

Interview with Gerald Davisson
Colorado River Water Users Association

Q: Alright, this is February the 26th, 2007. We're at the Palo Verde Irrigation District in Blythe, California, and our subject today is Gerry Davisson, who retired recently as general manager of Palo Verde Irrigation District, and has been involved, with Colorado River Issues for a long time. Gerry, thanks for joining us today.

A: You're welcome.

Q: To begin with, I know for a fact that you're not from Blythe, you're not from this area. How did you happen to come here to PVID? Tell us a little bit about your background.

A: Well, I was at Colorado State University working on my master's degree and I answered an ad in the Denver Post for an assistant engineer at the Palo Verde Irrigation District. Came out for an interview on February the 1st, 1971 with, John Blakemore was the manager at that time. And, after the interview, I went back home and he called me up and offered me the job. So I came to work on the 16th of April 1971 as an assistant engineer.

Q: Is there anything in particular that attracted you, aside from having a job offer, anything in particular that attracted you to this area or to the issues that you were going to deal with?

A: Well, my wife always reminds me that I was (recording skips) southern California, that was one place in the whole dang country I didn't want to go to. But I did want to go to an operating irrigation district. Worked around a

lot of them in Colorado, where I grew up in Colorado and I worked, in doing my graduate work at Colorado State, I worked for the manager, not the manager, the director of the Agricultural Engineering department trying to incorporate a lot of the little districts in the Puter Valley there in Colorado.

Q: Help us out a little bit locating that Denver . . .

A: Fort Collins, Colorado State University and then Fort Collins, Colorado, which is 60 miles north of Denver half way between Denver and Cheyenne.

Q: And the irrigation did a little bit of work for them, while you were there? Was the same area?

A: Well, it was for the university. The director was doing some work, there was a whole bunch of little bitty districts around the Fort Collins area, he was trying to consolidate them. He wasn't having much luck because, you know farmers, they don't want to give up anything. But anyway, that's where my experience was. I just wanted to be involved in an operating irrigation district, and this seemed an ideal place to get a little training, experience, and then I could move on to something bigger and better but I never did move on.

Q: After you got here, and you were here for six months or a year, whatever it took, was it what you thought it was going to be in terms of working for an operating irrigation district or was it different?

A: No, it was about what I expected. I enjoyed my work as an engineer. This was an old district and it always amazed me that it worked as well as it did because they ran these canals off into the brush back in the teens and '20's, and they still work good. So that always amazed me. We did a lot of work improving the system and getting more water into the south end of the valley where they were short. It was about what I expected.

Q: Can you describe for us some of the issues that you had to deal with early in your career? Thinking back to the early '70's, the early to mid-'70's.

A: Well I guess the main thing I was working with was just getting better water supply to the farmers in the valley, or better, more reliable water supply. Even though the Palo Verde Irrigation District has the number one right on the river and you can bring it in the north end, but if you can't get it to the farmer on the south end, he's got a problem. He's going to holler at the manager and the board and everybody else. So we were working to improve the delivery process in the south end of the valley.

Q: What was the problem? Were the canals too small, were they not deep enough, were they earthen lined and very slow or all of these things?

A: Kind of all of the above. Some of the canals were too small; some of the structures were too small, holding up. So we removed some structures, we enlarged some structures, we enlarged some earth lined canals, we concrete lined a lot of canals in the south end, which if you take the water all the way to the south end and it leaks out the bottom of the canal before it gets to the farmer, we were able to gain a lot of water supply by concrete lining in the south end.

Q: And your system. Well, describe your system for us a little bit. You have an intake. Well, don't let me describe it for you. You have the number one entitlement, number one priority of Colorado River water in California.

A: The number one in California. We divert directly out of the Colorado River, the Palo Verde Diversion Dam. And deliver it through about, there was about three hundred miles of canals, laterals, big canals, little canals, all kinds of laterals, 150 miles of drainage and all the drainage goes back to the river in the south end of the valley. In the process of enlarging canals and improving, there's probably only about 250 miles of canals today because some of the smaller laterals, we lined them and gave them to the farmer, to the adjacent land owner so that the district didn't have to take care of it any more. And he was happy and we were happy. So now there's probably about 250 miles of canal and 150 miles of drains, that's essentially.

Q: And the drainage water goes back to the river, Palo Verde gets credit for that.

A: Yup. What the district uses is diversion less return, all the return is measured. The main drain in the south end is measured. And there's several canal spill drains all along the side of the valley and they're all measured.

Q: This is 2007 and you started in the early 1970's, 1971, and so that's roughly 35, 36 years. Has water use gone up, gone down, or stayed about the same? And, that's probably, maybe that's not a fair question.

Let me re-ask that. You retired how long ago from PVID as general manager?

A: Eight years.

Q: So it's been . . .

A: Ninety nine. I retired in '99.

Q: '99. OK, so let's just deal with the period '71 to '99, that's fair.

A: Yeah, I can't speak for now.

Q: Talk a little bit about water use during that period. Has it stayed pretty steady, or up, down?

A: It'd depend on the crops, but it was fairly steady. Some years it would peak up and the Bureau would holler at us for using too much water but the next year it was back down again. Mainly, they were not upset but wondering why we didn't get a better estimate, future estimate cause we estimate early in the year what we plan to use.

