

Tom McClure interviewed Ed Bethune on May 31, 2023, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Tom McClure: The interview we are conducting today is a part of a joint project between the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society to document some of the history of the protection of wilderness areas in Arkansas during the last 50 years. I am Tom McClure, interviewing former Congressman Ed Bethune for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas on May 31st, 2023. Congressman Bethune, all I need you to do now is to state your name and indicate that you are willing to give the Pryor Center permission to make the audio file and related material available to others.

Ed Bethune: All right. I'm Ed Bethune and I am willing to let the Pryor Center use this however they wish.

TM: Okay. Thank you. Today we're speaking with former Congressman Ed Bethune, and he is joining us by phone from Little Rock, Arkansas. Congressman Bethune graduated from the University of Arkansas with a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration and then from the University of Arkansas School of Law. Congressman Bethune served as a

sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps with service in Korea. He was a special agent of the FBI for four years and was the general counsel for the FBI Agents Association for several years. He was a practicing attorney in Arkansas and Washington D.C. for 35 years and served as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for three terms. Congressman Bethune also led the effort in the House of Representatives to give interim protection for areas being considered for wilderness back in the early 1980s and was a leader in the effort in the House to help assure that many of these areas were eventually designated as wilderness in the Arkansas Wilderness Act of 1984. Congressman Bethune, I just wanted to welcome you and just let you know we have some questions for you.

EB: All right.

TM: We have some three or four questions as we get to them for you to consider, but we also want to encourage you to include other things that you would like to say that we might not bring up. So just feel free to do that. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas here in Arkansas?

EB: I was elected in 1979 or '78 and began serving in January of 1979. And one of the first things that I had to deal with was the vote on the Alaska Lands Bill, which was a bill to set aside more land than had ever been set aside anywhere in the world up to that time. It was quite controversial, but I got interested in wilderness at that time. And then shortly thereafter, I began getting involved in a problem in Faulkner County. The Soil Conservation Service wanted to dam up the Cadron Creek to hopefully try to stop some flooding and so forth. Anyway, I went out and studied that and opposed it. And I guess it was my involvement in the Alaska Lands Bill and the Cadron Creek that led the Arkansas Conservation Coalition umbrella group that included many, many of the groups that fight for environmental issues to reach out to me one day. I was in my mobile office out in the district, and this delegation came to see me and began to spread maps out on the table for me to look at, to show me what they wished to do in trying to set aside lands as wilderness in Arkansas. And people need to understand that that's to take the lands out of the domain of the Forest Service. Well, it's still in their domain, but out of their absolute control so that they're protected rather than forested by the Forest Service. And so, I got interested in that, very interested in it. And one thing led to

another, and a bill was shaped, and we began to proselytize and try to get people to get on board with the idea of setting aside wilderness lands in Arkansas. And I remember touring some areas with the members of the coalition. Well, Tom McClure, you were one of them, and Bill Coleman and Don Hamilton, and of course, most remembered of all was Neil Compton, the great Neil Compton, who was behind so many of the important efforts on Buffalo River and others. And I remember touring proposed wilderness area up in North Arkansas. And Neil was alongside me all the way through the tour, and we marched through the woods, and he explained things to me. And I never will forget. I thought he was going to cry. He talked about the white oaks and how they had been forested so much and virtually destroyed our crops. Anyway, that's how I got interested. And by and by, a draft bill was set up and offered to me, and I dropped it in the hopper at the House of Representatives, and it became a bill to create the Arkansas wilderness area. And then we had the hard work of... The easiest thing about a bill in Congress is dropping it in the hopper, really. The hard work comes after that. And so, we began to try to build support for our bill because eventually it would have to be passed in the Senate as well as the House and would have to be signed by the president who was Reagan at

that time. And so, that's how I got involved and wound up being kind of the lead horse for the Wilderness Bill in Arkansas.

TM: Well, thank you for going through all that. And that's some interesting perspectives and some interesting history. The second question that I have is, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas personally in Arkansas and what value these areas have for you and for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

EB: Yeah. I'm 100% in favor of protecting wilderness areas, and if we can enlarge them, that will be good. Last year, Congressman French Hill managed to enlarge the Flatside Wilderness area, which was in my congressional district, and it was even nicer. He wound up naming it for me, called it Bethune Lands. It was a nice area down in the Flatside area. Anyway, I think this is so important, and let me explain why. Look, Arkansas is the natural state. We hold ourselves out as the natural state. I think it was a stretch to say that in the beginning, but it's not anymore, and here's why. Once we got the Buffalo River protected, which was a monumental effort on the part of many, many people, eventually got it through the Congress and into law to protect it, the river. Once that was done, then we needed to go from there.

