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# OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF

ONNI PERALA

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Date: 10/16/03 Signed: O J Perala

INTERVIEWER: James M. Bailey

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Oral History Interview of
Onnie Perala

Bailey: This is an oral history interview on October 16, 2003, with Onnie Perala. Is that correct?

Perala: Yes.

Bailey: Why don't you go ahead and state your name for the record, and we'll start with that.

Perala: My name is Onnie Perala and I was born and raised in Toivola, Michigan. T-O-I-V-O-L-A.

Bailey: How long did you live in Michigan Onnie?

Perala: I lived in Michigan through, all the way through my education, grade school, high school, and then I went to school at Michigan Tech University.

Bailey: Did you graduate?

Perala: Yes, I did, in 1961 with a degree, bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering.

Bailey: Okay, when did you come out to this part of the country?

Perala: We moved out west in 1961. The first two years, I worked for the Forest Service in Transportation System Development, and in 1963 I began my career with Reclamation at the Snake River Development Office in Boise, Idaho.

Bailey: What were your first impressions when you came out west, after growing up in Michigan? What really struck you about being out here?

Perala: What struck me was the two types of landscape. I got to be on the coast the first couple of years, and then I moved out into a desert environment. And, as a kid I remember being very curious and wanting to know the name of every plant, and rock, and tree, and everything else, and I had to relearn everything because the coastal environment

and the desert environment are all together different than the cedar swamps of Northern Michigan. So... I had to start relearning everything.

Bailey: What did you do at the Forest Service? What kind of work did you do with them?

Perala: The first year I was in, I was a road designer. And, while on Walport [spelling?] District, the duty of the District Engineer was to have twenty-five miles of road in (animal yelps) Holly get out of there. Twenty-five miles of road under design, twenty-five miles in layout, and then twenty-five miles in construction. So, there was a major construction thing going on. As well then, when I went to the Regional Office, I was a bridge designer there for probably about a year, maybe a little bit better.

Bailey: Now, which reason was this? Region Six?

Perala: This was Region Six that covered Oregon and Washington.

Bailey: How did you like working for the Forest Service at the time?

Perala: I liked the outside work, the type of thing we were doing, whether we were on layout or designing, or building, just the environment and being out in the woods getting, seeing what you design get built that was quite rewarding.

Bailey: And how did you hear about the job at the Bureau of Reclamation?

Perala: Well, I knew advancement in the Forest Service was very slow and I was in contact with some of my colleagues that I had graduated from college with. They were quite happy working for the Bureau of Reclamation, so as a result I visited one of them who was living in Denver. I took an interview in Denver, in some o f the old annex buildings, and I remember sparrows coming down and making deposits on the papers

that were sitting on Frank Casner's desk. And then, as a result of that interview, I also was granted an interview in Boise, on my way back through to Portland where I was living at the time. I took an interview there as well, and got a job offer from the Bureau of Reclamation within a month, and took it.

Bailey: What forest did you work in when you were with the Forest Service?

Perala: Siuslaw S-I-U-S-L-A-W. That was called the Asbestos Forest. We used to have to look for days of the lowest humidity in order to be able to burn because the conditions were so wet in many of the canyons there you couldn't even get a controlled burn of slash.

Bailey: So, 1963 you started with Bureau of Reclamation. Where was your first duty station with the Bureau of Reclamation?

Perala: Boise, Idaho. 214 Broadway.

Bailey: I know the building.

Perala: And I was ... in Planning Hydrology there for ten years. I believe the highlight of that, that duty station would have been the development of the digital model for the Upper Snake River system, which covered the water use and water rights from the headwaters up at, flowing into Jackson Lake and going on down to King Hill, Idaho.

Bailey: You stayed in Boise for ten years?

Perala: That's correct. From October of '63 to October of '73.

Bailey: And what happened there in 1973? Did you come out to this part of the country? Did you transfer?

Perala: And then I came, I transferred to -- Planning was, again a big cutback at the time, and so I came to work for the Bureau of Reclamation on the Yakima Project, in Operations.

Bailey: What were your responsibilities in Operations?