Q: So they weren't concerned with how much water you were taking, they were concerned with how much you were taking relative to how (recording skips).

A: Yeah, how close, what we took was what we ordered, and that was kind of what they were concerned about.

Q: Did you deal with that over time, by the way? Did you solve that problem where your estimates were a little closer to reality?

A: I think we did a little better with our estimates, later on after I became the, if I could back up just a little bit, I became the manager in '82. And like I said when I was hired, John Blakemore was here and John left in '75, and Virgil became the manager in '75 and . . .

Q: Virgil?

A: Virgil Jones, yeah. And he got, Virgil Jones was a farmer and board member, and he got tired of being a manager, so in '82 he left, resigned, and then I became the manager in September of '82. But after September of '82, I think we did a, that was when I'd become directly with the Bureau hollering at us about our orders and all that. As an engineer, I really didn't have too much contact with that that was between the manager and the water department. But I became more interested in getting a better order, a more reliable order and I think the water department did a better job after that. And we started improving too. Metropolitan helped us put in an order system and our automation system.

Q: When would that have been, roughly?

A: Well, we had the automation system before I became the manager and it was just, it's still going on, they're still adding to it today I believe. So it's . . .

Q: Why would Metropolitan do that? By the way, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

A: Right. Well, that was part of the test land fallowing program in '92, '93, '94, when Metropolitan agreed to pay the farmers for laying a certain amount fallow. And they agreed to help the district with money for a computer system and better water ordering to get a better handle on our orders and actual use.

Q: So it would be fair to characterize that as Metropolitan investing some money in your system and then Metropolitan getting the water that was saved.

A: Right. They get the water that was saved and it helped prove what they were, what we were saving so that there wouldn't be any argument about Metropolitan taking more than we saved or less than we saved as part of the measurement system.

Q: Now, you know as well as I do that the priorities on the river are Palo Verde first, and then the other agricultural districts, specifically Imperial Irrigation District and Coachella Valley Water District, as well as Baird. They get to use whatever you don't use, in priority.

A: In priority system.

Q: And so Metropolitan comes in and they say hey, we want to save some water and we'll invest the money and we get the water saved, but you've got these other districts in line for that water that's saved.

A: Yeah.

Q: Was that a particular problem to iron that out between Imperial and Coachella?

A: Well that was part of the reason for Metropolitan investing in the measurement system because there was arguments from Coachella and Imperial about, because we had to get their agreement because first priority, you're going first priority water down to fourth priority water with Metropolitan, go through. Baird really wasn't a problem, that's second priority, and Imperial and Coachella are third priority, and they had some questions about whether they were, we were really saving what Metropolitan had agreed to pay for, so that was part of the reason, part of Metropolitan's logic in helping us measure better.

Q: Were there any other quid pro quos with respect to Imperial and Coachella or was it simply a matter of convincing them that the measurements were accurate and useful and they just said okay. Was it that easy or was it harder than that?

A: You know Tom Leavey. (Laughs.) I think probably Coachella was a bigger problem than Imperial because Coachella's on the end of the pipe over there. They're really on the end of the pipe. And there was a discussion all

the way through the following program about, and Coachella and Imperial sat on the measurement committee also to make sure that Metropolitan wasn't taking more water than what was really being saved.

Q: Now you mentioned Tom Leavy, and we should note here that Tom was general manager of the Coachella Valley Water District during that period. Can you talk about what did Tom want out of this deal? I mean we know that Coachella had to sign off on it. Was there something specific that he wanted or was he really just concerned about the measurement?

A: He wanted 500,000 acre feet.

Q: And how did he get to that number?

A: I'm not sure how he got to that number. That was a number that he decided that Coachella ought to have.

Q: A total. He's third priority. What part of the third priority?

A: Well, he's, yeah. He's third priority behind Imperial I guess. I'm not really sure about the makeup between Imperial and Coachella. After all the years I worked with him, I'm still not sure exactly how that. It seemed to me like that Coachella got what Imperial didn't use and they didn't like that too well, about what was left over in the, the first three priorities amounted to 3.85 million acre feet per year.

Q: And that was for which agencies that had to share that three million eight hundred and fifty?

A: Palo Verde Irrigation District's got the number one right for whatever they can use on 106,000 acres, no set amount. Baird has whatever they can use on, I don't know their exact acres, 30-some thousand acres, I think. And whatever's left in the 3.85 goes to Imperial and Coachella. And if Imperial is using 3.3, if they're using three and we're using six, there isn't anything left for Coachella.

Q: I presume he was very concerned about that.

A: I can understand that.

Q: Actually he was looking for a solid 500,000.

A: He wanted a guaranteed amount, yeah.

Q: Guaranteed for Coachella, which.

A: I don't think he ever accomplished that but he worked at it anyway for many years. He may still be working on that, I don't know.

Q: (Laughs.) Tell us a little bit then, Gerry, about that first land following program. Water, what happened to the water that was conserved by all of these improvements?

