

## Oral History Interviews

### North Union Canal – Lindon, Utah

**Interviewer:** Sheri Murray Ellis/Certus Environmental Solutions      **Date:** August 22, 2019

**Interviewees:** Alex Lott, Ron Whiteley      **Location:** Lindon City, Utah

**Topic:** North Union Canal History: Lindon City, Utah

**NOTE:** Portions of the interview that were unrelated to the topic at hand, such as side conversation, were not included in the transcription below.

### Transcript

**Sheri:** This is Sheri Ellis in Lindon, Utah, on August 22, 2019 talking with Alex Lott and Ron Whiteley about the North Union Canal.

**Sheri:** Would you mind stating what your association is with the North Union Canal as you were saying you had a long history and association with it through various roles, as did your family?

**Ron Whiteley:** Yes, I worked for Ken Gillman, who was the President of the irrigation company. He used to pick me up and I would go help him on the canal.

**Sheri:** When was that?

**Ron Whiteley:** Oh geez, probably back in 1958 or 1959.

**Sheri:** Back in the 1950's then sometime.

**Ron Whiteley:** And then he always picked me up and I would go help him. Eldon Swenson was the water master and I used to go help him and my Dad was on the irrigation company and the board.

**Sheri:** What was your Dad's name?

**Ron Whiteley:** Theron Whiteley. And my uncle was Ott Whiteley. They were brothers and they used to hook the team of horses up to the grader and clean the canal in the summer time when the moss would grow, and they couldn't get the water to flow. They'd put the horses right in the canal.

**Alex Lott:** Cause the moss would get so thick.

**Sheri:** They would do that during irrigation season?

**Alex Lott:** In a canal full of water they would pull the thing.

**Ron Whiteley:** Yes, long about the end of June or July they would get so much (moss). I would ride ahead of them on a saddle horse cause they would have to go in the canal and then they would go up to 12<sup>th</sup> North and then there would be a bridge, and so they'd have to come out of the canal, they had ramps, and then they'd come out of the canal. The canal was dirt. And they'd go across the road and back in the canal. And I'd have to go and open the gates and everything for them, because it was all farm ground, everything was farms, there was no houses you know. And so, when they would be in the canal coming up, I'd have to have the gates open.

**Sheri:** Do you mean the gates on the canal or gates to the properties?

**Ron Whiteley:** Gates to the property owners. The gates was where they'd come out. They'd have a fence so the cattle couldn't get in and we'd have to open them so they could get in and out and back in. And then, I think probably around 1959 or 1960, I can't really remember exactly when they tore the dirt out and put in the concrete.

**Sheri:** So, you think it was sometime right around 1959 or early 1960 when they put the concrete lining in?

**Ron Whiteley:** Yes, somewhere around 1959 or 1960. I am not 100% sure, because I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Alex Lott:** I moved there in 1953 and we would pick cherries for the neighbor around the corner (Billings) and soon as we were done with the cherries, clothes and all, there would be about 20 of us in that canal swimming...right there on 16<sup>th</sup>. I mean, that was a cool off and before I could walk home, I'd be dry again. It was that hot, cuz Timp used to burn brown by the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, and that's still green this year.

**Ron Whiteley:** But anyway, the canal right there by the Swenson's we had big swings, that's probably where you was swimming at the Swenson's.

**Alex Lott:** Right there, the Swenson girl used to go in there with us...Elmaretie.

**Ron Whiteley:** My sister, Alda May and all of us, we'd haul hay during the day and then when we'd get through we'd all go swim in the canal and it was a great time.

**Sheri:** I can imagine.

**Ron Whiteley:** And there was big trees all the way along the canal. Over there by 12<sup>th</sup> North. They called them silver leaf with great big silver leaves and it was just heaven. We'd ride our horses over there and had some swings over there.

**Sheri:** Was it mostly just kids that played or swam in the canal or were there any adults that did it?

**Ron Whiteley:** Nope. Everybody was farmers and was busy. The Galdings lost a little child that drowned in the canal. That was a bad deal, I was there when they pulled him out.

