

Colorado River Board of
California

Oral History Project

Bill Claypool

JAY MALINOWSKI

Let me start with a non-water question. All of the people that we've interviewed up to this time have been people literally in the water business -- general managers, attorneys, lobbyists. Your background is hardware, as I recall. So I'm interested in what brought you to Needles. What your business was for all of those years, and then how you got into the water picture.

BILL CLAYPOOL

Well, my family bought a general store in 1911. It had been here since about 1880 – the store had.

JM

In Needles?

BC

The general store was hardware, dry goods, and groceries and we operated it for years. Then we bought a feed mill in San Bernardino in 1927. I took over the management of the Needles store in about 1946 and managed it ever since. We, in turn, expanded and we had grocery markets in Bullhead City, Mohave Valley, Blythe and Parker. We also went into the

wholesale beer business and we had distributorships in Needles, Parker, Blythe and the Imperial Valley.

JM

You did say beer business?

BC

Beer business, yes.

JM

Probably a good business to be in out in the desert.

BC

Yes, we distribute Coors and Miller and we're still in Needles, Blythe and the Imperial Valley. So we had businesses up and down the whole river and my dad was mayor of Needles for 20 or some years. I was accustomed to politics and the things that were going on. I also was aware that Needles never had any water rights. So I became interested in the Colorado River and started to collect books and study it. In the process, I got on the Needles utility board.

But then I was aware of the fact that when Boulder Dam was being built, they withdrew all the lands along the Colorado River for any activity. And the river land was needed for recreation. Boating and fishing was becoming an issue for people from Los Angeles, but the land was all frozen. So, I convinced the government that they should have a plan to develop the use of that land. Our Congressman at that time was Stuart Udall. He was living in Yuma and he was our Congressman in Parker.

We heard that if he won reelection and Jack Kennedy became president, he would become Secretary of the Interior. So we arranged to meet him before the election and give him some several thousand dollars for his campaign. So he won and Kennedy won. Our manager in Parker and I went back to Washington, DC to visit with Stu. We were in his office when the phone rang. He answered the phone and said, "will you boys kindly go in the other room"?

We went in the other room and when we came back he said, "that was the President, I'm now the Secretary of the Interior." So we told him all this

land was going to waste and he should develop a plan to use it for public use and that they should appoint a group of people from along the river to develop the plan along with the Bureau of Reclamation. He asked, "who do you think should be on it?" We named a few names and later on he formed the Committee of the Lower Colorado River Land Use Plan and appointed about half of those that were recommended.

He also appointed others that we hadn't recommended, because he had his other favorite members along the river. We met for two and a half years. The chairman became Harold Giss, who was (a state legislator) at the time and was a very (assertive) person.

JM

(He was from) Needles?

BC

(No,) Yuma.

JM

So as not to confuse people, Needles is in California. Stuart Udall was from Arizona. And you mentioned Parker, which is also Arizona. Let's go back a little bit and tell me what you were doing in Arizona, because you and your family businesses and whatnot were primarily in California.

BC

No. Well, we had a very large business in Parker.

JM

Okay.

BC

A very large supermarket and department store and beer business in Parker. So we were the largest merchants in Parker.

JM

What was the name of that store? Was it Claypool's?

BC

Claypool's.

JM

Okay.

BC

The beer business was the Colorado River Distributors. By the way, I should say for the record, I'm a reformed stutterer, so I can't always ...

JM

I'm sorry, you're a reformed . . . ?

BC

Stutterer. I stuttered.

JM

Oh, a reformed stutterer.

BC

Yes, I've stuttered for years and I had a hard time saying anything before going to high school. But I overcame most of it.

JM

Oh, I would say you did.

BC

But I had a hard time. They used to tease me all through school about it.

JM

So you really were important in Arizona, at least in the Parker area.

BC

Yes. Well, the land use plan was the beginning of recreation in the Colorado River. Because it resulted in Lake Havasu City; in the Parker Strip and it resulted in the Bullhead City area. See, until then there were no private resorts on the river. There were only squatters and the squatters could only do up to a certain point because their investments were always on mushy grounds.

JM

Are you talking about in both Arizona and California?

BC

And Nevada.

JM

And Nevada, okay.

BC

All three states. See when they built Hoover Dam they withdrew all the land from Boulder Dam south and then 10 miles or so of the river from public use.

JM

All right.

BC

And it was all government land.

JM

Okay.

BC

So the land use plan had a plan to develop that land by leasing it to private parties. In one case to sell the land, which was Lake Havasu City and it was the Bureau Of Land Management that was put in charge of doing this. So then the leases are let but there are no water rights. So then you get

involved with water rights, because the person gets the lease to build a resort in a certain area, but if he has no water rights where is he? He's still a squatter.

JM

Right.

BC

So, that's how I got involved with the water rights issue.

JM

Okay. So, you were on the land use committee, right?.

BC

Yes.

JM

And who were you representing as a member?

BC

The City of Needles.

JM

Okay, so again we're back in California.

BC

But everybody represented the whole area. It just so happened that I was involved in all three states.

JM

You must have been the only one.

BC

Yes, I was the only one.

JM

With an interest in the three states.

BC

Yes, right.

JM

What year did that start?

BC

The year after Kennedy became the President.

JM

Okay, so '62.

BC

We met for two years and '64 is when the plan was printed. It's called the Red Book.

JM

Okay.

BC

In the Lower Colorado River Land Use Plan, the only land that we recommended to be sold were the alternate sections of Lake Havasu City, but without that plan there would be no Lake Havasu City.

JM

Okay, do you recall when that land at Lake Havasu City was that sold directly to McCulloch?

BC

Yes, it was directly to McCulloch. It was on a bid deal.

JM

All right.

BC

McCulloch was the only one to bid because he already owned every other section. He bought the Indian land from the railroad, but it wasn't Indian land it was railroad. The Indians owned half of this valley, which was railroad land and the government took it back and gave it to the Indians. Down there, it was still owned by the Santa Fe. So McCulloch bought every other section at site six from the Santa Fe. But he still owned every other section in the checkerboard.

JM

Okay.

