

From the Oral History of

WILLIAM W. WOOD, JR.

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An interview conducted by Robin Li in 2008, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.¹

WOOD: In 1961, I started taking my classes at Berkeley and finished them in '63, took my exams in '63, started doing my dissertation. Visited with a lot of people, read a lot of material, prepared the document. I defended that actually in '65. In the meantime, in the spring of '64, Cooperative Extension of UC inquired as to whether I would be interested in going to Riverside for a new position that they were creating. . . .

LI: So could you tell me what your average day was like for you as a program director? Who would you be talking to, what kinds of things would you be doing?

¹ Presented here is a brief excerpt from William Wood, "Taking the University to the People: University of California Cooperative Extension," an oral history conducted by Robin Li, Ph.D., 2008, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2009. © 2009 by The Regents of the University of California.

The oral history excerpts in this "Environmental Law — Oral History" section are intended to provide personal commentaries on the topics discussed in the preceding Environmental Law "Articles" and "Book" sections. This excerpt relates to the book: Rebecca Conard, *The Conservation of Local Autonomy: California's Agricultural Land Policies, 1900–1966*, in this volume, 13 CAL. LEGAL HIST. 101 (2018).

WOOD: I would say that the typical day was — there'd be a short portion of that day devoted to talking to and working with colleagues on their programs. . . .

LI: And how many people would you be overseeing at a given time?

WOOD: Twenty-five.

LI: And they were all specialists with particular areas?

WOOD: Yes. And they'd be at one, two, three, four different locations, for the most part. Then at least half of every day was devoted to program. Keeping abreast of what's happening, and this would be, as the years progressed, starting in 1966, with the passage of the California Land Conservation Act, the Williamson Act, I started spending more and more time on land policy. And I'd say, when I retired, that was — between water and land, that took up — since the last two years, there was no longer a program director. So I was back to being a specialist, 75 percent of my time was devoted to that. At the beginning it was small. In the course of that, it was made up of three or four components. One was, with some colleagues, we tried to do research on what constitutes land conversion and changes in land use through research projects. Secondly, working with either legislative committees, or more particularly with the state agencies involved in agricultural land. Third, it involved working a great deal with farm advisors and county government. . . .

LI: So you were talking about your interest in land policy following 1964, the Williamson Act. Was there a specific project that you can think of that kind of encapsulated the issues you really thought were critical to —

WOOD: It's difficult to put it into a project context, but let me talk a little bit about the history and how it evolved. Because there have always been some major problems associated with land and water. But let's talk about land for a while, because California has spent more time looking at water than it has land, and it still hasn't resolved that. When Proposition 13 was passed by the voters of California, that made quite a big difference, but that wasn't passed until after the state had already adopted the Williamson Act. Now, the California Land Conservation Act, also known as the Williamson Act — the author's name was John Williamson; he was the assemblyman from Tulare County. I think he had been county assessor

before getting elected to the Assembly. And he brought together a group of people, and they developed what became the Williamson Act. It was important because up until that point, because there had been a number of scandals in assessor's offices in various counties around the state in the '50s, where preferential treatment was given to certain landowners. The state Constitution essentially said that the land shall be appraised on its market value. Well, subsequent to World War II the demand for land in this state soared. So you had people paying exorbitant prices, and part of it was the Internal Revenue Code about which I talked earlier. Part of it was just to get a piece of the area.

The ones having the most difficulty at that time were the cow-calf operators, the livestock people. Because technically they had thousands of acres, because the animal-unit-months on typical rangeland in California is not very high. As a result, it wasn't at all unusual to find someone in the cow-calf industry for whom annual property taxes exceeded gross revenue. So the big push was from them, but all farmers were facing the same problem. The Williamson Act came along, and it essentially said that if a landowner goes in a ten-year contract that's automatically renewed every year unless you take explicit action — now that's based on the principle that most of us forget to take explicit action. Therefore, it can work in perpetuity. That land would be assessed based upon the value of return on investment.

LI: Right, rather than on the square footage.

WOOD: Well, rather than on market value.

LI: Right, I see.

WOOD: See, if the market said somebody will pay \$5,000 an acre for this land, and if you capitalize what you're making on the crop, and it turns out to be \$1,200 an acre, up until that point, the assessor was supposed to tax it on the basis of five. The Williamson Act contract said you can't assess it for more than \$1,200. So that made a big difference. The difficulty is that it was sold on the basis of protecting prime land, that very best delta land, that's the most productive. But that's the land closest to cities, and that's the land where the owner says, "I'm going to capitalize; when it gets to ten I'll sell." Now, we're talking 1950s. The Williamson Act was adopted by more non-prime land than the prime growers, or landowners, because they had fewer

options. And it did not do a whole lot on that land that people like Charles Warren, who was the assemblyman from Wilshire District, L.A., was a big supporter of the Williamson Act. He wanted to save prime land, but this really had very little impact.

