

Tom McClure interviewed Don Hamilton on May 30, 2023, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Tom McClure: Today, Don Hamilton is joining us by phone from Little Rock, Arkansas. Don is a graduate of Vanderbilt University and the School of Law at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. He worked for the House, Holmes & Jewell Law Firm in Little Rock for 25 years. He later was general counsel for Little Rock Wastewater Utility. Don has spent a lifetime trying to save wilderness and protect rivers in Arkansas and other parts of the country, such as Alaska. He served on the board of the National Wildlife Federation and played a large role in the passage of the Arkansas Wilderness Act in 1984. 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 Don Hamilton for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas on May 30th, 2023. Don, 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.

Don Hamilton: Okay. My name is Don Hamilton of Little Rock, Arkansas, and I am giving this statement on my involvement with the Arkansas

Wilderness Act of 1983 or '84. I think it was passed in '84, but I'm willing to put it in the public domain and let it be used for whatever purpose by whomever wants to use it, and without any restrictions of any kind. And I don't have anything further to say in that regard, unless you have another question.

TM: No, that sounds fine. Thank you. Don, we have some questions for you to consider today, but we also encourage you to include other things that you would like to say. So, our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

DH: Yes. I first became involved with the National Forest in general and the Ozark and the Ouachita Forest in Arkansas in the 1970s. And I learned of the Proposed Wilderness Act at a meeting at UALR in the mid-'70s, and I think it was in '76, thereabouts. And Jim Crouch, the then forest supervisor, had held the meeting and wanted all interested people to attend the meeting and make a statement and give our reasons of what we wanted and why we wanted it, which we did. I think one of the more humorous incidents that was when one guy submitted a map of the Ozark National Forest and had a big red circle around it and said, "That's what I want as wilderness." And of course, Jim Crouch, a very defensive bureaucrat and dyed-in-the-wool tree chopper took

offense at that. And he said, "Fellas, we're not going to have that." And so, he proceeded, and his staff, then staff, I don't want to belittle in any way the present staff. They've had some great guys there, but he proceeded to give his version and listen to us. And my particular interest was Hurricane Creek Wilderness area, and the Ozarks Society was the group that really put us together, that's not to omit the other members such as the Sierra Club and others, Audubon Society. And we got together and we chose one that we really wanted in mine was Hurricane Creek Wilderness Area. And I went through there on a special trip with Harold Grimmett. He was then the director of the Natural Heritage Commission, and he was a trained biologist, I'm just a lawyer, and we had a big time looking at everything in Hurricane Creek we could, and I had been there numerous times. And I then wrote a report of why we thought it ought to be wilderness area. Of course, it was one that the Forest Service endorsed, and so we didn't really have any controversy over that. It was obvious it was roughly around 15,000 acres. And Hurricane Creek closed through it and it's just an absolutely beautiful ... My favorite wilderness area, although of course, Richland Creek is everybody's favorite, is mine too. But anyway, we spent the day there and then had been back many times and went back and took others to show it. And I authored a report, gave it to Harold. He fixed it up and polished it up. And we submitted

that with a host of other reports from the Ozark Society, which Bill Coleman at the time, who worked for AP&L as an environmental coordinator sort, pulled all that together, put them in a binder, and then that was submitted with the Ouachita reports. We did one on the various Ouachita areas, and we published a bulletin summary which explained with maps all of the areas we wanted at the time. And from then on it was like getting on a roller coaster, and I had no idea that someday I would be at our nation's capital in Washington, D.C. testifying before all those congressmen at the time and then finally senators. But sort of telling my story on the importance of wilderness in our areas and how lucky we were to have them. And of course, my main support was all totally opposed and everything he wrote in Sand County Almanac. That's not to leave out the guy from California who wrote The Wilderness Letter. Because I consider The Wilderness Letter that he wrote and the Aldo Leopold two of the best writings on wilderness, giving all the reasons and all of that. So, they were our springboard for articulating our reasons for wilderness, why we wanted it, why we thought it was so important, and this was really a once in a lifetime decision, which was so important, and we were all committed to doing whatever it took, although I had no idea I would someday be testifying in these hearings. And I must give almost all of the credit to Tom McClure, who was the ramrod, the wagon master of our caravan,

and put this together and demonstrated such a dedication to not only wilderness in fact, but the idea of wilderness and how important it is. And I think that this, and I can't recall his name, I'm embarrassed, the guy who wrote *The Wilderness Letter* ...

