This interview was recorded on November 7, 2001, for the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. The interviewer is Guy Errickson. The interview also is available in video format, filmed by Guy Errickson.

[A].

00:25  Was planning director for the city of Boulder during the 1980s. Currently is deputy city manager for Scottsdale, AZ. Was born in Oklahoma. Undergraduate and graduate degrees are in political science. Came to Denver because his wife had a teaching job there. Was hired by Arvada as an entry-level planner. This was in about 1969.

02:15  Briefly describes projects that he worked on as a planner in Arvada. There was an opening for associate planner in Boulder, which at that time was equivalent to assistant planning director. He was contacted about applying for the job and was hired by Nolan Rosall. Describes the interview: “Nolan talked for an hour about his planning philosophy. At the end of it he said, ‘Gawf, I sort of like the way you think. Would you like to work here?’ And I don’t think I’d said over about ten words the entire time.” That was 1974 or 1975. Worked as associate planner for Nolan Rosall and then as assistant planning director for Frank Gray (the title was changed). In 1982 was appointed planning director for Boulder and held that position through the 1980s. In the early ‘90s, he worked in the city manager’s office on special projects, such as the North Boulder annexation and acquiring open space to increase the flood protection for Boulder High School. Description of these projects. After working on those projects, he moved to San Jose and then Palo Alto to work in their planning departments.

06:22  Describes family: two children. Daughter (the oldest) was in kindergarten when they moved to Boulder. Both children went through the Boulder School system. This was a great place to raise kids. Children now live in Virginia and North Carolina. Has three grandchildren.

07:09  First year in planning department, lived in Arvada and commuted. After that, lived in Boulder. Activities outside of job with planning department? Planning job was more than a full-time job. Also members of the First Presbyterian Church. Coached Little League for a couple of years.

10:00  Biggest challenge. “Working in Boulder is a challenge just to begin with. It’s a great community. The people in the community are fantastic. They appreciate good planning, they demand good planning, they have high expectations. Just trying to keep up with them is part of the greatest challenge.” Other than specific issues, however, it wasn’t really a challenge, was a great experience, he enjoyed just about every minute of it.
Solar Access Ordinance and other efforts around energy conservation. Late ’70s: Comprehensive Community Energy Management Program (CCEMP)—half a dozen cities around the country received grant from federal government to do an energy audit of the community. Ed worked on this with Susan Osborne. They did a comprehensive audit of Boulder’s energy consumption and ways to reduce energy consumption with a lot of emphasis on active and passive solar energy, influenced by the proximity of SERI—the Solar Energy Research Institute (Ed: located in Golden). Describes 4-plex that was built at 4th or 5th and Pearl in the late 1970s using solar energy technology.

Susan Osborne also worked with him on Solar Access Ordinance. It took about a year to develop. It was one of the first city solar access ordinances in the country. When he later worked in Palo Alto and they wanted to develop a solar access ordinance, he was able to tell them, from his experience here, about both the pluses and minuses. For example, a solar access ordinance could lead to the removal of trees because trees can block light, but cutting down trees would not be very popular in Boulder—so that was one of the first amendments to the draft ordinance here. As planning director here, Ed put a high emphasis on planting trees for about 15 years. Originally, there were very few trees here, but now trees are one of things, along with open space and the architecture of the university, that visually define Boulder. The Solar Access Ordinance was adopted in about 1982. It was a model effort that Boulder was in the forefront in for developing.

Ed lived in Rolling Hills, which is on the edge of Table Mesa at the base of Shannahan Ridge. Describes some of his neighbors there and the closeness of the house to the schools.

Major projects that Ed worked on when he first came to Boulder:
1) Floodway Ordinance. Ken Wright, a world renowned expert on floodway management, helped Ed understand the issue and helped them adopt an ordinance to deal with the impacts of Boulder Creek, which is a gentle brook most of the time but can go from its ordinary size to covering several blocks in either direction during a flood.
2) Danish Plan. Initially limited the number of building permits in the city to 450 per year, the equivalent of a 2% rate of growth. It also provided that new building permits from that point on would be issued on the basis of merit. But it didn’t define the merit system. Ed’s job was to develop the merit system within three months. Used info developed by Frank Gray and worked with Trafton Beane to develop merit system. System included rating such qualities as energy conservation, excellence in site design, affordability of housing, architectural quality, and availability of public facilities.