BC

So our plan enabled him to buy the other parts, which made a solid block of five or so square miles.

JM

Did you know McCulloch?

BC

Yes.

JM

Are some of the stories true about the way he marketed Lake Havasu City?

BC

Yes. In fact, we built the first grocery store there. The first grocery store was in a back room of the Nautical Inn Resort. Then we built a 5,000 square foot market and we operated for about four or five years as the only market in Lake Havasu City.

JM

That was also called Claypool's?

BC

Yes, right.

JM

Okay.

BC

You know, McCulloch, he had a good plan. He had his airplanes, and he would fly you in and you were given a dinner and a trip. Then you would sign a slip, and you'd pay for your lot over 15 years. Then we had a big fight and my father claimed it was a gyppo deal and he was really upset that we went in the grocery business down there. But you could drive through it now and see it was not a gyppo deal. It was a legitimate deal.

JM

What kind of deal? I'm not understanding that word.

BC

It was a gyppo deal.

JM

Oh, a gyppo?

BC

Yes.

JM

Okay. In other words, a scam.

BC

A scam, right.

JM

Okay.

BC

My father was a very conservative person. He thought it was a scam, but it wasn't. McCulloch really gave value. Now, he did well for himself too, but he still gave value to the property.

JM

Is it true that the people that he flew out to sell the property to, that he tended to fly them out during the dead of winter, from the east part of the United States?

BC

He had no flights in August.

JM

Okay. No flights in August.

BC

No flights in August.

JM

So, it's true then ...

BC

Well, sure.

JM

It was kind of cold ...

BC

Oh, sure.

JM

You know, he'd fly people out to gorgeous Lake Havasu City. I mean, in the winter time, it's great.

BC

Beautiful. In the summertime, it's miserable.

JM

Yes. Well, you've been up to Lake Havasu from time to time in the recent past. What are your thoughts about what it has become, from what it was when you were on the land use plan committee?

BC

We were down here just last week. It's a beautiful city. It's at 40,000 population now. You know, it's got everything. It's a nice town.

JM

How long ago did you give up your store up there?

BC

About 20 years ago. Fifteen to 20 years.

JM

Where did Lake Havasu get its water from? And where does it get its water from today?

BC

McCulloch made a deal with Arizona. I don't know the details of it, but he did make a deal with the state of Arizona. It's part of Arizona's water right.

JM

Okay, so you think they're getting water out of the Colorado River then?

BC

Well, sure.

JM

Okay.

BC

All the wells along the river are Colorado River water. I spent a lot of personal money to prove it and to get chemical analysis to prove that our city wells are 22 percent tributary and etc. Then the government tells me,

that's fine, but once it co-mingles, legally it's automatically 100 percent river water.

JM

You mean even underground in an aquifer?

BC

Underground. Even though it may be 82 percent tributary, if there's 18 percent Colorado River water it's Colorado river water.

JM

And who made that determination?

BC

The Department of Interior.

JM

Okay, and what timeframe are we talking about?

BC

They told me this about five years ago now. They probably made the decision many years earlier. But I didn't know about it then until five years ago, after we spent money to prove that our wells were "X" amount (native groundwater).

JM

Well, you can't be very happy about that.

BC

No, it's terrible.

JM

A very important piece of this interview is going to be Needles and their issues with regard to water rights and we'll get there.

BC

Sure.

JM

I kind of wanted to lead up to it a little bit. You mentioned your dad and, of course, your family. When did they settle in this area?

BC

My family came here in 1911. My grandfather was a mining engineer. He was a consultant or an advance man for the Guggenheims and the store here was owned by Monahan and Murphy, two Irishmen. They had a bunch of worthless mines around. They felt if they sold their grocery store to my grandfather at a decent price, that he would recommend that the Guggenheims buy their worthless gold mines. So my grandfather bought the store, but then he refused to recommend that the Guggenheims buy the gold mines.

(Train goes by during interview. JM says, "Let me stop for just a minute while this train goes by. BC says, "That's it" [after train passes] JM says, "Your home is about two blocks from the tracks and the trains come by how often?" BC responds, "Every 17 minutes." JM asks, "24 hours a day?" BC responds, "Yes, I lived with it all my life. I've been here all my life." JM responds, "So you're used to it?" BC says, "I don't even hear it anymore.)

BC (returning to interview)

He was a consultant for the Guggenheims and he was a traveling geologist that would go out and look for mines for them to buy. So after a year when he didn't recommend that the Guggenheims buy any of the mines, any of Murphy's mines, they came in and demanded that he pay up a note for the grocery store immediately, right then, or get out. Well, the year 1911 Santa Fe had (built its) railroad tracks and we had supplied groceries to the crews. So we had enough money to pay them off. My grandfather gave them a check and told them to get out and for them not to come back.

The funny thing is the bank was right next door and Murphy owned the bank. They hadn't checked before they came over to make the demand to get us out .

JM

Oh, very good. You use the name Guggenheim, are these the same Guggenheims out of New York City?

BC

Yes, right.

JM

The museum, and I mean that family?

BC

Right. Yes. They were a very wealthy mining family.

JM

In this area, we're talking gold mines?

BC

Everywhere, everywhere. They were even in South America.

JM

But in this specific area, Needles, the southwest it was gold?

BC

Gold, yes. Sure, there's gold around here.

JM

Okay.

BC

Just a matter how much of it is there.

JM

Right. Okay. So when you were born, your parents were living where?

BC

Here.

JM

In Needles?

BC

Yes. My father worked for the company. When they bought the company in 1911, he just graduated from high school. He spent his whole life working for the company here.

JM

Okay. I'm sorry, when you say company are you're talking about the family business?

BC

The family business, right.

JM

All right. Your family lived here in Needles when you were born. You're how old today?

BC

Eighty one.

JM

Eighty one. But you weren't born here in Needles.

BC

No, I was born in Los Angeles. I was born in 1922, before air conditioning. No white children were born in Needles in 1922. They either went to Kingman, Flagstaff, or Los Angeles. My mother went to LA, where her parents were.

JM

Oh, I see. So your mother's parents lived in Los Angeles.

BC

Yes.

JM

It was hotter than Hades out here.

