them like that.

We also designed a field program for them to try and create closer communications between the head office and the field staffs, and as far as I know, it still hasn't been totally agreed to between the Egyptians and AID as to how this future stuff will take place. I've talked to Chris Perry [phonetic], who works for IIMI, and he's been going back and forth from Sri Lanka to Egypt to try and work with both AID and the Egyptians to see if they can't get this program going and financed.

Work in Malawi

In Malawi this year, I was hired by the World Bank, and I worked with a guy from another international organization in Italy. It wasn't FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization]. I forget what it's called. Anyways, the two of us worked with the government of Malawi to help them to come up with and develop an irrigation policy, a national irrigation policy.

Malawi, normally it's almost totally rain-fed agriculture, and normally they have enough rain. But in the last ten years, they've had several years of drought and it has affected their agriculture output considerably. So they wanted to expand what little irrigation they had to sort of fill in the gaps when there's a drought, and so they wanted some help on establishing a national irrigation policy, and that's what we did. So the World Bank financed that, with the idea that once they get a policy in place, they would be willing to finance actual projects.

That's pretty much the main activities.

Storey: Were there other Reclamation employees or former Reclamation employees on any of these projects?

Vissia: Let's see. The one in Pakistan, no. The one in Romania, yes. Again, Adrian Hutchins was on that project. He was the only one. And then last year Adrian Hutchins was also on the project in Egypt. He was on that one. That's the only ones that were on those programs.

Storey: Why did you decide to retire to Ocean Shores?

Retiring to Ocean Shores

Vissia: Well, we had a couple of priorities. One was to find a climate that wasn't too severe. Actually, it wasn't exactly the climate we wanted, but the first priority was to live by the ocean. That was number one priority. When we were in Egypt, we looked in Cyprus and we looked in Spain, and then in Brazil we seriously looked at the northeast coast. There's some beautiful, beautiful places there, beaches there that would be a wonderful place to retire.

We decided finally that, well, because my wife is so attached to the children and the grandchildren, it would be not too good of an idea to live overseas permanently, because you would have this major expense of going back and forth to visit, and it wouldn't be as frequently as you'd like. So we decided then to look in the States. We ignored the East Coast, because we don't like the East Coast. We looked in Texas and the Gulf. We looked in southern California, and too many people and too expensive. Since we had lived in the Northwest, we looked over here, and we thought, well, the price is right, it's still fairly pristine, and we're living by the ocean, which we enjoy very much. The only drawback here is the winters can be a little bit long, because you get a lot of rain. It rains average 70 inches a year here, and most of it occurs between November and April.

Storey: And then you have blue skies like today during the summer.

Vissia: It makes up for a lot of that. So it's nice when we get foreign assignments in the wintertime, because then we can go somewhere else, like we went to Malawi this year in February and part of March, and it was beautiful there. I mean, it was lovely, and, of course, here it was raining cats and dogs. So that was a nice break.

Storey: Um-hmm. What else should we talk about that we haven't talked about?

Vissia: Boy, there's not much . . .

Storey: Did you ever come into contact with any of the Secretaries of Interior over projects?

Vissia: Not necessarily over projects, because [Cecil] Andrus was governor when I was regional director. He became secretary of the interior while I was still regional director

in Boise, and so when I came to Washington, once or twice he invited me up to see him and other times I'd just go up and talk to him.

I met with the under secretary of interior on Colville issues in terms of them getting part of the power revenues from Grand Coulee. Usually it was probably the assistant secretary's office if we were in town and we had to talk about a specific project. If they had to be involved, then we usually met with them. I think I was maybe only in one meeting with [Rogers] Morton at the most, but I wasn't there as the principal guy. I was just there as probably accompanying the commissioner or something. So, no, I didn't have that privilege to meet with all the secretaries or to have any large project-related meetings. It was usually with the assistant secretaries or like once or twice with the under secretary.

Storey: Do you remember any of the assistant secretaries in particular?

Vissia: There was a guy named . . .

END SIDE 2, TAPE 3. JULY 9, 1996.
BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 4. JULY 9, 1996.

Storey: This is tape four of an interview by Brit Storey with Rod Vissia on July the 9th, 1996.

Vissia: Dan Beard was in the assistant secretary's office, I believe, for a while.

Storey: Yeah, he was deputy assistant secretary.

Vissia: Yeah, deputy assistant secretary. I remember him. I didn't have all that much to do with him.

I remember one incident under Broadbent that involved somebody from the assistant secretary's office. I don't know who it was, but he came to the region to visit and we had a meeting in my office. Behind my desk I had a little plaque about this big which was a picture of a man and a woman taking a shower together and underneath it said, "Save Water. Take a shower with a friend." It was a gift that my wife had given me, so I had it on the wall behind my desk.

After he returned to Washington, he didn't talk to me about it personally, which really griped me, but he went back to Washington and he called up Broadbent and he said, "Hey, you got this guy out there who's got this plaque on his wall. It's not very appropriate. You should have him remove it."

So Broadbent called me up and said, "I understand you have this plaque on your wall."

I said, "Yeah, I do."

He said, "Well, so-and-so was out, and he didn't think it was very appropriate. Perhaps you ought to take it down."

What griped me about that, the guy didn't have the balls to talk to me directly. He was there sitting in my office. Why didn't he say something? After all, he was from the secretary's office. He went back and talked to Broadbent. I never did take it down.

Storey: Now, this would have been when you were in Denver?

Vissia: No, in Boise.

Storey: While you were still regional director?

Vissia: Yeah. Was Broadbent in the office then? Well, maybe it was Higginson that called me up. It must have been, because Broadbent I don't think became commissioner until I was in Denver, so it had to be under Higginson. Yeah, it had to be Higginson that called me up, I guess. That was a funny incident.

But, no, I didn't really have all that much to do with secretary staff as a regional director or as a assistant commissioner.

Storey: Nothing else, huh?

Vissia: No.

Storey: No funny stories?

Vissia: No.

Storey: Okay. Well, in that case, I'd like to ask whether or not you're willing for researchers to use the information on these tapes and the resulting transcripts.

Vissia: Researchers being whom?

Storey: People inside and outside Reclamation.

Vissia: Yeah, I think so. The part I guess I probably wouldn't want them to use is I talked about the problem we had with somebody in the White House instructing the Bureau to do a certain thing for an attorney on Cascade Lake under the Nixon administration. Since I don't remember the details, and I don't think there's very much in the record about it, that would probably be better left out. Maybe we ought to just scratch that part, because what I know about it is hazy, and there's not very much in the record about it written, so it would be ***guesswork*** if somebody tried to investigate that. I don't know how much they would be able to find out, because I certainly don't remember all the details, but I do know it was an interesting problem.

Storey: Okay, good.

Vissia: But the rest, no, I don't have any problem.

Storey: Thank you.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 4. JULY 9, 1996.
END OF INTERVIEWS