Oral History 227-31

Robert Wolf Oral History Project

Interviewee: Robert Wolf

Interviewer: Dan Hall

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Hall: Today's Wednesday, November 15. We're in the archives of the Mansfield Library talking with Bob Wolf. The topic will be disaster aid policy.

Wolf: Well, first, I think you want to talk about the Montana earthquake, which occurred on August 17, 1959. There was a significant earthquake that hit the Madison River, and after the earthquake, people said that it moved more earth than the Corps of Engineers had moved in its entire history of building dams, etc., in the United States. It was a huge amount that was moved by that earthquake in the Madison and an area of road collapsed [inaudible]. I think most of the casualties, in fact, were campers down the river. But it created a huge lake called Quake Lake, and it shook all over Montana and the surrounding area. And it was the largest quake in the United States in quite some time and had the concern of, not only the people in the area, but nationally.

I was working in the Senate and I was sent out on a plane with Congressman Metcalf and several other members of Congressional delegations from other states who were on the Public
Works Committee who were concerned about, not only that particular aspect, but the damage to roads and railroads and other things, which also was pretty substantial. But again, being a relatively low population area, it wasn't like the recent one that hit San Francisco and Oakland in California. We flew out and we landed. The governor of Montana at the time was (I may have misplaced his name) - I think it was Hugo Aronsen. His main concern was that bad publicity not adversely effect tourism in Montana! [chuckling] It was really somewhat sad because the Senators had flown out there with some people from the Corps of Engineers (there was no real disaster relief program in the federal government) and had come to look at the nature of the disaster and to decide in particular, because of the federal contribution to road construction under the Federal Highway Act, what should be done there, and whether there were other significant transportation problems beyond the question of the human suffering, which wasn't as significant as if a large urban area had been hit. So they were concerned about those aspects, and the governor's main concern seemed to be that the emergency provisions not be invoked. There was something that provided for emergency relief -- modest ones. The president made a declaration that required a request by the governor and [the governor] was very much concerned that it would give Montana some sort of a black eye, and tourists would avoid the state like the plague [chuckling]. So he spent most of his time trying to pretend that nothing had happened.

The discussions with the Army Engineers on the scene, and with others, did indicate that there was fairly substantial damage to the roads in the area. The question that also was discussed was whether or not the earthen dam created by the quake would fill, and then burst, and then send a huge stream of water downstream, which would do tremendous flooding damage. So those were the real areas of concern. The Corps promised to make some detailed examinations and to watch it, but their general view was that there might be water seepage, but that it would
not reach the stage where that plug would be washed out by the force of water. Their initial exami-
nation [indicated] that the earthquake had done a better job of dam building than they had ever
done in their history [laughing].

My recollection is that we went back and the Public Works Committee did enact not only
some relief provisions for Montana, but that was the beginning of giving some thought to
whether disasters had had interstate ramifications, and major ramifications should receive some
federal help. The philosophical position you can take is that it's a local problem, let the locals
take care of it. But there was a growing number of people who were concerned generally about
the ability of local, state and federal governments to respond to disasters.

A lot of this had an undercurrent of concern about what would happen if somebody
dropped an atomic bomb. [It] involved questions of what do you do in the event of a war,
declared or undeclared? How do you deal with major disasters? There are a significant number
of people who are involved now, 30 years later, in disaster analysis and disaster relief and so
forth.

My next involvement with disaster came when I was assistant to the director of the
Bureau of Land Management. On Good Friday, 1964, a major earthquake hit Alaska. It struck
in the Anchorage area and ranged from north of Anchorage down through Seward and Whittier
and Valdez, which now has an oil terminal. It also, because of the location of the epicenter,
created a huge tidal wave, which swept all the way down and affected California. That quake
did a lot of damage in Alaska and had a lot of coastal impact where the water level rose. It
doesn't come in like one huge wave; the water just sort of raises up, washes in, and floods areas
that are generally not prone to have that happen.

I don't recall exactly where I was when it hit, but it happened that virtually every key
official in the Department of Interior in the secretary's office was out somewhere except, I think, Secretary Udall. Jim Carr, one of the undersecretaries, was a very devout Catholic. He was at a retreat, and they couldn't find out where he'd gone at a religious retreat [chuckling]. The heads of several agencies were gone, and the director and associate director of BLM were [also] out. So I was called into a little meeting on this because Interior had a big involvement in Alaska, and there was apparently a fair amount of damage to Interior facilities and the secretary said that the president was sending a group to Alaska headed by Senators Greening and Bartlett, the two Alaska Senators, and I think Ralph Rivers, the Congressman. They were all going. They needed someone from the Department of Interior and they wound up selecting me. [chuckles] So we got on something that was close to the equivalent of Air Force One (I think it was Air Force Two) and took off for Alaska on a Saturday (I left my wife with a bunch of people coming in for Easter to dinner [chuckles] and headed out there). We got up there on Saturday. We had one stop at a SAC base in Nebraska and then went on to Anchorage.