BC

That's right.

JM

Okay, very good. So you're a native Angelino. You probably don't tell that too many people.

BC

No, I don't. No.

JM

So you obviously moved right back out to Needles after you were born.

BC

Oh yes, I was raised here. Went to grammar school and high school here.

JM

Did you go away to college?

BC

Yes.

JM

Where was that?

BC

Well, again my stuttering. Pomona.

JM

Pomona College?

BC

Yes, in Claremont.

JM

Okay.

BC

That's just one of the words I still can't say.

JM

What, Claremont or Pomona?

BC

Pomona.

JM

Pomona? Yes.

BC

Claremont's easy.

JM

What was your field in college?

BC

My field was just general.

JM

Okay.

BC

It took me eight years to graduate. In my junior year, the day after Pearl Harbor, I heard some rocks hit the window of my dorm room and I looked out the fence and a friend call John was there and said, "hey Claypool let's go join the service." So I said fine. So I went to LA that day and I was the first one from the college to join the service after Pearl Harbor.

JM

So that would have been December of 1941.

BC

Yes, right.

JM

And you joined which branch?

BC

The Navy. My friend joined the Air Force and I joined the Navy, but they didn't call me for active service until that term was over. So I finished my second year before I went to active service.

JM

Okay.

BC

After the war I came back. I tried to go to USC (University of Southern California). I wanted to go to USC, but I couldn't get a place to stay. But a friend of mine from before the war had a house there so he invited me to stay. I was married at that time, so I went back to Claremont. Then with one term left, my dad and uncle came by. We had a feed mill in San Bernardino and the store in Needles. He said that Jack, my uncle, had terminal cancer, so they wanted me to quit school and come to Needles and run the store.

My dad would go to San Bernardino and run the feed mill. And after one year of working here, I was able to go back to school during the week and still run the business on weekends. So it took me eight years to get

through school, but it wasn't because of studies. Actually, I graduated Phi Beta Kappa. So it wasn't grades. It was just the Navy and the family business.

JM

Well, that's a great deal of tenacity. You were effectively commuting from Needles to Pomona.

BC

Right.

JM

To finish school.

BC

Well, yes. Every week.

JM

Well, that's a great deal of desire.

BC

I drove many miles and I'm not a good driver.

JM

Okay. So, we're sort of into early 1950 here.

BC

Right.

JM

And you're running the family business here in Needles.

BC

Yes, right.

JM

What was Needles like in the fifties?

BC

It was much better than it is now. Needles has gone downhill, bad. Primarily for the action of the city. They made some very foolish errors. Needles was a railroad town and they got some young councilmen that were anxious for Needles to grow. So they built a bunch of low income housing and the county had all the welfare folks with no housing, so they sent them to Needles. When they came to Needles, Needles became the welfare town and this ruined the schools.

So the schools went to hell. The railroad workers, the highest paid railroad workers in the world, lived here. They moved to Havasu, to Bullhead and Mohave Valley because now with the cell phones, they didn't have to live close. They can be 50 miles away because they would get an hour or so notice.

JM

Why were the railroad workers so highly paid here? Just because it was ...

BC

Distance, and mountain pay. Mountain pay is time and a half, or something like that. And the distances that they'd run.

JM

Were there, if they were so highly paid, were there just not enough of them here to have an economic impact? Or, because they went to Havasu?

BC

It took the economic impact away from the town.

JM

Okay.

BC

It was terrible. I was involved on the local school board for 19 years and we had some of the best schools in the state. When the welfare came in, the students went to hell and therefore the schools went to hell. Our schools were top notch at one time. Our superintendent, for many years, was Max Rafferty, who became the state's superintendent.

JM

Right.

BC

He ran good schools. He was full of BS, but he still ran very good schools.

JM

Okay. So you're in Needles and the town is sort of going downhill a little bit in the fifties, mid to late fifties? Sixties?

BC

No, the late sixties.

JM

Sixties? Okay. So by that time, by the late sixties, you were involved in water issues.

BC

Yes, right.

JM

Because you'd worked on the land use plan committee?

BC

Yes, right.

JM

Who were some of the other people that you remember that were on that land use committee?

BC

I can get you one of the books, I have it around here somewhere. There was Giss, (from) Yuma. Then there was Graham Hollister, who was representative of the government and there were representatives from Blythe, from Imperial Valley.

JM

Where did they tend to meet? Where were the meetings held?

BC

They moved around.

JM

Okay.

BC

They had some in the Bullhead, some in Needles, some in Parker and some in the Imperial Valley.

JM

Okay. There must have been a government representative there .

BC

Yes, that was Graham Hollister.

JM

And what was he, or who was he?

BC

He was an Assistant Secretary of the Interior.

JM

Okay.

BC

Then there was, my memory's gone bad and I've had four heart attacks and a stroke in the last three years and my memory's gone bad.

JM

Well, I think you're doing very well.

BC

Graham Hollister and then, I forget right now.

JM

Okay, that's all right. But because this program that we're doing here is primarily for researchers in the future, if they wanted to find out more about the land use plans ...

BC

I'm going to get you a copy of it.

JM

All right. Okay, good and we can store that at the Colorado River Board.

BC

Yes, right. You should because it's a very important issue. Without it there would be no recreation on the Colorado river.

JM

All right.

BC

Or it would be hardly none.

JM

The committee work went on for, would you say, about two or four years?

BC

About four to six years.

JM

Four to six years.

BC

Yes.

JM

In government time, that's pretty fast.

BC

Yes, it is fast.

JM

That would indicate to me that all of you guys got along pretty well.

BC

Yes, it was a good group and we got along fine.

JM

Was there anything that was not done that you thought should have been done?

BC

I don't think so. We would meet in Bullhead and the local Chamber Of Commerce would make a presentation. We'd meet in Needles, the same thing would happen. So the main points (were in) Bullhead, Needles, Parker, Blythe, Imperial Valley and Yuma.

JM

Okay. Were the Indians represented back then?

BC

Yes, they definitely were represented.

JM

Okay.

BC

The Indians had several representatives on the group and they were invited at every meeting.

JM

Okay.

BC

The Indians were an important part, as you know, of the river.