Perala: I had the oversight of the river operation and reservoir regulation for the Yakima River and its reservoir system. We were delivering water to the irrigators, and as time evolved we also got more, much more heavily involved in providing manipulation of the reservoir releases for fish life. And, in those years when we had sufficient water supply we operated the reservoirs also under an informal agreement for providing flood control.

Bailey: So were you, you were obviously around when they shifted over from the old system to the new system?

Perala: I was part of the big change that -- when we came in the Project Superintendent at the time, Bill Gray [spelling?] had a big modernization program underway, thirteen-point-some million dollars for replacement of the reservoir gates. We had many, we had two dams that had the old cylinder gates, which were, they were effective but the cylinder gates had a history of anywhere from fifteen to twenty-four or thirty months you had to take down the system, reline the gate guides, and put in new gate shoes because the vibration caused by the water flowing through those gates would just rattley-bang those gates to death.

Bailey: Which reservoirs were these?

Perala: Keechelus and Cle Elum.

Bailey: Okay.

Perala: And then after that there was also a great fear of what would happen if a needle valve was operated in the wrong way on a dam, and Tieton Dam had a needle valve, and that was changed to a jet-flow valve in the mid '80s.

Bailey: So a lot of transitions from needle valves to jet-flow valves during that time?

Perala: Right.

Bailey: Do you remember when the irrigation districts went from the old system to the pressurized system?

Perala: Oh yes.

Bailey: Can you discuss that and any recollections of that?

Perala: In the Yakima-Tieton, in 1947, it was the first one of the irrigation districts that the Bureau built that paid its construction debt to the U.S. At that time, I don't remember if he was the Chairman of the Board, but I know he was a board member, it was Fred Bizner [spelling?]... was a very astute old businessman and he and the other board members, who were also good businessmen, decided that just because they had the district paid off that didn't necessarily mean that they could just stay status quo and go on happily on into the future. They realized that in order to stay competitive, and looking at their system, they knew that they had to keep making improvements to it so that they could stay competitive, and stay in the irrigated agriculture business into the future. So, they started making improvements and they saw that their biggest water

losses were in their small deliveries. The smaller the delivery the higher the percentage of the loss would be. So, they started doing a lot of small piping projects and this went on through the '50s and '60s. In the late '60s and early '70s they noted in their cost controls that, for the money they were spending, they were not gaining any more efficiency numbers. They were not gaining any more. They were holding status quo, and had held status quo for some time. And, because they were good records keepers and could show this, they approached, they approached a consulting firm to say, "Okay. You know, what could be done? Give us a recommendation." They did not want to approach the Bureau because the Yakima-Tieton had been built in the days before the Fact Finding Act. It was one of the -- Tieton and the Sunnyside were the first built, in this valley, when the Bureau came in first, as the Bureau of Reclamation, and started developing. So, there were, it was, they just dilineated where there would be irrigable lands and started putting in the system. The Fact Finding Act came in in 1924. It has a more official name, but that's the common name that old, old hands and old planners use. So, they didn't want to open up their contract and go through all of that, and sign on with the Bureau. They did want to go with R & B. So, they went -- Rehab and Betterment. And, they went to CH2M Hill who said, "Well, there are some things . . ." and I don't remember if there were other options, but there was one good option, a recommended option, that they elected to go with. The old system of open canals contoured the periphery of their, of their valley. The CH2M Hill engineers said, "Why don't you put in a central collector that goes right through the center of the

valley, or distribution system that would have a main going right through the center of the valley, and then trellis out from that and make a shorter distribution system but cover the same lands?" And they believed that with the ridge-type location that they had it was favorably suited for giving gravity pressure or pressure delivery to every user. Because of that topography many of the lands, and I don't remember the percentage. I've had that explained to me back in the days when they were explaining that, in '83 and '84. It was built in '85 and '86. And, to make that, get that done in two years, that was quite a feat. But you're talking about 27,000 acres, and getting a supply to them. But anyway, they laid out this trellis pattern and abandoned all of those canals on the periphery of the valley. The system then was designed. There was a lot of meetings and all the water users were not necessarily for it. Many of them balked at the cost, and as a result, the cost was quite, quite big. And, it was started off at about $66 million at the outset, and through different things that evolved, it ultimately cost about $80 million to build, which really isn't that high in, when you start talking about overruns. I mean, some of the things that came about weren't that surprising. One of the biggest surprises, and it hit them in one, one gulp, was when they, the Bureau said that for the French Canyon Dam, the Bureau and the state, the State Department of Ecologies. They said that you had to have a big spillway to pass a certain flood. The spillway for that, I think it's somewhere, the reservoir itself is something like five, six, seven hundred acre-feet. It's an equalizing reservoir, and it's their pressure -- it's the feeder for the whole pipeline. They bring in water down the canyon on their regular old