**Sheri:** So, when as a boy working on the canal, did you get paid for that or was that just something that you did?

**Ron Whiteley:** They paid me a little bit you know. Ken Gillman would always take me and I'd help him if he had something in the head gate or something and when we'd get through, he'd bring me back and pull 5 bucks out of his pocket or something. He was the president of the irrigation company for a long time. I can't remember when he went off. It was long before you was here I think.

**Alex Lott:** I don't know, I don't remember him at all.

**Ron Whiteley:** He lived here in Lindon. And then Eldon Swenson was the water master for a while.

**Alex Lott:** How many years were you water master here?

**Ron Whiteley:** Oh, I don't know, 10 or 12 years.

**Sheri:** When was that, roughly? It doesn't have to be specific dates.

**Ron Whiteley:** I think I left here in 1999. I sold my property up here and bought a farm in Sanpete County and moved down there. I was there for 10 or 12 years.

**Sheri:** Oh ok. For the un-initiated like me, what is a water master's job?

**Ron Whiteley:** Keep the canal flowing. Check the flow at the river every morning and see how much water. Ken Olinghouse was over the Big Bench and we'd pull water out of the Big Bench. Then his health got to where I was

helping him a lot doing cause he couldn't get around, so I'd go to the river and adjust the river and then I'd call him and tell him what we had cause he had to report to the river commission every morning on how much water we was pulling.

**Alex Lott:** This canal is different than most canals. When the reservoirs go empty the canals stop running, this one has a right to the river so as long as there's water in the Provo River we have water in our canal, so it's a special canal.

**Sheri:** But you're not drawing directly off the river right?

**Alex Lott:** Yes. The Big Bench goes right off the river. The Big Bench ends at 8<sup>th</sup> and ours takes over; it's the same canal with two different names, it's just a continuation.

**Sheri:** Is it basically a continuation then. From doing some research on the canal, originally, before the North Union Irrigation Company got started, it was allied with the Provo Bench, and there was a plan together to build a much longer canal and that kind of didn't work out and then the North Union went off on its own. Was that shared piece of the Big Bench part of that original canal?

**Ron Whiteley:** Yes, part of the original. I've been involved in a lot of concrete and stuff over the years, I mean years and years and years. There was some concrete that had dates back in the 1800's along the Big Bench. There was some old concrete and stuff with dates when we pulled them out. It was all hand poured. There's still some concrete in there that was poured back in the original day.

**Alex Lott:** Yes, there is. The canal was dirt but some of the gates that came off it were cement so they wouldn't erode.

**Sheri:** Sure.

**Ron Whiteley:** Then they did have, it broke out, I can't tell ya when that happened. It broke out and went down off; it was one section that went out, it went down towards University Avenue, but we didn't have all them big buildings and stuff it was just farm ground. And it washed pretty good.

**Alex Lott:** That's the most unusual canal. You go up Provo Canyon and you see where we take the water out and the water looks like it's going uphill to get up to Orem but really that bench goes slightly that way and so it just goes down, down, down, till it's up on top of the bench and then they cut it all the way back and come all the way through Orem and all through Lindon and over to the Armory in Pleasant Grove. So, it's really unique the way those guys did things...they were nobody's dummies.

**Sheri:** It's pretty ingenious those folks that built those things back in the day. Being able to use that grade and use gravity flow without the types of equipment we have today and to be as precise and they still got it right.

**Ron Whiteley:** My Dad (we) used to dig ditches with a "skip" and put a horse on it, and that's how they made the ditches. And my Dad told me, he said they used to take a whiskey bottle and fill it half full of water and then they'd put a string on it and they'd pull it in the bottom of the ditch and that's how they got their grade when the water would come down in and fill the neck of the whiskey bottle they knew that was the grade. If it was to the back of the whiskey bottle, they knew they had to cut.

**Sheri:** That's ingenious.

**Ron Whiteley:** My Dad told me. I said how did you get the water to go the right direction? He said well, they'd take a whiskey bottle and put a string on it and fill it half full of water and they'd pull it in the bottom of the ditch. Then they got a horse on there with a skip and pull and take the dirt out and that's how they made all the ditches and stuff.

