

Tom McClure interviewed Arthur Evans on April 16, 2024, at the Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History 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 Dr. Art Evans for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for the Oral and Visual History project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas, on April 16th, 2024. Art, 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.

Dr. Art Evans: Yes. I'm Arthur Evans, and I am glad for the Pryor Center to use this interview in any way they please.

TM: Thank you. Just a little bit about Art. First of all, I want to mention that Art is joining us in person here at the Pryor Center on Square in Fayetteville, and just a couple of things about Art. He was born in Chicago, and he is self-described as was a sickly kid that loved to go to the library and has loved books his whole life, and he loved books growing up about wild animals and explorers. Art's education included Hendrix College, the University of Arkansas, and the University of Tennessee College of Dentistry, where he earned a doctorate of dental

surgery degree. After college and dental training, Art had a reserve commission in the U.S. Army Dental Corps and was in a MASH unit in Korea. He later practiced dentistry in Gravette, Arkansas, for almost 50 years. He joined the Sierra Club in 1971 in California and later helped organize the first Sierra Club regional group in Arkansas in 1972. He worked on the Arkansas Wilderness Bill and the lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service to stop aerial spraying of 2,4,5-T to kill hardwoods to convert to pine. Art is also an active member of the Ozark Society, and he was a scoutmaster for 15 years. Art enjoys whitewater canoeing, nature photography, and is a gardener specializing in hybridizing the genus *Lilium*. He also enjoys international birding and is a secular humanist and a liberal independent. He has been married for 39 years and says his wife, Crow Evans, is a saint of a sort. I'll just end there. And Art, just welcome, and we're glad you're here today.

AE: Thank you. I appreciate your invitation, Tom.

TM: We have a few questions for you today, but we would encourage you to go beyond that and say other things beyond these four questions, if you would like to say them. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

AE: Yes. Now, a little background. Backpacking and whitewater canoeing made me ready to join the movement to save wilderness. To truly love it and be ready to save it, you have to actually be there. Otherwise, it's an abstract concept with no sweat equity. Being active in the Sierra Club and Ozark Society gave me the strength of a movement to go forward with real commitment. John Muir said, "Wilderness is only as safe as people knowing about it want it to be." That's why we have outings to the areas most in need of protection. That's why Barry Weaver, Robert Batson, and I organized the first Sierra Club regional group in Arkansas in the fall of 1972. Barry was president of the Ozark Society Highlands Chapter. And at the end of our September meeting at the library in Springdale, Barry said, quote, "If there are any card-carrying Sierra Club members in the audience who would be interested in forming a Sierra Club regional group here in Northwest Arkansas, please stay after the meeting." I particularly liked his use of the term card-carrying Sierra Club member. Six of us stayed. Of that six, I became the president and conservation chair. Robert Batson became outings chair, and Barry became political chair. At the time, there were 50 Sierra Club members in Arkansas. Now, there are thousands. The Ozark Society had already mostly won the battle for the Buffalo, but that was just the beginning. We wanted an Arkansas Wilderness Bill while there was still some old-growth, roadless, substantially wild

areas left. That became our primary focus, and we joined forces with the Ozark Society and others to find the best areas, explore them, and promote them for federal wilderness designation. It was a full-court press of talking to politicians, developing convincing data, testifying at public hearings, writing newspaper articles, taking tender feet out to see some natural grandeur, and anything else we could do to encourage the popular desire to protect wilderness in a real and permanent way. Fortunately, we had two excellent senators, David Pryor and Dale Bumpers, who already liked the idea of federal wilderness designation, but needed boots on the ground to promote it. Our congressmen needed a little more convincing, but they came around with solid support. Peace be unto them. Of the about 15 areas we settled on, the proposed Hurricane Creek Wilderness Area was the only one the U.S. Forest Service did not contest. We helped write and eagerly supported the Arkansas Wilderness Bill, which designated in excess of 60,000 acres of high-quality regenerating wilderness. In one hearing, an opponent asked me, "What do you mean when you say wilderness?" I said, "Wilderness is beyond the last beer can." The audience liked that. All right. Second question.

TM: Okay. Question number two, Art, is, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas personally and what value these areas have for you in a personal way, and what value you

think that they have for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

AE: Yes. Well, wilderness is more than a wild arboretum or a gene pool or a photo op. It is alive and ever-changing. I have never felt more alive than when I have been alone in the wilderness, especially when lost and alone. It is an unforgiving challenge where we must develop survival skills and feel competent and ultimately safe. There are bears, possibly mountain lions, wild boars, rattlesnakes, and mosquitoes. You have to find your own place in the food chain. My Boy Scouts could not stop talking about their wilderness adventures, like the first time they ever made a fire with wet wood, cooked a meal that they had foraged, and stayed dry and warm in a storm. They grew an inch when they hollered fiercely together, so fiercely, the bear ran away. Their paper topos, almost unknown now, and compasses became very real and very important when they learned how to get around from here to there in rough terrain. When they got there, they were another inch taller. Parks are great, but wilderness is the real deal.