main canal, put it into this reservoir, and then release it out of that. That reservoir needed a spillway capable of carrying an amount of water that would be flood, pretty good flood stage for the Yakima River, at Parker, which is in the excess of 20,000 cfs. One of the biggest runoffs that occurred here in the valley was in February of '96, on a, quite a sizable flood, and that flood turned out, it peaked out at something like 1500 cfs. So that was, that was as sizable flow, and it did not overtop the dam, it didn't go over the spill. I think they did, they can regulate into the channel as well, so. (Bailey: Hmm.) Yeah. But that was one of the biggest surprises that hit them, and it was a sizable blow at that time. And, it almost stopped the project because that was, that wasn't part of the cash flow that they were prepared for at that time. And, so that, that was a blow. But, they did get the project done. Yakima County engineers balked a little because of the vast amount of roads that were tore up, because they put in along, if not in the road, alongside the road, and there was a lot of pipeline buried at that time. So, there was road closures and all of that for quite some time. But, the project did get done and I don't think that there's too many users around now who would even consider not having that system, that would want to go back to the old.

Bailey: Especially taking in the growth of the area, and plus now it's not just agricultural. It's municipal and industrial, as well.

Perala: Well the, just the fact that everybody has water under pressure. For those areas that were landlocked and high up on ridges, there's enough pressure drop in that there are pressure relievers or pressure reducers. And a good way to reduce the pressure is to run

it through a power plant, and they run it through the power plant and they provide enough power to provide their own pressure pumping, and sell a little bit of power.

Bailey: Surplus. Yeah.

Perala: Surplus power to private power companies.

Bailey: Yeah. I've seen that little, they have one up on the district.

Perala: They have one out of Cowiche and one, one power plant over here just west of town off of Summit View Extension. On Orchard, I believe it is.

Bailey: During your career out here, what are the biggest changes that you saw besides the change from the open to the pressurized system? Are there any other changes that really stand out?

Perala: Modernization of the outlet works on reservoirs. There's been, every one of the dams has had substantial amount of work done on them. You've got a automated telemetry network that brings in information on the, from the river system, the gauging stations, and the weather stations. That was put in during the time that I was there. And we also, when I was the head of the Hydrology Branch, we put in the first remote control system for control of reservoir gates from the project office. So, those were changes that the public don't see, but it made operations improvement.

Then, along about in 1980, with the fracas that evolved from providing water over the Salmon Ridge, from the reservoirs, that was -- the judge ordered that the stored water had to be released there, because a certain amount had to be there. If it wasn't there naturally then you had to release reservoir storage for those fish. And so,

the manipulation of the flows for fish production was, has had a big change in the way water is operated in this valley.

Another big change was the, in 1977, the application of the 1945 Consent Decree, and losing, well translating the narrative of the '45 Consent Decree into a mathematical formula so that it could be used for predicting the total water supply available, which is the rule and guide for distribution of water in the basin. And, just that in itself, that formula could probably change in the future, especially with the, if the checkpoint, the checkpoint currently, and as noted in the '45 Consent Decree, is the Yakima River at Parker. It could someday be the Yakima River at Prosser, or even down near the mouth, because of the competition for the water resource. The use of that formula, even though the narrative was put into place in 1945, it wasn't until '77 that the formula was developed and put into use. That was a, that was a milestone change in the, I would say in the administration. You didn't see anything physical out there, but there was a big change.

