

LOWELL WEEKS

2002 - 2003

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Okay now, on all of this, do you want me to go back to the first remembrance of Colorado River problems I can remember as a kid?

JAY MALINOWSKI

Yes I do. I know you were born in the Imperial Valley and that one of your early jobs was working for IID. (The Imperial Irrigation District) I think your family had a farm or a ranch or something. I want you to go back there and just bring us up to date.

LW

I talked to my wife the other day of some of the things. I should have been a history professor rather than an engineer. I love history, that's an avocation. And part of it, I guess, because of my family and my wife's family. My wife's grandmother was probably the second, I hate to use the term, but White woman in Imperial Valley. At least she was one of the first 10. And if you want to read a good history, are you familiar with The First 30 Years of Imperial Valley?

JM

I'm aware of it, yes.

LW

Well, they have a family history in there in their early days. I was working for Imperial Irrigation District on a survey party. We were working in Yuma on a drainage problem on the All American Canal. As we drove home we saw a celebration down by the All American Canal. We stopped (and watched as a man portraying King Neptune was part of the celebration. He later) became my father-in-law. He was floating down the canal bringing water into the All American Canal.

So that was kind of interesting. Go back during the earliest days and everybody had something to do with the farm. And when I first was born, in the little town of Holtville, the Imperial Valley was a dairy county, there was no such thing as vegetables. It was dairy and that was probably about the whole thing. There were probably five, seven, eight creameries throughout Imperial Valley and you didn't have it for milk, it was strictly for making butter.

And my dad; we started on the dairy and I was always glad they sold it when I was about three years old. There was nothing I could think of worse than milking cows. My dad bought what was called a milk route where he went out and picked up the milk from the dairies to take to the creamery. We also had a little farm where we had the cows. He kept that up until World War II, sold that, and it was gone. And we moved into the town. We were about a mile and a half out.

So, yes we had the farm, but then we were in the other area. Now, in remembering the Colorado River, you want my background? Colorado River— I grew up before any of the dams were on the river, that river was just, as you know, heavy with silt. And so during my grammar school days and early high school days there was no such thing as a concrete ditch. Now out on the farm, the head ditch, water that got on it, it was wide enough that you could take a team of horses and it had kind of a V shape plow that you could plow the mud out to keep your ditch open for the next irrigation season.

The little place where we lived near town was about 10 acres. The ditch (to our farm) was smaller and that was when my younger brother and I, we shoveled out that silt every fall to open the ditch so it'd be sure to carry water in the ditch. And see silt was a horrible problem.

JM

This is silt that was carried downstream by the river?

LW

By the river. Well you know, you've heard it before, it was so common. The water was too thin to drink and too thick to plow. All we had in those days was just alfalfa without having the heavy equipment, tractors and things, and the land. As you let the water out of the ditch, it flowed down your alfalfa — we called them checks. There'd be maybe 100, 150 or more so you'd have a flood irrigation into another one. The upper end would always get high, not able to level to grade.

And you were having to take these little fresnos that probably moved a third of a yard of dirt and keep trying to level that out because it would be alfalfa and the silt. As a dairy county you had to have water for your cows. Now remember all water (used in the Imperial Valley) is from the Colorado River. So we had reservoirs, or ponds, whatever you call them, they were called both. They were, oh, twice the size of this room (indicating an average-size living room), we would dig it out because you couldn't go very high because your height was about the elevation of the water that's coming out of the canal, and that's where you store water for your cows and you have it so they could drink outside as well as settle the water of silt.

I don't recall how often but the reservoirs would silt up. And you'd have to clean them out. Therefore, you had a small standby water supply while you let the reservoir dry out and the silt would crack and it was probably that deep (gestures with hands, about three feet deep), shapes, all kinds. If it was hard you had the crowbar to break these thick ones up and we

carried them out. Now that's how you cleaned off a pond with that silt. The other problem that I can remember was that sucker fish, what's the fish, the name of it? Big mouth sucker. The one they're trying to replace right now.

JM

Okay well there are . . .

LW

It's a trash fish.

Every once in awhile. I'll start over. The outlet from your ditch to your farm—irrigation farm. We had what we called a head ditch. It was a concrete pipe cut with joints that you put in. But on the interior of the ditch it was square and you had a slide gate—a metal gate so you could determine how much water was being released. There's times when those fish would come in, they would block it up. Oh, if you open it full, sure they'd flow out. But if you only had it up like that, they'd block it.

And I remember we used to have to take pitchforks and go down and throw those things out of the head ditch. So you see I'm not much interested in saving the . . .

JM

Is it the razor back sucker that you're talking about?

LW

Whatever that thing is, yeah. I'm not interested in saving those things.

JM

Okay.

LW

I hear people say, "oh, we just wrecked the river, all it is (now in some places) is just a clear trout stream. That's right. But they don't know what it was in the silt days.

JM

Give me a sense, Lowell, of what era, what time period we're talking about here?

LW

We're talking early '20s, early '30s.

JM

Okay.

LW

It all changed with the construction of Hoover. After that we had clearer water. Relatively clear water. And you know what you're getting through to the metropolitan area, that's the same type of water we got here in Holtville.

People often ask me how did I get in the water business? Well in those days growing up, we had no internal water in the house and so our water system was 60-, 80-gallon oil drums out on the side of the ditch, whatever that size of those oil drums were. And the typical day, my sister, just older than I, we'd get home from school, we'd go out get two, three buckets, three or four gallon buckets of water out of this reservoir, take it in for the night and the next morning use.

And then we would turn that barrel over, wash it out, stand it up and we had a bucket with a rope and we'd dip water out of the

canal and put in there, and it would settle overnight. So the next morning we'd go out and get water for mother to have during the rest of the day. Now, if there was a storm on the Gila River I've seen times when that barrel would be two-thirds full of mud, over just one night. And we'd have to dump it out. So people don't realize today what that river was to the state of nature, it wasn't any fun.

JM

What was the mood in Holtville and where you lived in the Imperial Valley when Hoover Dam was proposed, finally funded and moved ahead and ultimately built? Did people understand before it was built what it was going to do? Were they seeing it as a good thing or a bad thing?

LW

Well they knew, we knew that we were going to have water. And I'll tell you one thing, and this finally came out, when I kept insisting to our attorney Mr. Redwine in the Arizona and California (lawsuit), that what it was, the farmers in my area, and I can remember the district director coming over because we lived about a mile from their farm. We consider him the father of the All American Canal.

JM

I'm sorry who's "him"?

LW

Mark Rose.

JM

Okay.

LW

He was the director of Imperial. We consider him the father, to people in Holtville. He and Evan Hughes, who was the chairman, were on opposite sides of everything. My mother's folks went to Imperial Valley I think in about 1910, or it may have been 1909 and my father came in there in 1910. And I've heard my mother talk about how Mark Rose and, during World War I, was out trying to sell the All American Canal. He was a hard drinking son-of-a-gun. My grandmother was a teetotaler. WCTU, Women's Temperance Union, whatever it was called.

JM

Women's Christian Temperance Union.

LW

She told him she would vote for the All America Canal if he'd vote for prohibition. And he swears up and down that he did everything he could to do that. But anyway that's beside the point. So that's how I got started in water. Now later on, I became very interested because my wife's folks went from Nebraska to Peoria, Arizona, in about 1892, '93. They were farming beautiful crops. Right at the turn of the century, they were farming and all of a sudden they didn't get any water.

And so they were told look at your deed. So when they saw the small print on the deed they found out that they were only entitled to surplus water. And you know how much surplus water there is in Arizona and California. So they had to look for somewhere else. And so, the Imperial Valley was opening up in 1901, 1902 and my wife's grandmother went over by herself. She

traveled through Imperial Valley and picked their homestead. Her grandfather used up his homestead rights in Nebraska so he told his wife, he said now just look for where there's heavy mesquite, if there's a lot of mesquite then you know it's rich soil.

My folks came out of the South and they were living in East Texas and they had cotton land and a cotton gin. And the old land quit producing, so they went to West Texas one year to look at it. My dad said he saw the most beautiful cotton he had ever seen. So they went back, sold everything, bought in West Texas. By three years later they were hauling the water to keep their animals alive, for 20 miles.

No water. And so he sold out everything he had, and they had quite a bit when they left East Texas. He sold out everything he had to rent a boxcar to Imperial Valley at \$70. So, water has been in my background as long as I can remember.

JM

So your family or your father, your mother and father moved from West Texas to the Imperial Valley?

LW

They moved from West, uh, yes from East Texas, to West Texas, not knowing each other but from different areas, but all this happened about the same time, and then they met in Imperial Valley after both their families had moved there. And see my wife's folks were there in 1909. They had to wait for the water to get into the canals. And when they moved to the Imperial Valley, when they began their operation,

the source of the water that they had, of course, was the Colorado River.