When we got there, the local people and the governor had quite a well-orchestrated relief program under way. They'd responded really quite effectively and, because there's a large military presence in Alaska, they had also gotten a lot of help from military people who were quite capable of, and had the facilities for responding to, disasters. There were several kinds of problems they were dealing with. But, in any event, they were going to make a tour. By then, we had a disaster relief program. The fellow in charge of it was on the plane, and I remember President Johnson kept calling him up about every 15 minutes with further instructions on what to do and what not to do. [chuckles]

We got up there and they were going to take a C-54 type aircraft and fly around and look at the disaster. The BLM had a number of smaller planes there, Grumman Gooses, for instance,
which were amphibious. My job was to look at things that had affected the Department of Interior. The Bureau of Reclamation had a power plant at Eklutna and I had to go look at that. The Alaska Railroad, which was a principal transportation facility, had been substantially disrupted. The manager of that was a fellow by the name of John Manley. He had extensive private railroad experience in the States before he went up there, and he was trying to figure out how he was going to get that railroad, if he could get that railroad, back in operation. The damage to the south, from Anchorage down to Seward, was tremendous. We flew over it and the railroad tracks looked like some giant had reached down and simply twisted them like hairpins. The faultline of this quake ran almost down the line of the railroad. It was like they'd picked it on purpose.

I talked with the state director, Roger Robinson, and we were going to take our Goose and go out and fly it. We were having a meeting at the Elmandorf Air Force Base, at which we were staying, discussing this and what to do. The general in charge was saying they were going to take people out on a C-54.

Robbie and I decided to go out in our Goose and look at what we needed to look at, any BLM stuff which would be relatively minor, but mainly the railroad and the power plant, and take John Manley of the Alaska Railroad. Senator Bartlett, whom I knew quite well, overheard Robbie and me, and he sidled over to me and he asked what we were going to do. He asked if we had some extra space in that Goose? I said, "Sure, Bob, we do. We can take one more." I knew the number of people it would hold and the number we had planned to put in it. He said, "Don't say a word to anyone." We had to take off from an amphibious takeoff dock where the BLM kept this Goose. I told him where we were going to be. He said, "Don't say a word. Don't even tell my [administrative assistant]" (who was along). He said, "I'm going to go with you
guys." So the next morning at sunrise, we all assembled at this airplane, and Bob Bartlett was there, and we got in and we took off. What we didn't realize was that by Bartlett doing it this way, the general and Senator Greening spent an hour looking for Bartlett and nobody knew where he'd gone. They thought he'd gotten lost. [laughter]

We flew to Eklutna and looked at the power plant, which had had a lot of gravel come down through the turbines, but fortunately, because of the design, had not been tilted and was operative with some modest changes. We then flew the railroad route, which is south to Seward. We decided to go on down to Valdez. Valdez had been hit by the tidal wave also, and the water at first dropped down and then it had come up and just flooded a good half of Valdez. The same thing had happened at Seward, though the damage was extensive in the waterfront. Huge railroad cranes had been moved a quarter to a half a mile. Boats had been washed a mile up into the head of the drainage in Seward. Seward had just gotten the All-American City Award. When the wave came in, first it hit some gasoline tanks and then it hit the power supply. The gas had burned on the water and the whole hillside where it snowed was black with smoke from the fire. Whittier had fires going in it, and it was substantially damaged.

At any rate, we flew that in this Goose, which is a very slow, cumbersome plane but is a very safe one. Oddly, we kept running into Governor Egan of Alaska, who had also decided not to go on the grand tour in the C-54. There were two problems with taking the C-54. One is, you couldn't see anything. Secondly, you couldn't land very many places. So we went out and made an on-site examination and that was used by the Department of Interior to devise the department's position on what it needed in the emergency funding that was going to be provided for restoration of damage in Alaska to federal facilities, as well as general relief.

As a funny aside, I was then assigned (when I got back and had made a report to the
secretary) to be on the task force [for] putting together the budget request and had a kind of a principal role in that. I think there were three of us on it. We sort of held little hearings with these agencies on things.

