

Tom McClure interviewed Tim Ernst on April 2, 2024, 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 Tim Ernst for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas on April 2nd, 2024. 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.

Tim Ernst: My name is Tim Ernst and I give the Pryor Center permission to use the audio file for anything they need to.

TM: Okay. Thank you, Tim. And Tim is joining us today by phone from Jasper, Arkansas. And I just want to read a little bit about Tim. During the three years that Tim was at the University of Arkansas studying environmental science, he was also working as a summer tour guide at Blanchard Springs Cavern for the US Forest Service in Fifty-Six, Arkansas, from 1973 to 1976. Since

1975, Tim has been a self-employed full-time landscape photographer. He hopes to retire in 2025 after 50 years of work. He is the author of more than a dozen hiking trail guidebooks and 20 coffee table picture books. Tim founded the Ozark Highlands Trail Association in 1981 and served as its president until 2009. Tim lived in Fayetteville from 1955 to 1997. Since then, he has resided in Newton County. He has been married to Pam Ernst from 2001 to the present time. Tim, once again, thank you for being here. And we have some questions for you to consider, but we also want you, to encourage you to include other things that you would like to say.

TE: Okay.

TM: Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement and efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

TE: Well, my involvement pertaining to protection of wilderness areas took a little different course than I'm sure a lot of the folks that worked so tirelessly on the 1984 Arkansas Wilderness Act. And I took unknowingly a two-prong approach to what I was doing and how I went about whatever efforts I was able to work

on. The first of those was actually going back to 1975 when I was in college. I was actually teaching with a couple other guys a course, a non-credit course on backpacking. And looking around, we didn't really have many backpacking trails in Arkansas, actually almost none, but we did have the most recent, the Caney Creek Wilderness area that had just been established. And that was the very first place where we took our backpacking students on an overnight hiking trip. And during that trip, it was, I think without knowing, it was the beginning of one of the two ways that I helped promote and protect wilderness areas in Arkansas. And that was following the Neil Compton, Ken Smith model of getting people out into the resource so that they could enjoy it and appreciate it. And that's what Dr. Compton did with the Buffalo River, as well as wilderness areas, of course. And that first trip opened my eyes to, well, yeah, this is really all great and everything that we can get out here in backpack, but this is a wilderness area. It's not something that I was used to. I grew up on the outskirts of Fayetteville, spent a lot of time just running around in the woods by myself, which eventually turned into deer hunting in the Ozark National Forest, and again, spending most of my time running around by myself. And I really appreciated the vastness

of those places. And that's what Caney Creek Wilderness on that very first trip opened my eyes to was that, "Hey, this place is always going to be protected." And that's just not a concept that I was used to. My little wilderness in Fayetteville, where I grew up, of course, quickly grew into city and my little neighborhood wilderness went away. And that trip led to many, many other trips, and in fact, decades of trips of taking people on hiking trips specifically into beautiful areas and specifically on hiking trails. So that's one side of my two-pronged attack. The other one was I was just then beginning to take a... Beginning life as a nature photographer. And as I proceeded through the years and decades, it turned out that people were really drawn to wild pictures, pictures of the pristine wilderness, using that as a small W. And I noticed that very early on, that I was better at taking pictures of wild areas than I was at taking pictures of cities and people, for instance. And by the same token, people seemed to react more and on a very positive note to my pictures of wild places, more so than they did to cities and people. So that's what drew me, that has continued to push my life and career since then. Both of those, actually the fact of trying to get folks into beautiful places so that they can appreciate them for what they are, but also for what they might not be if they're not

protected, and also to share my photographs with as many people as I can so that they can learn an appreciation for not only just the picture, but for the beauty of wild places in Arkansas in particular. And so that's been my two-pronged attack to preservation. Wilderness preservation in Arkansas was a made somewhat career just naturally from one step to another out of writing hiking trail guidebooks to get people out into wild areas and taking pictures of them. My involvement in the modern times was more as a footnote following the tribe of all of the great leaders in the Arkansas Wilderness Movement that really helped push this and did all the real hard work that wasn't always the fun stuff like I got to do taking people out and taking pictures.

