

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW



Robert A. Olson



Interview Conducted by:
Patti Aaron and Chelsea Kennedy
Bureau of Reclamation



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Statement of Donation

STATEMENT OF DONATION OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF

ROBERT A. OLSON

1. In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions set forth in this instrument, I, Robert A. Olson, (hereinafter referred to as "the Donor"), of Boulder City, Nevada, do hereby give, donate, and convey to the Bureau of Reclamation and the National Archives and Records Administration (hereinafter referred to as "the National Archives"), acting for and on behalf of the United States of America, all of my rights and title to, and interest in the information and responses (hereinafter referred to as "the Donated Materials") provided during the interview conducted on June 4, 2021, at 8:00 a.m., and prepared for deposit with the National Archives and Records Administration in the following format: taped video recording and transcripts. This donation includes, but is not limited to, all copyright interests I now possess in the Donated Materials.
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Date: July 11, 2021

Signed: Robert A. Olson

INTERVIEWER: Patti Aaron and Chelsea Kennedy

Editorial Convention

A note on editorial conventions. In the text of these interviews, information in parentheses, (), is actually on the tape. Information in brackets, [], has been added to the tape either by the editor to clarify meaning or at the request of the interviewee in order to correct, enlarge, or clarify the interview as it was originally spoken. Words have sometimes been struck out by editor or interviewee in order to clarify meaning or eliminate repetition. In the case of strikeouts, that material has been printed at 50% density to aid in reading the interviews but assuring that the struckout material is readable.

The transcriber and editor also have removed some extraneous words such as false starts and repetitions without indicating their removal. The meaning of the interview has not been changed by this editing.

While we attempt to conform to most standard academic rules of usage (see *The Chicago Manual of Style*), we do not conform to those standards in this interview for individual's titles which then would only be capitalized in the text when they are specifically used as a title connected to a name, e.g., "Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton" as opposed to "Gale Norton, the secretary of the interior;" or "Commissioner John Keys" as opposed to "the commissioner, who was John Keys at the time." The convention in the Federal government is to capitalize titles always. Likewise formal titles of acts and offices are capitalized but abbreviated usages are not, e.g., Division of Planning as opposed to "planning;" the Reclamation Projects Authorization and Adjustment Act of 1992, as opposed to "the 1992 act."

The convention with acronyms is that if they are

pronounced as a word then they are treated as if they are a word. If they are spelled out by the speaker then they have a hyphen between each letter. An example is the Agency for International Development's acronym: said as a word, it appears as AID but spelled out it appears as A-I-D; another example is the acronym for State Historic Preservation Officer: SHPO when said as a word, but S-H-P-O when spelled out.

Introduction

In 1988, Reclamation created a History Program. While headquartered in Denver, the History Program was developed as a bureau-wide program.

One component of Reclamation's History Program is its oral history activity. The primary objectives of Reclamation's oral history activities are: preservation of historical data not normally available through Reclamation records (supplementing already available data on the whole range of Reclamation's history); making the preserved data available to researchers inside and outside Reclamation.

Questions, comments, and suggestions may be addressed to:

Andrew H. Gahan
Historian
Environmental Compliance Division (84-53000)
Policy and Administration
Bureau of Reclamation
P. O. Box 25007
Denver, Colorado 80225-0007

For additional information about Reclamation's History Program see:
www.usbr.gov/history

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**Oral History Interview
Robert Olson**

Aaron: Robert Olson is a nationally recognized expert in water and energy issues. He had a long and distinguished career working in both the federal government and private industry.

He was the Acting Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation from December 1983 to August 1985 after working his way up through the ranks from a GS-9 in Huron, South Dakota, to the top seat in Washington, DC. We're pleased to be with you today, sir.

Olson: Thank you very much. I'm pleased to be with you.

Aaron: OK. We'll go ahead and get started with our questions. Chelsea has the first one.

Kennedy: When and where were you born?

Early Life

Olson: I was born in a little agricultural town named Wolsey, South Dakota. It was less than 1,000 people. It was about 14 miles west of Huron, South Dakota, where I grew up. I was born there on September 9th of 1933.

Aaron: Tell us about the education that prepared you for your career with the Bureau of Reclamation.

Joined the Navy

Olson: There never was a defined plan to prepare for a career with the Bureau of Reclamation. In fact, after high school, my first thought was to be a high school coach, if I could figure out a way to afford college. However, instead of college, the Korean War started in 1951.

