

RICHARD LAMM

PS: We're in Denver, Colorado doing an oral history interview for the Colorado River Water Users Association. I'm Pam Stevenson doing the interview. Bill Stevenson is on camera, and you are.....

RL: Richard Lamm, and I was born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1935. My family moved around a lot so I actually graduated from high school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I went back to the University of Wisconsin to get my undergraduate degree and I was in ROTC so I was commissioned right out of Basic Officer's Training School. I was stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado in Colorado Springs.

PS: Why did you go into the military?

RL: Back in those days when you went to a land-grant college, you had no option, you had to be in the military. So at least you had to take two years of ROTC. So having taken two years, I figured I might as well take four years. But in my generation, we faced the draft, and so our choice was whether or not you would go in as an officer or an enlisted man. I wanted to go in as an officer.

PS: Which branch of the military were you in?

RL: I was in the Army.

PS: Where did you serve in the Army?

RL: I served all my time in either Fort Eustis, Virginia or Fort Carson, Colorado. Then I went on and lived in a number of other places, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Berkeley. In 1961, just graduating from Berkeley Law School, I

decided that I wanted to live in Denver because I loved the mountains and kayaking and the climbing and so I came here in November of 1961.

PS: What was your first job here in Denver?

RL: I couldn't get a job as a lawyer, but I had been a CPA, Certified Public Accountant, so my first job in Denver was a CPA.

PS: Why couldn't you get a job as a lawyer?

RL: There was lots of lawyers the year that I got out of law school, so I worked for a year as a CPA and then I went on and practiced law.

PS: What kind of law did you plan to practice?

RL: Being a CPA, I did an awful lot of tax law early on, and then in 1966, I was elected to the Legislature. In 1969, I was elected to the leadership of the Legislature and I didn't want to practice law anymore so I went and joined the University of Denver faculty at the law school. So I became a law professor in 1969, and except for my years as Governor, I've been teaching at the University of Denver ever since.

PS: What made you decide to get into politics and then into the Legislature?

RL: John F. Kennedy. He was the big inspiration of my generation. I never met him, but he was certainly a shock of electricity for my generation.

PS: What was it about him that made you decide you wanted to get into politics?

RL: Because politics was a way to make the world a better place. Sounds naïve now, but we thought we going to do away with poverty. We thought we were going to do away with discrimination and racism. We made some progress, but I think it was a call to public service. John F. Kennedy was a clarion call to public service.

PS: So you were first elected representing what area?

RL: In Denver, South Denver, in 1966. I took office in 1967.

PS: What was Denver and politics like in the 1960s?

RL: First of all, Denver was incredibly a lovely little town and the air was so clean it was almost like little diamonds were cut in it when the sun was on it. And it was long before the sprawl and it was really a wonderful medium size town. Politics was just filled with idealists as opposed to today. There was the women's movement, the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, the stop the war or for the war, all of these causes were driving politics in the 60s. It was a wonderful time to start your political career.

PS: So you served how many terms in the Legislature?

RL: I served eight years, or four terms, in the Legislature and then ran for Governor and was elected in 1975 and served until 1987.

PS: What made you decide to run for Governor?

RL: It was up or out. I was eight years in the Legislature. I felt it was time to do something else. It gets very complicated because it was all involved in my leading a crusade against the Winter Olympics that were put into Denver. In 1972, we put on the ballot a vote as to whether or not we should use taxpayers'

money to promote the Winter Olympics. My side, which said no, won. And I looked around that evening when we won that November of 1972 and realized that the same group of people that won the Olympic victory could elect me Governor two years later and they did.

PS: Why didn't you want to have the Winter Olympics here?

RL: It's a complicated issue, but I think that number one, it was a taxpayer disaster. The history of Winter Olympics prior to 1972 was a history of red ink. Sapporo, Japan was a billion dollars; Montreal was a billion dollars in debt. It was really one of the first taxpayer issues and at the same time, it was an environmental issue. Colorado was already one of the fastest growing states and we didn't see the need to promote Colorado.

PS: So that kind of gave you some statewide recognition?

RL: Sure did.

PS: You have to have that, because local support isn't enough to get you in.