TM: Well, thanks, Tim. The second question that we have is, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas? And obviously you've already mentioned that a little bit, and also what value these areas have for you personally and for the people of Arkansas as a whole, both now and far into the future.

TE: Well, I think that it's an old cliché, but people really do need wild places. I believe that people need places where they can get

away from everyday life and where they can feel like they're out there without any distractions, without the noises of modern city life. And while I certainly appreciate state parks, as an example, Arkansas has a fabulous state park system, of course, and has for a long time, but I think that there is a great need, a longing for people to be completely isolated and alone sometimes. And you can get that in some national forest areas, national park areas, but they are getting a lot more popular, of course, and certainly are going to get even more popular in the future. And a lot of that popularity is due to the ease of access of motorized vehicles, for instance, from cars and especially four-wheelers and motorbikes, dirt bikes and stuff like that. And it's great that we have access to a lot of wild places where anybody can get to without having to put in sweat equity, but I think many people still need to push it further into the isolation and solitude of wilderness, and that's what wilderness areas bring us. And to me, in fact, just this morning, I got an email from somebody whose husband's parent had just died and they really needed to get away, excuse me, and just not have anything else to think about. And they're now headed into a wilderness area today as a perfect place to be alone and put their own thoughts and feelings, stuff like that. Excuse me. And I think wilderness areas

not only give that us ability to have places like that right now, but of course we know that it's going to be like that. There's not going to be condominiums and super highways going through those places. So it's just a safe, secure place that we know is always going to be there and that we'll be able to... Yeah, I can hike down to this spot or that part, and I know it's going to be an isolated, more personalized experience. And that's something that, to me, Arkansas wilderness areas in particular, I believe they're... Of course, they're much smaller than the great wilderness areas out in the west and in Alaska and places like that where you can go for days and days and days and never see anybody or cross a road or anything. But in Arkansas, the pockets of wilderness that we have, relatively speaking, are large tracts for us. And in one way, it gives us a more personal, a more intimate experience in Arkansas wilderness areas. And part of that has to do with the fact that a jungle environment here. So we can't see for 50 miles most of the time, but getting on a trail and hiking a short distance away from the trailhead in one of our wilderness areas, you can see things that are just as incredible as any of the big wilderness areas out west. And I think that people here are drawn to that because they don't have to designate days and weeks of driving and hiking and trying to

get into someplace. Our wilderness areas are within a very short drive of a large majority of Arkansans, especially in the northern half of the state. And it's just great to be able to... You don't have to dedicate a whole week to being in there. You can go out for two or three hours or an afternoon or a quick weekend hike, and you can still be in the middle of wilderness without all of the distractions of the rest of humankind.

TM: Okay. Thanks, Tim. Question number three out of four questions that we have for you is, do you have any special stories that you would like to tell about your experiences or the experiences of others regarding efforts to protect wilderness areas here in Arkansas?

TE: Well, this might be a roundabout way of getting to that. I took a group of high school students that we actually were building. They were all volunteers. We were building hiking trails in the Ouachita, in fact, the Little Missouri Trail back in the early 1980s, and they were in the woods for five weeks. And on the very end of it, or right at the very beginning of it, I'm sorry, we hiked into, and this again is going back into the Caney Creek Wilderness, which is where we were working nearby. And the

very first night, one of the girls, the senior high school group, she was from inner city, Los Angeles. And I heard her... She didn't scream, but she sounded a little bit concerned. And I went over to where the girl's tent was, and she was outside, out in front of her tent in the middle of Caney Creek, in fact, and she was in tears. She was actually afraid of stars. She didn't know what they were. She had never seen stars before. And by the end of that trip, every night, she would get up and go outside after everybody else went to bed just to stare at the stars. She'd never seen anything like that. And it was so incredible that she was able to see something that she would never have seen from Los Angeles. And that goes to another one of the things that I'm involved in now and really appreciate about wilderness areas is light pollution was something we didn't really think about much back then. And right now, certainly with the encroachment of more and more urban areas and more and more people, people are afraid of the dark and they like to have lights, lights, lights everywhere, and that's fine. That's not a bad thing, but it's better if we can help people redirect particularly yard lights that send most of the light up into the atmosphere that people can see from everywhere and try to use that same light, even less light, pointing to the ground where it's really needed or where