**Sheri:** That's pretty amazing.

**Alex Lott:** I came from a mining town in Nevada and coming in to Utah and seeing this farming area was just amazing to me. Because every spring, we had to clean our own ditches coming off that canal. So, there would be a big bunch of men with shovels and things and we'd all go up and down the ditches cleaning and burning and cleaning so that we'd have water during the summer. While they are taking care of the canal, we're doing all our own ditches. Every group of users were doing their own ditches during the spring.

**Sheri:** Did you guys help each other out?

**Alex Lott:** Yup. Everybody helped everybody and pitched in. Until it came to their own house, they may do their own ditch coming up to their house but the main ditch was cleaned out by hand.

**Ron Whiteley:** There would be a bunch of 30 or 40 farmers and they all pitched in and helped each other. Somebody would be burning ditches and some would be cleaning dirt and stuff out.

**Alex Lott:** Ol' Bill Pratt...he liked to burn.

**Sheri:** He was a fire starter huh; a fire bug?

**Ron Whiteley:** On the grader, they'd put the horses in, and my uncle, he'd have his team, and my Dad would have his team, and each one of them would drive their own team. And there was a guy called Clem Shoell, and he would be on the back and it had big wheels on the back, and that's how they raised the blade and turn it on an angle. They'd go one way and turn it on an angle and throw dirt against the bank and then when they come the other way he'd turn it back the other way and he'd raise it up and down; Clem was always the one on the back of it raising it and lowering it. I don't ever remember anybody but Clem on there. I mean he was always the one that run the grader.

**Alex Lott:** Probably cause he did it right.

**Sheri:** Well, you would have to be paying attention because if you get it wrong you would affect the flow.

**Ron Whiteley:** They'd be standing in the water. The water would be clear up on the wheels. They'd have their hip boots on and my Dad and uncle would be sitting in the seat driving the horses with their hip boots on and the water would be coming up over and the water would be up to the horses' bellies.

**Sheri:** You would have to make sure that you dig your canal wide enough that this can fit in across the wheel base.

**Ron Whiteley:** There used to be 50 or 60 second-feet of water in the canal when everyone was irrigating. All the fruit farmers and everything.

**Alex Lott:** This is some of the best fruit ground right here in the Orem area.

**Sheri:** Was fruit orchards the primary crop grown in the Lindon area?

**Ron Whiteley:** Hay and grain farming and a lot of berries. 1600 North had several dairies and they all had farms and raised hay and grain. Orem was really known for their cherries, apples and peaches. I remember people used to come from all over when the crops would come on. My Dad raised tomatoes, sugar beets, grain and hay.

**Sheri:** Did he sell the sugar beets to the sugar factories?

**Ron Whiteley:** He'd sell them to the cannery on about 10<sup>th</sup> north and west of state street. He raised sweet corn and they used to take the corn to the cannery and can it and the tomatoes in the cannery boxes. That was all irrigated from the North Union Canal.

**Sheri:** So, there isn't another major canal that feeds Lindon?

**Alex Lott:** The Murdock Canal. But most of its water is owned by the City of Salt Lake but we do have some rights in it.

**Ron Whiteley:** It was mostly orchards above that watered out of the Murdock (Stratton's, Gillman's and the Church farm). The Church farm owned clear from 1600 North clear to 1200 North (east of the North Union Canal). All their water came out of the Murdock Canal. Even after they cemented it, we still had to clean it and cut the brush and stuff away from the side. I've done that, for, I can't even tell you how many years I've done that.

**Alex Lott:** I had a water turn this morning. And my water comes out of the North Union 2 foot concrete rubber gasket thing all the way to my house. He turns it in at 8am and turns it off at 8:50am and I don't get it till 9am. But it still waters my whole place. I started with 400 trees and I'm down to 32 fruit trees. So, I don't have to clean these things anymore, but Ron, even today comes up from Sanpete County and cleans our cement canal...even to this day!

**Sheri:** You are a dedicated man.

**Ron Whiteley:** Well, there's a lot of certain things you have to have. Like trucks and skid steers and backhoes. It goes clear from Pleasant Grove to Lindon; I don't take care of any of the Pleasant Grove stuff though.