RL: Right. Then I capped it off by walking.....I was one of those candidates that walked around the state. I walked 888 miles around Colorado; finished it off with John Denver and I walking through a snowstorm the last mile up to the State Capitol. He gave a concert. It was a magic time.

PS: You were fairly young then to be elected Governor.

RL: I was elected Governor at 39.

PS: Did you like being Governor?

RL: I loved being Governor. It was a great job, but I retired after three terms, 12 years, sort of the same way I felt about the Legislature at the time. At some point, it's time to go on and do something else. So twelve years was more than enough.

PS: What were some of the big issues while you were Governor?

RL: We had some disasters, natural disasters like the Big Thompson Canyon would be the biggest one, where we lost 133 people to a sudden summer flood. I think that the economy is always an issue, running a balanced budget. But the environment and growth are some of the issues I was passionate about.

PS: That was during the period of time in the 70s when Jimmy Carter decided he wanted to cut a lot of big water projects in the west. How were you involved in those?

RL: Well, I'm sorry you asked, because I think Jimmy Carter was right and some of those were really outrageously expensive, but as the Governor of Colorado, none of us could voluntarily give up our projects so I fought for them. I didn't want to lose the money for Colorado. Jimmy Carter had a real point. I think, like a lot of other water projects, that they were driven by factors other than making economic or environmental sense.

PS: Do you remember any particular ones that were.....

RL: I'd just as soon not go into it.

PS: What we're here to talk about is water.....

RL: I don't really remember the names. I don't remember how many projects even we had on the hit list, but there were a number.

PS: Were they all saved?

RL: No, they weren't all saved. Animas-La Plata is the only one that went forward. That's now been a horrible expense and for a very marginal benefit but it went ahead. It's the one that was saved because it was wrapped in feathers, as they say. It was an Indian project.

PS: I know that the Central Arizona Project was one that they tried to stop. I interviewed Bruce Babbitt about that. Did you team up with other Western governors?

RL: We did. All of the Western governors, including Bruce Babbitt, spoke with a unified voice, went to see the President, talked to him, argued about it. I have very mixed emotions on that, because the President did this very unilaterally, President Carter. I think that's a matter of process. I think the main point is that he was trying to be a fiscally responsible President. He was trying to look at the various excesses that this Congress had passed. I have to say that some of our water projects were among them.

PS: Today you hear about taxes spending liberals, but it sounds like 30 years ago, the Democrats were being more fiscally conservative.

RL: President Carter developed zero based budgeting and he said everything goes back to go and has to be justified again and I think that he very much attempted to be fiscally responsible. By today's terms, you can long for the day when the President had some sort of understanding that you don't put this burden to our kids. Milton Friedman, the famous conservative, says if you cut taxes without cutting spending, then you don't really cut taxes, you just defer them to our children. That's what my generation of politicians is doing right now.

PS: You and Bruce Babbitt were sort of the same generation, you were both young Western governors.

RL: Absolutely, and good friends.

PS: Were there any particular projects that you remember working with him on?

RL: Bruce Babbitt and I worked on a lot of different things together, but we formed a whole separate organization out here of governors that tried to protect our western interests. Both Bruce and I were president of the Western Governors Association but we felt in the Rocky Mountain States, you put all the Rocky Mountain States together, and you didn't have nearly the political clout as California or New York, so Bruce Babbitt and myself, and Tom Judge from Montana, and a wonderful guy named Mathison from Utah, a whole bunch of us got together and recognized that we, in fact, had to speak with a unified voice, and we did to an amazing extent.

PS: How were politics different back then than they are today?

RL: They weren't as expensive, they weren't as filled with animosity, but they were more idealistically driven, and each political party was made up less of special interests. When you look at the influence of the trial lawyers and the Teachers' Union on the Democratic Party, and the Christian Right on the Republican Party, I think that these are not hopeful signs, that the parties can make nation solving decisions.

PS: Another issue that came up in the 70s was oil shale. Talk a little about your thoughts and positions about that.