JM

Did you envision, at that time, that two of the most popular places on the river--at least down on this end of the river—(would be) Laughlin and Parker, Arizona. Did you envision them becoming as popular?

BC

Laughlin, no. Parker, yes.

JM

Okay. Why do you say that?

BC

Well, I had no idea that Laughlin would come with this gambling and resume that. Parker already had the eleven-mile strip, already had a pretty good industry of squatters. It was packed every weekend.

JM

Okay. Even in the sixties, it was?

BC

Right. Even before the resorts were legal, there were resorts there. Jeanie Branson and some of the others went ahead and built resorts without owning the land.

JM

Where did they get their water? I mean, they must have needed water.

BC

Oh, from the river.

JM

They just took it from the river?

BC

Yes.

JM

Without permission?

BC

That's right. So now you can see why, with the land use plan, why all of a sudden there was a need for water for those people.

JM

Okay. Was the land use plan committee part of those (negotiations)?

BC

Okay, the problem was that everybody thought, like my father (who) was mayor for years, (that) we had water rights here so why worry? They had no conception of the power of water rights or the argument that was going on in the Colorado River; that one of these days, they were just going to cut you off.

JM

Okay, and Needles -- when you say we had water right here, you're talking about Needles?

BC

Right, after all, the river is right here.

JM

Right, okay.

BC

But they didn't have right one.

JM

So at that point in time, where was Needles getting its water? From the river?

BC

Oh yes, (and) from wells.

JM

All right.

BC

Over all the land that we owned, and it's was on the banks of the Colorado River.

JM

Okay. So, the City of Needles is pumping ground water, primarily, and it's delivering that to everyone in town.

BC

Right.

JM

And someone didn't like that.

BC

Well ...

JM

I mean, what transpired?

BC

As you know, when the water issue really became a real tough issue, we were told that it was river water by the feds.

JM

All right.

BC

But the (locals) just didn't listen to them, including my father. After all it's our water and don't tell us otherwise.

JM

Okay.

BC

But they didn't know that the Colorado River is a very national issue and what you thought didn't mean a damn thing. It's what the law of the river says.

JM

Right.

BC

And the law of the river says it's river water and you have to have a contract so you have to have rights for it.

JM

Right.

BC

And we had none.

JM

So when your dad was mayor, what timeframe are we talking about here?

BC

Mayor from 1932 to '42.

JM

Nineteen thirty two to '42, 10 years, and during that time Needles was pumping ground water to meet its demands.

BC

Right.

JM

At what point did the Federal government, I presume it was the Bureau of Reclamation, when did they come in and say you don't have a right to that water?

BC

Probably about 1950, maybe a little bit before that.

JM

Okay. And by that time, of course, Needles was a thriving community. I mean, whether it was going up or coming down or whatever, there were still a lot of people living here.

BC

Sure.

JM

It is a tourist stop today. It's on Interstate 40. So what did Needles do at that point in time to secure its water rights?

BC

They stuck their head in the sand. Period.

JM

And how long did they do that?

BC

For many years. I worked without the city's help. I did it as an individual.

JM

You did what?

BC

Tried to get water rights.

JM

Okay.

BC

Tried every angle in the world.

JM

And all this time, the city just continued to pump this water that the Bureau of Reclamation said they didn't have a right to? I presume that the Bureau of Reclamation just turned a blind eye to that for some period of time.

BC

Not exactly blind, but they didn't do anything about it.

JM

Okay. So that sounds like it was kind of an impasse.

BC

Yes.

JM

How long did that go on?

BC

Twenty years.

JM

Twenty years, until around early 1970 or so.

BC

Yes, right.

JM

Okay and then what happened?

BC

Well, we knew that one of these days they were going to have to stop us. They told us we're going to have to stop you unless you find rights. I said I worked with individuals, but I was still on the utility board. So I was official, but still the city council didn't care one way or the other, you know?

JM

When you say utility board, I presume it's the Needles Utility Board. Is that the official name of it?

BC

Yes.

JM

And how did you happen to get on that board?

BC

I was appointed on it.

JM

By the city council or the mayor?

BC

Yes. The city council.

JM

Okay and the duties of that board were to set water rates?

BC

It was to advise on them on the water department and the sewage department.

JM

Okay.

BC

Now we have electric, also.

JM

So that board oversees water, sewer ...

BC

And electric.

JM

... and electricity.

BC

Except, the present city manager doesn't pay any attention to us.

JM

To any of them?

BC

No, we're back with our head in the sand again.

JM

All right. Needles, in the early seventies, has to secure water rights. I mean, they just can't keep hiding and the Bureau can't keep pretending that they're not doing what they're doing.

BC

That's right.

JM

So push is coming to shove. What happened in the early seventies?

BC

Well, we tried every way in the world to get some way (to secure a water right). Now, my wife doesn't want me to say what I'm going to say, but it's true. We ended up in what's called the Lower Colorado River Water Supply Project which is (wells along the) All American Canal that pumped water from (ground water basins near) the canal. As you know, it isn't lined and it leaks.

JM

Correct.

BC

So, the government put wells down and pumped water back into the canal. Coachella Valley has agreed to accept that as river water and for paying for the pumping, the City of Needles gets legal water.

JM

Okay. So in effect, let me make sure I've got the path right. In effect, the City of Needles takes water out of the river and then you pay for pumping ground water into the Coachella Canal.

BC

Right.

JM

Which goes to the Coachella Valley Water District.

BC

Which counted as river water use because it came from the canal, it leaked.

JM

Right. Well, who thought that up?

BC

Well ...

JM

It was an interesting approach.

BC

MWD (Metropolitan Water District) did and that came about -- a story that my wife doesn't like me to tell. But, I was frustrated not finding any way to get water. In the meantime, we went to a fundraiser for our state senator, Bill Coombs.

JM

Bill?

BC

Coombs.

JM

Coombs? Okay.

BC

Reagan was going to be the speaker, he was then the governor. But rumor was he was going to run for president. So, they had a fundraiser for Bill Coombs at a winery at the Regina Brothers winery, owned by a very close personal friend of mine. So, we bought tickets for the fundraiser and went there. The day before the government had invaded Cambodia. So there were a thousand screaming students outside, parading against the fundraiser, because Reagan was going to be down there.