JM

But tell me how did the water get from the river to the farm?

LW

Through the old canal system in Mexico. Through the diversion work from the river, Rockwood check gate that was built later. And the water went down into Mexico into the old Alamo River Channel and brought around to south of Imperial Valley. And famous Sharps Heading was a check gate that raised the water out of the old channel and put it into the irrigation ditches headed for Imperial Valley.

JM

Okay. And where then were they when that canal, uh, breached because of the railroad accident and the Salton Sea was formed.

LW

That was, my in-laws were living there but my parents weren't there yet.

JM

Oh they weren't there yet.

LW

No.

JM

Okay.

LW

This doesn't have anything to do with what you're in but I can remember when the drought and the floods on the Colorado

River were, see and I don't recall right now whether it was the drought of '33, '34, and the floods afterwards or were the floods first were, you can always look that up somewhere. But I've seen the Colorado River when you could walk across it and not even get your ankle wet. Used to be signs during that time in the gasoline station restrooms in Yuma. "Flush the toilet, the Imperial Valley needs the water."

Then I've seen floods within a couple years either before or after, I've forgotten now, it's been a long time ago. I can remember we went to Yuma to see the flood and the highway across the Bard Valley was about that deep in water (indicating about four feet) and you had to be very careful to go through, get over to the bridge and chicken coops, huge cottonwood trees, everything flowing down the river.

JM

This would have been before Hoover Dam?

LW

Oh yeah. All of this is before Hoover Dam. Hoover is the salvation of it, of the Imperial Valley.

JM

Okay let's go back to that again, I'm trying to, where were you and your family when Hoover Dam or Black Canyon Dam was proposed and people really started talking about it and this would be a good thing to do. Do you recall that?

LW

Well I can recall, uh, not to the degree you're talking about. But my dad always

took this stand. Oh, I'll tell you one thing that the farmers were promised in those days. We were getting ready to talk about it and then we changed the subject. They were told if they would mortgage their land to approve the All American Canal contract (they would get free power). And in effect that's what they did by signing the contract, repayment contract, they'd get free power. And I think one of the things that sold (the project) was the free power.

JM

Free power out of Hoover?

LW

Yeah, because after all, they mortgaged their land for a 30- year repayment to the United States and so in return for that mortgage they'd get free power.

JM

Who was it that made that promise?

LW

The Imperial Irrigation District. In fact in Arizona versus California they finally dug up some newspaper clippings that talked about it.

JM

And that never happened?

LW

Why of course not

JM

Okay.

LW

But I would say. I can remember this, we

had two large newspapers, The Los Angeles Times and The Los Angeles Examiner. There was a time that you probably had a hard time purchasing a Los Angeles Times in Imperial Valley. They were anti-Hoover and anti-Imperial, All American Canal. And the reason is that they own hundreds of thousands of acres in Mexicali Valley. They own, as I recall, 160 or 320 acres within the United States and that's where they built their headquarters, which, by the way, is still standing.

JM

You're talking about the, which family of the L.A. Times are you talking about?

LW

I'm talking about The L.A. Times.

JM

Okay.

LW

And the Examiner was pro canal. Pro dam. So Imperial Valley people as a whole, and I think that was proven if you can find the vote on the canal, were very much in favor, had to be. Had to be. We had problems with Mexico. The week that I went to work for the Imperial Irrigation District they sold their uniforms and rifles that they had. Every time there was a revolution in Mexico, they had a group of men get into uniforms and rifles and run down to the main check gates on the canal in Mexico to make sure and protect the check gates.

So people of Imperial Valley, we knew we were all, it was for the All American Canal. That name came long before, uh, the dam

authorization. We wanted the canal all on the side of the U.S. Now that . . .

JM

Let's go back just a little bit if you can. The dairy farms, why did they disappear? There aren't many down there, if any at all.

LW

There's a few. To me there were two reasons they disappeared. Probably the main reason was the testing for TB. Prior to, when that law came in that all cows had to be tested for TB, tuberculosis, now I do not know whether a human being gets tuberculosis from drinking milk from a cow. I do not know. But that and the Depression killed, in my opinion, killed dairy. My Dad had this milk route. Now in those days, dairies were small. I think the largest dairy that he had on his route was a man milking 80 cows.

After the TB testing (started) he had two cows. And this was just about what happened all around. What the government did, they bought the cows and slaughtered them but they gave the people very, very little money. And so, that killed it. Plus the fact the Depression— nobody had any money. Now one of the things that I recall that happened when we say before the Depression, my Dad always said the Depression started in 1920 as far as farmers were concerned. The rest of the people didn't know about it until 1929.

But I can remember, gosh, this was in the, probably the late '20s when some dairy men, some of them sold a dairy because it was this idea of growing vegetables. Man,

you could make a lot of money on vegetables. Never heard of it before. So this was what would typically happen. He would sell his dairy and have money enough to go into farming vegetables. Within a couple years, you couldn't sell the vegetables and that's even true today. We have lots of time when a farmer plows up his whole vegetable field 'cause the price is so poor.

But these people were on short time, very little money. And by the time the Depression came on, they were broke. And, you could (probably research county records and see that) there was an immense amount of property that was owned by tax supported agencies. Farmers finally had to give up. It was rough in those days. And that's when it changed from dairy into the type of farming (we have) today. But the small farmer could not last. If he spent his money to grow a crop of lettuce and had to plow it up, he was through.

JM

So they were really on a one year cycle. You either made it . . .

LW

... I can remember one of the largest farmers down there. They lived across from my in-laws. He had three or four carloads of lettuce. In those days nothing was contracted. Everything went consignment. Sell it for what you can get after it got there. And I remember one time he'd come back. "I'm flat broke," he said, "but I got three cars of lettuce. If they will hit New York within the next 10 days, I'm all right. Otherwise I'm through." That's a hard way to farm.

JM

Well, how did the conversion then from dairy, I mean, Imperial Irrigation District is a huge producer of what they call today food and fiber, cotton, vegetables, edibles, — probably one of the largest regions in the country. And they use a lot of Colorado River water, as you know. Did that conversion from dairy to farming happen very suddenly or did it take a long time to develop?

LW

I think World War II made it.

JM

In what sense?

LW

Prices were good. The people buy more land so that after World War II I doubt if there were any 40 acres, 80 acres, tracts left. It was large farming. Now, we still have in our family the original homestead, one of the few families that still has the original homestead. We lease it out. The guy we're leasing to right now, I think he farms 5,000 acres. But it was a homestead. The original one was about 160, 320 in the desert. We had a little more than that. It evolved from Depression days, World War II is what solved lots of problems. It made available finances so that we had the large farms.

JM

Before we turned the camera on we talked very, very briefly about the 1934 compromise. What I'd like you to talk about a little bit is the use of water off of the Colorado

River— how it was shared in California, if you recall how that compromise came about and, and what it meant then and maybe what it means today.

LW

Well, of course, I can't tell you anything about what it meant when it was made because I was too young at that time. But because I've told you that, I'm interested in history. I came down here to this district from the Department Of Water Resources in Los Angeles.

JM

When you say this district . . .

LW

Coachella (Valley Water) District. Now, amazing as it might be to you, at that time the Los Angeles office of the Department Of Water Resources had less than 10 people in it. We had just started working at the Department on the well water supply in the Los Angeles Basin. I went out to interview some of the land grant people and found some of them still alive. We talked to them about their early well projects. So the Department was building up records.

And I could see where it was going. So when I came down here to the Coachella Valley District, with my background in history, knowing what the Department was doing, I tried to find out all the background that I could for Coachella Valley in the District. As time went on and the District had very little money, I was still able to convince the Board Of Directors, don't stop our investigation, our historical background. It's going to be important sometime.

So with that I interviewed people throughout the valley. I had two or three of them I got on tape with the understanding I would never use it until they were dead. And so I found out a lot of the background of how the contract came in and how the compromise came about. For instance, in the negotiation over the canal project, the district would pay only so much an acre foot for water, river water. I think CVWD still does. Fifty cents an acre foot . . .

. . . or something like that. Imperial agreed to that. The Coachella person fought it. He says, if we're going to charge for water, then I want my percent of the power revenues out here. If I'm gonna pay for water. So that's one of the compromises that came through. That's a reason for — his name was R. W. Blackburn — so long the two irrigation districts did not pay for water, for storage out of Hoover Dam. One of the problems, now this I have to say is hearsay. And this hearsay also goes with history.

Not only with the, some of the original board members, but also with some people in the Bureau Of Reclamation. And I have seen some of the letters. But the background of the compromise agreement was the Secretary of the Interior at that time, Mike Ely's father-in-law—he was the Dean Of Engineering, I think, at Stanford. Ray Lyman Wilbur. I could go in there in my records and look it up. And we will before we get through, if you want it. Anyway, for some reason or other, when they negotiate, well, let's back up a little now. Let's back up a little. The first contract the district signed for the All American Canal was the Kincaid

Act back in 1919, 1920. They signed a contract they had to repay. I forgot how much money. It came up to three or four thousand dollars to have their share of the study. And so, the district also was very active in the original negotiations in Congress.