In South Dakota, with the draft looming, my buddies and I decided we would rather join other military services than be drafted into the Army. Some of us went to the Navy, and some of us went to the Marine Corps. My buddy Dick Sievert and I chose the U.S. Navy, and we went to boot camp in San Diego, California.

After boot camp, I chose aviation electronics as my specialty. I was accepted by the Navy, and I was transferred to Memphis, Tennessee, to aviation electronics training school. After Memphis, I had a short stint at Pensacola Air Station in Florida. They sent me there to get familiarized with the various aircrafts that the Navy and the Marines had and they used in their operations.

From Pensacola, I was sent back to Naval Air Station in San Diego, California, and I was assigned to a squadron. It was a squadron that had a flight crew of four people the pilot and three crew men. It was a Grumman T-B-M Avenger, which was formally a torpedo bomber, but this was converted for other missions.

I thought about it for a long time, but I then signed up for flight training school. I figured

I'd rather be a crew member and operate the equipment as well as maintain the equipment. I became a crew member in this Grumman aircraft. We eventually were sent off to the Pacific to the Korean War.

We operated off of small aircraft carriers. They were called escort carriers. The flight deck was 550 feet long compared to the aircraft carrier of today, which is 5,000 feet long. When we were operating off the Korean waters, we flew air support for the ground troops that were there. These airplanes were prop driven. They could fly at speeds of less than 100 miles an hour.

Off of that aircraft carrier, during our operations, I had numerous takeoff and landings. A takeoff is basically when you're shot off with a catapult and with flights both daytime and night. The night flights were quite exciting. To find that little carrier at night to land on was quite a mission.

I entered the Navy in 1951. My four-year enlistment was over in November of 1955, when I got out. We returned home to Huron, South Dakota, in late 1955. I immediately began checking out colleges. I now had the G-I Bill to help pay for expenses.

Engineering Degree

We also learned that in Huron we had a little Presbyterian church college called Huron College. It was a very small college, but I learned that they had a pre-engineering program

set up by South Dakota State College, which was headquartered in Brookings, South Dakota.

That interested me, because it allowed us to spend a few more months in Huron, South Dakota, with family, after we had been gone for so long.

I began their pre-engineering program in January of 1956, and transferred to South Dakota State College that had a renowned engineering college, in June of 1957.

While going to college in Huron I managed to keep my hands in the electronic business, by fixing T-Vs and radios for a little storefront called A&M Radio and TV. I had some spare time between classes, and just to put things in the right perception, I made \$1.10 an hour. [laughs] That was the going rate for an electronics person in that period of time in 1956.

I got my engineering degree in 1959 from South Dakota State. I went to summer school every summer. That allowed me to complete a four-year degree in three and a half years, because I needed that G-I Bill for summer expenses.

I married in 1956, and with my wife working, the G-I Bill, and what little work I could pick up in the summers after class, we were making it work.

Entered the Aerospace Industry

I was hired after college by Hughes Aircraft Company, which was a California-based

company that specialized in airborne missile and guidance weapon systems that were installed in aircraft manufactured by other companies.

I relocated to California, went to work at the Hughes Aircraft Company, and in a matter of just a few short days Hughes called me into the office and said because of my military experience in Naval air I was ready for a field assignment.

We immediately turned around and transferred to St. Louis, Missouri, where the Hughes airborne aviation missile and rocket equipment was installed in McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corporation's F-101-B fighter aircraft.

As a Hughes engineering staff member at McDonnell, we were responsible for the investigations of the problems that would come in from the other squadrons in the field, as well as those that might show up on test flights.

Every aircraft that came off the assembly line had to go through a whole series of flight tests before they were sent out to the squadrons. We coordinated all the change proposals that were associated with electronics. We worked with the Hughes Aviation electronic technicians that were there, that kept the systems working.

After a short period of time, I was given inline management responsibilities, to supervise and administer approximately 25 to 30 Hughes Aviation electronic technicians that were also on site.

In addition to the technical aspects of the work, I evaluated the employees for the purpose of reclassification and merit increases, as well as for the purpose of their pay raises.

I showed up for work at McDonell Douglas in July of 1959, and Hughes transferred me to the Marine Air Corps station in Cherry Point, North Carolina, in February of 1961.

The move to Cherry Point was because, at that period of time, there were military activities between Cuba and the United States. It was called the Bay of Pigs. There were no flights and air support at that time, but the Marine squadrons at Cherry Point had been put on notice that they were going over there and be involved.