JM

Oh, because Reagan was there. Okay.

BC

Right. So they brought Reagan in later on under a pile of hay in a wagon, under hay. (That's) how they got him in there. But we worked our way

through the crowd and went in and there was my friend who owned the winery and we hugged. He's a good Italian, so we proceeded to drink his champagne, which was very good -- the Regina Brothers champagne. I got completely smashed.

So then a member of the board of supervisors of San Bernardino County who had been raised in Needles came over and said, Billy would you like to meet some members of the board of directors of MWD – Metropolitan Water District. I said sure, so I went over. There were five of them there. I said, I'm sure glad to meet you. I've wanted for years to meet a member of the MWD because I wanted to see what a true blue cheap bastard looked like and they just fell (silent). Let me explain to you why. I said, I'm one of the members of the school district at Needles and we have a school at Parker Dam for only one reason. The children of MWD who work at the power plant and who work on the aqueduct. It costs \$85,000 a year. The people of Needles pay that and you don't pay a cent. Yet you're keeping us from getting water and without water we're going to be dead. (Ed.note: Metropolitan Water District operates its intake pumping plant about 25 miles north of Parker, Arizona, near Parker Dam. Children of workers who live in Gene Village, which is owned and operated by Metropolitan for those workers, attend local schools in both California and across the river in Arizona.)

Now, isn't that true, isn't that a cheap bastard? Well they invited me to the board meeting. So, I went to the MWD board meeting and told them the same thing. Well it was sort of passé. Then the LA Times got a hold of it and the LA Times had a page and a half in the Sunday Times, on that issue.

JM

On the school issue, or on the ...

BC

On the cheap bastard issue.

JM

Okay.

BC

As well as on the school and our water rights and that. So the next day, the phone rang. It was an attorney from the MWD. He asked, Billy did you read the article in the Times? I laughed. He knew I wrote half of it. So he said, let's get together and find an answer. I said, sure. So, we got together and this was the answer. The All American Canal deal, which is a crazy deal. But it legally worked out.

JM

Do you know who that attorney was?

BC

No, I don't. It was their head attorney.

JM

Was it Carl Boronkay?

BC

I think it was, yes. I'm not sure. But to get the deal done and we had to go to Congress and get a bill passed. It took a national bill. So it was a long time deal. But then, what's turned out since is a contract that the City of Needles has with an individual. There still is the water rights issue of the former squatters, who have leased land and now have leases with the government.. So they said, why doesn't the City of Needles subcontract water from these projects to those people?

Which is what is being done. So that solves the whole water rights issue now. The land has been leased legally to resort owners, or individual homes and now they have legal water.

JM

Do you have a feel for how much water Needles uses today?

BC

We use about four to 5,000 acre feet is all.

JM

Four to 5,000 acre feet a year, right? Do you see that increasing in the near future or is Needles kind of flat?

BC

Needles is kind of flat.

JM

Okay, and of the four to 5,000 acre feet, let's put that in perspective, for the purposes of the tape. Metropolitan's Colorado River Aqueduct is capable of moving 1.2 million acre feet of water from the Colorado River into the southern California area.

BC

That's why I argued that with a million acre feet, all we use is four or 5,000 so why do you want to be a cheap bastard? Now, I know why they took action after that article that came out in the LA Times. Because they were already thinking about drying up the Palo Verde Valley and the Imperial Valley. And of course, they had the history of the Owens Valley, which hangs heavy over them.

JM

Yes, well in fairness the Owens Valley is an LADWP, not an MWD event.

BC

No, but still, it's ...

JM

But it's LA. I mean a lot of people associate it with Los Angeles and honestly a lot of people confuse those two agencies anyway. Were you aware that MWD made a deal with Palo Verde irrigation district to buy some of their water? What did you think of that deal?

BC

I personally don't like it, because we're in the beer business and we sell beer to pickers of the produce.

JM

Okay.

BC

And as you dry up the land there's no need for pickers and there's no need for beer.

JM

So.

BC

So, this is a personal issue.

JM

Well, actually when you think about it, one of the deep concerns when water is transferred from the agricultural areas, are what are called third party impacts.

BC

Oh, sure.

JM

How that water being transferred affects other people that aren't directly affected by the water.

BC

And of course, we are one of the third party impacts.

JM

Did Needles ever think about buying water from one of the other priority holders?

BC

We tried that. It didn't get anywhere.

JM

Why do you think it didn't get anywhere? You're not talking about that much water.

BC

Yes, but people hate to give up any of it. As you know it's become a ...

JM

People hate to give up?

BC

Any water rights at the present time. That's why I have promised my library to another organization. If I give it to where it can be open to others to read. I think the Colorado River issues are going to become a battle again. (Editor's note: subsequent to this interview, Mr. Claypool's collection was donated to the water archives at California State University at San Bernardino.)

JM

Let me ask you a question that just occurred before you came on the scene, but maybe you know the history. Imperial Irrigation District – I'm sorry, Palo Verde Irrigation District has the highest right to Colorado River water. They filed for it first and they began using it first. And then the Yuma project, which you're familiar with and the Imperial Irrigation District filed and Coachella filed. So everyone is filing for water rights here off the Colorado River. Needles has been here since the turn of the century. Why did Needles never file for a water right?

BC

Because we're on the river and it belongs to us, why worry about anything? It's ours. They had their head in the sand. They didn't understand modern legal technicalities.

JM

Well, they kind of got run over.

BC

Yes, and my father was part of that group. That's why I felt a little bit personally responsible to try to get water for the City of Needles.

JM

So if you go back historically, what you're telling us is that the situation that Needles is in today where they don't have a right of the Colorado River water and they've had to literally beg, borrow and, according to you, steal water for decades is simply because those people that were here in the earliest part of the century just didn't even bother to file for water .

BC

All they had to do was to write a damn letter, that's all. That's all they had to do.

JM

They didn't do it.

BC

And they didn't do it.