they want it. And wilderness areas give us an opportunity just by the very nature of them to be further away from light sources. And the more of the area that is a bigger area, the further away from light sources we can get. And I think that's a really great thing that wilderness areas can offer, not just in the daytime of the great beauty, but also of the nighttime and make them a destination for folks, give them another opportunity to get out and experience something that they wouldn't see necessarily in their local parks even, or even in smaller parks because wilderness areas are generally larger than like a state park, for instance, they are going to have more areas of dark sky. And that's something, that's a reason, I believe, to make more lands wilderness areas, add to the existing areas that we have and expand the acreage so that we can have more areas of darker skies besides more areas of solitude. Most of my experiences with people out in wilderness areas or potential wilderness areas have to do with hiking trails. I have always believed from that very first hike that I did back in 1975, that wilderness areas, while we want to protect the areas for themselves, for the fauna and flora and everything that is naturally there, we also need to protect these areas because people are part of the natural environment also. And having access to these wilderness areas

by people, I think is to me as much a reason to have them as just the scenery. And while it's great to be able to get out and what I call bushwhacking through an area, wilderness area in particular, where there are no trails, you can do that in almost any place you want to go, even if there are trails there, you can get off the trail and go bushwhacking and in a few minutes, be totally away from everybody. But I believe that most people, most of the population, they won't do that. They're basically uneasy, afraid, however you want to put it, but they much prefer to have a path or a designated trail to be on. And while certainly we don't need motorized vehicle traffic and mechanized vehicles and stuff like that, hiking trails and horse trails have been noted as being valued and allowed in wilderness areas. And I know there has been a lot of pushback in Arkansas against having trails and wilderness areas, but I believe that they give a much larger percentage of our people, the owners of wilderness areas, the ability to safely get out and access these wilderness areas. And so I've always been a huge proponent from that very first hike of not having trails going everywhere. We don't want trails going everywhere, but having a trail system that goes into the wilderness areas where folks can use it as a means of maybe that's all they do is just hike that trail and nothing else, or

maybe they use it to access a particular area and they branch off and follow a creek drainage or a buff line somewhere where there is no trail. And that was one of the big things that I have always done from the very beginning was to advocate and push for primarily the Ozark Highlands Trail that, as you mentioned, we started a volunteer hiking club in 1981. And whenever we first set that trail organization up, the Ozark Highlands Trail had been started by the Forest Service in the 1977, I believe, but they needed a strong and viable force of people to continue the construction whenever they basically abandoned it. And when we sat down to come up with this long distance backpacking trail, the Ozark Highlands Trail, not only did we have an overall route laid out for us because the Ozark National Forest, which is where this trail was going to be and is, is a linear national forest going from west to east and then a little further up to the north. And it allowed us to link campgrounds through the national forest. So the trail would go from campground to campground, but it would also go through... most of the rest of it was wild and it was just national forest land. And of course, those areas were being, at the time, heavily cut over timber harvest by the Forest Service, but many tracks were also being evaluated through RARE I and RARE II. And whenever we designed the trail to go, which now