The Hughes people were there to help them get their electronic systems working perfectly. They never went, thank goodness. At Cherry Point, in addition to supporting them on a daily basis, Hughes had me set up training sessions for Navy electronic technicians working in several East Coast squadrons. They were assigned to Cherry Point to attend the training sessions.

The training sessions were six weeks long and included both detailed theory and hands-on maintenance work for all the electronic equipment that were utilized in the squadrons of where those sailors came from. In addition to that, we did provide the technical support to systems used by the Marine Corps as needed.

It would seem to me that my military experience in electronics, my college degree in electrical engineering, and my work experience on my Hughes Aircraft assignments, all provided experiences that would provide me for a career in the Bureau of Reclamation power programs.

Kennedy: Well, that leads right into my next question. How did you come to work for Reclamation?

Joining Reclamation

Olson: [laughs] That's almost a miracle really. Hughes Aircraft Company was transferring me from Cherry Point to Ford Island, Hawaii, to be a part of the Polaris missile program.

The Polaris missile was launched from a submarine. I was a little ambivalent and unsure about that potential move, because I had a very young family. I knew a little bit about missile guidance systems in airplanes, but I knew nothing about a submarine.

I had a little bit of anxiety in my mind when we left. On our drive from North Carolina to Hughes headquarters in California, before I embarked to Hawaii, we chose a route that would take us through South Dakota, so we could stop and visit our family.

Our parents had not had a chance to spend any time with our three little sons at all, because we had been gone for so many years. While in Huron, I saw my friend Dick Sievert, who went with me to the Navy, and also went through

Huron and South Dakota State College, and got an engineering degree.

When we both graduated, he chose the Bureau of Reclamation, which I knew little or nothing about it, in Huron. I chose Hughes Aircraft Company. Dick wanted to show me around the Huron project office of the Missouri-Oahe Region of the Bureau of Reclamation.

It was headquartered in Huron, South Dakota. I got a chance to meet the engineers and the technicians, and much to my surprise, I found out that they were responsible for a vast electrical grid that ranged all the way from the western extremes of South Dakota, all the way down to Creston, Iowa.

The Huron Project Office was definitely responsible for a major program that marketed power out of the hydroelectric power plants on the Missouri river, that were owned and operated by the Corps of Engineers.

The Huron Project Office marketed the power, transmitted it, and delivered it to all of the Bureau customers. In addition to meeting all of the technical staff and engineering staff, I was introduced to their Division Chief, Mr. Ed Smith. He and I discussed my career since leaving high school and he gave me a real rundown on the growth of the electric system that Huron was responsible for.

He also said that one of the major projects coming on for them was this development of this solid-state microwave system, to provide

that transmission system with up-to-date modern communications and control equipment.

He said they were going to have to add staff in order to take care of that. After we had an extensive discussion, he said would I like to have a job, and would I be interested in coming back to Huron.

It didn't take me too dang long to think about that question, knowing about a Polaris missile in a submarine wasn't exactly my cup of tea. I told him if I was offered the job, I would take it.

Mr. Smith said that he had to check with upper-level management at the regional office. I told him I had to get going to California to protect what I had. I said, but if you call, I'll call you as soon as I get to California, and if the job is mine, I'll turn around immediately.

I'll try to stop my furniture that was going from North Carolina to California, and reroute it to Huron, and that I would get back to Huron, South Dakota as soon as I possibly could.

I arrived back in Huron after I got the call that said the job was mine. It didn't take me long to head the car in the other direction. I reported for work at the Huron project office as a GS-9 electrical engineer.

Working for Reclamation

As the GS-9 engineer I preformed or directed the installation, testing, and troubleshooting of the communications equipment utilized by the

project. That was a lot, with substations and transmission lines, and the power plants.

I learned, for the first time, about the operations and requirements of the Watertown Dispatch Office, that basically was in charge of the operation of the transmission grid, and all of its interconnections with other utilities, which was a major requirement in the power business.

In August of 1963 I was named acting head of the communications section. In May of 1964, I was named head of the communication section.

About three years later in September of '67, I was promoted to chief communications and control branch, which was a GS-12 position. I was now responsible for the planning, direction, and execution of the operation and maintenance program of very high specialized equipment VHF radio, telemetering, supervisory control, and the tie- line low frequency control equipment, that's all utilized in a major transmission grid.

We had to coordinate all the functions with the Corps of Engineers because, in fact, they were the power developers of the electric power that we marketed and delivered. I was also given total responsibility to oversee the construction and the operation of that major microwave system that was being built in the Dakotas.