Use that as a cornerstone, as a basis for extending the whole concept of conservation and environmental efforts in Arkansas. And I think that was really the beginning point for a change in attitude in Arkansas. Let me give a little history of... Many people are too young to remember that in 1980s, cell phones were a novelty. Only the doctors in Searcy had cell phones, and it looked like an army field kit or something that they had to carry around with them to communicate. My point is this, at that same time in the early '80s, a book was written called *Megatrends*, and it was written to suggest that we were entering an era of technological advancement like we had never, ever seen in our history. The book made the point that we're in an age of high technology, which we are obviously in right now, that there would be a corresponding need for high touch. So he said, "If you're going to have high-tech, you need to have high touch." Well, we liked that theme. And so, I began to incorporate that in my pitches that I would make as we went around the state and tried to explain why we needed to support wilderness and the Wilderness Act of 1984. And that began to sell. I remember going to a lot of places where people had no understanding of what we were headed for in the country with all the technological

advancement. Anyway, that's kind of the history of it. And so, I'm 100% for it for all those reasons.

TM: Well, thank you. The next question is, do you have any special stories that you would like to tell about your own experiences in this effort to protect wilderness areas or the experiences of other people that you know about in the efforts to protect them?

EB: Well, I've already mentioned the high-tech, high touch idea, which we got from the book *Megatrends*, which is written by Naisbitt, John Naisbitt, I think his name was. And we began to go around to the garden clubs. I remember going to Don Hamilton of Little Rock, who was in law school with me. Don and I used to go around to all the garden clubs in Little Rock and try to sell it to them. And we didn't have much luck trying to explain the high-tech part of it, but they liked the high touch part of it. And we got a lot of endorsements from the garden clubs. And then pretty soon we expanded our reach, went out to the civic clubs, got an endorsement of our bill from the Little Rock Chamber, got an endorsement of it from the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission, and those were huge turning points for us because it showed that the people were catching on to the idea that we needed to declare as much as we could in

wilderness in Arkansas. And this led to a lot of other collateral efforts that should not be overlooked that came out of this same spirit of conservation that developed because of the Buffalo and because of the Wilderness Bill. And because of all these endorsements, people began to catch on, and the spirit grew and the... and by the way, I must mention the work of the Nature Conservancy and a lot of the other organizations. Gosh, the Ozark Society, others, all these things have been done in this same spirit. And that is, Arkansas is natural, and we can prove it. We can prove it because we not only have federal law for the Buffalo River and for the wilderness areas, but the spirit has shaped so much of what I think has taken place in Arkansas in the last 40, 50 years that does make us indeed the natural state. And I think that accounts for a lot of the immigration that we've seen into our state, people moving here for jobs and for the wonderful life that we have. So those are a few of the stories that I have that may be of some value.

TM: Absolutely. One other thing that I wanted to ask you is, do you have anything that you would like to bring up that I haven't asked you about that may relate to wilderness or something that wilderness does for the state of Arkansas or for certain groups or people in the state of Arkansas? And also, is there something

that needs to be emphasized about the history of the protection or about wilderness itself that you think the public needs to know that maybe they have not heard about as much as you think they should?

EB: Well, I should take this opportunity to explain a little further about the introduction of the Wilderness Act. When I put that bill in, it took a while before we could get traction, but once we got traction, the most important thing that happened was that toward the end of... in fact, it was the last day of the session in 1983, Senators Bumpers and Pryor introduced a bill which was virtually identical to the bill I had introduced in the House. Therefore, we now had a bill in the House, and we had a bill in the Senate that were virtually identical, and we were off and running, and that led to a lot of good things. One of the special stories I'd like to tell about in that regard was we had a hearing in Little Rock, and we had almost 200 witnesses show up for that hearing. Senator Bumpers and I conducted the hearing. Senator Pryor was unable to attend because I believe his mother was sick at that time. But anyway, that was an important time which showed just how much support there was in the state. And then kind of on a personal note, I should make this point. I'm very proud of the fact that my son, Sam, is a lover of the wilderness

and he has done through-hikes, I mean, through all the way from beginning to end of the Ozark Highlands Trail. He did that just this year, took him almost two weeks, but he made it. He did that by himself. He has twice hiked the length of the Washita Trail, which runs all the way from Oklahoma to Pinnacle Mountain in Little Rock. I like that so much because I enjoy so much to see him get ready for those trips and to go and tell me what he experienced and look at all the pictures that he took and all of that. It's very, very satisfying. And then I should also mention that in connection with what you said there, Tom, about how this is expanding, and I mentioned how the Nature Conservancy and others are doing so much to set aside additional lands, maybe not pure wilderness like we have in our federal legislation, but areas that will be protected as best they can and used for the enjoyment of the people. That's again, part of that high touch experience that we really do need that these days. Everybody's got their nose in a mobile telephone, sending text messages and looking at pictures and all of that. We need an offsetting experience, a high touch experience so that people can get back to nature and enjoy that. I should also mention all the stuff that I think can be in some ways traced to this entire development of conservation and trying to protect things from