TM: Thank you, Art. Let's see. The next question is about stories. Do you have any stories that you would like to tell about your experiences or the experiences of others regarding efforts to protect wilderness areas here in Arkansas?

AE: Oh, yes, but we only have three hours to do this.

TM: Well, you'll have to pick.

AE: Okay. When we were exploring and evaluating areas for possible inclusion into a wilderness bill, I guided a party of five, a young man from California and three ladies from the East and Midwest, into the upper Buffalo River drainage. I am sure you know Whitaker Creek, Pruitt Hollow, Dug Hollow, Big Pine, Little Pine, and the rest. We got to the bottom of Kapark Road in late afternoon, already losing light, and starting to snow pretty hard. We knew from the topo that we needed to get at least a couple of miles downstream before dark to establish a convenient headquarters. We were somewhat disappointed in our progress and about decide, "This is it, like it or not," when the base of the hill on the left converged with the creek on the right. At that spot, a rock shelter magically appeared, dry, deep leaves, and big enough for five, if they were pretty good friends. We dropped our packs and settled in, thinking we were surely the most fortunate people alive. We pooled our packets of freeze-dried sawdust, which is much better now, and sat down to dinner, watching the snow and listening to the trickle of the upper, upper, upper Buffalo, then we sat around a very small campfire and took turns reading chapters from John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra*, and we slept dry and happy. Then every day for

a week, we explored the transcending beauty of the upper Buffalo. The ladies marveled, and even the guy from California was impressed. At another public hearing with Senator Bumpers, I suggested, "Sir, we only have one chance to get this right the first time. The miners, loggers, drillers would strip-mine the streets of heaven if they could only reach that high."

TM: Okay. Question number four. 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 consider?

AE: Well, it was a growing time for all of us, and we learned how to be better citizens and how to take part in our vital democracy. We learned how to talk to politicians in terms they might identify with. It was a good civics lesson. We practiced overcoming our fears of public engagement, and we embraced the need for wilderness experienced by every new generation. It's big. It's dark. It's cold. It's scary. But once you get to really know it, there's food. There's shelter, and most of the critters don't bite if you give them their space. Plus, it is more beautiful up front and personal than anything printed, projected, or artificial. Arkansas is truly blessed.

TM: Okay. Thank you, Art. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about?

AE: I really want to thank the Ozark Society for getting the ball rolling. After we started the Sierra Club, I was more active with them, but I still like to go to Ozark Society meetings, and what a great bunch of people.

TM: I agree. Thank you. Also, would you like to add anything else to your earlier comments, or is there anything else that you would like to mention that you have thought of?

AE: I also want to thank everybody who has continued the effort to expand our wilderness areas. Now, the 60-plus-thousand acres that we started with have been increased and rounded out and better protected, because they're larger now, but the people who never give up are the ones who give wilderness its best cause and its best feeling for all the generations to come.

TM: Well, thank you for those thoughts. Do you have anything else that you're thinking that you want to add, or should we just close it out at this point? What do you think?

AE: Well, on a personal note, some Sierra Club friends of mine and I saw an ad in the Jasper newspaper of 60 acres for sale, and Tom

McKinney, one of our partners, got with the real estate agent and went down to see those 60 acres in the Hurricane Creek Valley, and he came back and immediately said, "We have to get enough resources together to get this place. No matter what happens to it, if we own it, it's going to be safe." So we were very happy when, later, it was a proposed wilderness area, 15,000 acres, and our place is right in the middle of it, and we manage it as wilderness after it was designated. Well, it wasn't, but the area surrounding us was designated a federal wilderness area. We get down there as often as we can, but it's never often enough, and we have a logbook, a guest book on the dining room table where guests can sign in and relate their experiences. Now, I'm not exaggerating a bit, but a lot of people hike the Ozarks Highlands Trail through the Hurricane Creek, and people from more than 25 countries have signed into our guest book, and we never met most of them.

TM: Wow. Thank you for sharing that and all of your other comments as well, and do you have any other things on your mind that you want to mention, or thoughts on stuff?

AE: Yeah. Everyone who stands up for wilderness, never give up.

TM: Okay. Thank you so much, Art, for all of your comments and for being here today. I'd just like to thank you again on behalf of the Pryor

Center and the Ozark Society for sharing your perspective with us and your memories and your advice and enthusiasm for wilderness, and thanks again for being here to be a part of this project. The Pryor Center wants you to know that they will be providing you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. And so, I would just like to thank you again, and I'll say goodbye for now.

AE: Thank you.