Of, one of the biggest, the biggest threat in, to irrigated agriculture in the basin today is the push by fisheries to take over the drain system and have that operated for fish production, because the drains are straight in nature, designed to get water away from the land. It is not, they were not designed to be trout streams. They were designed to get water away from the land so that the lands would, wouldn't become water logged and sour. There's a strong move afoot now by the Department of Fish and Wildlife to take over the drains. And, if that happens then irrigated agriculture is set

for a demise here.

Bailey: Well, one of the conditions of this project has to do with ditchrider houses, (Perala: Uhm-hmm.) Bureau of Reclamation. Did you have any involvement with any of those houses in any way?

Perala: In Hydrology we really didn't. I knew where they were and when you visited district people, district personnel you would often go to those. In fact, right back above the office where I worked at 1917 Marsh Road, there is a Roza ditchrider house right by the, just up on the uphill side of the Roza Power Plant. And so, we, usually if the people were personable at all we got to know the people who lived there, and one of the more colorful old timers was a very bandy-legged old gentleman who like mules. And so, he was a rather colorful character to talk to, and it was always pleasant meeting him as he was out there talking to and tending to his mules.

Bailey: Let's go ahead.

Perala: Added color.

Bailey: Let's stop this side.

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1. OCTOBER 16, 2003.

BEGINNING OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1. OCTOBER 16, 2003.

Bailey: One question I like to ask everyone that was here in 1980 was about Mt. St. Helens, and just getting your just general impressions of Mt. St. Helens when it erupted. Did it affect your job in any way? What do you remember from that event, because that's a pretty major event up here in the Northwest.

Perala: Well, the main thing I remember, I happened to be home with the two younger children. My wife and oldest daughter were away on a band trip at the time, and so we were home. And, it was on a Sunday morning, and the sky was so black, I kept warning the kids that we were going to have a thunderstorm. Well, I was wrong, because when the stuff started to fall you didn't get wet. And we did have some of the heaviest, the heaviest material fell here. And so, that was the initial reaction. At work, one of the things that it affected, the -- there were a number of things that happened because of that fallout. The local canals all received a [ lot], and that water, it was heavy enough that it didn't flow down to the canals. There was about an inch layer of that ash that overlaid everything. That meant that there was, it acted just like sand or silt would in a canal, and it built up. It built up in the canal, so every one of the local canals had a massive cleanup to get that amount. An inch in one place doesn't seem like much, but when you have an inch over the whole three miles or so of a certain stretch of canal lateral, it had to be scooped out otherwise you were taking away a sizable portion of the, of your flow area. So, that had to be done. The way that the ash set up when it got wet, it almost made like a, what would happen when you got a

concrete slurry on things, it made an impermeable layer. So, as a result the Yakima-Tieton, for instance, on the steep canals on their main canal, they had a wash-in, first of all, in June. And, it washed in and wiped out a section of canal. Or, that was a washout. Excuse me. That came down the hill and wiped out the canal. So, that was a wash out. In July, they had a wash-in. Just about three weeks after they got everything all watered up, and every thing else, then they had a wash-in, and about a three-mile section of their canal got filled with debris; rocks, mud, sticks, just everything, to the point that, and with its location, every item in there had to either be shoveled out, if it were sand, or if it was rocks the size of your head, and many of them were, and bigger, they had to be literally hand-picked out. Well, you're in a horseshoe- shaped concrete tube that has a open space up on top with bars across the top so that you don't have a free top, but there's bars across the top of it. for stabilization, and keeping that concrete intact. You had to have places, manholes literally, to take that stuff out and scoop it out by hand. So, three miles worth of that had to be done.

Now, so that was a big event. As far as the ash itself, it was about thirty-three to thirty-five percent conductor or semiconductor. As a result, with the long power line that goes from the Roza Power Plant to all of the Roza pumping plants, the insulators got covered with this electrolyte. Then about a third of the insulators ceased to be insulators because they had this cap of electrolyte on them, and they conducted electricity, and, they're supposed to insulate. So, a third of the insulators had to be swapped out the very first year, and the next, the next worst third the year after that,

and the remaining third the year after that. So that was another part of the fallout.