Phil Swing was the Congressman from San Diego and Imperial counties. And they worked with him. And at that time, from what I could read and find out, the district had a young lawyer that was probably years ahead of his time. Things that he would dream about and think about came about even in my life. So the district was very, very active. And so, let's see, that was the election in 1928. I think it was for the Board Of Directors.

The Coachella people had gotten into two camps because of what the secretary said. The secretary said, I'm only going to sign one contract for the West. We don't need to have several contracts for water. I'm only gonna have one. And we're going to meet with the Imperial Irrigation District. So we had two camps in Coachella Valley. One led by the President Of The Board, R. W. Blackburn, who said, fine, let's join Imperial. We had another group that was led by Vice President Anderson, and some more, and they said absolutely not.

We're not going to have anything to do with the Imperial Irrigation District. Off the side, from my standpoint, I believe Coachella would have gotten water sooner if they had joined Imperial. The other side, I think they're very fortunate that they did not join Imperial. So you see, you have

those two points of view. Fact is, from Mr. Anderson, and also for Mr. Blackburn, judging from the fact that they invited each other to a fight, you know, on the stage at the high school where they were debating this project. And what happened? In the election, the old board was recalled.

So the new board, we want our own contract. So the Secretary (of Interior) said, settle your difference with Imperial. And in effect, he put a shotgun to the head of Coachella and said, you've got to settle your differences, because you're in a bad position. So they settled the differences by the contract, by the compromise contract. Now Mr. Levy today will tell you that that contract, we'd be better off without it. My own personal thinking is the Coachella district had lost in this negotiation by not holding on to the compromise agreement. The Compromise agreement, as you know, says that Imperial cannot deliver any water outside of their boundaries.

And all water must be beneficially used. In lawsuits where I've testified, (I've said that) Imperial does not use their water beneficially. You get water on a 24-hour basis. The guy gets tired at night, he can turn all the water into the waste ditch, get up the next morning and start irrigating again. I know this because we did it on our own property. And so that was a stand I always took with Imperial when we were negotiating with them. That you're wasting water.

Now, that to me is the background of the compromise agreement. What did Coachella get out of it? They got out of it that they could have power at the same rate

as Imperial for their own facilities. We had to give up the power right. There is no benefit for Coachella except that restriction from Imperial, and I guess that's gone now, under the new agreements. But to me, that was the strongest thing we had for Coachella.

JM

And the reason that was so important? I mean that Imperial could not deliver water outside their service area, is because Coachella stood to have available to it whatever water Imperial was not using? Is that correct?

LW

No. In talking to Mr. Anderson, Vice Chairman of CVWD, he was an older man at the time we spoke, he said, we didn't think there was ever going to be any shortage of water. There was plenty of water, so we didn't care. Imperial put that in the compromise agreement, that they would only beneficially use water on their land, because it also applies to Coachella. Coachella can only use water on their (land), within their boundary, for beneficial use. That was kind of, oh, we know, we're all going to be good. We're going to live together on this.

As Mr. Anderson said, we never dreamed there would be any shortage of water. We weren't worried about it. So I would say they entered the compromise agreement at the request of Imperial for Imperial to have all the power facilities. With Coachella not thinking there's going to be any water shortage.

JM

Well, let's go back a minute. Why would Coachella care if, now, I'm going back historically. Why would Coachella Water District care if Imperial delivered water outside of its boundaries? I understand why they would care today, but . . .

LW

I understand what you're saying. I don't know the answer to that. I would say that in those days, Coachella had a shotgun at their head, and they wanted to get something back from giving up the power. And I would say, of course, they were supposed to get eight percent of the revenues of Imperial, which is a joke. I think it was just put in there to, well, if you're giving up this, you got to get something. So somebody came up with that. I don't think Coachella at that time, from what I could find out, really worried about that.

'Cause they were going to get all the water. They wanted it anyway. The first time they shocked Coachella, in my opinion, was in the Arizona versus California (lawsuit). When we sat up there in that courtroom and had Imperial witness Mike Dowd put in an exhibit that showed the allocation, or the diversion of water at the present time, how much left Imperial Dam, how much went up Coachella Canal, all the way down, the losses and everything, that's today. Then in the corresponding column, future, they showed no water for Coachella. That's when we and Coachella got worried. Up to that time, we'd never been worried about it.

JM

That, what, that would have been in the mid-fifties?

LW

Oh, let's see.

JM

The case was settled. . .

. . . Fifty six, fifty seven. Fifty seven, fifty eight, no. fifty six. I became manager, assistant manager in '56. Really because the manager was an old Bureau man and he didn't want to go up and testify. So it was in '56, '57, '58, I spent a couple years off and on in San Francisco. That's when we got worried. That's when we found out up to that time, the Bureau had caught up, we'll say, prior to my time, it showed how we get water here. You'd order all the water you want from Imperial Dam. You've got too much water down here, you just turn it out to the Salton Sea.

And that's when I came home from that trial and told my irrigation people, no more watering the Salton Sea. We've got to verify and justify every acre foot of water that comes through our district. Because Imperial's going to try to take all of it away from us.

JM

Is that because you were worried that they, that Imperial would claim that you were wasting water in Coachella?

LW

Yes.

JM

And . . .

LW

That was one of my points that we had against Imperial. They were definitely wasting water.

JM

How would you characterize, over your career in water, which extends some forty, more than 40 years, how would you characterize the relationship between Coachella and Imperial? Has it been up and down and up and down, or has there always been enmity there?

LW

No. No, I don't think, when I came to Coachella, before World War II, when I got out of Junior College, and I'd run out of money, and I couldn't go on to school, so I got a job with the Imperial Irrigation District on a survey team. Because of having two years of college, I got fifty cents a day more than the other people in the same position. I got three dollars and fifty cents a day, six days a week. So I worked for Imperial practically up until World War II, two years, three years, whatever that was. Then when I came back from the army, uh, I knew I was going back to school.

But I had about six or seven months. So Imperial hired me to run a survey party. And I ran the original power lines from Imperial to Coachella. Because during World War II, Imperial finally took over, purchased all of the power facilities of the private company— Southern Sierra Power Company, then later in Nevada, California,

and then, well, it, California, Edison finally bought them out. And so then when I came here to work (CVWD), a lot of the guys down at Imperial had come up. They were old friends of mine. You knew Bob Carter, the General Manager of Imperial Irrigation District?

Bob and I had known each other for years. We'd visit. Every time we did, I'd tell him he was cheating us on power, and he'd laugh. You can't, you can't find out how we are. You know, I would say, no. There wasn't any fighting or anything. I knew all of them. One or two of them down there were a little jealous because I became a general manager. But that's beside the point. I would say 90 percent of the people, 95 percent of the people, 99 and nine tenths percent of the people don't even know anything about the compromise agreement or anything like that.

It's just that we knew that we had to be on our toes to be sure we kept our water. And I tried for years to get the district to bring an action against Imperial over the power, and our attorney always said, no, we don't want to cause any trouble. Water is more important to Coachella than power. Now, as you know today, Coachella has sued Imperial over power. Then, I think, (we never would have done that).

JM

When did you go to work for Coachella Valley Water District?

LW

I came in October of 1950.

JM

Okay. Palm Springs was not what Palm Springs is (today) of course. Farming was not what it is today, and Imperial was not what it is today.

LW

Yes, Imperial was. I'd say Imperial was.

JM

But you think it was as large then as . . .

LW

Oh sure. It hasn't grown any.

JM

Okay. What was your vision in 1950 of this general area, and what it has become?

LW

There's nobody alive that dreamed that we were going to have what we have here in Coachella Valley. Nobody. When I came here in '50, there were, I think, two streets here in Palm Desert. There was nothing in Rancho Mirage. It was Palm Springs and Coachella. Now, go back to the recall in 1928. Prior to that time, Palm Springs was within the Coachella District. And one of the agreements on the side that the new board had, it later became a recall, was that they would let Palm Springs out of the district. The people down there would support them in the recall. That's how boundaries were no longer within the district. Well, Palm Springs, as I remember some of the things I read, their argument was, you're spending all the taxpayer's money trying to get Colorado River water into Coachella Valley, not helping us at all. So why should we pay for that? That made

sense in those days. I think they made a mistake now. They'd probably be better off within the district.

JM

You mean within Coachella Valley Water District?

LW

Yeah.

JM

They formed, at some point, they formed their own district, called the Desert Water Agency.

LW

Oh yeah, that's relatively new.

JM

And, and when did that occur? And why did they even . . .