JM

Let's move ahead. How do you feel today, now that this is 2003. How do you feel today about Needles' water future? Are they okay? Is this deal that they've crafted with Coachella okay?

BC

I think it's fairly good, yes. I was concerned about them still tracking, coming out and selling out for when they line the canal, so that it stops leaking as much as it is.

JM

Right.

BC

But there's a clause in here that protects them on that.

JM

That protects Needles?

BC

Right. But, I still think there's some things that I wish the city would pay attention to. One issue which they gave in on that I dreamed up. I dreamed up a phreatophyte control program.

JM

Okay, I want to say that word again for the transcriber. Phreatophyte?

BC

Phreatophyte control program.

JM

Right.

BC

For recreational use. As you know, the phreatophytes burn up an awful lot of water.

JM

I think we'd better describe, for the people watching this, what a phreatophyte is.

BC

A phreatophyte is a water loving native plant. The mesquite trees and the arrow weed.

JM

Salt cedar?

BC

Salt cedar and tules, all that.

JM

Okay.

BC

Now the government right now is planning to spend millions of dollars to clean it up. But the sad part is because it's native plants, (you) clean it up, it comes back again. So you can't just pulling it out -- doesn't solve the problem.

Now, Needles has a golf course. It's on the edge of the river and is completely in phreatophytes. The grass uses about one fourth as much water as what the phreatophytes do. So I came up with a plan that, along the Colorado River, if you eliminate phreatophytes with a recreational area and prove that the water use for the grass is less than the water saved by eliminating the phreatophytes you're not counted towards the use of that water.

JM

Okay.

BC

You see, it's outside of the system and it really makes sense because it's only by doing that, that phreatophytes don't come back again. I foresee the way the land is now, I foresee a stretch of land, say from Blythe to Mexico, two or 300 yards wide of grass. All the way from Blythe to Mexico. A tremendous recreational facility for the people of California and no use of water. It saves water and water saved goes to the priority owners, it doesn't go to fill the phreatophyte system.

JM

Right.

BC

It makes sense. I started to report that and the government accepted it. Then some bureaucrat objected to it and now the city said they have not accepted that. The city has accepted the fact that it doesn't count. So what's going to happen is one of these days, the golf course uses a thousand acre feet. This project is \$128 an acre foot. When the city's

going to start paying \$128,000 a year to pump water for the golf course, I have news for you. There ain't gonna be no golf course and the phreatophytes are going to be back there. But the damn fools, they got their head in the sand. That's what all the government officials told them, it doesn't make sense.

JM

Right.

BC

You gotta fight for things.

JM

Well, that's certainly been the history of the Colorado River.

BC

You gotta fight for every goddamn thing there is. There is no other way and this really makes sense. Like I said, I foresee it elsewhere. I foresee it as a tremendous deal in the Imperial Valley, as they wipe out some of the farms, this recreational area along the river will hold the population of LA. They need a place to go, especially in the winter time to just camp out and recreate.

JM

Sure.

BC

But you can't do it when it's phreatophytes. But you can do it if it's a grass area.

JM

Right.

BC

I think this is a program I'd like to get back into again, if I ever get my energy back.

JM

Bill, you were talking about a golf course here in Needles that's pretty important to the community, because there's not a heck of a lot to do here to be honest. Golf is probably a good diversion. They use about a thousand acre feet a year on the golf course. When the Coachella canal is eventually lined, there's a component of that agreement whereby the golf course is going to have to start paying \$129 more?

BC

Well.

JM

When does the \$129 kick in?

BC

Once the government starts to really get technical about everything.

JM

Okay.

BC

And a thousand acre feet is what the City of Needles is using. When they, technically, they got to start paying for this project, which is estimated to be about \$129 an acre foot. It'll be a thousand feet that wouldn't be there if the golf course wasn't there. That's \$129,000 a year, which is a lot of money for the City of Needles.

JM

Right.

BC

So I feel that when the time comes, there's a good chance there will no longer be a golf course.

JM

Okay, and so part of one thought that you have is creating conserved water?

BC

Well it saves about 2,000 acre feet of water for the state. That would go up and be wasted through the phreatophytes.

JM

Okay.

BC

So Needles could lose its very valuable asset and the state can lose 2,000 feet of water.

JM

Okay.

BC

Because legal is beside the point. You have to have actual, physical water before you have water.

JM

That's right.

BC

I don't care what your legal status is.

JM

Right.

BC

So I think you can see where a program could be used elsewhere to improve recreation along the river. The river is needed for recreation as Los Angeles, Phoenix and (Las) Vegas grow. Water is a valuable issue. It just makes sense.

JM

Yes, no argument there. It's a matter of cost and environmental issues and things like that. But water is, in fact, going to become that valuable someday but we'll probably have to do that. We've been talking about Needles struggling for water for a long time. In 1983, I think they got more than they bargained for.

BC

In 1983, they flooded us out and lied about it.

JM

They being?

BC

Oh, the Bureau did a very nasty job of keeping the public informed of the situation.

JM

Okay. Well, were you living here at that time in 1983?

BC

Right.

JM

When the Colorado River flooded

BC

What happened was that the mountains were full of a snow and the lakes were full.

JM

Lake Mead and Lake Powell.

BC

That's right. The Bureau knew they were going to have to flood, but they refused to tell the public. They kept lying about it. They said, oh, we're

okay. We knew it wasn't true. We were in contact everyday with people in the mountain areas and we knew what was coming. We personally have a five-acre ranch in the valley that would be flooded. So we were personally involved with that issue, plus the fact that it was going to hurt the whole City of Needles. So we kept tabs on it and we kept informed with the truth. We kept talking to the Bureau and the Bureau kept lying to us.

JM

Let's see, the flooding started in ...

BC

Eighty three.

JM

Yes, in the early part of the year?

BC

Yes, the early part of the year.

JM

Okay, and so what you're saying is that the Bureau was not forthcoming with you in '82.

BC

They were actually lying. They actually lied.

JM

Okay.

BC

Which is a shame because it's a big issue. I mean we live along the river.

JM

Did you, or other city fathers here in Needles, take action without regard to what the Bureau was telling you? Did you do anything ?

BC

Yes.