it's eventually going to end up at the Missouri border, besides going from campsite to campsite or campground to campground, we wanted to take it through areas that would become wilderness areas or were wilderness areas so that we could hike through the wilderness areas on a known path. And that helped us solidify not only the route that we were going to take, because we knew, for instance, there was... Well, Indian Creek was a potential wilderness area that unfortunately hasn't made it yet. There was Hurricane Creek, which did become a wilderness area. Richland Creek did become a wilderness area, but we were closed out of taking trail through it. And now, unfortunately, there's actually a lot of social trails in the Richland Creek wilderness because there's not a central trail that goes through there. And then the Lower Buffalo Wilderness, there will eventually be one main trail going through there, and then the Leatherwood Wilderness over on the Sylamore District, which we also were kept out of that with the trail, but the trail goes around it now. So I think that a main trail system like that really gives really a majority of Americans and others access to what they probably would never do on their own by just bushwhacking through it. And part of that, part of our efforts in the early 1980s working with the Ozark Society and the Arkansas Wilderness

Coalition was to do exactly that, to get folks out on the trail that we had already built and into areas where we had hoped to build the trail and show them this is what we could have on our trail system. And those folks appreciated what was there and understood that they needed to put in sweat equity to build the trail and maintain the trail. And we ended up with several thousand members across the United States and several foreign countries that would come to Arkansas and help build and maintain that trail. And I really think that the other side of that is if we just had wilderness areas that had a fence around them and no trails and very few people were ever able to get into them, I don't believe there would be much support for them protecting them in the future. And so I believe that we need people, we need boots on the ground in those areas so that they will appreciate it and understand that they do need continued protection and we need more areas and we need to expand those, certainly as the population increases. So that's where I've always come from. And we have done a lot of hikes in wilderness areas in Arkansas that we're not on trails. And 99% of Hurricane Creek Wilderness, for instance, where the Ozark Highlands Trail goes right through the middle of it, 99% of it, there is no trail at all and people are welcome to go on as much bushwhacking

adventures as they like to. So I'm always a trail guy because I think people are just as important as the resource and they need to work hand in hand in order to keep what we've got and get more of it if we can in the future.

TM: Okay. Thanks, Tim. Number four question is, would you like to add anything else that you think needs to be emphasized about the history of wilderness protection in Arkansas that you think the public should know or that the public should consider about wilderness and the future of wilderness?

TE: Well, one thing I wanted to go back and mention something else about my involvement, going back to question number one, in early 1980s, I was hired by the Forest Service to go take pictures of potential wilderness areas. And I don't know if it was part of the RARE II or how that dovetailed into the Wilderness Act. But what they did was they gave me a set of aerial photographs of the proposed wilderness areas in the Ozark National Forest, and they had little Xs with numbers all over the map, and they gave me topo maps with the same little Xs drawn on them, and then a list of all these places. And like in the Richland Creek wilderness area, for instance, there was probably

30 or 40 different locations, and my job was to simply go find these places and take pictures of them. And interestingly, my first thought was, "Oh, this is going to be great. They're picking out all the most beautiful places." But I realized that the Forest Service, while they were in support of wilderness areas, it did not seem like they were as enthusiastic as the rest of us were, and that a lot of the places that they wanted me to go take pictures of and that I did photograph were areas that they wanted to emphasize that they felt were scars to the area and might detract from and be a reason not to include this in as a wilderness area. But they also had scenic spots too. And it was really an eye-opener for me on a couple different fronts, but one of them was just being able to get out. And of course, there weren't any trails anywhere back then. There were old roads, of course, old logging roads and stuff, which there still are, but to be able to see and photograph these just incredible places like Twin Falls of Devils Fork and Sandstone Castles and Richland Falls and just the various bluff lines that go through the Richland Creek Wilderness. And that's something that I don't know how many different bluffs locations they had me photograph, but most people go to Richland Creek for the waterfalls or float through it when the water's high, but the bluff lines in that

place, as most of our wilderness areas are just really spectacular. And very, very few people ever get up to them because you usually have to climb up to them pretty good. So it was great fun getting to photograph these scenic areas, scenic spots within the wilderness areas, also in Hurricane Creek Wilderness and East Fork Wilderness were the three main ones that I photographed. But it was also interesting to me that sawmill sites were places that they had me photograph, and back then some of them I guess were actually pretty fresh and a scar on the landscape and also some old home sites and stuff. But to me, even though some of those places were not necessarily scenic, I think that, and this goes into something else that the older I get and the older the wilderness areas get, is I see a lot of these places as history of Arkansas and the people that settled here and homesteaded here and made a living, scratched the living out of these places, which obviously were pretty rough places to make a living on. And that's another thing that I really appreciate in our wilderness areas today is that while typically a home site, if it was made out of wood, which most were, they're mostly gone, but there still remains life, signs of life from the past, I think, scattered all over our wilderness areas, from home sites, which were usually stone.