**Alex Lott:** That's their gray water now. They own 76% of the canal now. It's Lindon's gray water coming out of our canal and goes into ponds and they pipe it throughout the whole city.

**Ron Whiteley:** The farmers, as they developed the ground, the cities bought the water. Ray Brown, he was with the city and he was kind of the main guy that pushed putting the gray water in and getting the funds for the gray water. Then they put it all through the whole city.

**Alex Lott:** I wish I had it. Because the price they pay per month, each family. For one month myself using culinary water in Orem (even though Lindon is on each side of me) is \$190 a month and most was just to water my lawn. Lindon residents pays \$10 a month and they get gray water every day.

**Ron Whiteley:** It's a little more than \$10 a month.

**Sheri:** Obviously as the city has grown and farms have been sold off, subdivided and developed and all those things, that has been a big change. So, is most of the water that is in the canal now used for flood irrigation for lawns and things like that or are there still pockets of farms that are still being used?

**Ron Whiteley:** There are very few farms that use any water anymore.

**Alex Lott:** It's all Lindon City and their gray water.

**Ron Whiteley:** It all goes into a pond and it's all a pressurized irrigation system.

**Alex Lott:** Lindon City has at least 74% of all our shares.

**Sheri:** Do you see that trend continuing and they will keep buying shares until the North Union doesn't exist anymore? Will they need the North Union Irrigation Company or just the canal?

**Alex Lott:** No, they will need the company as the company has the rights, the city doesn't.

**Ron Whiteley:** Norma Brown was the secretary and I remember Norma Brown back in the 50's.

**Alex Lott:** I am the President now and Norma Brown was my secretary until she was in her 90's probably.

**Ron Whiteley:** She just passed away 2 years ago. She was the secretary as long as I can remember. My Dad would go to have checks signed and she would give me cookies. I can't remember any other secretary. Ray Brown worked at the city and was her husband.

**Sheri:** That is amazing. I'm sure it's her handwriting that I have been seeing on the old documents I have been looking at. She would have been the one to write most of that stuff.

**Ron Whiteley:** So, do you have a list of the old, old, old people that owned water?

**Sheri:** I do have some of the pre-1900 records and copies of those things that were provided with names and their shares; pretty fascinating stuff.

**Ron Whiteley:** I have a list of all the old owners when Ken Gillman was still around and I was doing the water master; it's been 30 something years ago. I have some stuff in my safe in my vault I've had for years and years.

**Sheri:** We have records scanned digitally so they are accessible online to research the canal which is a great history to have. I will look at the list to see if there are any gaps or anything that you may be able to fill in.

**Ron Whiteley:** Ken Gillman was over the Murdock Canal and Central Utah Water Project and over the whole State of Utah. I'd ride a saddle horse and open a gate for him or whatever.

**Alex Lott:** That's what a water master does, he'll open a gate when it's one person's turn and closes it and does another one for somebody else and goes right down the line opening and closing gates all up and down that canal on a schedule and know when it was their turn to take the water so people didn't get too much water.

**Sheri:** So, you control it and shut it off at a certain amount based on the flow rate; it wasn't up to the property owner.

**Ron Whiteley:** It was based on their shares of water; so much water per share.

**Sheri:** I wondered what you do when people wanted to take a little extra time, but if you're controlling the gate then they can't.

**Ron Whiteley:** That was one of the things I did for Ken in the summertime because I was out of school. If Ken was in a water meeting, I would ride my saddle horse or tote goat and open and shut gates when Ken couldn't for a meeting or something; when he was around, he would do it.

**Alex Lott:** This last year the state came and wanted to take some of the water away from us. Because they said the water is ours, your shares only give you the right to use it. But if you're not using it, and we had to prove that we were using the water, all of it, or they were going to cut down what goes into our Big Bench and North Union Canals. And we were able to make them back down and show that we are using everything in a responsible manner. That's why water masters are so important.

**Ron Whiteley:** We could document that we was using every drop of water because they thought that we wasn't using our water and if you wasn't using it, we would lose it.

