

Tom McClure interviewed Floyd M. Freeman on April 2, 2024, at the Pryor Center in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Tom McClure: The interview that 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 Mickey Freeman 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. Mickey, 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.

Mickey Freeman: Yes. I'm Mickey Freeman, and I do give my permission to use recording for David Pryor Center.

TM: Okay. Thank you, Mickey. Just a few words about Mickey. Mickey is joining us today in person here at the Pryor Center on the square in Fayetteville. A few things about Mickey. Mickey was born in Dumas, Arkansas. He has a BSBA degree in marketing from the University of Arkansas, an MBA from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and a master banking degree from

Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Mickey worked for 16 years in bank marketing, and another 16 years in telecommunications. He is a Vietnam veteran, and was awarded the Bronze Star for service. He was also a Peace Corps volunteer from 2003 to 2005 in Kenya. Okay, Mickey. We once again would like to welcome you and thank you for being with us today. And we do have a few questions for you to consider, but we also would encourage you to include other things that you would like to say beyond the questions. So the first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

FF: My involvement was mainly through the Sierra Club and the Ozark Society, as well as testifying at the U.S. Senate hearing on Arkansas Wilderness. In the Sierra Club, I was part of a team that took elected officials and others on hikes to witness the proposed wilderness areas. In addition, I helped communicate the need for wilderness to our members. In the Ozark Society, I participated in hikes to prove the proposed area met all the requirements. There were lots of meetings and maps before hitting the trail. The plan, as I recall, was to ask for nine areas, and hope we got about half or so of them. Certainly, we exceeded our goal. On behalf of the Sierra Club, I hand wrote a

letter that communicated the need for wilderness to Mack McLarty, who was president of the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce at that time. I didn't really know Mack, but I knew Donna. Subsequently, the chamber voted to support the proposal for nine wilderness areas, so we were glad to have that support. Another way that I was involved was setting up a public relations event. My marketing background told me that the organizations proposing these nine wilderness areas were likely to be attacked by the timber lobby. We were going up against large timber companies, most with their own PR departments. Now, I think of public relations as a bank account. Good stories and events are deposits to that PR account, and bad stories and events are withdrawals. At the time, our Sierra Club chapter was not known for doing much other than hiking and writing letters for public officials. What people in Arkansas knew about the Sierra Club came mostly from national stories, which were sometimes negative, so we needed a good PR deposit before getting any bad press. As group chairman, I set up a park cleanup day in Allsopp Park. Allsopp is a beautiful city park in Hillcrest neighborhood of Little Rock, but it had been neglected for years and years. Almost all the entrances were grown over by vines, there was trash everywhere, and the homeless had

made camps deep in the park. I wrote a news release and submitted it to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. I notified the Little Rock City Parks Department of the project. They were great, they showed up with tools and then removed the debris. We got some volunteers in the community to help. And not only did the newspaper print the story, but they included photos and a long article describing the need to clean up the park. So we got our good PR deposit before anything else happened.

TM: Okay. Well, thank you, Mickey. And question number two is, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas, and what value these areas have for you, and what value you think they have for the people as a whole in Arkansas, both now and in the future?

FF: Well, as you said earlier, I was born and raised in Dumas in Southeast Arkansas. The tallest hill around was the Arkansas River Levee. At about five years old, I ventured out on my first hike across R.A. Pickens' cow pasture, which was near our home. As a kid, I was seeking adventure and I was dreaming of hiking these wild places. But I remember looking back and finding my mother on the back porch actually watching me the whole time. I thought I was really making a big hike there. I was seeking

adventure and dreamed about hiking in those wild places, as I said. Boy Scouts really introduced me to real hiking, and I began to hike in some of the more beautiful areas in Arkansas as a student at the U of A. There, I realized Arkansas had much to enjoy and protect. My mother was from Colorado, so we visited my grandparents in Colorado almost annually. In Colorado, I could see what jewels wild places really were. So my interests and efforts were leading me to help protect special wild places in Arkansas even when I was a youngster. National forests cover, I believe, about 56% of Arkansas, yet for many years, Arkansas had only two wilderness areas in the two national forests. Those were Caney Creek, and the other was the Buffalo River area. So I was glad to be a part of the project to get nine more areas. Now, as Arkansas grows and develops, the scenic areas are more and more crowded. You can see that anytime in the summer if you go down around Buffalo River. The state has done a good job of building state parks and hiking trail systems. But someday, all of these parks and the nine wilderness areas, along with the other wilderness areas that we have, will not be enough to serve the citizens of Arkansas. Then, there may be a need to designate more wilderness areas and teach people how to use them.