A: The water that was conserved for the first test land fallowing program in '92, '93, and '94 was strictly land fallowing savings. They take 25% of the valley out of production. And the water that was saved by not farming those 25% of the valley for two years was supposed to go to Metropolitan. Actually all they did was leave it in the reservoir. We didn't divert it so they left it in the reservoir. And I think there was an agreement between the Bureau, I believe it's true anyway, that they could leave it in Lake Mead as long as Lake Mead didn't spill. But in '93 Lake Mead spilled, and all of the water they saved went to Mexico.

Q: How, we know from some other interviews that farmers in the Imperial Valley have a problem with land fallowing, they don't like it, by and large.

A: I understand that, yeah.

Q: How did the farmers in the Palo Verde Irrigation District react to the land fallowing proposal?

A: The biggest percentage of them were interested in it. The early '90's were kind of tough in the agriculture business, they liked the money. And they could get a guaranteed amount of money for that 25% of the land without doing anything, which I think was a little incentive. Part of the (recording skips) didn't think very much of it, part of the business district, the fertilizer people, equipment people, but they came around. It wasn't as bad as they thought it was. And there was a few die hard farmers that wouldn't participate in it if hell froze over.

Q: Are you talking about what has come to be known as third party impacts? Seed salesmen?

A: Yeah. And it did have an effect on them, there's no doubt about it. Seed salesmen, fertilizer people. It turned out, I think, that the equipment people did better because now the farmer had some money in his pocket. He could buy new equipment and get ready. Course he knew it was only going to be a two year program. So he could get ready to do better when he got back in to it.

Q: Okay. I kind of lost you a little bit. The land fallowing program was '92, '93, but you also describe Metropolitan investing in better control systems and improving canals and what not.

A: Just the control system is all.

Q: Oh, just the control system, okay. If the '92, '93 program was strictly land fallowing, when did this other investment in the better control system happen? At the same time or was that later?

A: Mmm hmm. No, right away. We bought the computer system right away in '92, maybe even before the fallowing program actually started. Because it took awhile to get (recording skips) programmed and up and running.

Q: So that system was really to, I'm probably reiterating here, system was really to verify the savings created by land fallowing, is that fair?

A: I think that's fair, yeah. And I think Metropolitan was looking forward to the future when they might do it again. I mean they didn't do a test land fallowing program for nothing, and they were figuring on doing something in the future.

Q: And did they?

A: They finally did here a couple years ago, finally got it started again since I've left.

Q: Okay, so in between '94 which was the end of the land fallowing program, and 1999 when you retired, Metropolitan really had (recording skips) to implement a later stage.

A: Talked about it many times but nothing ever came to fruition about it until, well just a couple three years ago when they finally . . .

Q: While you were general manager, was Met just kind of feeling out the ground, I mean were they very interested and they couldn't make anything happen here? Or was everyone interested, but Met just wasn't ready to take that water? What, when you were general manager, what delayed the implementation of the next stage of water conservation at PVID?

A: I think Metropolitan, only my opinion, that they were interested in the future, but in the mid-90's, there was so much water in the river, (recording skips) plus water running every place. Maybe their board didn't want to invest any more money at the time, I don't know. But we just talked about it off and on but nothing ever came about, never came around.

Q: Okay. There was another, what has come to be known as ag to urban transfer that occurred while you were general manager, and that was Metropolitan was dealing with Imperial Irrigation District.

A: Yeah.

Q: And that program was called IID1. How was that program, well, firstly, was PVID concerned about that deal or was that just another deal and fine?

A: We really weren't that concerned, I don't believe, but I was a member of the measurement committee on that program working with Imperial and Coachella and Joe Summers was the chairman. And I attended all their meetings just to make sure they didn't do something that might affect PVID.

Q: Can you describe for us the work of the measurement committee? That sounds like a term that most people would not be familiar with. What did they actually do?

A: Well, there was concrete lining in the Imperial Valley, new reservoirs, what do they call, interceptor canals, they built interceptor canals across the end of a lot of their laterals, part of it was actual measurement. Part of it was kind of empirical judgment that the committee had to say okay, based on the information you've given us, we can say we've saved X amount of water from the... Canal lining wasn't too hard to do because you could measure what the canal did before and after, and you had a pretty solid

number. Interceptors were pretty positive, reservoirs were, they saved water out of the end of laterals into reservoirs and then (recording skips) the next day, so they used that water rather than dumping it into the drains and the Sultan Sea.

Q: Was it Metropolitan then that invested in all of that infrastructure?

A: Yeah. I think Metropolitan paid for it all, I believe.

Q: And then, again, like PVID, in exchange for investment, Metropolitan got the water.

A: But that was a guaranteed amount of water every year, every year after, after the program was finished.

Q: After that program, there was another IID program that came up, and most people refer to it as IID2, and it has to do with the San Diego County Water Authority negotiating with Imperial. Was that going on when you were general manager or was that after you left?

A: It was in the process while I was still the manager. I attended a lot of their meetings, but it hadn't come to fruition yet when I retired.

Q: Okay. Within the structure of those meetings then, that you attended as the water authority and Imperial were moving toward a deal, again, did PVID have any particular concerns with that program or were you generally okay with it?

A: I don't recall any specific concerns that PVID had, as long as they leave our number one priority, we didn't worry about it.

Q: That is the PVID mantra.

A: Yes, that's why we went to all of the meetings to make sure nobody changed that number one.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your dealings with the Bureau while you were general manager? Mostly the folks in Boulder City, Nevada, I presume.