Now, there are some other factors involved that made it very difficult then, still make it difficult. Number one, all land-use policies, by and large, are the responsibility of city and county governments. And the state runs into difficulty every time it mandates what local governments shall do. Secondly, the amount of prime agricultural land, I mean really productive land, is not equal among counties. And so the question rises, what interest do people who reside in San Francisco have as far as land decisions made in Tulare County? The citizens of San Francisco say, we're very concerned, because that's our food supply. The people of Tulare County say, look, we have local autonomy; we're not going to let you dictate what we're going to do. So this constant conflict between local autonomy and statewide goals was not resolved then; it has never been resolved.

LI: So did you find yourself speaking a lot to county politicians and officials?

WOOD: I found myself speaking to numerous boards of supervisors, to citizens' groups, in urban settings, in very rural settings. And what came out of that is that the very simplistic idea of trying to keep our productive capacity for food is so complex, I coined a phrase, how comprehensive can planning go before it becomes incomprehensible? Because there are so many of these considerations. The source of most revenue at both city and county is property tax. So first of all you're dealing with their autonomy. Then you're dealing with their revenue source. And then you're saying that here in this nice, rural county, you're going to let those idiots in L.A. and San Jose and San Francisco dictate what we do. That has nothing to do with local autonomy. That has to do with the fact that those individuals who have a bucolic area would rather have an income. Those people who live in some parts of San Francisco would rather be able to go see a bucolic environment.

LI: So was the tension between developing land for other uses and —?

WOOD: It got to the point where that was the battleground.

LI: So it was like, shopping malls or orange groves?

WOOD: Yeah. And Riverside's a good example of things gone wrong. This had more navel oranges than any other place in the world when we moved down here in 1964, and a lot of them had been removed by then. They have a large area that's quote "reserved for navel oranges or agriculture" unquote. No. It's mostly development now. And the reason is very obvious. From the urbanite's perspective, we'd like to keep those orange groves, but we want the economic activity. We want employment, we want sales in our business, et cetera, which means we want more people. Where are you going to put them? Build houses. Where are you going to build houses? In the orange groves. From the producers' standpoint — and there are some producers who have stuck it out. But I know one grower, a large grower in this western Riverside area, who says his annual cost just of picking up trash that people throw under his groves runs way over a hundred dollars an acre.

LI: Wow. That's a new problem, I'm sure.

WOOD: That's right, let alone you can't use chemicals. The water rates are still differential for agriculture, but not as much as they used to be. Labor becomes a problem. Theft and vandalism becomes a major problem. So most of those growers said, bless you, if I can get more than my investment out, I'll go live somewhere else. The navel orange production now is predominantly in the San Joaquin Valley, where they've had equal problems, because they don't want to lose their opportunity for urban development. And if you look at Visalia, for example, one side is highly productive land. The other side is not very productive land; it's got hardpan. It's also not very good for putting up houses. [laughter] So what happens? The other problem, of course, is dairies out of Chino have moved up there. The most recent interesting conflict was between dairy operators and tree fruit growers in Tulare County over water quality. You can't win.

Anyway, the Williamson Act was voluntary. It was adopted by most counties but not all. Used by a few in conjunction with their county plan. Others used it just to keep the landowners quiet, which was not a particularly good way, because you ought to coordinate it, in terms of areas that you want to keep as agriculture. But that's never been a high priority for most county governments, certainly not for Riverside, and not for San Diego. It is, today, for Los Angeles, when it's too late. [laughter] So, there you have it.

The whole issue of land is then further compounded by the fact that our heritage is the family farm. And the family farm in California is your retirement account. And if you take away the value of that retirement account, what do you do? Now, that's not always the problem, but it's still a major part of it, that the way a lot of small farmers retire in California is by selling to someone who has ideas of development, at a price higher than what the capitalized value is from agricultural products. So all of these factors come together.

LI: Do you think this issue of land policy was particularly difficult for California Extension, versus other states, because of the population and the — ?

WOOD: I think it was more difficult in California for two or three reasons. Number one, the population pressures on California are much more severe than anybody except maybe Florida. Now, in Arizona, the pressures were on water, not on land. Secondly, the nature of our land resources, if you go to counties in the Corn Belt, there are variations, but most of the counties, most of their land is highly productive land for those kinds of crops. So the fact that County A decides to develop and County B wants to remain agricultural is not a statewide concern. It may be a concern of how much land we take out in total, but not in terms of those two counties. In California, if you take out Monterey County, or Fresno or Tulare County, you've taken out a good part of our productive capacity.