And you see stone chimneys and rock walls everywhere that some of the rock walls in our wilderness areas are just their art. And I know that they were certainly a lot of work, but I think that they are a living history of the people that settled Arkansas. And so I find those as part of the scenery now instead of things that are not valued as wilderness characteristics. Even some of the old mines and stuff like that, down in particular in the Lower Buffalo Wilderness area, I find quite remarkable. But springtime right now when we're recording this and we've just gone through a month where walking through a wilderness area or in the national forest also, if it hasn't been cut over recently, you see the first signs of spring are usually these what I call heirloom daffodils that pop up bright yellow and usually surrounding old home sites. And it's a great time of the year to get out and just wander off trail, bushwhack into these wilderness areas. And that's where you find where we came from in the old home sites that are for the most part dissolving back into the landscape. And the stones will probably still be there for generations to come. And I have a feeling the flowers, a lot of them are a hundred years old or more now and they're still just as strong and beautiful as they ever were. So photographically, that's one thing that keeps me going to wilderness areas to find places like

that. But it's something that I think people, very simple, getting back to the intimacy of Arkansas in general, but our wilderness areas in particular, it can be so uplifting to simply go out and find an old home site to where somebody a hundred years ago planted these flowers that are so bright and beautiful.

TM: Yes. Did you have something else, Tim, or was it-

TE: Well, yeah.

TM: Yeah, go ahead.

TE: Something regarding the history of some of the people that of course helped all along, but I was fortunate enough to work with some of them. I'm weird in that one of my guidebooks is a guide to Arkansas waterfalls. And this is something that I don't think most of us had any idea that Arkansas had so many and varied and beautiful waterfalls. And I hear this from people all the time, particularly those that come from out of state, but also people who grew up in the Buffalo River area where I've lived for 20 or 30 years, even here, people are really surprised that I didn't know we had these kind of waterfalls around here and it's

become a thing for people to go exploring and find new waterfalls or just go to waterfalls. And early on, the first guidebook I put out had over a hundred different waterfalls in it, but only three or four of those had official names. And I decided that it would be good to honor some of the people who worked so hard to create wilderness in Arkansas and have named some of these waterfalls after them. And in particular, the showcase folks like Governor Bumpers, and there's going to be a new waterfall named after Senator David Pryor that isn't known about yet, but will be. But other folks that worked not only on the Wilderness Act, but other high priority things in Arkansas, like Dr. Neil Compton and various Ozark Society members. And I think that... Well, as an example, right across the highway where I live now is a waterfall who's named after Congressman John Paul Hammerschmidt. And of course, he wasn't necessarily on the wilderness side for the 1984 Wilderness Act, but he obviously was for Buffalo National River, which has, I believe, three wilderness areas included with it. So he's a part of the wilderness movement in Arkansas. And I think those are things that while those names are not in the official United States geological survey notes maps, but they are known by those names now. And a lot of people I have discovered, they say,

"Well, who was Dale Bumpers or who was John Heuston or Ken Smith?" And it's a way for the future for people to be connected to the past, because that will bring up questions. And that's my little contribution to helping the history of all this that we've been doing for the last 50 years and forward to be carried forward to generations.

TM: Well, thank you, Tim. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about or would you like to add anything to any of your earlier comments?