TM: Thank you, Mickey. Question number three, do you have any special stories that you would like to tell about your experiences or the experiences of other people regarding efforts to protect wilderness areas here in Arkansas?

FF: I do. I have three stories. So here's my first one. To get the wilderness project moving as we needed it to, we scheduled public meetings to inform the general public about the project, and also to inform those that had declared opposition to the wilderness. One of those meetings was scheduled for Perryville, which is just west of Little Rock, and it was heavily dependent upon the forest industry. Don Hamilton and I were to handle that meeting. Everybody that showed up was against designating any wilderness. We began our discussion about the nine new proposed wilderness areas, including Flatside, which would be just a few miles away from Perryville. As the meeting progressed, the questions were getting more pointed and angry. Finally, Don began to mention the groups that supported our wilderness plan. Two groups caught their attention really well, muzzle loaders and turkey hunters. Just knowing that people that were like them had endorsed the wilderness plan really helped. So we decided that the next meeting, we would lead with muzzle loaders and turkey hunters. One of the other stories

I have is about a hike. In the Sierra Club, I often led hikes, as well as the Ozark Society, and one of these hikes was to one of the two wilderness areas. On one of those hikes, we crossed Big Buffalo Creek, which was an important tributary to the Buffalo River. We camped on the other side at an old homestead. During the night, we had a long, hard rain that caused the creek to rise quickly. The next morning, we tried crossing, but it was too deep and dangerous. So we had a map, and it looked like our only option was to bushwhack to the west and the southwest until we found a road. Eventually, we did find a road, and we hoped it would lead back to our cars. But a big farmer came along and asked us where we were going and did we need a ride. He offered to take us there, but after he delivered a large sow that he had in the truck at that time to a friend of his down the road. He returned in about 30 minutes. So we loaded into his truck. Two of us sat in the front seat with the driver. And a few minutes driving down the road, the driver began to denigrate hikers and campers in general. And then, he said, "I hope you folks are not that bunch that wants to turn the whole woods into the wilderness areas." And I said, "Well..." And I was preparing to debate the issue when my friend in the front seat jabs me in the ribs, and I said, "Well..." I think I decided just to kind of let this

one go by. Another story is about Senator Dale Bumpers. Senator Dale Bumpers was a great advocate for the Arkansas wilderness, and in that capacity, he scheduled a hearing in his Agriculture and Forestry Committee in Washington. Our wilderness team rallied and prepared speakers to cover all the interest. I was excited about testifying in a Senate hearing. I mean, think about this, a boy from Dumas is about to testify at a hearing in Washington. Since I was a banker, I was asked to speak on behalf of the business community and was last on the schedule. When the hearing started, it was well attended by senators and aides. As it progressed though, many senators and aides began to leave quietly. When it was my turn to speak, Senator Bumpers was the only senator left. As I introduced myself, Senator Bumpers stopped me and said, "Mickey, I have to leave to catch a flight to Little Rock in a few minutes, but you go ahead and give your testimony. It'll be on the congressional record." I said, "Thank you, Senator Bumpers. We just appreciate your scheduling a hearing on Arkansas wilderness." So I gave my testimony to an empty committee panel, no senators, no aides, just me and the congressional record.

TM: Well, that's an interesting story, Mickey. We have in question 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 should consider?

FF: Yeah. I think that wilderness is not Democratic or Republican. It's there for everyone, regardless of politics, religion, or practices. And I've heard the list of speakers for this project, and many of these folks should be treated as state heroes. I think they recognize the need for wilderness, they organize the effort, and they continue to monitor the results. They didn't get discouraged when the going got tough. I'm just glad that this recording project will preserve the story for other Arkansans.

TM: Well, thank you, Mickey, for that. And a couple of other things here. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about?

FF: No, I think that I've covered everything in my experience pretty well. I was glad to be involved in that project at the time that it started, and I'm very happy to be involved in the recording and telling the story of this. And I'll be anxious to read the story of the other people. There were so many people that worked on this project, and the Ozark Society sponsored it from the beginning, and it makes you believe in personal involvement.

TM: Well, thank you. And would you like to add anything else to your earlier comments?

FF: No, thank you.

TM: You're good? Well, I just would like to, once again, thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today, and for sharing with us your perspective and your stories and your memories of wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. The Pryor Center will provide you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. And so, I'll just say thanks again, and goodbye for now.