LW

That occurred because they wanted to become a contractor for the State Water Project.

JM

Okay. So that was their sole, at the time, that was their sole purpose for forming.

LW

They formed the district and then bought out the Palm Springs Water Company.

JM

Okay. Coachella also became a contractor for State Water Project Water. Coachella Valley Water District. And yet, they never built any physical connection to the State Water Project. What were the thoughts of

the board and the staff when they did become a contractor? Was there a plan to physically hook up to the State Water Project?

LW

You'll recall, it was originally called the Feather River Project. And I started going to meetings and became a member of that at the very beginning. Because we knew we would need more water in the desert. We knew there wasn't enough water. We probably brought in Colorado River water for the lower valley. There wasn't any water for the upper valley. And in those days, we were very naive. We were told the facility would probably run down the ridge line of the mountains, all the way to San Diego. And it was going to be pure mountain water. No one ever thought about the delta when we started this.

JM

The Sacramento San Joaquin Delta.

LW

Yeah . . .

JM

As opposed to the Mexican delta that . . .

LW

No, we're talking State Water Project now.

JM

Right.

LW

And so, that's how we got started. And then, when we came into the agreement of where we are now, we all knew that we

wanted more water. So I was given the option to do all I could so that we'd be sure to be a contractor. We asked for more water than the state would contract for. We had several studies made, the Desert Water Agency by that time was on. And there's only two ways to bring water from the state project. One is through the pass, San Geronio Pass, spanning Beaumont. The other one's to go out around the mountains in the 29 Palms area, come in that direction. Through Victorville. Hook in there and come around. Desert Water Agency had done a couple studies on the going around. We did a small study with water coming through the San Geronio Pass. And in those days, I think that the cost was something around, oh, \$150 million, something like that. I imagine it would be a half a billion now. So we negotiated an exchange agreement with the Metropolitan Water District, where they could have our water from the state, at Lake Perris, or wherever they wanted it.

And who was MWD's famous water guy, what was it? That was a very dedicated MWD man? Cooper. Remember, Cooper's statement was, bucket by bucket. If we give you a bucket of (SWP) water, you're going to give us a bucket of (Colorado River) water. And, uh, we negotiated that. And in our last negotiation session, you had a strong board member by the name of Ransom Chase. And I demanded that we get a percentage of the power made at Devil's Canyon. After all, if you got our water, we're exchanging water now, bucket for bucket.

Therefore, we should get our percent of the

power. Oh, Mr. Chase says, if you want this exchange agreement, you're not going to get any power. So we worked out the exchange agreement. Why? Cost \$100,000 for a connection to Metropolitan Water District, versus \$100 to \$150 million for state water. And bucket for bucket, it's just as wet, what is the other. Now, on the side, back in those days, Metropolitan — everybody, wanted pure, northern water. We wouldn't have to treat it or anything. It was going to be so wonderful.

You weren't going to have that old hard Colorado River water. You were going to exchange it. It's amazing to me that down through the years, we don't care whether water's hard or not, do we? MWD stopped all their softening plants, and San Diego will take Colorado River water. It's changed. But we had that probably here in Coachella, especially Palm Springs. We had two or three guys up there saying if you drank that Colorado River water and spread it (to replenish groundwater) it's just going to wreck our water. It's (hardness) going to really just be up there. That's all we're going to get.

So I'd go to meetings and say, you know, we bring Colorado River water in, then it rains in the mountains. The Whitewater River water comes in. I said, I don't know whether they'll mix or not. But the wells aren't just to pump only Colorado River water. They'll pump all kinds of water. Nowadays, nobody says anything about it. Everybody wants wet water.

JM

During that negotiation, you said that

Metropolitan was insisting on a bucket for bucket exchange, which is ultimately what happened. Did Coachella have a different view of that?

LW

No, not really. Except for the power We figured that was not quite bucket for bucket.

JM

So the water exchange itself was pretty cordial?

LW

Oh, very much so. Fact is, and I guess Jim Krieger pushed this. Not the attorney, but the young Jim from MWD. They'd put up most of the money of building this spreading works that we have up in the Palm Springs area. You've seen those. And MWD put up most of the money for that.

JM

Let's talk a little bit, Lowell, about the growth of the Coachella Valley Water District, and, the increase of its importance. Because I think when you joined the district, there were probably about only 40 people working there. And I think today, it's probably more like 400. What did you do while you were general manager to grow that district from what it was to what it is today?

LW

When I came to work there, I came to work as an expert on salinity problems. I worked in Imperial Valley and knew, well, we thought we knew how to solve the salinity problem by tile drainage, outlet drains.

And so the people here in Coachella Valley (had similar problems).

The general manager at that time worked for Imperial prior to World War II. So I knew him. And during the war, when the canal construction stopped, he was visionary enough to recognize that there was going to be an agricultural drainage problem — salinity problem here in Coachella Valley. They already had a salinity problem in the lower valley. When the water, when the basin was full of water, there were enough factors that water would come to the surface (like an artesian well) and then evaporate off and leave the salt. Now, you're an old water man.

You know that there's soft water and hard water. The old saying is, in agriculture, hard water makes soft land, and soft water makes hard land. Basically, hard water is calcium water. Soft water is sodium. And so the sodic soils are much harder to reclaim than the calcium soils in drainage. White alkali, black alkali. We don't use those terms anymore, though. White alkali is calcium. Black alkali was sodium. We call that sodic soils now. They had that problem. So even in the early '20s, the district at that time only had a few observation wells around the lower valley to check on the salinity.

So when Mr. Snyder, who was the manager of the district (Joseph H. Snyder), came out of the Imperial Valley, the manager of this district, in negotiating the Coachella branch of the All American Canal, he knew that we were going to have this salinity problem. So he organized what was called

the Coachella Valley Cooperatives. CVWD was a member of that as was the Bureau of Reclamation, the University Of California, the United States Department Of Agriculture, represented with their salinity laboratory in Riverside, and the water district. It was the four of those. And so, after water was going to get here, water got here in 1949.

JM

Water from the Colorado River . . . ?

LW

Colorado River, through the canal. And so, the person I had worked with in drainage, in the Imperial Valley, who was a private contractor, we had worked together at Imperial before he went out into private business. He called me and he told me there's a wonderful opportunity if you drive down here (to Coachella) and get in on the ground floor. On Columbus Day, 1950, which I had as a holiday at the Department of Water Resources, my wife and I drove to Coachella Valley, and it was a pretty, pretty rough area at that time. This is a long-winded answer to your question. We left Los Angeles about five o'clock in the afternoon, stopped in Indio to get gasoline, it was 112 by the thermometer there, got in the car, and my wife says, you know, there's one thing we've made a decision on. We are not moving to the Coachella Valley. Prior to this, when my brother who, well, let's see, Assistant City Clerk at the City of Los Angeles for years. When he heard I was looking at this, he came over to tell me, Lowell, don't go out there.

The horrible desert, we all left there, don't

go back. Anyway, that's what my wife said. October the 12th, two weeks later, I was working down here. For the first six months down here, I don't think my wife hardly spoke me in a nice way. After that, I couldn't even get her to go to Los Angeles for any reason whatsoever. Now, when I went to work for the District, it must have been 40 or 50 people, I went to work in November. In January they fired the General Manager.

So my wife said, "well, we've had it, haven't we?" I said, I guess. They hired a new General Manager, a city boy, a real tragedy. He had no concept how to deal with the people down here, 'cause it was a farm district. And he lasted two years and they fired him. And during, about this time, the system was constructed, as you know, by the Bureau. It's an all pipeline system, best engineering to be done, but we couldn't serve water.

The day that I came to work, the water-master took me out and showed me some of the problems. They had shut down, turned the entire canal into the Salton Sea, shut down the whole system, trying to solve some of the problems. Now the Bureau had already worked on some of the problems, but they didn't work. Let me tell you, this type of. . . I say the Coachella District is a covered over, open ditch system. Now you know in Imperial Valley, an open ditch system, the water runs down the canal, you have a check gate that raises the water high enough to go out the farmer's ditch.

That's the same thing here, except it's a

pipeline. So the check gate is within a stand pipe. The pipe stands probably, oh, 8 to 12 feet high. It has a concrete baffle up the center. So the water comes down the line, it backs up the height of that baffle, over it, the baffle is a check gate, so that it sends the water out through the meter to the farmer. You're with me?

JM

Right.

LW

These stand pipes are every quarter of a mile, because it was built for 40-, 80-acre delivery. I'm an engineer. . .so I have to go through all this story for this background that you ask. I went (with another) engineer, and he took me out on a ladder so we could see in this stand pipe. We're up there and here's the water coming down, climbs up over, goes on down. Pretty soon, there's no water coming, and in a little bit, this water comes backwards, it climbs over that stand, backwards. Now, also, we went to an area where the water's up high on that stand, we open the weir, and no water.