Reclamation's Issues with AT&T

Unfortunately, shortly after completion of the microwave system and after we had it placed in

service, the local Bureau of Reclamation was forced by D-C [District of Columbia] management to sell the microwave system to AT&T Incorporated. It seems like AT&T did not want anybody in their long-distance communications business. We were required to sell it and then to rent all the services back.

It seemed like having a private company in the middle of a federally-owned electric transmission grid was not a very solid smart idea. It became a problem when it was first placed in service that way because AT&T thought they were the big company and they could take out their communication channels and the links for maintenance without talking to anybody.

They never cleared with the dispatch office. They could take out a channel that could put the lights out in half of the Midwest if it wasn't coordinated.

It took a while to get that cleared up so they understood that they could not take the channels they were renting to the Bureau for maintenance, without clearing it with the Watertown Dispatch Office.

It eventually got worked out, but it took a while to get done. We still had the benefit of the up-to-date communications lines between our substations, Watertown Dispatch Office, and the generators, but it would've been a lot better if we would've maintained the ownership of it.

Kennedy: Great. Please continue to walk us through your federal career.

Power Division Lower Colorado Region

Olson: OK. It was nice to remember some of the guys you worked with and you went to school with, because in late 1969 I became aware of the GS-13 vacancy in the power division of the Lower Colorado Region of the Bureau of Reclamation, that was located in Boulder City, Nevada.

Ed Hallenbeck was the chief of the Power O&M Branch, and was moving to the Parker-Davis Project down in Phoenix to be its office head. I knew Ed really well. I called him and asked him about the job.

He thought I would be a good fit, and that we would like Nevada. I applied for the job, was selected, and I relocated to the regional office in Boulder City, Nevada, to become the Chief of Power Operation and Maintenance Branch, which was a GS-13 position.

I reported to work there on November 23rd of 1969. As chief of the Power O&M Branch, after I've got on the job, I was responsible of the supervision and administration of the nationwide operation and maintenance program for all power plants, substations, transmission lines, and communications in the Lower Colorado Region.

The Lower Colorado Region was the state of Nevada, Southern California, all of Arizona, and

parts of New Mexico. They had a very vast transmission grid with numerous substations.

I participated in negotiations leading to the Arizona-Nevada Power Pooling Agreement and to the interconnection agreement with all the investor-owned utility participants of the Mojave, Four Corners, and Navajo projects. I was the designated Bureau of Reclamation representative on the Western Systems Coordinating Council operations committee, and I served on that steering committee.

The Western Systems Coordinating Council was a reliability council made up of all of the major utilities in the total of the Reclamation's 17 western states. It's the organization that kept the lights on, and they coordinated operations and maintenance of transmission lines, so that we didn't take one out that caused them problems if they had maintenance already going on other parts of the system.

It was a hugely effective organization for security of electric transmission grids. In November of 1973, Regional Director Manny Lopez, Jr.,¹ selected me as his Regional

¹ Manuel (Manny) Lopez, Jr. served as Lower Colorado Regional Director from 1975 to 1979. Mr. Lopez also participated in Reclamation's oral history program. See, Manuel (Manny) Lopez, *Oral History Interview*, Transcript of tape-recorded Bureau of Reclamation Oral History Interviews conducted by Brit Allan Storey, senior historian, Bureau of Reclamation, in 1995 and 1996, in Jefferson County, Colorado, edited by Brit Allan Storey, www.usbr.gov/history/oralhist.html.

Supervisor of Power, to fill a vacancy left when Byron Miller retired. The position functioned as the principal staff advisor to the regional director on all aspects of the regional power program.

The program included the regional hydroelectric power plants, over 2,000 miles of high-voltage transmission lines, numerous substations and power supply and transmission service contracts, with over 54 entities. I functioned on behalf of the United States as the operating office head of the Bureau's 24.3 percent of the Navajo Project.

This is the Bureau's share, and the balance of it was owned by other utilities. I also represented the Secretary of the Interior on the Navajo Coordinating Committee. As such, I was responsible for the programming of funds for the U.S. share of O&M budget, and for the general administration and supervision of the United States' 24.3 percent interest in the project.

At this level, I represented the Bureau of Reclamation on the executive committee of the Western Systems Coordinating Council. Our group also initiated the power development for the Hoover upgrade program and the Hoover modification programs.