TM: Stegner.

DH: Stegner, Wallace Stegner wrote the most eloquent statement of wilderness. And I think that he said it pretty well when he said, "If we lose the wilderness, something will have gone out of us as a people, and who we are and why we are, what we are." But anyway, all of these areas that were passed eventually whittled down by the Forest Service and their timber people cohorts made the difference, and we got what I thought, not everything, but what we thought was a good bill, and I must say, I have to give the credit for the Flatside Wilderness, which wasn't even included in what was known as RARE II. The Roadless Area Reevaluation was suggested by both Tom McClure and Lisa Thompson, and without their guidance and their leadership, that would never have been. And both Ed Bethune and Dale Bumpers worked hard, and without Ed we wouldn't have gotten Flatside, I don't think, because he picked the ball up and early on, even though the rest of the Congressmen were opposed to our version of what we needed for wilderness, he stayed the course, and he and

Lana both, she was just as dedicated as Ed, of course, I had known him in law school back in the class of '63, and so we were good friends, and we'd gone different ways. I went with the law firm, and he went with the FBI, and then the law practice, and of course, eventually ran for Congress. But without the determination of Ed in the House, because all the other representatives were not for us, they had a watered-down version that Beryl Anthony sponsored, which had some of ours, but not all of it. And of course, I had known Beryl Anthony in law school, he's a great guy, I treasured our friendship, but he was from a timber family, and he was oriented in that direction, which we had to part ways on those ideas. But anyway, Dale Bumpers picked the ball up in the Senate after Ed Bethune pushed it in the House, and it would have been stalled in the House if Senator Bumpers hadn't given the extra push and introduced the Senate bill, and we got that passed, and we had some great hearings that involved everybody. And I guess the record that was made at that hearing, which is reported is the greatest example of democracy in action when everybody from the least to the greatest, the best to the worst, testified and really spilled their hearts out for what they believed in on wilderness. I say all driven by all the opposed teachings in Sand County and writings in *Sand County Almanac*. I can't think of that other guy. What's his name?

TM: Stegner.

DH: Stegner. Wallace Stegner I think articulated beautifully. So, it was a long haul. We got to know the Forest Service, and there's a little irony to me in the Forest Service viewpoint, because I had worked for the Department of Agriculture office of the General Council in Little Rock for almost a year before I went in the private practice. So, I knew quite a few of the foresters, including John Orr, the head of the ... Superintendent, who was a very likable, competent person, but he was strictly timber oriented and he was from a school of thought that just ... I don't know if he ever heard of Aldo Leopold, but at any rate, it was a very difficult situation with him, and Senator Dale Bumpers handled it beautifully. I think outside of Ed Bethune, he's the only one who could have achieved what we achieved. He had such a great personality and wonderful sense of humor and broad experience as a trial lawyer in a small town. And I don't know if you all have ever read the book, *The Best Lawyer in a One-lawyer Town* that he wrote, but it is absolutely outstanding. He has a reference there, and I'd be remiss not to mention Susan Reef, his chief aide who worked so hard with us, and also Ed Bethune's chief aide, Martha Tarkington, from Searcy, and she worked hard on it too, and we got so much cooperation from our two elected representatives and senator that I was very touched by that old experience and I have some of the most pleasant memories,