RL: I'm sorry that Colorado has any oil shale. I believe that no matter how you do it, it will be an environmental disaster to whoever houses it, whoever has it present, and it is going to be us and Wyoming. But the first oil shale wave came on my watch. I had a wonderful Natural Resources Director named Harris Sherman. One of the proudest things that I am is that the oil shale companies came to us and wanted us and our local communities to bond for the schools and sewers and housing and water systems that would feed the population that oil shale was going to generate and we were really tough on that and worked with the locals. And of course, on Black Sunday, the day when I got a call from the head of Exxon that they were cancelling the whole project, we praised the stars that we were tough on that. Because, you know, the history of the West is the history of exploitation. Various economic interests come in here and they ultimately leave you with a hole in the ground, surrounded by a ghost town. And so I was very, very insistent that the oil shale industry, and I hope that the next Governor is going to do the same, because oil shale is coming back again.

PS: Actually, Rollie Fischer told us the first time it came around, was in the 50s.

RL: That's true, absolutely true, but the first thing it wasn't in the 50s, I mean what we had was the synthetic fuels program that promised a lot of federal money, billions of dollars of federal money to help generate and jump start oil shale.

PS: You were concerned also with water as a big issue in oil shale.

RL: Water is a very big issue and some of the numbers just went off the charts on the water need. When you combine what they need to develop the shale oil and, on top of that, the whole infrastructure that we're going to need. 500,000 acre-feet of water. I mean, it was just a phenomenal amount of water that was needed.

PS: How do you feel about the fact that it's back again?

RL: Not happy. You look at Butte, Montana, you look at the copper mines in the West, you look at all the gold mines in the West, I think if you take all of them together, they're going to have far less impact than oil shale would have on this one little area of Colorado. So I assume it will bring so-called economic opportunity, but what that means is, when you have a diminishing resource, I used to call these the match economies, because like a match, it would break brilliantly in the flame and then after awhile, it just snuffs out. So it's not like you put in an auto plant, or a computer plant. What this is, is a diminishing resource that would cost an awful lot of money for the state to support. I look at the history of the West and generally we've never been able to adequately get back in severance taxes or any other way the kind of burden that is put on our communities.

PS: Are you actively involved with it today?

RL: Only indirectly. I know of no organization.....a lot of organizations are getting ready, actually. So I am involved in some conversations getting Colorado ready, but there isn't a proposal yet that we can react to.

PS: Another issue that came up while you were Governor was the Two Forks Dam. Can you talk about that project?

RL: The Two Forks Dam would take one of the most beautiful canyons in Colorado, dam it up, make it a reservoir, to feed lots of endless front-range growth, so it was something that I never directly opposed, but I think Colorado is much better that it went away. And that the EPA and other factors killed the Two Forks.

PS: So you could say you weren't opposed, but you didn't support it?

RL: Right, that would be better. Well said.

PS: Anything you would do differently today?

RL: No, I think that was a bad project.

PS: Looking at some of these projects, particularly water projects, who did you feel were the people or organizations that were your allies in positions?

RL: Definitely the environmentalists. There was essentially what I used to call the quality of life brigade. The great thing about being in office back in the 60s and the early 70s is that you had the League of Women Voters, you had all kinds of different civic groups on your side, so environmental was very much a rising tide back in those days. Today it's not even a major political factor. At least no where near what it was in the late 60s after Earth Day. So let's say mainly it would mainly be the environmentalists that I considered to be my allies.

PS: Some people talk about the good ole days of water politics. Did you see those good ole days? Have you seen a change?

RL: I don't know how they're using that. I thought water politics was always, at best, hand-to-hand combat that I would prefer to avoid.

PS: Looking back, in looking at water, what projects or what legal developments do you think have impacted Colorado the most to make it the state it is today?

RL: That's a great question. I think that the whole legal system, the various.... the West, I think, as opposed to riparian rights, I think that the West got its whole legal structure right. We live in a semi-arid desert out here, and we get a lot of