A: Yeah, they I guess probably had more dealings when the high river flows in '93, '94, '95, '96, had extremely high river flows, I guess we had more dealings with the Bureau.

Q: There was quite a bit of flooding in the Needles area during that time. Did you guys?

A: Yeah, the Needles area, some of the, part of the low lying around Needles had flooding, but we never had that problem here. There was some low land along the river that some of the levees washed away, but no farm land ever got flooded, or no residences or anything like that got flooded.

Q: I'm jumping around a little bit here, but it occurred to me I had been in a conversation with Virgil Jones, your predecessor, a number of years ago,

and one of the interesting things that he talked about that you don't think about in the desert, because after all this is the desert, is that there's some pretty high groundwater or there was some pretty high groundwater here in Blythe at one time.

A: The groundwater in the Palo Verde Valley was extremely high prior to, well in the '40's and '50's. They would build, it was before my time of course. They'd build melon beds and the next morning the furrow would be full of water, the groundwater was that high. So the district undertook a deepening of their drains starting in the early '60's. They dredged the main outfall drain all the way down to where it met the old river channel before the cibolla cut. And all that dredging ended in '68, but they were still deepening some of the bigger drains up in the north end of the valley when I came here in '71.

Q: So there was, how do I phrase this, they intentionally lowered the groundwater.

A: Yeah. The average water level in the valley was about five and a half feet when I came here, or not when I came here, before they started the drain work. When I was working here in the middle '70's, we had it down to about nine and a half feet, average over the whole valley. So the drainage program worked very well. The predecessors in the '50's and mainly the '60's had a lot of foresight. Virgil was really involved in that drainage program.

Q: Now is that high groundwater level, is that runoff coming out of the mountains surrounding Blythe or could it be identified as Colorado River water moving under ground?

A: Well it was mainly the irrigation had no way to get away. When you irrigate anywhere, you've got to have a drainage system to take the salt, the excess salts away. And the drains weren't deep enough or wouldn't flow enough water to take away the water when you irrigated.

Q: Oh, alright. So, just to bring that to a conclusion, the high groundwater was really the result of irrigation.

A: Irrigation, yeah.

Q: Okay. And so that issue has been solved by now, I take it?

A: Yeah, well the groundwater is in pretty good shape in the valley now I think. It has been.

Q: Blythe doesn't get its municipal and industrial water from PVID, does it?

A: They pump from wells.

Q: Okay, so. And are they pumping below the water because of irrigation? That was kind of a convoluted question.

A: Yeah. Most of their wells . . .

Q: Is their groundwater basin independent of the water that occurs there from irrigation?

A: Most of their wells are four or 500 feet deep I think. I don't know, I think bedrock is down around five or 600 feet here in the valley, so they're down below the surface. The surface water is not too good, not for drinking purposes. And their well water is still not the best, just like Colorado River water is not the best.

Q: And, again to confirm, that's a different entity does that. Palo Verde does not provide municipal and industrial water.

A: No, we don't supply any municipal water. There's always been some discussion about . . . the city is pumping, and if they're pumping, the Colorado River water is replenishing, so therefore they are using water under the PVID water right, so they're within the district boundaries, so that's legal.

Q: Okay, interesting. There's no financial arrangement between you and Blythe.

A: No, no. Well, there's, the district taxes everybody, even the people in town. There's a little tax for the Palo Verde Irrigation District to protect your water right.

Q: Okay. So the folks in town are getting ultimately it's Colorado River water.

A: Yeah. And a city lot is about \$12 bucks I think, the tax, or something like that. So it's not big, but newcomers to the valley, I'm sure they have a lot of questions still. I don't get any water from you, I ain't ever going to get any water from you, why do I got to pay you a tax? We've had that question for years, forever probably.

Q: Okay, interesting. Let's take a look then at the period while you were general manager. Any other issues come in? What were you working on? I mean, you were general manager for a fair number of years. What kinds of things kept you busy?

A: I suppose mainly a labor problem, regular . . . a lot of the things that managers have problems with. I guess labor problems, costs, budgets. Hmmm, I've been away so long, I can't remember what I did. (Laughs.)

Q: Well, let's talk about budget. I mean, the cost of water is a very important part of farming. How is the cost of water, or at least when you were general manager, how was the cost of water here relative to other areas? Were you able to keep it down?

A: Yeah. Oh, yeah. The board made sure of that, because the board's the one that sets the water toll, they set the budget. The biggest percent of the budget comes from water tolls, 'cause there's no outside coming into this valley. The farmers in the valley pay in water toll; they pay most all of the cost, and the little tax that I referred to awhile ago covers a little bit but not very much.

Q: In Ball Park, what would you estimate the cost per acre foot would be to a farmer in the Palo Verde Irrigation District?

A: Never measured it per acre foot. When I left here, I think, I don't remember what it was. It's a flat rate per acre; you get all the water you want.

Q: Oh, okay. Do you know what that flat rate was, roughly?

A: I think it was up around \$42, I think, and by the time they paid their tax, their water cost per acre was about \$50 bucks, as I recall, per acre, per year. And they get all the water they want.