This system was a nightmare to operate. What was the problem? Well, the Bureau finally decided the problem is that we had a hydraulic (harmonic) motion, that's the official name. Being we were so (up and down) every quarter of mile, in effect you got this.

JM

The water was trying to balance itself?

LW

No, I don't know whether you call it balance or not, it was just the movement of

the earth that caused the problem. So this was a problem that this new manager had to deal with. And, plus the fact, we had this terrific moss problem. They had to shut down the system because the meters were full of moss. Remember every farmer's water would go through a meter. Similar to your house meter. And the meters get plugged up. So if a meter gets plugged up this is an open pipeline system, this meter up here just plugged up, well, water goes down the main pipeline.

Plugged up. So you're at the end, that farmer's down there getting flooded. All right? At the head of the pipeline system, the Bureau had installed screens in front of the outlet, to keep this debris out. They had no concept of how much debris was in the water. So those screens, they get plugged up to where no water is going down the line. Absolutely not a drop. So we had screen cleaners that would come by, and it took two men and a boy to pull those things out.

They'd pull the screens out to get this debris off. Well, while they're pulling on the screen, this slug of water goes down. That farmer now gets flooded. He went out and he didn't have any water. Then pretty soon, he's being flooded. That was a type of a system we had here. Modern, but unworkable. And so, they let that manager go, and they brought in, and hired the Bureau of Reclamation Construction Engineer that had been in charge of the construction. If he constructed it, he could operate it.

About that time, now we're in 1956, Arizona versus California is coming, and I'm convinced he did not want to testify

'cause he had his retirement. He thought he'd be testifying against the government. And so he resigned. First, he took a six months leave of absence to work for the contractor that built this system. And so, the District Board hired me as temporary manager while he was gone.

Now I should have said that when I came down here, there was no organization whatsoever. So the General Manager hired me in October. In December, he asked me to form an engineering department. So, I was the head of the Engineering Department from then until April of 1956, when I became the temporary manager. Well, the watermaster and I decided we were going to solve the problem, and we did. But we took away some of the automatic control. In other words, you're letting that water run over that baffle.

We knocked a hole in the baffle, we put a gate in it. So we undershot. We kept the air out. Harmonic motion — it's what I was thinking of. We got rid of that harmonic motion, so we were able to serve water. We solved most of the problems in that six months. When the manager came back, he never said a word to me, and he worked about two months, and then he resigned. And that's when the District, the Board then made me the permanent Manager.

First trip I took to Washington with them was probably after I was a manager for about three months. And I worked out a table of organization, and I showed them, where we had 70 employees, I could get by with 40. We were just a little irrigation district. We had flood control powers, we

were a flood control district for Coachella Valley, uh, I think we had two old dozers, and about three men that were working on little channels, trying to handle the flood.

Well, as the farming grew, I think there were 16,000 acres when I came here to farm. And when I left it was something close to 70,000 acres. So the farming increased, and in the very early 1960s, again you have to digress a little. Coachella Valley was not getting help from outside. We didn't get the services, so throughout the Valley we organized. We organized a Coachella Valley Advisory Planning Department. (They were ordinary) citizens, so that we could have some influence with the Board Of Supervisors.

And I was very active in that. And so in the early 60s, well, back up again, Palm Desert was just a community. No city, just a community. So there was a group of men in Palm Desert, it had grown a little bit, and they were a pseudo-city council. It's, you know when you go back to this, it's really kind of funny, if you can get all the history on it. And so they came to the District Board and said, hey look, in effect they said this, you guys have been spending money for water for the farmers all these years.

You know we're going to have a shortage of water. We want you to start looking out for water for us. Long story short, the Board gave me the authorization to enter into a purchase of all the private water companies in the Valley. We purchased some, some were given to us. Some I refused to take unless they spent some money and brought their old system up to where we would

accept it. And that's how we got into the domestic water (business). When I look at today, with all the money this District got, they just throw it around.

It seems that on weekends a pipe would break. We had no money to replace it, and I just couldn't serve water in Palm Desert for instance. The President of the Board had taken it on himself to guarantee me \$2,000 to buy some pipeline. That was the beginning of our domestic water. As you know, in irrigation, we're considered one of the foremost irrigation districts in the country. We were the first to develop what do you call it now, in those days it was telemetering.

We could control all of our canal gates, no, no, that's another story. Let's just stay with this. So, we were in water. All over the Valley, one well company area. No stand by (water supply) or anything. So down through the years, as the Valley grew, we were able to combine the systems to where we are now. Oh, in the late 60s, must have been the late 60s, (there was an issue with) the Mission Hills Country Club, if you know where that is, over near Palm Springs.

A developer wanted to develop that, and he had to have a sewer system. (Even if) he did not have to have it, he felt that would be the best thing for him to sell (real estate). And so, they put up the money for the sewer lines. I think the District put up the money for a small treatment plant or; let's back up a little. Just prior to that, we had purchased the water on what is now Palm Desert Country Club over near Indio.

And they had a little sewer system, so we'd taken that over. So we had that one. It was nothing. But then we built this larger plant, and (sewer) pipeline was laid from Palm Desert all the way up to Mission Hills near Palm Springs. So that's how we got the sanitation system. And, as you do that, of course, you grew. I think when I retired we had close to 400 employees. So I was a typical bureaucrat. I really grew.

But then, during this time, we had a big flood here, (19)75, and had another one in (19)76. And I had been preaching flood control. I'd had meetings with people saying we need to spend some money. Here in the desert when you flood, you have to worry about it. So we had, as a flood control district, every time they (started a) development we had to rule on it. And so our attorney came up with the same thing. We'd say, this is protected, except from rare and unusual floods, which we didn't define.

So that's the way we did every one of them. It was a joke. And one of the things we had to fight, we had people that wanted to subdivide the whole Whitewater River out in the Palm Springs area. (Wanted to build in the) channel. We had to find, well, as I say, I had been out giving talks, here in Palm Desert. I had an engineer stand up, and he said all you need to do is dig about ten, take a post hole digger, 12 inches, and dig about six holes in your backyard and fill it with gravel, and that will take care of all the flooding.

The following year we had a flood. They would break out the front windows of houses that had floor to ceiling windows

and put in scoop shovels to get the mud out. I've seen mud up to the roof. So, that meant that we really had to get into flood control. So when we hired (consultants) to do all of our flood control things, and we started, most of them were pay-as-you-go. Here in Palm Desert, I got organized and I'm absolutely against them, but I helped organize a redevelopment agency here, to have, to build flood control (facilities).

Did the same thing in Rancho Mirage, same thing down at La Quinta. So except for this area, north of the Ten (freeway), and the farming area down on 86th before the county line, this area is protected (against) a standard project flood. I don't know how much work you've done in flood control, but the standard is a hundred-year flood. Well, the guy I hired got to be in charge of my engineering department. He and I did some work on some areas that we could work on, get information.

One of the best is Boulder Creek, out of Denver. They've got such good records there. And they had hundred-year floods three years in a row. So, what we did then, we said, we're not going to have our (standard) at a hundred year. Now, a standard project is a Corps of Engineers standard, and what the standard project is, you find the biggest storm that ever occurred in your area, and you drop that on your drainage area, and you compute the amount of water that's going to come out.

And if you haven't had enough rainfall, find another area that has bigger rainfall, and bring it over. So, that's what we did. All of our facilities, except the dike by the canal

down in the lower valley that the Bureau built, all the facilities we built (to) the standard project. Well, politically, you have to put an annual (probability) on it, because newspapers understand what a hundred year flood is, but they don't understand that ("standard") project. So the Corps of Engineers overlooked our work, saw what we were doing, so they said that here in the desert, the standard project flood is probably a one in 250- to 300-year flood.

So that brought in a lot more employees. A lot of this work went to contract, we did a lot of it (ourselves), the district. And so that's (how we got into the flood control business). I laugh and say that I had more fun than anyone else can ever have, because I helped change the district from just an agricultural district to a very modern, urban district. Now the guys today can get new equipment, better treatment, but they don't have the fun of changing the whole thing, so that's the background on how we got the size it is today.

JM

I'm not even going to ask a question, I'm just going to give you the name of an agency, or an event and, just give me your thoughts about that agency or event. Historically or today. Salton Sea.

LW

What do you want to know about Salton Sea, you know how it was formed.

JM

Well, I do, but . . .

LW

I get mad at the newspaper talk about the big flood that broke the dikes (thus forming the Salton Sea). It wasn't done that way. The canal (from the Colorado River) was built without a check gate. That was a problem. You knew that.

JM

I did.

LW

So you want me to talk about that?

JM

Oh yes I do.