Now, there's one other aspect of this that I find fascinating, and it's fun to do it with a group. We produce far in excess of 250 commercial agricultural commodities in this state. And I'll meet with a group and say, included in that is probably thirty different vegetable crops, commercially grown. We don't need thirty different — nutritionally, we don't need that many choices. So let's start cutting down, and I always say, "Okay, now, first one to go is eggplant. Can you hear me, dear?" And in the group, I say, "How many are willing to give up eggplant?" And a few will raise their hands, and there's half of them who like eggplant. I don't happen to like eggplant. Pick another vegetable. I said, therein lies one of our major problems, in terms of planning the resources for agriculture. We could get by with a lot less land if we said, sorry, folks, no more consumer choice. You get one nut, one fruit, two vegetables, one green, one yellow [laughter] — it would be so much easier if I were the czar.

But that's not the nature of the beast. And to cater to consumer choice — it's interesting as a sideline, all of the attention now on energy consumption, the one thing that's going to begin to take its toll is our ability every day of the year to get any fresh fruit or vegetable we want. Those days are numbered. When gasoline or fuel gets up to ten dollars a gallon, you're going to stop getting fresh fruit from Chile in the winter. You'll stop getting fresh vegetables in the winter from Mexico. And it's consumer choice that has driven — the consumer choice in Iowa or Illinois is not an issue. You're going to raise corn and soybeans. What else do you do?

LI: And they import most of their food.

WOOD: Right. I never will forget, I was sitting in a meeting, and an assemblyman whose name I can't remember, or where he was from. He was an urban assemblyman. So the group made the observation in the same context. He said, "You don't need to save land for avocados. Let them grow them in the Dakotas where nobody wants to live." Which turned out to be a very good example, because you can just eliminate avocados from your diet. It wouldn't bother me particularly, but there's some people that it would be a major loss.

So the whole issue of land, and to a large extent water for agriculture, is compounded by all of these other variables in the policy process. There is the matter of, what level of government do you want to make decisions? How do you want to protect the grower who has his investment in there? How much choice do you want to give to consumers? If a county has a significant amount of prime land and no one else does, should they be required in perpetuity to be the food bank and not have the economic growth? In water, how short in food supply should we get before we cut off irrigation to agriculture, instead of shipping it to Los Angeles? These were all critical issues, and there really is no resolution. My definition of a public policy is where there's no best answer.

There may be a best answer for me, there may be for you. But anytime somebody comes along and says, on energy policy, here's the best answer, here's the solution to everything, wrong. I don't care what it is; it's wrong. And that's one of the things that's been hard to get across. And I would say, in summary of my quote "educational career" unquote in Cooperative Extension, in the area of land and water, it's been the effort to help make

people understand the complexity of issues and to avoid the single-valued solution. The good resolution of a public policy issue, at the local level, is where everybody is equally unhappy. And I think that's a good message to remember. Because if somebody's happy, then you better watch out. I think it sounds like a sermon as much as anything. See, a part of that time period I spent in educating our advisors on the public policy education process. That's where the political science and the agricultural economics came together very well. And I gave weeklong seminars for all of our county directors on public policy education, how you help your clientele without taking sides. Help them define what the issue is. Help them identify what the alternatives are. Help them identify the impacts of the alternatives. And then a political decision is what comes next, and you're not part of that.

LI: Right. You give them the tools for them to negotiate the political decision.

WOOD: That's right. And I'd have to say that looking back on thirty-some years in the university, the one thing about which I'm most proud is that Extension personnel got much more comfortable on sticky policy issues. And you can't avoid them if you're working with people day in and day out. I remember a state senator from Fresno, who shall remain unnamed. We were at a public meeting, and he came up to me afterward, and he said, "Bill, one of these days you're going to have to take a position." I said, "George, if I took a position against your pet project, how reliable would my analysis be in the future?" "Well, but you've got to take a position." I said, "No. My role is not to take positions. My role is to help people understand what their options are and make informed decisions. I don't have to agree with them." And it was a very good lesson.

One other quaint story. The most valued compliment I think I ever got is a fellow that I'd known for a long time. We had a seminar in Modesto, all day. At the end of the day, I'd given two presentations, and I'd chaired a discussion group. He came up and said, "Dr. Wood, I don't understand. I still don't know [where] you stand on this project. I couldn't get a glimmer of an idea." I said, "Thank you. That was my objective."