Q: Is it fair to assume, given the temperatures out here in Blythe, depending on what they're growing, of course, but they're probably using somewhere between three and five acre feet a year? Is that a reasonable estimate?

A: Well our test fallowing program was 4.65 I think, acre feet per year.

Q: Okay, so coming up on five acre feet a year.

A: Yeah between four and five.

Q: So the farmer is buying the water for somewhere in the neighborhood of \$10 per acre foot at the end of the day, which is pretty reasonable, I mean even compared to Imperial.

A: Yeah, it's pretty cheap. Yeah. And like I said, Palo Verde Irrigation District doesn't waste any water. Any water they don't use goes back in the river, measured back to the river.

Q: Is the way that farmers acquire a water right here in Palo Verde Irrigation District different from other districts?

A: If . . . when the district was set up, it was, the boundaries were set, 106,000 acres, or 104,600 I guess it is. Something like that anyway. The boundaries are set, and if you own land within those boundaries, you have a Palo Verde Irrigation District water right. There's a mesa water right too, but that's another, that's third party along with Imperial and Coachella. And there's very little land irrigated on the mesa anyway.

Q: Well, I guess what I'm trying to do is compare and contrast a little bit to Imperial Irrigation District, which is different, isn't it, in terms of what the farmers do or don't own down there in terms of a water right?

A: I'm not sure. Of course they pay by the acre-foot in Imperial, and if they don't use they don't pay, I don't think.

Q: That's correct. But also Imperial . . . I guess the difference I'm trying to get to, and maybe you don't know, and that's fine. In the Imperial Irrigation District, the district itself maintains the ownership of the water.

A: I understand that's true, yeah.

Q: And they deliver it to the farmer for beneficial use.

A: Mmm hmm.

Q: But until the farmer actually applies it to a crop, the farmer doesn't own anything. Imperial . . . and I think that's a little different here.

A: Well I think, in Palo Verde Valley, the water belongs to the land. The 104,600 acres.

Q: Okay, if I own ten acres of land in PVID, then I have ten acres of water right.

A: You have a water right, yeah.

Q: Can I do anything I want with that water?

A: As long as you apply it to the land. You can't sell it.

Q: Oh, okay, I have to apply it to the land. And I can't sell it to a third party.

A: Mmm mmm.

Q: So the Metropolitan Palo Verde deal was between Metropolitan and Palo Verde, and then Palo Verde compensated the farmers? How did that work?

A: No, Metropolitan had a contract with each individual farmer.

Q: Okay.

A: And they had a contract with the district separate for the computer system to supplement the district for any increased costs that the district might have had because of the following program. But the contract was with each individual land owner.

Q: But since the individual land owner was not applying the water to the land, they were actually selling it outside the district.

A: They just weren't using it.

Q: They just weren't using it.

A: Therefore it stayed there, and as long as Imperial and Coachella didn't use it, then Metropolitan got it.

Q: But your board had to approve that deal.

A: Yes, they did.

Q: I guess that was my point, is that even in Palo Verde Irrigation District, individual farmers are not at liberty to go out and try to market their water.

If they wanted to try to do that, they'd have to come back through your district and your board.

A: That was the consensus then anyway, I don't know how this new program works. I'm sure the district had to approve it too.

Q: Okay. Is PVID...you mentioned labor problems and I don't want to get into all that, but do you have a large work force at PVID?

A: No, when I (recording skips) the district we had about a little over 100 employees I think, and when I retired as manager we had 75, because of bigger equipment, automation in the canal system, no more deepening of the drains, that was completed, that job was completed. So it was a pretty stable labor force around 75 the last ten years or so and it still is, I think.

Q: Did you have trouble attracting people out here? I mean, Blythe admittedly is pretty remote.

A: Yeah. Is my board going to see this too? The district is notoriously low wages, and I guess they're having a terrible time now because the prison, the state, the county, the city, everybody pays more money than the district. So it was a problem when I was there too because we couldn't convince the board to pay higher wages and you'd get somebody good, they'd leave. So they got to hire somebody else, train 'em again.

Q: And yet you stayed all those years.

A: Yeah, I'm not sure why, but. (Laughs.)

Q: Wait a minute, wait, let's talk about that for a minute. You're obviously a quality guy with a terrific education, (recording skips). What kept you here?

A: I like the valley, and I liked the people I worked with I like the (recording skips), I like the valley. The board was difficult to work with, but you might have that anyplace. And I applied for a couple other jobs. They didn't pan out, so I stayed here.

Q: Okay, well that's fair. Well, not only did you stay here, but when you retired, you still stayed here.

A: Well I had a house all paid for here, and we own a house in Delaware now too, so we're back and forth now. There isn't a better place in the winter time than the desert, in my opinion.

Q: And maybe no worse place than Delaware in the winter time.

A: Oh, man, they've been, this February's been nasty back there.

Q: Just as an aside, you're from Colorado, and moved from Colorado to California, and bought a retirement place in Delaware. How did that happen?

A: My wife's family is in Delaware.

Q: Ah, you have a familial...

A: I don't have any family in Colorado any more.

Q: Fair enough. You mentioned that the prisons, there's more than one, right?

A: Two. Yeah.