the buildings that we protect, like the Old State House Museum and different places like that to the new developments of the Crystal Bridges and the Arts Center in Little Rock. People are really into the business now of conservation and protecting the things that if you're not careful, they get away from you, and you lose them. And I think that's a very strong force in Arkansas these days, and I'm very, very proud to be a part of it. And I do think that much of this can be traced to that spirit that got developed during the Buffalo River Project, but then was, I think, set on fire when we got the wilderness bills passed. And by the way, I should mention, I did mention Senators Bumpers and Pryor, and I should also mention that the bill was signed by President Reagan in 1984, and I, of course, encouraged him to do that, being of the same party as he, and that was an important step as well. And that got the bill done. So I had it signed, sealed, and delivered in 1984.

TM: Well, thank you very much. One other thing that I just wanted to ask you, is there anything else, and I apologize for being somewhat redundant here, but is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about, or would you like to add anything to your earlier comments? And we are not in a rush to get through this. We have plenty of time, but we don't

need to... If you feel like you've said what you want to say,
that's fine too. So just whatever you want to add would be great.

EB: I'll just mention a couple of things.

TM: Sure.

EB: Susan Morrison, who has an art studio in Eureka, did a book in which she had a poem for each of the wilderness areas, as well as an etching of the wilderness areas. And those came out just as we were completing our work on the wilderness bills, a very important event at the time to have that work of hers in support of what we were doing. She gave me a book which I treasure, and old Bill Coleman endorsed it for me and said some flowery things about my work on wilderness, which I appreciated. But the one that I really treasure is George Fisher was always an environmentalist, and he used to give the Army Corps heck for the work they did. But anyway, he wrote a little book called *God Would Have Done It If He'd Had the Money*. He gave me a copy of that, which he autographed and said in his autograph, "To Congressman Ed Bethune, a true friend of the wilderness areas and the environment." I treasure that because he was not known to ever say anything nice about Republicans, but good man, and those are just kind of interesting little tidbits. There's a lot of

stuff like that. The Arkansas Parks now are so great. They're redoing the Pinnacle Mountain Vista Center, which is not too far from where I live and just all kinds of things like that are taking place that showcase our great state of affairs here in Arkansas, that we are truly the natural state more so every day.

TM: Well, I appreciate you saying all that, and I think that it's been good talking with you. I just wanted to thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today.

EB: Yeah. Tom, one other thing, the Old State House Museum has an event every year where they feature something that they think people would be interested in. And this year, they're featuring a program, I'm going to be on it as just a panelist, but the working title they're using is Beyond the Buffalo, and essentially it will open the door to take a look at all the things we do through Game and Fish Commission, through the wilderness areas, and through all the other arts and whatnot, but it'll principally focus on as the cornerstone of what's taking place in our state, it'll focus on the Buffalo and the wilderness areas. They're going to do that in October of this year. And I believe the Ozark Society will be involved in that. And so, that's a good thing coming up. And just another opportunity for us to explain all this to the

people who really need to know this bit of history because we've come from the dark ages to really a rather commendable position insofar as doing the best we can to make this truly the natural state.

TM: Well, I appreciate that. It sounds like a great event coming up. It seems to always be a good idea to think ahead, and it sounds like that's some forward-thinking and planning that might be really helpful. The other thing I wanted to mention is that the Pryor Center will provide you with a copy of this audio recording, and it may be a few weeks. They have to do a little work first, but you should get a copy of it. I'll give you one more shot at telling any more stories, but you've done a great job already, so I'm not trying to push you, but if you think of anything else that was related to the effort that you remember and...

EB: Well, I mentioned the number of personalities who were critical to this. You were certainly in there and Don Hamilton, and I mentioned all those, Neil Compton, I mean, gosh, but the trouble with mentioning people like that is that you say, golly, I forgot to tell you about so-and-so.

TM: You leave people out, yes. I know how that goes.

EB: Yeah. But I did the best I could.

TM: Yes. Well, thank you again for doing this, and thank you for all your attention to wilderness and your efforts to keep Arkansas a great place to live.

EB: You bet, Tom. Thank you now.

TM: Thanks.

EB: Bye.