JM

Because you knew what was coming?

BC

We had the sandbags to protect the golf course and things like that.

JM

How much damage was done here as a result of the flooding?

BC

Not so much in Needles itself as what was done across the river in Mohave Valley.

JM

In the Mohave Valley?

BC

Yes.

JM

Okay.

BC

In Mohave Valley there was hundreds of thousands of dollars of damage.

JM

Crop damage or homes?

BC

No, in homes.

JM

Okay, and how long did the flooding go on here in Needles? How long were you impacted?

BC

Six months. Now my wife is more of an expert in this than I was because she was very much involved in it. She was on the phone everyday for a half hour a day.

JM

Okay and she was running a business at that time that was going to be affected?

BC

No, but she's always had been involved with our business.

JM

Okay.

BC

But she also had her horse ranch across the river.

JM

Oh, in Arizona?

BC

Yes, right.

JM

Right. I probably should point out, for those people that don't know where Needles is, that we are downstream from Hoover Dam and downstream from Mohave. We're about 30 miles downriver from Laughlin, Nevada. It's directly across the river from Arizona and the Mohave Valley.

BC

So, we're 22 miles from Nevada and 100 yards from Arizona.

JM

Toward the end of 1983, the flood waters began to recede and the river was back in control. Were there any long-lasting impacts of that flood?

BC

Oh yes, sure.

JM

Can you describe those a little bit?

BC

There's still impacts. There's still houses that are deserted because they flooded out. Homes.

JM

Has anything been done to protect properties in the future?

BC

No.

JM

Or is it still exposed?

BC

It's still exposed because there was no reason for it.

JM

There was no reason for the flooding?

BC

Well, you see part of why the lower Mohave Valley flooded was the Bureau, to relieve the pressure of a lowered dike on the lower end of the valley, they kept water from coming in.

JM

Okay. In your mind, did the Bureau ever come into Needles or the Mohave Valley and make things right?

BC

No. Now, again, my wife knows more about it than I do. She's very emotional about it.

JM

Right. You were on the Needles Utility Board for how many years?

BC

I've been on it for about 27 years.

JM

Oh, are you still on it today?

BC

Yes, I'm still on it.

JM

Oh, you are?

BC

Right.

JM

Okay.

BC

But the present administration doesn't pay much attention to any boards.

JM

Okay. But you still meet regularly?

BC

Yes, once a month.

JM

Okay. What are the hot button issues today?

BC

Well, electric rates is probably the hottest issue.

JM

Electric rates? Okay.

BC

See, when Boulder Dam was built, Needles was allotted a ration of electricity from the hydropower and it's very low cost. It was served to us by a private company. About eight years ago the private company was told that they were going to lose that because they were only going to give hydro to governmental agencies. So they were going to raise their rates by 35 percent. Well, I worked on that issue and proved at a hearing that they had overcharged us for 20 years, therefore, they should absorb that loss for 10 years to repay us what they'd overcharged us.

The management realized that we might win that argument. So that's when they said, well why don't you buy this system? You will keep the hydro yourselves if the city owns the system. I said fine, at what price? He said book value. I said, book value the day of the takeover? He says, yes, book value of the day of takeover. So we formed a bond that bought the system at a very low price and kept the low cost hydro and the city has owned it since.

JM

Well, it sounds like it worked out well for you.

BC

It's working out very well, yes.

JM

Let me ask you, you've had meetings and negotiations from time to time with other water agencies in California. I'm going to ask you your thoughts about the agency in general. Maybe not about a particular person, but just generally speaking how do you feel about them. For example, Palo Verde Irrigation District.

BC

We haven't met with them much, but of course myself having the business in Palo Verde, I know most of the people there. They've been fair. We haven't dealt with them. We haven't had to deal with them that much. Either they or IID.

JM

Okay, and so your thoughts with regard to Imperial Irrigation District would be pretty much the same?

BC

Yes.

JM

Okay, we've kind of covered MWD. Since they worked out a deal for you, do you feel any better about them?

BC

No. I feel okay about them. I know that they have a tough job to do and they've got to be (self-protective) in order to do that job. We did work out our issue with them, so we have no complaints.

JM

How about the California Department of Water Resources, have you ever had much contact with them?

BC

They've never helped us much.

JM

Okay and how about California PUC. You ever been involved with them?

BC

No, they've never been involved.

JM

Not too much at all.

BC

No.

JM

Well, I'll ask you about the Bureau. I think we have a sense of your thoughts about the Bureau of Reclamation. But over the long haul -- ?

BC

The Bureau is bureaucratic and when you're a bureaucrat you really can't have much concern about local issues. You have to follow the rules of the Bureau.

JM

Okay.

BC

Only when we accused the MWD of being cheap bastards, they didn't mind being called bastards. They hated to be called cheap.

JM

Can you reach back a little bit and just give me, I don't want to go into a long history about any individual, maybe a line or two about some of the water people that you have dealt with and run across during your career.

BC

Well, yes. The person that helped us a lot was Dennis Underwood.

JM

Okay. Dennis Underwood, now at MWD.

BC

Yes. Dennis helped us a lot during that time.

JM

When he was with the Bureau, or when he was with the Colorado River Board?

BC

When he was with the river board.

JM

Okay. How about Bruce Babbitt, and his administration of any assistance to you?

BC

Oh yes. Oh, they helped us a lot.

JM

Okay and you mentioned meeting Stuart Udall.

BC

Right.

JM

And how was his administration? Reasonably helpful?

BC

Right, helpful.

JM

No major problems?

BC

No.

JM

Okay. I'm not looking for a scandal, don't get me wrong.

BC

No. Bruce, by the way, is personally involved with us. My uncle was married to his cousin.

JM

Your uncle is married to Bruce Babbitt's cousin?

BC

One of his many cousins, being a Mormon family they have lots of cousins, you know.

JM

Okay. Doesn't his family compete with yours in Arizona in the grocery business, or at one time they did?

BC

At one time, but we never competed head to head. The closest they ever came was they had a store at one time in Kingman.

JM

In Kingman.

BC

Yes. But we never competed. That's 60 miles away.

JM

Okay. So you never went head to head with him in the grocery business.