Q: When the prisons were built here, those are state run, and they're competing for talented labor force. Did the prisons have any other impact or on Palo Verde Irrigation District itself or the Palo Verde Valley? I think they were built while you were general manager here.

A: Yeah, the board, it was kind of an interesting time because the board voted to oppose them, therefore the people that wanted the prisons were marching on us and everything else. But it really had no, I don't think, as far as the PVID, except for losing talented labor, it had no impact on PVID, I don't think.

Q: Why would your board oppose the prisons?

A: I don't know. They just, the farmers were, in general, were opposed to building a prison in Palo Verde Valley. And they were going to build it a whole lot closer down into the valley and then they convinced them to move it way out west. You passed it when you came in.

Q: Well, let's talk a little bit about how people get on the Palo Verde Irrigation District board, because I think that's a little different as well. And it's different in this sense. In other districts, often times board members will run within a district, a defined district, and everybody gets to vote. One man, one vote, one woman, one vote. And whoever gets the most votes wins. I don't think it works that way here, does it?

A: No, Palo Verde Valley is not one man, one vote. It's the land voting. It's based on the tax you pay, you get one vote for taxes you pay. So everybody that owns land gets to vote for the board, and you have to be a landowner to be on the board.

Q: Okay, so that would indicate that the board will always be made up of people in agriculture.

A: Well, the people in agriculture pay 90% of the cost, so that's . . .

Q: Does that mean then that people that own vast tracts of land here carry with them into the polling booth a lot of votes?

A: True.

Q: And so the power, if you will, the power to elect people . . . I'm not being critical, I just want to make sure people understand.

A: That's the way it works, yeah.

Q: So a few people can be very powerful here if they own enough property.

A: Mmm hmm. Yeah. there's a couple of big ranges, 15,000 acres plus, each.

Q: Fifteen thousand acres each. Now can you translate that into voting strength for us? Does that represent 10% of the vote or 25% of the vote? I'm talking now about the 15,000 acres.

A: Yeah. I can't specifically tell you that, I'd have to look it up because . . . it's 15,000 acres out of 90,000. It's a big percentage, no doubt about it. But I can tell you that all of that 15,000 acres may not have the same voting power. If it's poor land, it has a lesser tax, and then less vote.

Q: Okay, but, well to bring this to conclusion, if you have two families that own 30,000 acres between them, that's almost a third of the vote, I mean roughly.

A: Mm hmm. Well, yeah, and one of them is the Mormon Church.

Q: One of the large land owners is the Mormon Church? Is it the church itself or? And who operates the . . .

A: Mmm hmm. They have a . . . it still belongs to the church, but it's an operating entity separate from them, Desert Security Farms I think they call it.

Q: Okay, well, just out of curiosity, and it probably doesn't matter, but how would they vote? I mean, how does the, if it's any church, if it's Mormon or Catholic or Hindu. If a church owns that much property, who actually votes? Someone has to go into the poll and pull the lever or whatever.

A: They have to have a document that says they're authorized by their board or however they operate, that says they're authorized to cast the vote when they vote.

Q: So it would work the same way if it were a company, the ABC Farming Company could own 30,000 acres.

A: Yeah, you have to have a . . . what do you call it?

Q: A certification or a letter of authorization.

A: You know, I can't think of the right word. But anyway, you know, the president or secretary has to sign that says this person is authorized to vote.

Q: Like a resolution or something.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay, well that's interesting enough. Has the PVID board been pretty stable or has there been a lot of turnover?

A: No, it's pretty stable. I think the only way to get off PVID board is to die. Well, there was one that resigned here last year, I think. He'd been on the

board almost since the district . . . and he finally decided that he was old enough; he was going to let somebody else do it. But a lot of them, the biggest turnover when I was the manager were they'd die, and they'd get somebody to replace them.

Q: We talked a little while ago about water quality. As you noted, water quality here in Blythe is not all that great. Did you have the opportunity to work with the Bureau of Reclamation or other agencies on improving water quality in the river; I mean there is the salinity control project.

A: Yeah, there was a little program that went on here in the, golly in the late '70's I guess, in conjunction with the salinity control program. The Bureau brought people in here and did test land scheduling, irrigation scheduling. And measuring to see if we could cut down any salinity by concrete lining, it was just a study. There was somebody here for five years doing irrigation scheduling.

Q: From the Bureau?

A: From the Bureau. Yeah, they had two guys here from the Bureau that were in our office for five years. And as long as, some of the farmers would participate in the scheduling, since they didn't have to pay for it. But as soon as the Bureau left, they didn't want any part of it. As soon as they had to pay for it

Q: Does the quality of the water that your farmers in PVID get for their . . . have any particular negative impacts on crops or do they have to make crop decisions based on water quality or?

A: You have to know what you're doing to use, when you're using Colorado River Water. I don't think it affects any particular crop, but you've got to be careful on how you irrigate, and how much water you apply, and not let, like you can't let water stand on an alfalfa field or something like that.

Q: Are there any issues with the drainage water, with the quality of the drainage water or?

A: The drainage water is pretty high salinity, because if the farmers . . . see we diverted, 900,000 acre feet a year we would divert, and the farmer used that, but 450,000 went back to the river, just using round numbers. And that 450,000 was twice as salty as the 900,000 we took out. That's the way it was supposed to be is take that salt out.