The Geologic Survey people came in, and I recall this one geologist -- they were seeking money for monitoring earthquakes, but this was an emergency appropriation, not a regular one, so we weren't going to put anything in that had long-term programmatic content -- but I still recall this fellow. He said he had forecast the earthquake. I asked him how? When? He pulled out a geological survey monograph on Alaska and dug to something like page 98, and there, in the middle of a paragraph, was a description of the soil types in Alaska, and the observation that if an earthquake were to hit, it would do extensive damage because of the soil types. His position was that that was, in essence, a forecast. And it wasn't funny, because that's how limited our knowledge was at the time of how you could measure the likelihood of an earthquake. One of the results, though, of that earthquake was subsequent appropriations [for] the Geological Survey, which have led to the Geological Survey being able to do extensive monitoring of faultline tensions and forecasts. Up to that point, geologists felt they were lucky if they could forecast an earthquake within a span of a hundred years, plus or minus 50. Now they're getting down to where they can almost tell you within several weeks of when it may happen. They're getting techniques for measuring these tensions, which is a significant scientific breakthrough. But it took these disasters to push ahead going into these types of scientific work, which certainly have major implications because we've built so many things in earthquake-prone areas.

The third one, and I certainly didn't have anything to do related to it, is Mt. St. Helens. When that blew the scientists were able to monitor Mt. St. Helens, and came very close in their
forecast of when it would blow. The other remarkable thing, and I've been to several meetings with people involved in disasters and earthquake relief and other types of disaster relief, is the human reaction. You've got one group of people who want to go see the disaster and almost stand there and cheer. Then you have others who are highly motivated to deal with the problem. [There are] those who want to go and watch you float down the river when a dam breaks, [who] get very upset with the people who are saying, "We're here to protect life and property and to save people, not to watch them float down the river." [laughter] But now a substantial number of public as well as private people are engaged, not only in major disaster prevention and relief, but in generally working in these areas. And it becomes a significant thing, which provides the means for an effective response to it.

The area where we still are having difficulty though, and the South Carolina situation certainly demonstrates it, is trying to decide in what situation should or shouldn't you reside and live.

One other thing I didn't put in here was, I think it was 1960, we had a huge hurricane that swept up the East Coast. I was working for the Senate Interior Committee. Senator Anderson sent me out on a flight with the Coast Guard. We flew from below Norfolk all the way up to the end of Long Island, New York, which was a major part of the East Coast beaches that were hit by that hurricane. There had been a lot of talk about federal acquisition of barrier islands along the East Coast -- pro and con. Some people were opposed to it; some were in favor of it. There were a lot of people pushing for development of those islands, putting summer homes on them, et cetera. Senator Anderson's view had been that we would be ahead nationally if states or the federal government were to acquire the seashores where they were prone to hurricane damage and simply keep them as public beaches, undeveloped. That was not the universal view.
Anderson sent me on this flight and we flew at about 500 feet right along the whole coast there, took a lot of pictures and looked at a lot of things, circled over and looked at things. What came through most vividly was that where people had built behind the dunes and retained the dune grasses, had not disturbed the sand dunes, there was a minimum amount of damage. It was remarkable [to see] the amount of stabilization that these dunes provided. Where people had come over the dunes and destroyed the dune grass and built residences, they were wiped out. I remember making that report to Senator Anderson, saying that for one thing the federal government certainly shouldn't be helping these people rebuild in the same disaster area, because it was just a question of time before another major hurricane swept up the coast. But I would have to say that the people who wanted it developed and have one foot virtually in the water all the time, were claiming that their private property rights were being disrupted.

Hall: What was the upshot of that? I mean, if someone wants to build in an area where it's geologically unsafe, does the federal government have some kind of responsibility to help these people?

Wolf: These weren't federal lands. But what you run into is in the disaster relief programs ... because there's federal aid in disaster relief -- small business loans, residential loans, et cetera. You get the federal government involved in bailing out these people who have built in an area because the state or local government won't restrict the development along in that [dangerous] area. This remains a debate in the United States. What are the critical areas where human habitation is a high-risk proposition? What you do with someone who, in good faith, bought a lot on the ocean from somebody else who owned it through a real estate development. It's
perfectly legal because the state simply hasn't restricted development there. Yet anyone who looks at that area knows that the likelihood is that every 30 years a storm of sufficient magnitude will come along to wipe out anything built on that stretch of beach. You don't know whether it's going to happen in 1989 or 2030. But even if it doesn't happen till 2030, should you be building in that area? That still remains a debated thing, and it involves some of our notions about our rights to do things. But the question is, does that include the right to be bailed out by your fellow taxpayers?

Hall: Exactly.