LW

Well, in the development of the canal system in Imperial Valley, the whole idea was to divert water from the California side (of the Colorado River). They wanted definitely to have a California, or U.S. water right. But the sand dunes area in Imperial Valley at that time made it impossible to keep the canal within the United States. So the canal went across the border into what is now the town of Algodones, and it joined an old overflow channel from the Colorado River. Now most people don't realize that the Colorado River itself sets up higher than the surrounding land.

And that's true with every major river, because as the floods come, they deposit the, the silt on the sides of the channel, and then further out it doesn't deposit anything, so it's always (altering itself). So during the, before man was in here, the Colorado River would divert itself, build up

a dam so it couldn't go into the Gulf, and then it formed Salton Sea. Salton Sea's been formed several times and dried out.

And then the channels. The Salton Sea would be silted up and the water then goes back to the Gulf. So these old channels that're available; we'll talk about the Alamo River within in the United States, which came out of the low dunes. It traveled around the sand dunes west to the Imperial Valley and entered the United States in a little area called Bonds Corner. And it flows down the eastern part of the valley to the Salton Sea.

So the California Development Company was developing this new water system. They diverted the water in the United States, paralleled the river down, I don't know, I think it was about two or three, three or four miles below the international boundary where they hit this old Alamo channel. And they release the water into that. They went downstream several miles probably 40, 45 miles and built a structure to block the water from the channel and divert it into canals, into the Imperial Valley.

Well, the river is running so high with silt. I believe it was winter in 1903 and in the early spring of 1904, I got to get my notes out. The intake area in the United States is very flat and the silt dropped out and it filled it up. So, they were concerned that for the season of 1904 they would not have water for the farmers because the canal was so silted up. So the decision was made to go down river into Mexico three or four miles and build a new channel from the river

directly into the Alamo Channel.

The floods on the Colorado River are always in late May to June. It takes that long for the melt in the Rockies to get down to the Yuma area. So when they decide to build this canal, and here again it's an amazing thing. Even the Imperial Irrigation District—they never dealt with the U.S. government. They worked directly with Mexico. And so they (did this) the same way. When they were down in Mexico they didn't go through a state department or anything.

They worked directly with Mexico. So they had the plans for this diversion structure that they're going to build. You never open into a river without having a control section facility. So they sent the plans down to their lawyer in Mexico City and they didn't get a response. By September, I believe, was when he, their lawyer, finally said, well they're going to approve it. Now, remember Mexico does not have a congressional record so you can't go back into records to find anything.

And so, he said they'll approve it. So they started digging. And they dug the canal. And this in wintertime. There's (hardly any) water in the Colorado River so they hadn't any problem. They keep contacting their attorney. Couldn't get approval of the structure. And so in the next year and I may be off a little. . .

. . . Yeah I was right. Rockwood, the engineer, made the cut in September of 1904. Now remember the floods don't come until May and June. So, he had plenty of time to

build the structure. Unfortunately there was a flood on the Gila River. And the first flood was in February of 1905. Now they've been building this in the fall of '04. Well that wasn't too bad. They could still live with that. Then they had a second one late February.

They had a third one in March and in June we hit the flood season. By November of 1905 110,000 cubic feet per second was flowing out towards the Salton Sea. The break was probably a half mile wide. And so then they spent all their time trying to get it done and as you probably know it was only (paid by) the Southern Pacific. Theodore Roosevelt had no authorization to spend money on this.

It was down in Mexico. And so he asked Mr. Harriman, the president (of Southern Pacific) to close the gate because the company had had three or four closures. They built dam checks all the way across and then they'd wash out on them. And he told Harriman that the government would pay for it.

JM

Harriman was president of Southern . . .

LW

Yeah, Southern Pacific. And they never got paid. Never got paid. Congress refused to pay them. And so, it was finally fixed. The company went broke and so that's when the people in Imperial Valley organized the irrigation district. And I believe in 1916 they bought and paid for all the works and became the district. Prior to this time now

the whole thing was, the company was going to own all the diversion works in all the main canals. Then they'd form mutual water companies. I think actually there were seven of them formed—seven or 11. I forgot how many. It may have been 11. And they, the little mutual water companies, then would finance whatever they could do to build the interior canals and deliver water to the farmer.

JM

This is when Imperial . . .

LW

When Imperial took over it. Became one district, which was the ideal way to do it.

JM

Your thoughts . . .

LW

Oh on Salton Sea? I was on Salton Sea on an island where you can't even get to now. But, Pearl Harbor day I had already received my draft notice to go.

JM

The treaty with Mexico guaranteeing them 1.5 million acre feet? Is that something you were comfortable with? That was before you joined the district.

LW

Well, that was right then after the war, so I had nothing to do with that.

JM

Okay. So, by the time you became involved in water in this neck of the woods, that just wasn't an issue. The United States Bureau

Of Reclamation. Thoughts about their work historically?

LW

When I came to work for the district, I was horrified to find out, maybe not, I guess it was horrified, to find out how much battle there was going on between the district, and when you say the district, that's your director, the board, and the Bureau Of Reclamation. I guess I felt they should probably work together. And what really got me was when, uh, I hadn't been here very long. And they were going to meet with some of the regional, I guess with the regional director, and maybe one of the undersecretaries. They bugged the room.

And in those days, we didn't have all of the VCRs that we have today. But they bugged the room so that they'd get it down, whatever the directors said. And I thought, if you can't say something face to face, that's kind of funny. So after I became manager, and with our attorney, who was a very, very shrewd old gentleman, Earl Rathbine, and with our board, our board set a policy that we should be on a first name relationship with any and all commissioners of reclamation. And that we should be able to walk into the Secretary Of Interior's office. And we did then, all those years.

And so we worked, I thought, very closely with the Bureau of Reclamation. We really didn't have much to do with the Bureau. Under our contract with the Bureau, they had the right to inspect the canal to be sure that we were keeping it up. I think they inspected it twice. I don't think they ever came down to it the last 20 years. I don't

recall any really. I thought we were on good relations with them. We got organized, and I think the Bureau recognized that. We had the Imperial Dam cooperatives, which was everybody that got water from the Imperial Dam both in Arizona and California, we met once every three months with the Bureau.

Even after the Bureau turned over the Imperial Dam to IID we still met. We got a storm water dam built on the west side of the valley by a redevelopment contract, I think that's what it was. And you had to put your tongue in cheek to justify it, but the Bureau justified several million dollars building (systems). Under that, we did a lot of (building). That's where we first got our money for really the first system.

They'd finance us to put in new check gates. So (the canal) would operate easier under (these) controls. I would say you know we lie in the first, oh, 49 miles of the Coachella Canal, across the sandy desert. You want to know how that happened?

JM

Well, I do want to know how that happened. But before you tell me that, you said earlier, you used the term bugged talking about the Bureau. And I assume that they simply, that what you mean by that is that they had recording devices that recorded everything. They weren't secretly in . . .

LW

They were in another room. Hidden microphones.

JM

Oh, you did mean bugged.

LW

I was amazed.

JM

Okay, all right, let's, now that we have that cleared up, let's go back to . . .

LW

The All-American Canal. And this is where the compromise agreement comes in from my standpoint. We were losing, out of our canal about 130,000 acre feet a year in seepage.

JM

This is out of the Coachella Canal.

LW

Out of the Coachella branch of the (All American) Canal. And I always figured that was water going to a bank to be repumped, but a paper water bank that if we ever lined the canal, that was going to be our answer for additional water. Now, whereas we were getting so much water that we were using. But we were diverting a lot more. And to me, I felt if we ever lined the canal, that deferred water was ours because it would be lost anyway. If we lined the canal, it should be ours. So that was a principle that I sold the board on. But we didn't have any money.

And about this time, let's see, that would be President Nixon. I think that President Nixon appointed former Attorney General Brownell as his special assistant to solve the problem with Mexico. Mexico was making a lot of noise about the salinity of the Colorado River. The Welton-Mohawk dis-

trict in Arizona had a terrific drainage system. And they were dumping a terrific lot of salt water into the Gila River. That flowed into the Colorado below Imperial Dam, so it didn't have much water to mix with.

And Mexico was getting a lot of salty water. And there was a lot of pressure from Mexico on our government. So, Brownell was supposed to come up with a recommendation to solve the problem, but not to hurt United States' interests. So we had a bus trip with him in Imperial, through Imperial Valley. And so we were all assigned three seats on the bus. The President, the Vice President, and myself. And then as we'd drive around the valley, Brownell would ask different people to come down to sit and talk about the area. I'd already convinced the board that maybe this was an opportunity that we could get a loan from the government to line that leaky canal. And that way, we'd have water. I should go back a little. In the contract in the entire All American Canal, San Diego has a right for 150 cubic feet per second of capacity.

JM

Hundred and five, I think.