TE: There's one thing that whenever I went to Washington with you and other members of the coalition, and I think it was in the fall of 1983, I was asked to bring a couple of photographs of mine that I had printed large and framed, and they wanted to present them to some of our legislatures. And at that point in my life, I don't think I'd ever met any politicians, certainly not any at the scale of who were working in Washington, DC. So that whole trip was really fascinating for me, but to be able to be part of it at my level of being able to present pictures, for instance, to Senator Pryor and Senator Bumpers was fabulous for me. But one of the pictures of mine that was chosen by somebody in the

coalition was a photograph that I had taken in probably my second trip to a wilderness area, which was one of the other original areas in Arkansas that was established in 1975, the Upper Buffalo Wilderness area. I had one winter, we had a couple feet of snow. I was living in Fayetteville then, and I drove and broke trail, broke highway, because nobody else had gotten out in that, and drove all the way to the, I think it's the Jerry Dahl Monument or Memorial, right at the edge of the Upper Buffalo Wilderness area. And I wanted to go experience what it was like in the wilderness in middle of winter, and I did. And boy, I got taught many lessons about camping in deep snow and below zero weather. But part of that, and of course there were no trails, it was just bushwhacking. And I bushwhacked down across the Buffalo River and camped on the other side and then spent a couple of days wandering around taking pictures. And the picture that they gave to one of the senators of mine was a picture of the Buffalo River and a bluff that was covered with ice. It was just a spectacular, one of those intimate landscapes, but yet on a very large scale to me. And if it'd been in a big million acre wilderness area out west, nobody would ever noticed it. But here, it was just really spectacular. And I shot pictures of it for a while, and then I decided to take a picture of myself with it for

scale. And that's the picture that they chose to give to one of the senators on that trip. It was a picture of a person with a backpack in front of a spectacular scene in a wilderness area. And to me, that again ties together the fact that, yes, we want to protect all the nature that's in the wilderness area, but I think part of what wilderness does is protect our right to be in that area and enjoy and explore our wilderness area. So I always appreciate the fact that the original writers of the National Wilderness Act realized that people need wilderness and we need to be inside wilderness from time to time in order to make that happen. So there you go.

TM: Well, thank you for being here today. Is there anything else that you wanted to say before we close out?

TE: Well, one other just little funny story to me that is whenever Senator Bumpers, who of course was so involved in all of this, and he wrote the forward to the very first hiking trail guide book that I did back in the 1980s. And I always enjoyed everything that he did for our state and in particular wilderness. But out of Flatside Pinnacle, the flat edge of the Flatside Wilderness, the day that they were dedicating one of the large stones that talks

about Senator Bumpers, which is placed... there's one of those stones, I believe, placed at all of the wilderness areas that were part of that, the 1984 Arkansas Wilderness Act. And I was there with my dog that I always used to hike with named Aspen, little springer spaniel, and he was leashed. And we had got there early and hiked up to the top of the pinnacle and back down and just as Senator Bumpers was arriving, and he got out and we started to approach him, and he always loved being out. Of course, you know that he loved wilderness and wildness. And he started to walk towards us. And my spaniel walked over to him and bit him on the hand in a soft manner, because my springer spaniel's a bird dog, and Governor Bumpers just got a big kick out of that. Of course, I was mortified that my poor little dog had just laid his teeth on a United States Senator. And I later learned that someone had told me that Senator Bumpers sometimes might have had a... Sometimes give puppy dogs a piece of chewing gum just for the fun of it to see what they would do with that, which I have done myself in my younger days. And so now that I know that, I think that that was just my dog's way of thanking the Senator for appreciating puppy dogs like him. Okay, there you go. That's all.

TM: Thank you for that. And I very much appreciate you being here and being a part of this project. And I would like to thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today and sharing your perspective and memories and thoughts about wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. So wanted to also mention that the Pryor Center will provide you a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. And Tim, thanks again for being here, and I'll just say goodbye for now.

TE: Well, it's an honor for me and a pleasure, and I really appreciate everything that everybody else has done. And particularly you, Tom. Thank you.

TM: Well, thank you.