our water from the mountains and snow that comes in the mountains. I think that anybody that has governed a state like this has to be sobered about what happens when a drought occurs. Our tree ring laboratory people tell us we've had four or five, actually six or seven droughts that would last anywhere from ten to sometimes thirty years. About the time Columbus came to America, the Anasazi were impacted. We had this incredible drought. So it weighs heavily on a governor's mind what happens. You can go a hundred miles from where we're talking and see the wagon wheels of the Oregon Trail that were laid down a hundred and sixty years ago. You can still see them snaking off across the plains. So I think that our forefathers and foremothers gave us a really good, some good legal doctrines in which to allocate scarce supplies. That, however is, my feeling is, and was at the time, although we had different words for it, we didn't think about global warming, but I always felt that the growth, that, in fact, it would be a real mistake to grow Colorado to ten million people. I've been very active. I was the president of ZPG at one time. My first year as a freshman legislator, I sponsored and got passed the first liberalized abortion law. I have been a population, a limits person, all my life and all my political career and still am. It seemed to me at the time that there's no way that a state that had as many cycles of drought as we did should build up a population of ten to fifteen million people, which is what we project by the end of this century. So the doctrines, I think the legal doctrines are there, but there has to be a different mindset. That different mindset has to do with immigration, it has to do withthere's a new issue in American public policy in my mind, and that's what's our demographic destiny? Why do we want a billion people living in America at the end of the century? I've written a paper called "The Two Cultures". There's two cultures out in the west. There's the culture of growth, and that's the culture that has served us well. It's that we can grow and develop. We can make this semi-arid desert into a wonderful garden. At the same time, there's been this culture of limits. That's the culture of trickle irrigation. It's sort of the culture of Malthus and Aldo Leopold and all of the great conservationists that don't look at growth as this inevitability, that it's not a given, it's a variable. And so I think that

the culture of the West, which is so tied up in this “Watch us grow” Chamber of Commerce upward...is something I’ve been fighting against all my life. I can get elected for governor for three times but I could not do near enough to change that whole culture. We still see now, as we’re adding our three hundred millionth American, a bunch of editorials saying “isn’t this wonderful?”. Well, I think in a time of global warming, this is not wonderful. I think that our coral is dying, our oceans are warming, our ice caps are melting, our land is blowing away. I think there has to be a whole new re-thinking, as basic to humankind as say, the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution. We have to move to sustainability. And so unfortunately, I believe that in Colorado we still see that the answer to population related problems is more storage, more water, instead of anybody rethinking the whole question, is do we really want to grow to ten million Coloradans?

PS: How do you stop that growth? It’s beautiful here. People want to come here.

RL: You don’t stop it from America because people have a right under the Constitution to move here. You have to rethink your immigration laws. I believe that America’s growth is really tied up with the question of immigration. By our own birth rate, we will stabilize in about 40 years America’s population. With immigration, we’re going to double America, and double it again. The issue is immigration.

PS: All immigration, not just Mexico?

RL: No no, it’s all immigration, sure. No matter where people come from, that’s what driving the population growth, not our own indigenous births.

PS: Today, when we use the term immigration, people automatically think of Mexico. Getting back to water, do you think western water issues have changed during your career and how have they changed?

RL: Not near enough. Relating to my previous answer, I think we still look at it as a supply side problem, not a demand side problem. And if there's one thing that I started my career has been built around, it's trying to look at the demand side problem. There are some ingenious plans out there that are far beyond anything we ever thought about, the idea that we're going to go into the Yampa River and pump some of that back to the Front Range before it leaves the state. The Denver Water Board has a whole series of different things with the Green Mountain Reservoir where they're going.....but I think that when you look at what Aurora is doing right now in going out to the South Platte and taking its water before it leaves the state there, very expensive water, costs to water we would never have dreamed about even 20 years ago. But I think it's still basic structure, and it's basic supply, the basic supply mindedness of water policy as opposed to the demand side that I think a new sustainable world has got to address.

PS: Some people have said conservation is the answer. If water was more expensive, people would use less of it.

RL: Yes, I'm sure that's right. Under current projections, again with immigration rates, you're going to have a billion people at the end of this century in America. That would mean twenty million people at least in Colorado. Conservation is not going to get you out of that problem. And at the same time, you're going to be experiencing, in my opinion, and the experts' opinion, global warming which is going to make that water supply much more vulnerable.

PS: It's been said that we've seen the end of the big water projects. Do you agree with that or do you think there will be more big water projects?

RL: The crystal ball gets very murky, but I think that that's probably right. I think you're probably going to see conservation; you're going to see xeriscaping. You're going to see an awful lot of conservation in pricing and I think you should. That would be my first alternative too. So I think probably the end of the big water projects is nigh.