LW

A hundred and five, whatever it is, uh, acre-feet a year. And they have owned that percent of the canal. So we came up, and I talked to our attorney. I said, you know, if we . . . someday we're going to line the canal, and we need to have the right to this water. But we need more water, because we only have a right for 1500 CFS, I think, in the main All American. We're going to need

to get a little more capacity so we can bring that extra water in, so we could use it. So we attempted to buy San Diego's capacity in the All American Canal, down to Coachella Edwards.

We and San Diego approved it. We had an approved contract. And the Bureau would not agree to it. Their attorney at that time kept wanting to know, "what do you want it for? What's your purpose?" And we wouldn't tell him. We didn't want to get into the seepage problem with the Bureau at that time. So we never moved forward with it. And the San Diego City Attorney was just furious. They felt, boy it wasn't a lot of money, but it looked good to them then. So we had that background.

When Brownell came down . . . I talked to him, and he talked about (conservation) and things, and I mentioned the fact that he was looking for water. And that's what he was doing. He's looking for water to dilute that Welton-Mohawk (drainage). So I laid out a proposition to him (about the lining). That's how we got the first 50 miles of lining. And under our contract with him, as long as the United States needs the water, we do not make a payment for that year on that lined canal.

Some way or another, the United States has taken the stand that they need the water. Coachella has never made a payment on that canal. Then at the same time, I negotiated with Metropolitan Water District that the denominator is 132,000 acre feet. We lined the canal, but then MWD takes half of that, 62,000, whatever it is, they pay half the payment and we pay half the payment. I

don't know where MWD has ever made any payment or not, but Coachella has never made a payment on that 50 miles of concrete lining. So I think I did a good job for the people in this district.

JM

That was a good deal.

LW

Of course, Myron (Holburt) helped me on that.

JM

Okay, continuing just with your thoughts about various people and agencies and concepts: Metropolitan Water District.

LW

I always had an excellent relationship with them. Hank Mills (former MWD general manager Henry Mills) is the one that insisted that I be president of that first state contractors' group that we had. And we got the exchange agreement with Metropolitan, we got money enough to build the spreading area. I guess I've always been in Metropolitan's bucket. I always felt that they were a great organization when I was working. I don't know anything about it now.

JM

Oh, that's fine.

LW

It became a more of a political organization. Back in my days, it was an engineering water delivery organization.

JM

How about Arizona V. California? You've mentioned that several times, and you testified as part of that suit which goes on today. Uh, it's a difficult answer, I suppose, for you to give, but just generally, what are your memories about the beginnings of that lawsuit?

LW

My memory on this is the fact that Arizona made a mistake. In my opinion, if they sued the State of California, it might have been resolved, maybe not better, but sooner. But the mistake they made, they sued all the agencies in California that use Colorado River water. And I'm sure they thought they would divide us. That we would be fighting one another. Instead, we closed ranks. And we did not fight one another. The closest (to) any dispute that Coachella might have had was when we were rudely awakened to the fact the Imperial (Irrigation District) felt that someday they'd cut all of our water off, as I've already mentioned.

But other than that, it was strictly Arizona trying to fight us. I remember that. I remember I was a young man. And I could remember when I was called to the witness stand. And I was called before we put our testimony on, because we had hired W. Ken Rhode to be our consultant to be the one that would testify. And when we came back off of the recess, after Imperial had put on their case, after some (time), I'm sure it was before we did our testimony, Arizona was able to call me as some type of rebuttal witness or something.

(Rebuttal) witness, friendly witness, I don't know what. Why do you get in on the Salton Sea. And I know Imperial held their breath. And, after all, I was a young man. I wasn't used to being on a witness stand, and things like that. And before long, the Special Master takes over, and looks me right in the seat of the chair, and he's right there. And he and I were carrying on a conversation, and the Arizona attorney's trying to stop us. So, I think that we did very well on that suit. I think the one thing the Special Master was unfair to California (about) is when he would not allow Arizona rivers to be included within the quantity of water that Arizona's supposed to get (from the Colorado River).

I still think that's a mistake. As a layman, you read the (Colorado River) compact, and certainly it says all tributaries within the United States. It was an interesting time. We stayed away from the Arizona people. We didn't even go out to dinner with them in those days. Later on, we had a lot of dealings with them on other things. I think the friendship with Arizona started with Joe Jensen from MWD.

I think Joe Jensen was a man that has not been given the credit that he (deserves). But after Arizona vs. California, he came to the decision Arizona was going to get their share of the water politically, they're going to get their canal, so let's quit fighting. So I can remember the first meeting we had with the people in Arizona. We invited them over. I think we met at Metropolitan's board room Or did we meet out here? Anyway, the first meeting was very . . . it was very strained. Everybody was very careful.

That's when Jensen said, "we're in this together now." And so we would meet what, every six months, first in Arizona, here in California. So we all (got along) very well. But Jensen started that. I still think he was a marvelous man. I know that a lot of people hated his guts.

JM

Well, that may have been true at the time, but I think history has softened that a little bit, and I think a lot of people feel the way you do, looking back historically at what he was able to accomplish. Are there any other people, Lowell, that you know, reaching back into the '40s and '50s. Any other individuals that come to your mind that were particularly important? Maybe they didn't become famous, but in your relationships with them, were particularly important in the development of either Colorado River water for California, or water in general? You mentioned Joe Jensen . . .

LW

I would think, and maybe I have to — people here in this valley have always said I had a rubber stamp board. They did whatever I said to do. But people don't understand. I did my homework. And the board knew everything I was going to do. I've had developers want me to bring up things to the board, which I knew the answer would be no. I refused to do it. I wasn't going to embarrass them. So I would say probably one that stands out was the President of our board for many years, Leon Kennedy. He had, he had confidence in me. And he supported me in everything that I wanted (to do). But I was, I think, intelligent enough, smart enough not to ask for things

that I really shouldn't have had.

And so, I would say that was one that I would look back (and mention). I remember one thing. I fired a man. Absolutely incompetent. Sleeping on the job. And he went to one of the board members crying about how unfair I was. So this board member went to Kennedy, who was the president, and said, we've got to have a personnel meeting over this. He said this is something that I do. So I said, fine. Let's have the meeting. The first item on the agenda (will be) to fire Lowell Weeks. Well, I don't mean that, (he said). Well, (I said) if you don't mean that, then, what are we having the meeting for?

So I guess that's the reason. He (Kennedy) was the type of man (who) could see in the future that we're going to need more water. We could see some growth in the upper valley. We never knew there was going to be a hundred golf courses here in the valley. But we knew it was growing. I would say probably the second one, who you knew, was Ray Rummonds. He just followed along the same line. So, Leon was first, and probably foremost as far as I can see. Statewide, I felt like we had a lot of weak people statewide.

JM

Statewide?

LW

I didn't see any strong people up there. Harvey Banks, maybe yes. Now, I would say yes to Harvey, but I was thinking more of the ones since that time that took over the department. I never saw any strong people up there.

JM

Pat Brown?

LW

I never had any contact with him except one time, in a meeting. We were talking, and the first thing he asked me, how many voters do you have in your valley? So I recognized immediately what he was after. I will give him credit for the State Water Project. I don't think anybody else could have put it over. But I, I had nothing to do with him. Uh, Bill Warren was interesting. I recall we had a meeting in the Biltmore Hotel with several representatives from the water (community) Mr. Jenson, two or three from MWD. We were all meeting there.

Going to meet this new director, Bill Warren. Bill Warren walked in, and we had name tags on. He came over to me and said, how's your sister Willie coming along? His folks farmed next to my folks in the Imperial Valley. He went to high school with my older brothers and sisters. Here all of the others are scared to death to meet this Bill Warren, and he comes over and asks me how my sister is. So it was, I liked Bill. Back then, after we both retired, we were on a conference in, uh, Greece. We went on a five day bus trip together. I think Warren was a good politician, but he knew, he had his feet on the ground.

JM

How about on the Federal level?

LW

Federal, well, during my lifetime there was only one dominant figure — (Bureau of

Reclamation Commissioner) Floyd Dominy. You know, the good Lord only made one mold. Boy, when he cast that mold, he broke it. One Floyd Dominy was all this country could take.

JM

Did you know Floyd well?

LW

Very well.

JM

Can you tell us a little bit about him?

LW

Floyd is still alive. Some of the things I know about him, I don't think we should have out until he is dead. Floyd was quite a ladies man.

Dominy was very, very dominant. I think he did more for the Bureau of Reclamation than all the other commissioners put together. And I think one of the reasons was that we had a very strong Congress at that time. Wayne Aspenall from Colorado. Wayne was a true believer in using government funds to build water projects in the West. He thought the only way you could develop the West was to have water. And so, with his background in Congress, and Floyd Dominy's very dominant personality as commissioner, I think we got so much accomplished during that time.