Wolf: So anyway, that is the sum of my involvement in this disaster relief thing. One other thing is, I remember going to a conference in Colorado -- I think that was probably 1965 -- of disaster relief experts in educational institutions and state and federal government. As I say, there's a significant number of people working in this area seeking to make living on this planet safer from those kinds of things.

Hall: To go back to the Montana earthquake, after you toured the area, you went back to D.C., I presume. What were some of the topics that were tossed around as far as what kind of thing could be done by the federal government?

Wolf: The major one, the immediate one was, I think we provided some special funds for restoration of roads that had been damaged. A lot of roads had been just disrupted. In the Federal Highway Act, public land states get additional federal aid because of the presence of
federal land. And then, there are also roads which, because they're on federal land, are 100 percent federally funded. So it's my recollection that we provided additional money to this area to restore roads that had been disrupted and made untravelable by the earthquake. We provided some funds to treat the area where the huge slide had occurred and Quake Lake had been created, to stabilize things there. Those would be the major things.

But the other thing was that it did begin some discussions within the geologic community on improved earthquake forecasting. Unfortunately, it always takes disasters to stimulate an interest in it. The science of monitoring tensions on the earth plates was still very young. You know, the earth plate theory itself, by then, was only about 12 years old. The prevailing geologic view prior to that was that the earth was the way God made it, and this idea of continental movement was only put forth in the late 40s by a geologist by the name of Ewing at the University of Texas. And he did most of his research out of Woods Hole taking cores out of the bottom of the ocean, and it was something he had postulated during WWII based upon SONAR work. Prior to that time, geologic thinking was that the bottom of the ocean was flat and lifeless. We had no idea what was underneath the ocean. SONAR and RADAR were what began to give us these readings that showed that there were huge canyons and mountains under the ocean. We knew about coral reefs, things we could see. Anything 50 feet under the ocean by 1940, we didn't have too much trouble seeing some of that if the water was clear. But our knowledge of the earth and its origins rapidly emerged in that period after WWII.

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... origins of the planet earth.
Hall: Would you say that Governor Aronsen's response might have hindered in any way the disaster relief that was done for Montana?

Wolf: Well, it might have had some minor effect on it. He was not considered by Congressman Metcalf to be a very heavyweight sort of governor, and this wasn't a political judgment; this was just reactions to the guy. He wasn't thinking through the consequences, in terms of the impact that this huge earthquake (and it was huge) had had on Montana. Also, looking back on what I've learned subsequently, Aronsen didn't realize that lots of people liked to come and see disasters. [chuckles] No, I don't think [Aronsen's attitude] hindered it. It made Aronsen look kind of silly, really.

Hall: In the Alaskan quake, what was the final result of the Alaskan Railroad?

Wolf: The Alaskan railroad was rebuilt to Seward but not to Whittier, and it was rebuilt north from Anchorage, because it runs all the way to Fairbanks. The damage was somewhat smaller north of Anchorage. But it was rebuilt, put back into operation, except for the Whittier extensions for it.

Hall: With federal funds?

Wolf: Oh, yes. It was a federal railroad. At that time it was the only railroad in that part of the country owned and operated by the federal government. I should have made that clear earlier. I
think there's been a change in its status now because of a lot of the other railroad things where
the Department of Interior no longer runs it. You see, Alaska was a territory originally, so all
sorts of things that happened in Alaska were done under the territorial status. And the Alaska
railroad stayed then as a federal business run by the Department of Interior under what was
called the Alaska Railroad Commission. No private railroader wanted to operate the thing!
[chuckles] It wasn't exactly a railroad that made great profits, and as you know, we've had a lot
of reorganization of railroads in the U.S. because they declined in profitability.

In Alaska, with the advent of aircraft travel, the Alaska Railroad lost a significant amount
of its day-to-day passenger travel because flying was more convenient -- and some of its more
lucrative freight travel. But still, a lot of its heavy-duty travel, stuff that went to Fairbanks [was
continued]. But we never extended the railroad, for instance, up to the North Slope when oil
development began. All that was handled by trucking over the frozen tundra or by aircraft.
Maybe the Alaska Railroad's an anachronism, I don't know. But it was a government agency.

Hall: Was the federal response, then, after the Alaskan earthquake, would you say [it] differed
from the Montana quake?