The “three-tier concept” developed at the same time—Boulder Valley divided into three tiers: the existing community; the area that could be added to the community, based on services available, over the next 15 years; and the area where no growth was expected to occur within a 15, 20 or 30 year period. Developed by Nolan Rosall.

Performance industrial review: encouraging employers to move into the area who would meet certain performance measurements. One of the first things Ed worked on after becoming planning director.
24:19  More discussion of the Danish Plan and how it evolved. Original plan had a five year sunset. Towards the end of the first five years, every project was scoring near the top of the evaluation—they all would have energy conservation, affordable housing, etc. Started requiring the aspects of the merit system as normal and went to a proportional system in the early 80s. Developers would get a proportional amount of permits, as long as they met the requirements of the merit system.

26:56  Robinson vs. the City of Boulder: case filed by developers challenging the constitutionality of the Danish Plan. Won by the city. In general, tried hard to work with whole community to create a win-win situation. Discusses working with various interests.

29:28  Discusses and praises PLAN-Boulder County. Strong environmentalists, but also cared deeply about the community. Very strategic in their thinking. A very positive force.

31:04  Flood plain issues. Eleven or so tributaries go through Boulder. The city defines as the area of regulation the 100-year flood plain, which is the area that statistically will flood once in a hundred years. Within that fill width, can further subdivide as a flood storage area and a floodway. A floodway is the main channel, where the current is. The flood storage area is the slower moving water. The floodway is the most hazardous part. Need to be careful of development in the floodway. Over the years he has come to question whether there should be development even in the flood storage area.

33:12  Flatirons Property. Prior possibilities for its disposition: open space, private research park Ed’s reaction to Rock Creek and Flatiron Crossing: sprawl at its worst. Looking down into Boulder Valley from the top of Davidson Mesa: thank heaven for the preservation of Open Space in Boulder.

36:58  Fought against the establishment of the beltway (C-470), Superior, Rock Creek, Flatirons Crossing. Growth and change occur and that is good, but it needs to be done well. Boulder for the most part has done it well. It certainly is always trying to do it well.

37:52  Discusses issue of annexation of Gunbarrel. Close vote, but it didn’t pass. Last tried in about 1986-87. Also was involved with North Boulder annexation, which did pass. Describes the methods he used to contact residents and educate them and answer their questions. This happened in 1990 or 1991. Included everything up to the junction with U.S. 36 and west to the foothills.

41:56  Crossroads Mall / Boulder Urban Renewal Authority (BURA). Frank Gray is Mr. BURA. He pulled it together. This saved the city of Boulder at that time. The threat was that a regional shopping center was going to go to Louisville. Just like it happened 15 years later; it would have happened that much earlier. Ed’s involvement: he worked on the site plan and then, after Frank Gray left, he became the urban renewal director in addition to becoming planning director. Worked on acquiring Mervyn’s to come to the mall during expansion. They also worked on getting a downtown hotel developed on the old Burlington railroad property at 9th and Canyon. There was a proposal for a 300-room
hotel with underground parking. The Urban Renewal Authority would pay for the parking. Hotel market went under, so it didn’t fly. (The property is still a parking lot today). But also it was a problem that in order to have an urban renewal authority kick in, had to show that the area was blighted. This had been easy at Crossroads where businesses were leaving but downtown didn’t appear to be blighted. But by that time the redevelopment of Crossroads had kicked in and sucked some of the business away from the mall. The downtown mall was successful, but needed constant vigilance and attention to keep it that way. The hotel was seen as a way to get people downtown with minimized impacts. Walking around there today, Ed could see that other things had been done: “it looks like it is still the jewel of Boulder.”

47:12 Boulder Creek Path: Boulder Creek had been ignored by the community as an amenity for 80 years. Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr., when he did the plan for Boulder in 1908 identified it as an asset that we needed to take advantage of. But we ignored it for the next 80 years. There were several attempts to channelize it, which would have taken the beautiful creek area and turned it into a hardscape channel. The community didn’t accept that idea, which speaks to the wisdom of the people of Boulder. Ed pursued and won a comprehensive plan amendment that said that Boulder Creek would not be channelized, that it would be left in a natural state.