Interestingly, but—to me not to the greatest advantage to the Bureau of Reclamation was—in 1977, when Congress passed the Energy Act of 1977, which in part required the Bureau of Reclamation to give up its power programs and

transfer the people, the equipment, and the facilities to a new agency in the Department of Energy, that was yet to be named.

Impacts of the 1977 Energy Act

For us in the Lower Colorado Region, it meant that all the power-related staff in the regional office, the personnel and facilities of the Parker-Davis Project, and all the maintenance staff out at Mead Substation had to be transferred to the Department of Energy. It was a shock, I think, to most people that it happened, but it did.

It meant that all the power-related staffs of not only our region, but the other regions, had to go through this same program. I was named Acting Area Manager of the Boulder City Area. The Boulder City Area was exactly the same as what the Bureau of Reclamation areas were, namely, Nevada, Southern California, Arizona, and parts of New Mexico.

The organization, we learned, was now named the Western Area Power Administration, and we were the Boulder City Area of the Western Area Power Administration. This occurred all in late 1977.

During this initial period, we still had the responsibility to take care of all related power matters in the Bureau, and now the Western Area Power Administration. Also, to provide for responsible, orderly transition, and organizational formulation of the new Western Area Power Administration, Boulder City Area.

In May of 1978 I was named the official Area Manager of the Boulder City Area Office of Western. The power responsibilities essentially remained the same, except that the powerplants remained with the Bureau of Reclamation.

Hoover still remained part of the Bureau. Davis remained part of the Bureau. Parker remained the Bureau. Western marketed the power for the Bureau and provided the revenues that we collected in order to affect the repayment obligations.

As Area Manager I was also responsible for the negotiation, and the development of the consolidated power marketing plan for the Boulder City Area resources, which had nominally been named Hoover power negotiations.

New power contracts out of Hoover were required because of the completion of Hoover's 50th year of operation in 1985. That was the termination of the existing contracts. The new ones needed to be in negotiations as those contracts expired.

The complex undertaking involved several states. Namely California, Arizona, Nevada, several government entities, and numerous parties from the private sector. These negotiations took considerable time and were eventually ratified by House Resolution 42-75.

Coming to Washington, D.C

In July of 1983, I was contacted by then Reclamation Commissioner Robert Broadbent.² He asked me if I would be willing to return to the Bureau of Reclamation, and come to DC to be his Assistant Commissioner for Planning and Operations.

After much discussion, I asked Mr. Broadbent to let me have a little time, and I would get back to him. We discussed it at home, our boys were all in college, and we figured it was an opportunity that we could accept.

I had passed up a potential move to D-C when Gil Stamm was Commissioner.³ He wanted me to come to be the chief of the power division there, but our kids were so active in sports here that we didn't want to change things around.

I returned the Commissioner's call, I thanked him very much, and I accepted the position of Assistant Commissioner for Planning and Operations. We relocated to Washington, D-C to join him in the headquarters office.

The Assistant Commissioner of Planning and Operations supervised and coordinated the Bureau's planning activities for the development and management of water and power resources and directed the Bureau's resource planning program.

² Robert N. Broadbent served as Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner under the Reagan Administration from 1981 to 1984.

³ Gilbert Stamm served as Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner under the Ford administration from 1973 to 1977.

Acting Commissioner

At that same time there was a presidential mandate for all cabinet levels, to review the policy, personnel, and processes. The Secretary of the Interior Bill Clark, by a news release dated December 26th, 1983, announced the realignment of the Department of the Interior to take place as a result of that presidential mandate.

The assistant secretaries of the department were all realigned and some renamed. The Assistant Secretary for Water and Science was a new assistant secretary, that would now have the responsibilities for the Bureau of Reclamation, the Geological Survey, and the Bureau of Mines.

Secretary Bill Clark proposed that Commissioner Bob Broadbent be named Assistant Secretary for Water and Science, and that Robert Olson be appointed Acting Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation. That was all in 1983.

On December 23rd, 1983 I was officially appointed the Acting Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation and moved into the Commissioner's Office. The Commissioner, of course, is the top executive official of the federal government's principal dam building, water supply, and hydroelectric power agency for the 17 western states.

He was responsible for the formulation and the execution of water and power programs funded

at the one-billion-dollar level, for fiscal 1985, which was the highest budget ever in the Bureau of Reclamation at that time.

He exercised executive management authorities over total agency staff, approximately 10,000 personnel, located in seven operating regions in the Western United States, the engineering and research center in Denver, Colorado, and agency headquarters at Washington, D-C.