Q: When you say twice as salty, can we put a number to that and maybe you were getting 600 parts per million?

A: If we were getting 600 parts per million water in 900,000, the 450,000 was going to be 1200 parts per million going out.

Q: Wow. And no pressure on PVID to do anything about that? It was what it was, right?

A: That what the drain's there for, to take the salt out.

Q: Well, of course, but you've got users downstream.

A: I understand, but that's the way agriculture, I mean irrigated agriculture works. The plant, I'm not an agronomist, but the plants can't use the salt. So they take the water and leave the salt in the ground. If you don't put excess water on and flush that salt out, you're going to be out of the farming business in pretty short order.

Q: Okay. Fair enough. Tell me a little bit about your dealings with the Colorado River Board. You would attend meetings from time to time?

A: I attended the Colorado River Board meetings almost from the time I came to the district. I was the alternate board member after about 1990, I think. You'd have to look that up, but surely you could tell. And I can't even remember who the alternate board member before me. I think he must've died. So, and Virgil was the board member forever, and I was the alternate board member. So I attended all the board meetings when I was manager and a lot of them before I was manager.

Q: Any particular issues there that come to mind that the board dealt with that PVID had a particular interest in?

A: Well, the salinity control program that the board was always involved in with the Bureau and other states. If the water gets too salty here, it's going to affect the agriculture, no doubt about it. Hmmm, what else did we get involved in?

Q: There were no water rights issues or water supply issues? Of course, as you've already described . . .

A: We just watch out for our number one right to make sure nobody changes that number one right.

Q: It would have to be a pretty severe drought to impact PVID, and PVID has never been threatened by drought, is that fair?

A: That's fair, yeah.

Q: Let's talk about a few of the people that you ran across. And I think, Gerry, what I'd like to do, and I'm not looking for dirt, I mean this is not the National Enquirer. Just interested in your read, how well you got along with people. Any brief thoughts that you had about them? I'll just throw out some names, and if you knew the person and you had a chance to work with them. Just a couple thoughts on your part about their personalities, and how well or not, if you had to work with them. No particular order. Dennis Underwood you knew?

A: Oh yeah, I had great respect for Dennis Underwood. I was, in fact that was one of the times that I might have left the district because I told Dennis, when he became commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation, I said I'd like to come back and help you. But after he got back there, he said you really don't want to come back here. So I said okay. I was interested in going back there and helping him as a commissioner, but he convinced me that it wasn't a good idea. I've always had a great respect for Dennis, and I was really shocked at his passing.

Q: As were most people. Virgil Jones, who you mentioned?

A: Virgil was a great guy to work for. I worked for him when he was the manager. He was on the board when he was the manager, and he was on the board after he was the manager. I worked for him directly when he was the manager, of course, and he made me assistant manager and chief engineer. And we worked well together, had many trips to the Colorado River Board together and other meetings together.

Q: Most of the people at PVID I presume have come from an agricultural background. Were you the only engineer they had or were there others?

A: I hired, he's still working here, Roger Hanning, I hired him in '73. I was assistant engineer and I hired him out of Colorado State University, as a new graduate, bachelor's degree, and he's still here, and he's the only engineer they've got now.

Q: You mentioned Tom Leavy, I know you had a lot of dealings with Tom over time.

A: Yeah, I have a great respect for Tom. We worked well together, I think. I didn't agree with all of his tactics, but he had a job to do, and he did the best he could for his district, and you can't fault him for that.

Q: Chuck Shreves I think was GM at Imperial when you were GM here?

A: Yeah. Still pretty good friends with Chuck. Every time we're in Las Vegas we had dinner with him and his wife. I always had a lot of respect for

Chuck, he's a military man, and you can still tell that. (Laughs.) But we worked fine together.

Q: Were there other general managers at Imperial while you were GM here, or was Chuck the only one? I know Mike . . .

A: No Mike was, was he after Chuck?

Q: No I think Mike was before Chuck. I think Jessie followed . . .

A: Mike Clinton, no Jessie was after Mike.

Q: Jessie, okay then you're right.

A: Yeah. No, Mike Clinton, I knew Mike too. We worked, I made several trips to Sacramento with Mike because he knew a lot of people. And I can't even remember what we went to Sacramento for, but some kind of meeting with somebody. And Jessie, I worked with Jessie too, and I worked with Don Tougood before Chuck.

Q: You're going now back before my time.

A: That's before you're time, yeah.

Q: And how about the folks from Metropolitan Water District? You would've worked with Myron Holbert I presume at some point.

A: Yeah, well, Myron, was at the time they called it Chief Engineer of the Colorado River board, I believe.

Q: Before he went to Metropolitan.

A: Before he went to Metropolitan. Yeah. I forget what year he left the board. He left the board before I became the manager I believe. Worked with Myron. Never had too much to do with Carl Brunk. Was in several meetings with him. We had, for awhile we had a managers meeting once a year with all the managers of the six party water agreement, six party, and Carl attended several of them.

Q: Okay. I'm going to stop this tape and we'll put in a second one just because I don't want you to stop talking just because ran out of tape. This is tape two, we're interviewing Gerry Davisson, Palo Verde Irrigation District, it's February the 26th of '07. We were pretty much wrapping up here, but we were talking about several people you worked with, Gerry. Lester Snow who is now the director of the California Department of Water Resources, I believe you worked with him at the water authority?