**Alex Lott:** Especially since we have a right to the Provo River, we get to have irrigation. Where all these other little companies, when the reservoirs are gone, they are done and get to keep running. Even if Deer Creek is down, we get to keep running because we have a right to the percentage of the river itself and they will never let that go empty because of the fish.

**Sheri:** Right. So, you document by how much you are pulling out of the river, and what an individual user does with it that is not documented per se?

**Alex Lott:** You are documenting how much for all the users.

**Sheri:** So, you are pulling out this much and diverting it for their use.

**Ron Whiteley:** There are other users down the river that pull out of the river too. We can only pull our share so that down the river somebody else can pull their share. And then they controlled it because of the June sucker; we had to

watch it really close. Ken Ollinghouse was over the river commission and we could only pull so much and we had to make sure there was so many second feet going down the river because of the June sucker.

**Sheri:** Did that share have to decrease over time in order to maintain that level?

**Alex Lott:** I had years when I'd take my full stream instead of watering 5 or 6 rows at a time. I would go down one side one row of trees and get it watered and I'd go to another row and if I hadn't had enough water I'd turn down the other side cause sometimes I'd only get one side of trees done on dry years.

**Ron Whiteley:** Norma (Brown) would make the schedules out. Our water all comes from the Uinta's; trout lake and all them, and it would just depend on the measured amount of snow and then they'd allocate how much water each person had according to how many water shares.

**Sheri:** In those cases, did everybody get a certain percentage of their water shares; like everybody got to do 75% of their water shares or something like that so it's pretty equal across the board? Although the amounts would differ based on shares and totals in the river.

**Ron Whiteley:** Yes, it was based on how many shares you owned. So, whatever you owned, and if everybody was 70% that's what you got.

**Alex Lott:** This year we got 100% if we need it, if we don't, then it goes on down to Utah Lake and the Great Salt Lake or Lindon City takes it in their ponds and uses it here; we are using it. When the State came after us, we really checked on everything to make sure that we had dotted all our i's.

**Sheri:** I'll bet you did. That's no joke because once you lose it you can't get it back.

**Ron Whiteley:** Well, I don't know if I should tell you this, but Ken always said make sure you take what you use because if somebody don't want their shares we'll put it in a lateral down to the lake cause it don't make no difference whether we put it in the lake or in the river. He said (Ken) we need to make sure it's going so we're showing our use; it made a big difference.

**Alex Lott:** They were able to show that. It took us a year to finally get that to really back down. I sat in a million meetings where they really thought they had us. But once they saw that we was using the water responsibly they said okay, we'll keep it where it is.

**Sheri:** That's good, I'm glad to hear that.

**Sheri:** I have one last question for each of you and you can answer from your own perspective.

What's the biggest change you have seen over the time that you've been associated with the North Union Canal, in terms of its use or physical structure; what is the biggest thing that strikes you?

**Ron Whiteley:** Converting to gray water. The biggest use he's seen is when the farms went into houses and everything and they quit using it for agriculture and went into the pressurized irrigation system and people could water their gardens and lawns and the city parks.

**Alex Lott:** The biggest change for him was seeing it go from a dirt canal to a cement canal, because it saved so much water; they was losing so much water in a dirt canal seeping into the ground or whatever. That to me was a marvelous thing, plus it took away a lot of needless work that didn't have to be done anymore; except the moss, it still has to be done.

**Ron Whiteley:** It's all cement now but they're going to pipe some sections up here that they're having some issues with leaks.

**Alex Lott:** Our problem now is people dumping their garbage into the canal. It drives the water master crazy too cause it gets in the gates and can flood things.

**Sheri:** I noticed that while I was surveying along it.

**Ron Whiteley:** I had times where I'd have to go to the river and shut the water off when somebody would throw a mattress in or an old couch and it would get under one of the bridges and plug it and then back up. Then we had a kid that went in to get a ball and sucked him into the siphon and I had to go and turn the canal off to get him out. That was on the 4<sup>th</sup> or 24<sup>th</sup> of July. I was the water master when that happened too.

**Sheri:** Thanks. Let's go ahead and wrap this up and we will get copies of the transcript to you.