Wolf: Well, they're not really comparable because, in Alaska, there was a great deal more
damage to people and property. It was a much larger earthquake, hitting much more developed
areas. Even though Alaska is not noted for being highly developed, its development is
concentrated, and so the earthquake hit in those concentrated areas. The tidal wave hit the
Kodiak settlement. It hit a lot of these waterfront settlements through the tidal wave. I think
probably as much damage was done by the tidal wave, set off by the earthquake, as by the quake
itself. In downtown Anchorage, one of the streets dropped, I think, 22 feet -- a chasm. To this
day it has not been leveled out. So I'd say that the response was much greater because the
damage was much greater. Now whether the federal government should be responding as much
as it does is a different philosophical question -- a political question. The federal response to
most of these quakes and disasters depends first upon the governor requesting the assistance and
citing the size of the disaster, and the president deciding that it deserves being made a federal
disaster area. Once he makes that decision, a whole series of emergency actions are triggered.

Hall: Why don't we move on to the Disaster Relief Act of 1965?

Wolf: That is the basic act that, with some amendments, governs this triggering and the kinds
and scope of federal relief. I haven't had a chance to go back and check on the reason for the
veto. I was in the Department of Interior and had a minor role in the development of the
legislation. Senator Anderson had named a fellow who worked with him in the Nuclear
Regulatory Commission as a special staff person to formulate a disaster relief policy. I can't
recall his name right now. It was a joint Congressional-executive-cooperative kind of effort, a
rather unusual one, probably largely created by Anderson's role in his relation to Lyndon
Johnson, which was very close. What they did was, they worked out (and it was a multi-
committee thing on the Hill, too) the terms of the Disaster Relief Act of 1965, which became the
charter for the federal programs of disaster relief. [It was] emergency aid in general, not long-
term structural changes such as the monitoring of earthquakes and so forth. It was a major
effort. They issued a comprehensive report having looked at what had been done in response to
the Alaska earthquake and earlier disasters, and sought to fashion a uniform federal policy. But
there was some aspect of that bill which caused the president to veto it. It wasn't all that significant, as I recall, in my mind, at least. When that was removed, the president signed it. Johnson was a fairly strong president, and so if he was convinced that something should not be done, he had no hesitation about vetoing a piece of legislation. Looking back over the last period of years at various presidents, Johnson was a strong president and had pretty good effect getting the Congress to do what he wanted them to do -- whether he agreed with it or not is beside the point.

The next president in terms of exercising strong veto power was President Gerry Ford, who vetoed more pieces of legislation during his few years in office, proportionately, than any president since Harry Truman. One of the least vetoing presidents was Ronald Reagan, who kept talking about the terrible things Congress was doing, but seldom vetoed anything. I think this probably was one of the major factors in creating a national debt of the size it is. I think that Harry Truman or Gerry Ford would have challenged the Congress more and vetoed more, and made it stick. It's pretty hard to get 2/3 ... Bush had shown the same sort of tendency, vetoing the Minimum Wage Bill.

Hall: You'd mentioned that you played a minor role in the disaster relief policy. What, specifically, was your role in developing that legislation?

Wolf: Well, one was describing how the proposed provisions would seem to relate to on-the-ground situations -- what actually happened and was happening and what was being done to treat it. That was the major thing I did. I was one of the people who had been there when people were trying to figure out what to do and why, so that was my major role in it. As one aside on it, the
head of the Small Business Administration was a fellow who at one time had worked for Senator Hubert Humphrey. His name was Gene Foley, a big gregarious Irishman. We had gone to Alaska. I had made a couple of trips to Alaska, one the day after the quake, to assess damage and to look at things. I think I'd made three trips up there. Foley had gone on one. Foley liked to sing, and he'd written a song about the SBA that had the music of "There's No Business Like Show Business." [laughter] It went, "There's No Business Like Small Business," and Foley was regaling us on the plane this one day, singing this great song of his.

A few weeks after he got back from this one trip, late one evening, it was about 6 p.m. and I was in my office working. I called Gene's office up and asked if he was there. His secretary said, "Well, he's tied up right now." One of Lyndon Johnson's assistants who was working on the earthquake issue was Walter Jenkins, and I said, "This is Walter Jenkins over at the White House. See if he'll talk with me." [laughter] "Just a minute, Mr. Jenkins." So Foley's right on the phone. "Foley, I understand you've written a song about the Small Business Administration. The president's interested in it. He'd like to perhaps use it at the inner-gridiron. [laughter] Can you sing it? Sing it now, sing it now!" So he starts singing this whole thing over the phone to me. After he got done, I said, "Mr. Foley, the president wants me to inform you you're fired." Complete silence at the end of the phone. Finally, I said, "Gene, this is Bob Wolf." [chuckle] He said, "You son of a bitch!" [laughter] I guess that should close on small business as well as disaster relief.

[End tape]