BC

No.

JM

Or in the retail business. Did you ever meet Babbitt?

BC

Oh yes. I met him a lot.

JM

And what are your feelings about him personally?

BC

I think he's a fine man.

JM

Good guy?

BC

Yes.

JM

Anyone else come to mind? I mean, you've been at this for a long time.

BC

Well, a person that was kind of a pain in the neck was Myron Holburt.

JM

Okay.

BC

Because he was, you know, 100 percent for MWD.

JM

Now, this was while Myron was at the Colorado River Board or while Myron was at MWD? Because he worked at both places.

BC

I think at MWD more than the river board.

JM

Okay. Was he just a tough negotiator?

BC

That's all. He just was protecting the rights of California under the law of the river and so to do that you had to be a pain in the ass to the City of Needles, because that's all we were asking for – (an accommodation of any kind).

JM

Well, were you were looking to sort of bend the law of the river a little bit.

BC

Sure. Yes, sure.

JM

And Myron just wasn't the type of guy that was willing to do that.

BC

No.

JM

Okay. Um, anyone else come to mind?

BC

No, that was, that's mainly it.

JM

Okay. Let me ask you, this is a more recent event and I want to get it on tape for the record. You just donated a massive amount of material to California State University at San Bernadino. They have a water resources center there. Can you talk about that a little bit?

BC

Well, for years I've always believed if you're going to argue on issues on the river you'd better know the issues. So for years I've read everything I could get my hands on regarding the Colorado River. And to do that I bought all the books I could on the river. I had close relationship with probably six book dealers, used book dealers. They would send me the brochures three or four times a year and the day I'd get it, I'd go through it fast. You had to be the first one in order to get the book that was involved.

So I bought all I could on the Colorado River. I had over a thousand books on the river and it was part of me. But when we closed the store, we had to get rid of all the storage. So we gave them to the San Bernadino, California State University at San Bernadino, because I feel they need to be open to the public. I feel the issues are going to come back again. That they aren't dead. People may think they're dead, but they aren't. The river is too important.

Either next year, 10 years or 15 years from now all this is going to break open again. And to argue the issues, you have to know the history. So we've given that to the university.

JM

Okay and they'll be making that available to the general public at some point in time?

BC

Right, yes. Right.

JM

So anyone doing research on the Colorado River, I mean, they not only need to know who you were but they need to know that you've provided the water archive at San Bernadino with a storehouse of material.

BC

Yes. I've also given them my private papers, which in my many battles, the technique that we used was, I'd write four or five or 10 page arguments. (My wife) would type it, correct the errors and argue with me about issues.

Then we would mail it out to 20 or 30 people that we used to win these battles. So we believed in written arguments.

JM

What do you think was the toughest battle?

BC

The water right for the City of Needles.

JM

And you feel pretty good about that at this stage of the game?

BC

Well, I think we have water rights now. It's going to cost us money.

JM

If you were a fortune teller and could look into the future, what do you see for the City of Needles? Not necessarily just water. But what do you see for the City of Needles in the next 20 or 30 years?

BC

At the present time, nothing. But there's a lot of potential assets here and if you get some people with foresight and energy it could grow. But my wife and I are too old now and pooped out. We're exhausted. But they have legal water now and there's a plan for the use of the river. So they can work on it.

JM

Okay. Is there anything I've forgotten to ask you or anything you want to mention for the record? Anything that we just didn't get to?

BC

I don't think so, particularly.

JM

I think I got everything.

BC

Needles is on the Interstate and that was another battle which we had.

JM

I'm sorry, what was?

BC

Needles was on the Interstate 40. That was the battle that took two, three years of my life.

JM

You mean to get the Interstate to come through Needles?

BC

To keep it here, yes.

JM

Oh, to keep it here.

BC

It was going to be moved elsewhere.

JM

Why were they going to do that?

BC

Because the bill was passed not on money but on miles. They were going to dual-use Interstate 15 from Barstow to Mountain Pass and then head towards north of Kingman from Mountain Pass. So by dual use of Interstate 15 and 40 they would save X amount of millions and millions of dollars.

JM

Oh, I see.

BC

And of course, then there was some real estate deals involved with the other route that were financing the fight.

JM

Well, had the Interstate 40 gone up to Mountain Pass along 15 Needles not only would have been in the middle of nowhere but there wouldn't have been any way to get here.

BC

No.

JM

Well, that could have been devastating to the city.

BC

It would have been terrible for Kingman, also.

JM

Oh, sure.

BC

And how we won that battle is a strange thing. You never know how battles are won. Our water right was solved by the article in the LA Times. The highway battle was solved by the fact that the fella who was in charge of the interstate was a fella by the name of Whitten. He had his boss, the Secretary of Transportation, come out to visit with us in Victorville. My father always argued that our highway would be solved by the head of the council in the bureau of highways. A fella by the name of, I forget right now. But he was a bureaucrat and he talked bureaucratic and didn't ever solve a goddamn thing.

But my father thought he was a hero. So, we were going to hold that meeting in Victorville with the Secretary of Transportation.

My father insisted that the fella from the state highway come to the meeting. I said, I don't want him there. He said, well he's coming anyway. I said, okay. So he was there. I'm glad that he was, because that's how

we won the battle. Whitten had been telling the government that they couldn't come through Needles because of timing. It couldn't be built in time to meet the Federal law.

JM

Oh, I see.

BC

So at the meeting, I said, Mr. Secretary, here is the head of the highways, whichever way that goes. I said, would you like to ask him how soon it could be built if it goes through the City of Needles? He said, sure I'll ask him. He said, how soon could we build it? He said it'd be built within two months but we'd better take our time and take maybe six or eight months. He said, well, Mr. Whitten said it couldn't be built for three or four years.

He says, the state of California feels that Mr. Whitten has read nothing, or has something out of context for the last 10 years. So he said, gentlemen, as of right now I'm taking it out of Mr. Whitten's hands and I'll make the decision. I'll meet with you in Washington DC next week and I'll make the decision personally. In the next month. Again, you have to know your homework.

JM

That's true.

BC

Like the cheap bastard deal, you know?

END