PS: Does the issue of a hundred years ago, when talking about water, it was all for agriculture and its changed to the municipal uses, and now we have recreational, environmental being introduced into the appropriations. How do you see that all working out?

RL: It gives us a whole bunch of very difficult problems. Does Denver get its additional water from the west slope, which the west slope doesn't understandably like, or do we get it from drying up agriculture in the Front Range? It's really a Hobson's choice. One of the things thatsorry, I just blew your question.

PS: The new emphasis on recreational and environmental.....

RL: I think that's wonderful. It's inevitable. Recreation and environmental uses are....I was in the Legislature when we put some of that minimum stream flow in and things like that. I think that our society has reacted belatedly, but reacted, to try to get these new interests, sportsman's interests, environmental user interests, involved in water law. Still not enough, but at least we have a place at the table now.

PS: Do you think there's a time that they might want to look at the appropriation doctrine, the first in time, first in right,

RL: I don't know. I think that some change in the appropriation doctrine would probably be appropriate, although when you then ask me what I think that ought

to be.....I guess I don't know. I guess I would not want to speculate exactly how it ought to change. But I think basically the appropriation doctrine has served the West well.

PS: What about the 1922 Compact dividing up the Colorado River rights?

RL: It's a time bomb waiting to explode. One of my favorite sayings is "Beyond a certain point of stupidity, cunning must be presumed." But why the Upper Basin ever agreed to deliver 75 million acre-feet every 10 years, because that means any shortfall in the River, any drought-caused shortfall, would be borne by only the Upper Basin. So I think that we either deliberately or accidentally talked ourselves into a very bad deal and this is going to be one of the great issues of the future, is how any shortfall in the River is going to be divided.

PS: Would you be in favor of reopening it and maybe revising that Compact?

RL: At best, I think I'd be in favor of trying to litigate it and whether that's even a good idea is very doubtful, but you don't open up a compact with California anymore when their political power is so clearly in California's hands.

PS: Looking back over your long career, what accomplishment related to Colorado or Western water are you proudest of?

RL: You know, I hate to talk about accomplishments. It always seems to me it's up to other people to judge what I did or what I didn't do, and I can't immediately think of any that were particularly water related.

PS: Are there any things you would have done differently?

RL: Well, I think that I should have had more political courage to sort of give President Carter some support when he went after some of the hit lists.

PS: Did you really think he was right?

RL: It became more apparent....I mean, I didn't know....this happened soon after I got into office, and I wasn't prepared for the idea that some of these projects....the argument was that maybe there were a hundred families that were going to benefit from this water project that would cost the taxpayers a hundred million dollars, so no, those are hard to justify. So I didn't realize until I started getting into them, I mean this was just another project that I inherited, and when I started looking at them, I started seeing that the President had a point. But that's not the way it developed. All of a sudden, all the western governors were presented with this hit list that came out of his budget and saying that these are projects that are going to be deauthorized. What do you know? It was only with the wisdom of time that I was able to see that he was probably right on some of those projects.

PS: How big of an issue was water when you were Governor, or how much emphasis was there on it?

RL: Any Colorado governor's gotta have water on the mind all the time, but we didn't have any major events once oil shale was past us, and oil shale sort of died aborning so the water problem's inherent. So we were thinking about water all the time but nobody pulled the trigger. I did have to manage one drought in the winter of 76, 77, I believe it was. There was only between five and six million acre-feet in the Colorado River system, so we did have a major drought, but luckily it only lasted one year, but that really got your attention. It is unthinkable to me what happens if a five or six year drought hits of that magnitude, let alone what the tree ring laboratory show us we might have, which is a 20 or 30 year drought. We'd have to be picking numbers to see who moves back east.

PS: And back then in the 70s, Arizona wasn't taking their allotment because the Central Arizona Project wasn't finished.

RL: Colorado is not even to this day taking its full allotment. We are reaching the point where these things can't simply be shoveled under the rug. There is going to be a call on the Upper Basin, I think within the next 20 years, which is going to have major litigious and other implications.

PS: Back in the 70s too, Indian water rights weren't talked about much.