49:29 Next step was to get the city council on bicycles. The creek at that time had just a few broken asphalt segments of path along the creek. Couldn’t go very far. Got every council member onto a bicycle. One was blind, but he rode a tandem. Mayor Correll hadn’t ridden a bicycle in 40 years. Tried to traverse Boulder Creek bike path. They saw how hard it was, but also what a great opportunity. Planning then went in with a proposal to council and their only questions were, “Can you do it earlier?” and “Do you need more money?”

50:56 Third step was an organizational one: settling who would be in charge of project. Money was coming from Parks Dept., Transportation, Open Space Dept. None could agree on the other one being in charge. Finally it was agreed that, since Planning Dept had no money involved in it, that it could be impartial and it should be in charge. Plan was put together by Susan Osborne. Deserves a huge amount of credit. Another wise staff move was hiring Gary Lacy who is an engineer but doesn’t think like an engineer—thinks like a planner, like a visionary) to be the construction manager. The creek path and creek restoration is better than any other he’s ever seen in other cities.

54:20 More on creek restoration: when they went to Nederland to buy boulders for the creek, headlines read “Boulders for Boulder.” Cleaned up vegetation, put in jogging and bike paths so it would have varied uses. Did introduce a lot of people to a sensitive habitat area. But tried hard to minimize impact.

55:30 Boulder-Dushanbe teahouse. Initial reaction was, “What in the world do we do with this?” Discusses acquiring the Central Park corridor as a public space.

57:46 Planning Dept. involved in MANY projects; very busy, but lots of opportunity.
Full name is George Edward Gawf. Has gone by “Ed” all his adult life.

Library. Debate over whether to expand the library in its downtown location or move it to the Dairy Center location. The city librarian wanted to build a new main library. The existing library was in the municipal campus area. It had been built around the same time or shortly after the municipal building was constructed, around the early 1950s. Boulder had outgrown the existing library. (This was in the mid to late 1980s). Half a dozen sites for a new library were identified. City librarian wanted to build a new main library at the Watts Hardy Dairy Center site because that was the geographic center of Boulder. When it came to the planning department for review, the city manager, most of the city council members, and the city librarian favored the Watts Hardy site (26th and Walnut). It had been a Watts Hardy dairy and would have been easy to develop. The planning department thought that maintaining the existing downtown, the emotional heart of the community, was important and therefore recommended that the existing library be expanded—staying out of the floodplain, but crossing the creek and building another facility on the other side and bridging the two. They thought it was important to have main facilities downtown in the heart of the community. It also was cost-effective. Already had a 30,000 square foot library. What better setting than crossing Boulder Creek. Council, in a split vote, decided to go with the Watts Hardy site. PLAN-Boulder County members circulated a referendum petition to place the question on the ballot, which it was. The vote ended up being about 2/3 to 1/3 in favor of keeping the library downtown. Discusses feeling as a planner that he worked for the citizens of Boulder rather than the city staff. In retrospect, is very pleased that the community “rose up and took that action.” “If the main library had been built at the Watts Hardy, behind the service docks of Marshall’s, I would have felt that much of what I tried to do in Boulder would have been for naught.”

Ed actually had wanted to use a different architect. A local architect was chosen, someone that the library commission and the city librarian felt more comfortable with, rather than a nationally known architect. The architectural idea was to capture some of the Flatirons concept and to use Boulder Creek. One of the concepts was to try to create a grove of trees near the glass area to create an indoor/outdoor, California type relationship with the building, so that when you are inside looking outward you feel almost like you are outside and vice versa. He left just about the time that construction had been started but hasn’t been back since construction has been completed so he is interested in seeing how it turned out.

The airport and development in that area. During his tenure, that area was always an afterthought. He was involved in creating the airport master plan. One of the questions was, should the airport land be sold and the airport be moved further out to get the noise
of the airport away from housing. They didn’t follow up on this because, 1) you can only do so many bold projects at one time!, and 2) it would have been financially difficult, in terms of FAA requirements for paying back loans. So instead, they did the master plan, which defined such things as approach zones, and no-fly zones, etc.

14:47 Planning Dept. offices originally were on the north side of the second floor of the municipal building. This was in the mid-1970s, when he first started. Then they moved over to the Park Central Building at Broadway and Arapahoe, above Mustard’s Last Stand.