A: He was general manager of San Diego County Water Authority when we started talking about a San Diego Imperial program, whatever they want to call it. And when he left, Maureen Stapleton was, worked with her too and her staff, their staff.

Q: How were your dealings with the water authority? Did you get along pretty good?

A: Yeah. I think Maureen even approached us when she was having little problems with Imperial and said well, how about Palo Verde? Do they want to deal with San Diego? And Virgil said let's talk. But I don't think that anything . . .

Q: Do you know why not? I mean, it seemed that, from the perspective of Metropolitan, it seemed that working with PVID was a little easier only from the standpoint that your farmers were a little more receptive to the concept of fallowing and moving the water west from here than IID was. So why did the water authority not have great success here in the valley?

A: Well, I always thought maybe there was a little politics. Metropolitan said San Diego, you better not, that's our territory. I don't know if that's true or not. I know there was always some, San Diego and Metropolitan didn't get along too good for quite a few years, as I recall. Maybe they still don't, I don't know. I don't know if that's true or not, but I always thought maybe that's why they never pursued it after they brought it up.

Q: We were talking earlier about the fellow up in Needles, Bill Claypool, he's up river from you. Bill of course is now the (interrupted by intercom). Well, we didn't know about that.

A: I don't know how to shut that thing off.

Q: We'll let that go. Anyway, Bill of course is a water guy in Needles, and has been looking out for Needles' best interest. And, in fact, there is an oral history of Bill on file at the Colorado River Board. But did you have

dealings with the Claypool family or with Bill or were they just too far removed?

A: Not too much with Bill, I met him at several meetings when the high water on the river and Needles was getting flooded. And I think other meetings that Bill showed up at because he was looking out for Needles, and Needles didn't have a very good water right. But his family ran the Coors beer business here. Jim Claypool was, I don't know if he was his brother or cousin, I'm not sure.

Q: So his family had interest, the Claypool family had interest here.

A: Yeah, they had a big beverage distributor and several local markets back in the '60's and '70's.

Q: Are they still here?

A: No.

Q: Okay. One of the questions I'll ask you just about Blythe, since you have lived here since what, 1971, and this being '97, whether you were general manager of PVID or not, you're still a resident of Blythe. How has Blythe changed over the years?

A: Oh, Blythe was a lot better little town when I came here in the '70's in my opinion. It's just, when I came here there was four grocery stores, now there's one. Had a lot of dime stores, Sprouse-Ritz, some of the other what we call dime stores then. There isn't any now except K-Mart. Lots of

empty buildings. The chamber and the city council keeps trying to improve it, and they're doing a little bit I guess.

Q: What caused that to happen? Did the population decrease or was it big box store that took everyone out or a combination of factors?

A: Well, it was a combination, I think, back when the Midland, there was a big gypsum factory in Midland closed down and the iron ore mine out in Desert Center closed down, and a lot of people lived here.

Q: So the economy.

A: The economy, yeah, it went downhill. And then the prisons came and they brought a lot of people with them, but doesn't seem like the business community has ever come back.

Q: What about this area as a recreation area. Has it gotten any better or any worse or? The river's a big deal for recreation.

A: Lots of people from L.A. come out in the summertime for the river. And lots of snowbirds this time of year, or the ones that want to be just out here in the rough and they live out in the desert or wherever they live. There's really no developed parks around Blythe. That's never happened here, and I could never figure out how Yuma grew and they don't even have a good river. Because they get 100,000 snowbirds down there in Yuma, or some big amount anyway. And we don't have near that much around Blythe and I don't know why.

Q: Has much of the farm land in Blythe been converted to other uses? I think I might have asked this earlier but maybe now I'm asking in a different way. But, in many agricultural areas, the farm land itself has been converted to other uses such as recreation, housing, manufacturing.

A: There's a few housing developments, but it really hasn't impacted the agricultural acreage that much I don't think. The crops grown, back in, when I first came here in the '70's, there was a lot more vegetable crops grown here. The big growers from up north would grow, you know, a crop of lettuce here, but they've all gone to the Yuma area. I don't know, they say the labor's better, the town is better for the brokers. The brokers won't come up here and buy it. So there's only a couple of farmers that grow vegetables here now.

Q: What are the primary crops grown here?

A: Alfalfa and cotton. And there's still quite a few melons, they're planting melons now, in fact.

Q: Onion, don't they grow a lot of onions here?

A: Not any more. Used to. Used to grow a lot of onion, the dehydrator type onion, used to be a lot of them. Used to be cannery tomatoes. Used to grow a lot of them. Not any more. And I don't know why. Market price? I really don't know.

Q: So the crops have changed, but you still have roughly the same amount of acreage in production, just different crops.

A: Same amount of acreage, less the fallowing, whatever that is.

Q: Okay. Anything else I forgot or anything you'd like to mention or talk about before we wrap it up?

A: Don't think so, don't think so. No.

Q: So we hit just about everything. Gerry, thank you very much for your time, we appreciate it.

A: You're welcome. Yup.

Q: And that will finish this one up.

A: Alrighty.

- - - End of Interview - - -