RL: That's right, and the one project that we did get from the federal government and which, looking back on it, you can very reasonably ask whether or not it was worth it, was the Animas-LaPlata, which has ended up like a lot of other water projects, being far over budget. And its only justification was Indian water rights. I don't mean to say there were not some legitimate claims there, but I think there were some other alternatives. I think you could have bought those Indian water rights, given the Indians some economic opportunity in another area, which would have been far better for the taxpayers than building them a water project.

PS: In Arizona, they're selling that water to municipal uses and they're seeing those rights as being a cash register for them.

RL: Absolutely, and they are. Our southern Utes and mountain Utes are doing the same thing with Animas-La Plata.

PS: One of the Indian leaders told me that the water rights are much more valuable long term than the casinos will ever be.

RL: Well, that's an interesting point of view. And probably absolutely right.

PS: What are the greatest surprises for you regarding Colorado and water?

RL: I guess the greatest surprise would be the vulnerability to a drought. The most terrifying day I had as governor was up at the tree ring laboratory at CSU. The average Coloradoan has no idea how vulnerable we are to drought. And so when you look at this tree ring laboratory and you see the fact that this area, this whole Rocky Mountain area, has experienced these horrific droughts and you start thinking, “how am I going to provide the water?” Of course there really is this possibility of recycling, and so that would really relate to another surprise that I had in water. It’s sort of an interesting story. I went up to see a little company called Pure Cycle up in Boulder, which had developed a recycling of water. And they went into their little place and they said to the landlord, “We want you to take out our water system. We’d like to get our water from Shakey’s Sewage.” To show that they could recycle water in a potable way. Essentially they would give you distilled water. But if you don’t think when you go into that place, and they offer you a cup of coffee, wait a minute! But Pure Cycle showed that you can recycle. Everybody knew that with enough money, you can get distilled water out of sewage. But I am convinced, a certain amount, that after conservation, after reuse, after some of the other things, you really do have recycling and reuse of water, is going to be, if we ever had a major drought, we’re all going to be drinking our own sewage recycled.

PS: Golf courses are using effluent and I’ve heard people say that homes should be designed so that if we want to have green lawns, we could have gray water.

RL: Our lawns are a hole in the card. We can dry up our lawns and everybody recognizes that our green lawns are one of our protections against drought. We may not like it but it’s going to be much better than going without drinking water.

PS: What do you see as the most critical challenges relating to Colorado water resources today?

RL: The fact that there's no way that we can through the supply side provide water in existing patterns. The biggest challenge, and it relates to the biggest challenge that I think even humanity faces, is the fact of how do we move to a sustainable society? How do we, in fact, find ways, as they say, to trample more lightly on the earth? I think, to me, it is attacking this whole watch us grow ethic, that is so inherently a part of humankind. I just read a book called "The Spirit of the Gene" where a guy named Reg Morrison makes the argument that we're genetically programmed to grow. That, in fact, the same genes that allowed us to win against the ice, the tiger, and the bear a million years ago, are now driving us almost to extinction. So I think that again, water is just one part, an important part, but just one part of this larger issue of sustainability.

PS: What about how do water issues facing the whole southwest region impact Colorado?

RL: The whole Upper Basin is tied together. Certainly now there's a direct tradeoff when somebody else uses the river in the Colorado River system. There has been, except for times of drought, enough for all generally, and with managing it through Lake Powell and other things, we've been able to manage shortfalls much better than I think we're going to in the future.

PS: How do you feel about Glen Canyon Dam today? Would you support building that again?

RL: I didn't support it at the time; as a matter of fact, I opposed it at the time. But as a young environmentalist, I opposed it. I took a raft, just as they were closing Glen Canyon Dam, I took a raft through that lower Colorado and I saw the beauty of Glen Canyon Dam. I can't justify what would happen to the Upper

Basin if we didn't have Lake Powell to be able to manage, so I'm going to be absolutely schizophrenic on this issue. But no, I think it's a crime against nature that we built Glen Canyon Dam.

PS: Of course, in the scope of the Grand Canyon, in the millions of years that it's been there, I guess that dam.....

RL: You can say. I have a hard time sometimes taking a geologic view of life, so.....

PS: Do you have any advice for people that are operating Colorado water resources today?

RL: Look to the demand side, look to the demand side. I'm gonna have to go. I'm sorry.

PS: That was actually my last question, unless there was something you wanted to add.

RL: No. That was wonderful.