16:23 Planning Commission. Great Planning Commissioners. Top notch group. Bob White, who was a developer, had a very progressive view of urban development. Gage Davis was chairman. He was a nationally recognized landscape architect and a great person. Bob Drake was on the planning commission. Very insightful, had broad vision.

18:35 Favorite experience involving a public meeting. South Boulder. Meeting on the comprehensive plan, discussing growth. A lot of the people at the meeting lived in the county, didn’t particularly like the city of Boulder, had moved out to get away from the city. Meeting was contentious. Someone yelled at him that he was a city slicker. He replied, “You know, for someone from Oklahoma, I take that with some sense of pride, being called a city slicker.” A few people laughed and they had a good meeting after that. “The heart of a great community is public involvement, citizen involvement…I’m a strong proponent of the public process. I think maybe that is the cornerstone of why Boulder’s such a great town…is [it has] very extensive public involvement.

21:14 Downtown design guidelines were adopted in 1986. Downtown had gone from difficult economic times in the early 1970s to having the mall starting to be very successful. New buildings were being built downtown, some good, some not so good. The issue that arose was whether Boulder should be more protective of this “jewel.” Tried to analyze what would make it important in the future. Felt that design of the buildings would be very important. Put together design guidelines. Didn’t think that a mandatory review process would fly. Therefore adopted a process called “mandatory review; voluntary compliance.” Had to go through review process, but didn’t have to follow recommendations. Theory was that most people want to do the right thing. Most development here is done by people who live here. This leads to a uniform desire for quality. People may have different visions of what that is, but they want the best for Boulder, according to how they see it. This set up may have helped the design review board be more creative and less purely regulatory and bureaucratic.

25:07 Being a planner in the 1970s: tensions between Danish Plan regulations and development pressures made it a difficult job. For a while, went through new planners at a rate of one every six months. Recounts the story of a respected planner with a professional degree who couldn’t take the pressure and left to work for Domino’s pizza. Ended up owning the franchises for Domino’s throughout Denver and Dallas and was financially very successful. Other staff members at the time: Louise Allen, Susan Purdy
(now director of Housing and Human Resources), Chris Caris, Dick Ryan, Steve Jepsen, Peter Pollock (now planning director in Boulder).

28:28 Taught a class at CU in the Environmental Design school: “Reality and City Planning.” Talked about what REALLY happened in city planning, as opposed to the theory about what happened. Included field trips to buildings that were under construction.

31:40 Historic preservation issues. Historic Preservation ordinance adopted when Nolan Rosall was planning director. A lot of the implementation happened during Ed’s directorship. Originally tried to get whole downtown designated as a an historic place and placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Merchants wouldn’t accept this. That was the impetus for instituting the design guidelines. They did do the Mapleton Hill Historic District, the Chautauqua Historic District. Describes an area called Russian Hill, an early PUD: between Baseline, Broadway and Chautauqua. Efforts to have the Arnett House designated as an historic place. Also developed pocket parks and the Goss-Grove traffic calming layout. Used traffic calming design in some new subdivisions also, called “pedestrian streets.”

37:06 Other park issues. Boulder Creek is a linear park. Describes as a necklace with a series of pearls on it—the various parks, such as Eben Fine, the Boulder Public Library area, the fish viewing area, along the way are the pearls. The fish viewing area (near the Millenium Hotel, which was the Harvest House Hotel at the time) was designed by Gary Lacy. Gary came to him and said, “I want to build this trout observatory.” Ed said, “What in hell are you talking about?” It was going to cost about $10,000. They got some money from a block grant program, but Gary went out and raised the rest of it himself. “I had no idea what he was even talking about. But … he put together this great kids’ area.” This typifies the kinds of experiences that are part of the whole Boulder Creek Park. Sunset Magazine did a nice article on the creek park while he was planning director that called it one of the best in the country.

39:34 Boulder Creek Path goes under the railroad tracks at one point. The railroad company said that they would only close that line for one morning. So everything—all the contractors, all the equipment, all the materials—had to be gathered together in advance so that the day they closed it they would be ready to start right away. They took down the track, built the underpass, put everything back, and four or five hours later the trains could run on it again. Gary Lacy coordinated this project. Ed calls him “a great resource in this community.”