Also as a result of that fallout, in -- I don't remember if it was in '81 and '82 or '82 and '83, the Yakima-Tieton, because they knew that all of those hills still had all that ash, and they have that vulnerable canal strung on the Tieton Canyon hillside from Trout Lodge to the west end of Tieton, they went into a massivc construction program. If I remember right, about $3 million worth.... something like that. They put in bridges, bridged the, bridged their canal over some of the bigger draws with a much bigger opening down below, because a lot of them were down, were old masonry structures, that you had the, the canal was suspended on. It was masonry structures with a passageway big enough to, what they figure, what that creek will carry. Well, when you have a big flood and mud debris flow, that, you didn't have sufficient capacity. So, the areas were widened. They made much bigger openings for those. In areas where you were on a big hillside, they made what they called "hardcover." They build a ramp right over the canal so there's just like in areas where you have snow sheds, so that the slide can pass right over the canal. And, in other places where the slide debris, or it wouldn't be as big, then they made what they called soft cover over some of those areas so that the patrolmen could take that off of that cover and so, give them some relief that way. Because, they, Yakima-Tieton does patrol that canal every day, one-half of the main canal one day and the other half the other day because of the fact that the restriction, if there's any restriction, and if you have material fall in there, that does take away from your effective flow area. So, anything that cuts down on the area

means that there's less water getting down to the district. So they still actively patrol that. And that was the upper ditchrider, or dam tender's job always was to walk the canal. And, in this day in age that's still the best way, is if you flew it, and you found a problem, you'd still have to get down there to fix it. So, you might as well just walk it, and fix things as, or note where the problem is and then get somebody in there to correct the situation.

Bailey: How often did the irrigation district have to consult with Reclamation on projects?

Perala: They would consult fairly regularly because we were in charge of the reservoir regulation and river manipulation, so that in anytime that they ordered water on or off, they would contact the Bureau. So, that would be one of the contacts. As a result of the water supply interests, and all of that, the districts get in touch. Manager's meetings are held -- I would say, probably something like nine or ten times a year, so that the, you get a run down on when the operations are going to be. You'll have other meetings probably one or two a year, where you talk about Bureau Budget, because the irrigators pick up -- let's see, what's the line river formula today? I think the water users pick up fifty-one percent of the O & M costs. So it's -- well, I always felt that when I was on the district, or I mean on the project, that it was our duty to let the irrigators know what we were spending their money on. And then there's also a annual visitation where that the districts get together, or the Bureau invites the districts, and they'll take a tour around the area and show where current work is being done, and where the latest construction or improvements are being done, such as today the work up at Keechelus.

So, that would be of great interest to the water users. The big interest in the getting all of the water operations is the fact that you do have just the one-year supply. There is, this system is not designed so that there's a carryover that you can get through a two or three year sustained drought. Really, this basin exists on much less than that, because the storage in this basin is probably, the total storage is a percentage less than fifty percent of the average annual demand on the system for irrigation.

Bailey: I think that's one of the reasons why they want to build Blackrock Dam so they can have more exchange water.

Perala: Well, that and the idea now is that they want it so that they can take Roza and Sunnyside supply out of Blackrock and leave that water in the river for the fish. So, fish are the driving force, and whether people realize it or not, it became the driving force in '80, and it was already starting to be a driving force in the '70s.

Bailey: What did you like best about the job that you did out here? What motivated you to get up every morning and get out there?

Perala: It wasn't, a lot of people say that "You are here for eighteen years, didn't you have one year of experience eighteen times over?" And I said, "No. It was eighteen years of experience because there were no two years alike." And, I would think that dealing with the irrigation community was the primary drive, and the satisfaction I got out of working with them. Secondly, it was just the overall public, and all of the -- the water touches so many things. If you wanted to find out, if you think that for instance, in January when there's no irrigation going on, that you can change flows around and do

some reservoir manipulation, it's amazing the amount of people that, between construction projects, it affects, that river touches the lives of so many people that when you, when there's the slight -- in numerically looking at the flows in the river, you would think that that's a blip. The people who are on the streambank, they notice it. And, it reaches much farther than a guy who might be standing out there in chestwaders doing fly fishing. He'll notice it , and he always did notice it, but there's a whole lot of other things that go along. And, you really don't realize how much goes along, as far as activities that deal with the river or on the river. As soon as you start manipulating, you find out from all these just how much they are. Dealing with that, and it was satisfying.