Federal, that's the only person I could even think about putting. Floyd had a personality that I can put this on. One time we were having a party for him, meeting here in the valley. The fact is that we were going to

meet at the home of our president. Now, I do not drink alcohol. I have family background with reasons why I do not. I will drink some wine, a little wine with dinner. My president, sometimes, got too much to drink. He had a good looking gal for a wife, and they were the same age.

And at this party, I got my instructions. Lowell, don't you dare let Floyd Dominy in a room by himself with my wife. That's the type of background that Floyd had, as far as his personal life was concerned.

But I look back, and just the people that followed him were so weak it was pathetic. And, if you recall, under Carter, who was the Commissioner, from Idaho? He didn't run it. The Under-Secretary from Alaska ran the department.

JM

Can we talk just a little bit about what has come to be known as the Mexican Delta, or the Colorado River Delta. It's very much in the news today and what I mean by that is, there are people who would like to see much more Colorado River water flowing to the Sea of Cortez to restore, in their words, to restore the delta. Had that been an issue while you were active in water, or is this something new to you?

LW

This is entirely new. It's only very recent.

JM

Right. So it hadn't, it had not come up before. Anything in general, You talked earlier, when we first started, you were talking about the terrific benefit that Hoover

Dam presented, among other things, with regard to water quality. It has vastly improved water quality in the lower Colorado. Any other thoughts or issues with respect to water quality during your career that raised an ugly head, or any kind head, from time to time? There are salinity issues of course . . .

LW

Well we thought at the time, of course, we had salinity problems, which the Colorado River Board, under my reign, overtook a very active part of trying to eliminate. We had oil wells that were producing terrific amounts of salt. I think we got those diverted or, put in evaporation pans. But that wasn't caused by the Hoover Dam, that was just nature above Hoover Dam that put in all this salinity.

I don't know whether this is correct or not, but I would think Hoover Dam balanced it out so that we did not have extremes in salt. In other words, we'd have flood runoff when you didn't have any (salinity), and then you would have very little water which probably (was) very high saline. I imagine Hoover Dam has balanced that out. So the overall benefit of Hoover Dam of course is, the power and water, to the metropolitan area. And then the source of water for the agricultural areas.

Unless we change the aqueduct supply, I think one of the problems in the future, one that's being worked on right now, is the idea of having Metropolitan (Water District's) aqueduct full and remain under our 4.4 legal allotment we have from the Supreme Court.

JM

Okay. Were you engaged in any issues involving the upper and lower basin of the Colorado River?

LW

No, I had a friend, uh, later became friend. (When I first met him) he was a Congressman from Colorado, Mr. Chenoweth. He represented the southern part of the state. And we became very good friends. You know, I often told him that the biggest mistake Colorado made was not entering into the suit of Arizona vs. California. I don't know whether you recall or not, the upper basin states did everything they could to stay out of it. They made a mistake.

Because there is, when the Supreme Court finally ruled that the lower basin had seven and a half million acre feet a year, there's no water for upper basin states to develop their full potential. No way. There's not that much water. And I don't see how they, they reverse the Supreme Court ruling. Why I used to tell him that.

JM

Why do you think they did not join?

LW

I think they thought they would get their water; wouldn't have to go to the cost. That they were entitled to that seven and a half million acre feet—the upper basin. Which they are. But if there's not enough after the rule that they have to release so much water they were beat.

JM

That is correct.

LW

We overestimated the river. What is it, we have contracts and uses for about 18 and a half million acre- feet. I think that's what it is. And if you can get an average of 14 to 14 and a half million, you are, long time average on the river, you're going to be lucky. If my subtraction is correct, say it's 14 and a half from 18 and a half, that's four million acre-feet short.

JM

That's a lot of water.

LW

And if they get, say, three and a half million, see, it would be like they don't get any.

JM

That's . . .

LW

Of course I know numbers sometimes don't work out. But I, I think they made a mistake. I really think they made a big mistake. Because they let the court rule for the lower basin. Without realizing. I used to tell them, you people always think it's California that is your enemy. Really it's Arizona. If you can prevent Arizona from using their water, then you'll have some water.

JM

Because you're not going to stop California?

LW

Well, we already had our four point four.

JM

We were already using it, and the number was there?

LW

We were already. The number was there, but I think that's where they made a mistake.

JM

What were your thoughts at the time they were building Glen Canyon Dam?

LW

I don't think we had any except we just bought additional storage.

JM

Okay. I don't recall if there was anything particularly controversial about that?

LW

Oh, I think if I recall, there was a little from the Sierra Club, but that was before the environmental program got strong. I don't know. If you mean from the people, no, we were always interested in the City of Los Angeles going ahead and building the dam on the Colorado River.

JM

You mean Parker Dam?

LW

No Bridge Canyon Dam.

JM

Tell me about Bridge Canyon Dam.

LW

The City of Los Angeles proposed two dams, one in Marble Canyon, which is downstream from Lee Ferry, and the other one is at Bridge Canyon Dam, which is probably two-thirds of the way from Lee Ferry, to Glen Canyon. That's a power dam. And water storage. It would be at the heart. And I've gone up river to the Bridge Canyon Dam site.

JM

How long ago was this?

LW

I was still working. Must have been in the 60's.

Well, Reader's Digest caused one of the big problems. They said the water would be from brim to brim, there would be no more Grand Canyon. The water in the lake, you would never be able to see from any of the tourist sites. It was downstream from what we call the Grand Canyon, the area the tourists go to. It was just . . . it died. And I think it was wrong. I think today we'd like to have it. Just like Glen Canyon. What was it? It was going to take 20 or 30 years to fill it. Well, it got it filled in three years?

JM

Well, we've covered a lot of territory here in the last couple hours. What have I forgotten to ask you, or does anything leap to your mind that you'd like to chat about with respect to the Colorado River and its significance to either Imperial where you worked for a few years, or Coachella, where you spent the vast majority of your career.

LW

The Colorado River is the life blood of both districts as far as agriculture is concerned. And it certainly developed Southern California's metropolitan areas.

JM

That's for sure.

LW

And when I hear people talk about how horrible it is, they don't know what the river was in the state of nature.

JM

Well that's true, because most people alive today only know it the way it is today.

LW

Yeah, you take this idea of saving the delta. I was hired by the Bureau to work on an investigating team to do a report on a little project in Wyoming. And it was going to be during my vacation time, so the board said I could do it. Instead, we ended up in the first two weeks of December, everything was frozen up there. And there was a professor from U.C. Davis, a professor from Montana, and myself. We were the ones working on it. Trying to figure out how to put in farm drainage for this area. And it was rough.

And so we had all the data, with all the families, how many members of the families and all that stuff. We sat down one night. I happened to have a brochure from a hotel in Florida. Very exclusive hotel. And we sat down one night, figured out it would be cheaper for the United States to take all those families, through their grandchild-

dren, put him up in that hotel, then it was to (subsidize the) work (needed on the farm) up there.

That point led to the point of why we were against the (subsidy) on the project for so many years. Because agriculture couldn't even pay the operation and maintenance. But now, with their urban development, they can pay for it. But see, we didn't know we were going to develop like that, just like we didn't know about this valley.

JM

Well, the Coachella Valley. I know that Metropolitan, after the lawsuit was essentially over, although it, as you know, it goes on today, but the essence of it was over and, with the decision of '63, '64, and as you indicated earlier, Joe Jensen and others sort of got on board and in many ways helped Arizona get funding for the CAP.

LW

I know. I think (without) California, they would never had gotten funded.

JM

And were you involved in that or?

LW

We all agreed to it. At that time, when Mr. Rummonds was President, he and I attended all those meetings with Arizona. And, no, they never (would have gotten that if) not for California's support.

JM

Um, one of the things that . . .

LW

And I think we had California's support, because, who was the Senator from Northern California? Senator Eagle, no, it wasn't — Claire Engle, yeah.

JM

Oh sure.

LW

Claire Engle has a meeting with Joe (Jensen), that's what Joe told us. Mr. Jensen told us that he said, you know, I have to have some money in Northern California. We've got the Shasta Dam, we got those projects up there. And he (Engle) says, I'm going to support Arizona. I have to, for me to get money for my (projects) And that's when Mr. Jensen said, okay, we'll join you. Go help Arizona get their financing.

JM

There was a quid pro quo?

LW

Oh there had to be. There always is.

JM

Well, sure.

LW

I mean, I know what it is, but there's always . . .

JM

There you go.

LW

Oh I'm, as you could see, I'm a fan of Mr. Jensen. I used to go to the State Water Contractors meeting when some young

punk would (challenge) Joe. And I thought, you should at least call him Mr. Jensen. I never called him Joe, I called him Mr. Jenson. So you see, he's a favorite of mine.

JM

Yeah. Well, which explains . . .

LW

Sure, he made a mistake. He bucked the (sizing of the) east branch and he proved them wrong. But, tell me people that haven't made a mistake. I've made lots of them.

End of Interview

INTERVIEWEES: LW 1

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