I think that's about it.

Kennedy: Awesome. Tell us about your time as Acting Commissioner.

Olson: There were many important activities related to the Reclamation program that float out of the office of the Commissioner. I agree, listing of those are important to the history of the Bureau of Reclamation for that point of time.

In order to provide an accurate accounting, I will refer to a department press release, dated in May of 1985, and recite for you the major accomplishments, as stated by Secretary of the Interior Don Hodel. He was my boss.

In the Department of the Interior news release, dated May 24th, 1985, it stated in part that during the 17 months Olson has been Acting Commissioner, the Bureau has had many accomplishments.

Secretary of the Interior, Don Hodel attributes many of these accomplishments to Olson's, "skill, hard work, and management expertise."

Accomplishments as Acting Commissioner

In the news release, Secretary Hodel says as examples of Bureau of Reclamation's accomplishments during Olson's tenure as Acting Commissioner, Secretary Hodel cited the following:

Delivery of the first Colorado River water through the facilities of the Central Arizona Project. Water was delivered May 22nd, 1985, to the Harquahala Irrigation District near Phoenix, fulfilling a commitment made by the Bureau of Reclamation in 1979 to deliver project water to Maricopa County in 1985.

They also cited a negotiated agreement between the Bureau and the State of California for the coordinated operation of the California State Water Project and the Bureau of Reclamation Central Valley Project.

The coordinated operation agreement was presented to Congress in 1985. He recited the first billion-dollar budget in Bureau history was approved by Congress for Reclamation operations during fiscal year 1985.

He cited agreements signed between the United States and the People's Republic of China, under which the Bureau will furnish technical assistance to the Chinese in the construction of the massive Three Gorges project, which will be the largest dam and hydropower generation complex in the world. It doesn't state it in this news release, but I was the one that was privileged to sign the agreement between the

United States and the People's Republic of China.

He pointed out the Reclamation Safety of Dams modification reports, which were sent to Congress, covering work on seven dams in two states, with a total outlay of \$350 million. Legislation to increase that amount to \$650 million was approved in 1984.

The implementation of the Reclamation Reform Act of 1982⁴ was accelerated by approvals of rules and regulations in January of '84, and the distribution of certifications and reporting forms to water users in 1984 and early '85.

In my opinion, one of the most important things was the passage of the Hoover Power Plant Act of 1984, which provided a negotiated agreement by the states of California, Arizona, Nevada, for allocation of power from Hoover Dam after '87.

This legislation also authorized work to raise the rated generating capacity of the Hoover Power Plant by 500 megawatts and provided improvements to the visitors' facilities at Hoover Dam.

Legislation was submitted to Congress by the Bureau and the Department of the Interior to

⁴ In 1982 Congress passed the Reclamation Reform Act (RRA), which raised the minimum acreage allowed to receive project water from 160 acres to 960 acres, removed the residency requirement, and placed a limit on the leasing of lands receiving government water. The RRA recognized that agriculture had become more mechanized and industrialized and that 160 acres was too small for successful farming in the modern world.

implement recommendations of the Garrison Diversion Unit Commission, which needed Congressional authorization. Programs were placed underway to modify construction of the Garrison Diversion Unit to conform to this commission's findings.

We implemented the development of the Groundwater Recharge pilot program, authorized to be developed in the 17 Reclamation States, under Public Law 98-434.

Not included in that, but the one I thought was important, was a trip that myself and Hal Furman, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Water and Science and Sammy Guy, who was the head of the Bureau's Foreign Activities program.

Foreign Activities

We took a trip to represent the United States in Egypt and Tel Aviv in Israel. In Egypt, we had several Bureau of Reclamation employees, as well as a major contractor from the United States, working to repair Aswan Dam. The dam was originally built by the Russians for the Egyptians, and unfortunately, it was uneven. The dam was crooked, and the shafts of the hydroelectric power plant and the turbine runners were all damaged during operation.

The Bureau of Reclamation engineers out of the E&R Center were there to help the Egyptians, with the help of Allis Chalmers, the United States company that built the new shafts and

turbine runners, to install the new equipment and to get the powerplant back in operation.

We went from there to Tel Aviv. We did stop in Jerusalem, but our business was mostly in Tel Aviv, on the municipal water supply problems that the country of Israel was having. We had several staff meetings with their water experts, and even talked a little bit about the basics of desalinization, because the Bureau had a demonstration plant in the Yuma area.