Bailey: So, I take it you enjoyed your job very much out here?

Perala: I would not have stayed there for that length of time if I had not.

Bailey: Were there any times where you just kind of shook your head in disgust and went, "What am I doing here?" Did you ever have any periods like that?

Perala: I had periods like that. You're going to have that with any job. The, some of the things that were kind of frustrating were the number of people who -- I'll pick the Elk Meadows area for instance. They have, they will come and build cabins along the river. Now, some of these cabins are in the $250-$300,000 range, and they will have their deck out hanging over the river. Well, they're not only built on the flood plain, they are in the chanel when you have your maximum flow of the river. And so, and you hear from them when you have a flood. I mean, "It's all your fault," at that time.

And, there's one of the cases where, I didn't do it in disgust, but I just shake my head in amazement that how can people come and build there when they're digging in river cobbles to build their foundation, how can they not think of that? And, nothing but water-loving plants all around on both banks. And, they're building a house!

Bailey: I've seen some of these houses that are up there on the west end of town. The ditchrider, I went around with him one day and they show me Baileys, and the pressurized system, and we were looking at some of these houses going, "You know, it's not, agriculture just isn't it anymore. It's to support these huge lawns that these houses have now," (Perala: Uhm-hmm.) and everything like that. I think that's the biggest change that I've seen. So. How about the American Indian tribes, like the Yakama, did you have to deal with them in any way?

Perala: Yes. And I'll, I'll make this short, and I will leave it on the record, but of the tribes I have dealt with I have found them to be the most difficult to deal with. And they are big and strong enough that they don't have to deal with anybody. They can exist all on their own. They don't care if anybody else is around.

Bailey: Difficult as in stubborn, or?

Perala: If you want to do something, they don't want you to do it. Just plain and simple.

Bailey: And we're talking about the Yakama tribe, right?

Perala: Yes.

Bailey: Okay. Alright.

Perala: And I'm going to leave it at that.

Bailey: That's fine. So, what have you been doing since your retirement?

Perala: Traveling quite a bit. And so far this is a comfortable place to come back to. I like to travel but I just don't want to be a total nomad. I want to have some place to come back and saw rock and read my books. I don't think there's too many flat spots around here that don't have a book stacked on them (chuckle) so you can see that I have books or rocks in just about every location. You can't pack too much books and rocks when you're traveling in a trailer.

Bailey: Maybe the final question here for today is, how do you see the future of this irrigation district in this area around here? Will they, will there have to be changes made? Or, do you see a good future for the irrigation? What are your general impressions?

Perala: My general reaction is that the districts themselves have an appreciation for what they do and that the area is growing just like what you were talking about. Once that, once people have that big lawn they don't care if they get their water from the city or from an irrigation district they want, they just want their water. People, or the general public, is losing an appreciation for agriculture. They don't care if we get our foods from somewhere else, and if we become dependent on food. And, I feel that if we don't stay self-sufficient and support our agricultural areas where they are, when we become dependent on the world for food and all of our resources, because we haven't -- with regulation, small town and rural America is dying because we're squeezing down with reg, big regulations.

Bailey: NEPA?

Perala: Everything that deals with anything with resources. You can't use timber anymore. We've just about closed down mining. We're squeezing out agriculture. Small town America is going to die and we'll get all of our resources, we'll become even more the ugly American because we're dependent, we're big consumers. We're going to get all of our stuff from everybody else in the world, and all of a sudden, someday, that price is going to go way up when we have to get all of our food and all of our resources from elsewhere. So, if we don't have a societal change on the realization of this we're all going to die. The big cities, right now, they don't care. They're watching small town and rural America die, and that's wrong, because when that dies then the cities will also die.

Bailey: I think that'll do it for today. I really do thank, appreciate you for taking your time out and telling me and giving me some of your thoughts and recollections on your career and everything. I thank you for your time.

Perala: Okay.

END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1. OCTOBER 16, 2003.

END INTERVIEW.