41:17 Political life in Boulder, diversity of interest groups. Describes Methodist Church across the street from Buddhist temple as exemplifying this diversity. Politically, is a very active place. In 1960s, Boulder was business-oriented and business-controlled. PLAN-Boulder County and Zero Population Growth group came into being in the early 1970s, which began to change this orientation. People elected to city council reflected the diversity of ideas that was coming into being. Council became very volatile with a lot of split votes. There were sometimes some mean-spirited aspects to the way people acted,
which affected staff morale. Cites the firing of city manager Archie Twitchell as a case in point. Describes other council members. “Paul Danish, who I love, was on the council. He would come to council in those wool shirts and jeans—usually dirty jeans, you know, he’d worn them for a while—and hiking boots—only in Boulder. And he would call the downtown property owners rag merchants. And he’d always yell at me, and I couldn’t quite understand it, cause in many ways we were allies. And certainly I was probably more empathetic and sympathetic to his views than anyone else on city staff. One day I asked him, ‘Why are you always yelling at me?’ And his response was, “You’re the only one who will listen to me on the city staff, so I go for you because you might actually do something that I ask you to.’ He was usually the minority on the council. But very articulate and very powerful—persuasive.”

46:17  “Then you had just the great people. The Janet Roberts, who, regardless of your philosophy, you would say, this woman makes sense, and you listen to her. The Ruth Corrells, who had a passion for housing, especially housing for people who can’t afford market-rate housing. So you had those kind of great intellects and great personalities on the city council.”

47:49 Mall Crawl. Started in the late 1970s. At that point it was just a few people going downtown on Halloween, you’d bring the kids, dress up, and it was just a community-coming-together event and was great. For several years it got bigger and bigger every year. People outside of Boulder started coming. A lot of alcohol started being consumed. Last year Ed attended was a couple of years before it ended. He took his son, who was about 8 years old—this was about 1980, 81 or 82. It was so crowded you couldn’t move except by moving with the group. His son got scared and wanted to go home and this was only 7 p.m. or earlier. It had gone beyond a community event and had become a circus in the worst sense of that word. After that Halloween, a city management team that included Ed met and started developing a strategy for the next year to start to phase out the event. For example, having the event happen on Halloween night, not the closest weekend day to Halloween. Bob Westdyke was city manager. Consciously thought through how to take a too successful event and regain control. Within a couple of years it was a non-event instead of the almost out of control semi-riot it had become.

51:13 Red Zinger Bicycle Race when it became the Coors Classic. Would circle North Boulder Park. People couldn’t get out of their houses for a couple of days. Another initially small event that became successful. Part of Boulder’s role “is to be creative and generate new things. As they grow, quite often they have to move somewhere else. In the ‘70s, it was ski apparel. A lot of the ski apparel places grew up in this area, and started becoming successful and had to go somewhere else because they couldn’t find cheap labor, but they also needed more space. Boulder has had that role of creating and nurturing small industries into big industries. Celestial Seasonings is one of those successes that has stayed here.” Discusses development of Celestial Seasonings.

53:18 Something he didn’t expect to happen: didn’t expect 28th Street to look as shabby as it does. Disappointed with what’s happening with Crossroads Shopping Center. Didn’t expect it to the extent that it has happened.
54:21  Silliest/craziest things done: 1) Tom Miller, who was on the staff at the time, put together a video of the planning dept making fun of themselves. Describes it. 2) Took a picture of Ed in a three-piece-suit riding a tiny, fold-up commuter bike on the Boulder Creek Path. This photo later appeared in an American Planning Association spread on Boulder. 3) Paid a mermaid to come to the opening of the Boulder Creek Path: she had “a lot of endowments and fins” and she came out of the water at the ribbon cutting ceremony.

57:20  Reasons for leaving. Quote from newspaper: “after 17 years with the city of Boulder I had come to view the organization as an extension of my family. As with any separation there is a certain sadness but also a recognition that there must be change in order to grow and expand one’s abilities.” He loved Boulder but got tired of cold weather. Kids were in college. Had made a conscious decision to raise kids in one place. But wanted to do some other things. Was beginning to do same types of things over and over again. Wanted new challenges.

59:46  A lot of credit should go to Peter Pollock for understanding the long-term view of planning and that part of that is understanding history as well.

60:41  Closing remarks about Boulder.

61:19  End of interview