Not as a result of our trip, but knowing what happened a few years later, they did add desalinization plants to the waters off of the country of Israel to provide and improve their municipal water supply.

As part of that trip—probably not too technical—but we had the privilege of attending a reception that was held in honor of the visiting folks from the United States of America’s government with the Israeli cabinet, and had a wonderful evening of talking shop with an awful lot of people. To think that we were so included in their thoughts showed a lot of respect for the United States. We were proud to be United States representatives at that reception.

I think that gets us to the end of that one.

Aaron: When and why did you leave Reclamation?

Leaving Reclamation

Olson: The question of leaving Reclamation was not at all on my mind when I was in Washington, D-C.

I was so busy doing my job as Acting Commissioner and I was still the Assistant Commissioner of Planning and Operations.

I also knew that the new policy for replacing the Commissioner was to pick a political appointee. That was not high on my expectation list, except I did get my hopes elevated quite high, when on a flight from North Dakota back to D-C.

We were there for the Garrison Diversion project. Secretary of the Interior Bill Clark walked back to coach where my wife and I were riding and told us that Mr. Broadbent's confirmation hearing had been set, and that I was next.

He used, several times, Commissioner Olson, not the Acting Commissioner. That did elevate my hopes, when he basically said my confirmation was next.

Mr. Clark left the Department of the Interior, and Energy Secretary Don Hodel was named as the new Interior Secretary. After Broadbent's confirmation hearing was over, names of potential candidates began floating around.

Shortly after that, I received a letter signed by Assistant Secretary Bob Broadbent, transferring me back to Boulder City, Nevada, to be the new Regional Director of the Lower Colorado Region, filling a vacancy that existed.

Nothing could've been nicer for us, as we never sold our home in Boulder City, we just rented it out. However, in the meantime, I had received

several jobs offers from outside of Reclamation, and outside of the government. One of them interested me.

I took the letter from Assistant Secretary Broadbent down to the personnel office and asked them the rules on a directed transfer, and if it was correct that I could turn the offer down and retire if I had 25 years of service. I was told yes, I could.

Aaron: [laughs] And so, you did, right?

Olson: I did.

Kennedy: What did you do after you left Reclamation?

Resource Management International

Olson: I retired from the Bureau on August 1st of 1985, and I accepted the offer from a company called Resource Management International, Inc., that was headquartered in Sacramento.

R-M-I was a full-service engineering and consulting firm, specializing in water, power, and natural gas. I was familiar with them because they represented several of the California companies on some of the Hoover negotiations and some of the transmission plan negotiations.

I was familiar with the principles of the firm because of the activities. I was named Executive Vice President of R-M-I, Inc. and worked with them for several years. We grew

the company quite a bit in those four years that I was with them.

Century Power Corporation

In late 1989-time frame, a client of mine, Century Power Corporation, headquartered in Tucson, Arizona, recruited me to be their Chairman of the Board and the C-E-O. Century was a wholesaler of electric power generated by power plants formerly owned by Tucson Electric Power of Tucson. They've basically formed the company and then sold it.

The Chairman of the Board and the President of Tucson Electric at the time went with the new company, Century Power. They sold the company and those two individuals went home with several million dollars in their pocket. It was purchased by the new buyer with considerable debt. We never sold our home in Sacramento when I took the job because I knew it was a troubled company that needed a lot of attention.

My wife and I took turns commuting from Sacramento to Tucson, and Tucson to Sacramento probably every second week that she would come down, and then every other week, I'd go back up there. In the summer, she brought our grandson down and stayed for several weeks. We could enjoy each other's companies for quite a bit of time at that period of time.

In order to reduce debt, we sold several of the power plants to municipal power agencies in

Southern California. That helped quite a bit, but unfortunately the new owners then come up and said they wanted to move the headquarters to Texas, to take advantage of the tax advantage that the state of Texas had.

I was not interested in doing that. I told them that I would stay on as Chairman of the Board, but I was going to be living in Sacramento, but I was resigning as C-E-O, and my company president, John Van Egmond, could take over the reins of the whole company.

They agreed to that relationship, and so I then returned back to Sacramento. I always stayed in contact, like they always say, never burn your bridges. I always stayed in contact with the president of R-M-I, and the people at RMI. I've really enjoyed them.

The president of R-M-I told me of an opportunity to buy a well-established water resource consulting and engineering firm, that was headquartered in Glendale, California. The name of that company was Bookman Edmonston Engineering Inc.

Bookman Edmonston Engineering

I knew it quite well, because they built much of the distribution irrigation canals for the customers of the Central Arizona Project down in Arizona. I checked the company out on the way back to Sacramento, and R-M-I eventually bought the company, hired me back as President of Bookman Edmonston Engineering, and sold me a five percent interest in the company.

We eventually moved the headquarters from Glendale, California to Sacramento, California, in the same office building that R-M-I was in. I stayed with them until I totally retired from everything on January 1st of 1998.

Kennedy: What do you feel was your greatest accomplishment as a Reclamation employee?

Greatest Accomplishment

Olson: That's a difficult one, and this is probably self-serving, when I've figured out an answer to this. It's difficult to pick one greatest accomplishment as a Reclamation employee, but the one thing that has always come to mind is the fact that this kid from Huron, South Dakota, entered employment with the Bureau of Reclamation as a GS-9 and grew up to be the Acting Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation and did the job for 19 months.

Aaron: I agree with Mr. Olson. [laughter] I don't think that's self-serving in the least. [laughs]

Kennedy: What issues were most significant and/or made the largest impact, in your opinion?

Olson: Some of the issues that were very significant and made a large impact on Reclamation started early in my career. That was the introduction of the microwave system into the vast Bureau electric system in the Midwest.

This very up to date communications and control system that provided real-time status and data from the vast number of substations, the

power plants, and everything emanating from the dispatch office in Watertown, South Dakota, made the Bureau of Reclamation's power system in the Midwest as modern and up to date as any investor-owned utility in the area.

It was a hugely important introduction of new services to that system. It modernized all of our communications and control system with the Army Corps of Engineers who owned the hydroelectric power plants, and with the investor-owned utilities that we were tied together with.

The hydroelectric generators, of the Oahe, Fort Randall, and Gavin's Point powerplants on the Missouri River, that we in the Bureau of Reclamation marketed and delivered their power to the many power customers of the Bureau of Reclamation. The interconnection with the major systems, I think, was very major to modernizing the transmission system in the Midwest part of the United States.

The other significant issue that had a huge impact was the joint development of the coal-fired powerplant, the Navajo generation station, with the other major utilities. Mainly because there was not any unused federal power to provide power to the pumping plants on the Central Arizona Project canals.

The Bureau's investment into the Navajo Generating Station with the other major utilities allowed us to purchase 24.3 percent of it. The sole purpose of that Navajo power, owned by the Bureau of Reclamation, was to provide the

electric power to the many pumping plants on the canals along the Central Arizona Project.

The C-A-P, the importance, allowed the state of Arizona for the first time to use its allocated share of Colorado River water for their beneficial use of their customers. As I stated before, the first delivery of water occurred in May of 1985, fulfilling that commitment made by the Bureau of Reclamation.

To deliver water to Maricopa County in 1985, I think, was a great, major accomplishment of the Bureau of Reclamation in that time frame. At the same time, it would be difficult not to consider the passage of the Hoover Power Plant Act of 1984 as significant and of huge impact.

It provided a negotiated agreement amongst the states of California, Arizona, and Nevada, for the allocation of the electric power from Hoover, as a result of their contracts terminating. It increased the capacity of Hoover by 500 megawatts, which was considerable at that time. It improved the visitors' facilities at the dam and power plant.

Hoover marked its 50th year of operation in 1985, and in my humble opinion, Hoover Dam and powerplant was one of the great accomplishments in the history of the Bureau of Reclamation.

Aaron: Lastly, what was your favorite experience from your time as a Reclamation employee?

Favorite Experience

Olson: My favorite experience as a Reclamation employee was being able to work with other employees who were as dedicated to the mission and work as I was. It didn't matter if it was headquarters personnel, regional office personnel, or project office personnel. The people who worked there were as interested in getting the jobs done as I was.

It didn't matter if it was a water project, a power project, or an environmental impact statement. The citizens of the 17 western United States that depended upon the Bureau of Reclamation to conduct its mission were the beneficiaries of that. There were not any bureaucrats in Reclamation, as we all were professionals getting our job done and the mission accomplished.

It was a pleasure to be part of that organization.

Aaron: Sounds good to me. That was our last question for you. Have we missed anything, or is there anything else that you want to add?

Olson: I can't think of anything. Like I said, it's been an absolute pleasure. It's been a difficult job, thinking of things back in the '80s, when I'm in my 80s. [laughs] Thank you very much. Have a good one.

Aaron: Thank you. You too. Bye bye.