and of course, the friendships that developed out of all that, and just the pure fun we had, I think it's a shame that more citizens don't get involved with the government to see what we have up there in Washington. It's incredible. I might say the Arkansas legislature was a total disappointment. And as we testified in Washington at our expense, the timber lobbyist in the Arkansas legislature got them to pass a anti-wilderness resolution, and they handed that out during the middle of our testimony, and it really made me furious, but it just proved the absolute stupidity of the Arkansas legislature. I mean, it's a hoot, but at any rate, we did get the bill and now thank heavens for the help of such people in the publicity and parks of the Arkansas, and it went ... Our help and support went across the board through numerous chambers of commerce all over the state, including the greater Little Rock Chamber of Commerce. And I give Ed the credit, because he got in there and really worked hard with them and we got resolutions and my testimony is rather lengthy, and I really have to defer to it in this written printed record, because I attached copies of all those resolutions to my testimony. There were something in excess of 35, and we got everything from Chamber of Commerce, the garden clubs, the Boy Scouts, although we did get a little resistance from the Boys Scouts because of a man named Ray Camp, who was a great guy, but he was anti-wilderness and a dedicated forester who looked

at trees and saw nothing, I think, but board feet, and how much could be harvested, and how much money could be made off of it. But he was a great guy, a neighbor and all, and we got along fine. There was nothing personal in all this. I think that our relations were civil, even though we had one forester, head of the Ozark Forest, who was bitterly opposed to wilderness, and that was Jim Crouch, and John Orr was the same way. I think John meant well, he was a competent forester, worked for the Department of Agriculture all his life, but he could not understand why anybody would want to lock up this valuable, he thought, timber, in a wilderness area where you couldn't harvest the trees. But I think that Leopold made the case for wilderness, why it's so important, not just for wildlife science and recreation, but just for the fact of having it out there so people can enjoy it. And I must say that my experience with the wilderness and with Tom McClure and Kirk Watson and so many of the others, including French Hill, our current congressman from Little Rock, who got Senator Tower to co-sponsor the bill, was an experience I'll never forget. So, I think it was worth all the grief and all the hard work that was put into it by a lot of people who made sacrifices all over the state, from north to the south part. I'd be remiss not to mention Joe Nix down there in the southern part of the state. He was certainly a supporter and a long time Ozark Society member. Of course, Neil

Compton championed the Buffalo and he championed wilderness. He was right there with us at every step of the way, supporting, encouraging, and doing whatever he could to advocate wilderness. And without him, I don't know it would have been a tougher road than it was. He did so much great work on the Buffalo, and I think river, National River establishment, and I think he gave us a blueprint for getting the wilderness bill when he championed the Buffalo River. Because there were parallels there in terms of the arguments for and against, and the difficulties we all experienced. The timber group did not, in my mind, distinguish themselves in this wilderness fight, because I think they took a lot of Western timber propaganda and injected it into our fight, which was irrelevant and didn't apply. The economics alone of our national forest, they were literally, as that book says so well, the lands that nobody wanted. And they were not economically profitable. Now you get in town into some of these river bottoms where you have fine plantations, and yes, there's money to be made, but when you consider all the other factors, I question now and then the economy of getting those marginal trees out of that rough country. Our national forest are far more valuable to tourism as the Park Service or the Parks and Recreation Department stated so well so many times. Joe Rice was one of our champions and they have so much value and nobody who floats the Buffalo River, for example,

or hikes in our wilderness area will ever forget the experience. It's just absolutely the most peaceful and beautiful. So, it's hard for me to wrap up comments. Because like Neil Compton said, "The fight goes on." Even now there are those who want to adversely affect our natural areas for a dollar, and it's so foolish. The American values, I think have been turned upside down, but fortunately we have a generation of those dedicated to protection and wise use of our natural resources. So, I probably rambled around, but I can't think of much more to say, except it was a privilege knowing, meeting everybody that we worked with and they were all over the State of Arkansas, plus even outside the State of Arkansas. And I was particularly indebted to the members of the Wilderness Society who came down here and worked with us, and the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society, all the other groups who played such an important part in the wilderness effort, but it's hard to believe it happened. And really when I went to that first meeting back in the mid-'70s, I thought that we're on the losing end of this fight, and then Tom McClure appeared and I think he saved our bacon by getting the rest of us inspired and fired up. And who would have ever thought any of us would be in Washington, D.C. testifying on the value of wilderness and advocating for setting aside these places. And there were so many wonderful people we all came in contact, who's that guy? Wilderness Society, the senator from

Wisconsin, I can't tell his name offhand, but he came down here and he was an inspiration too. He did now, but anyway, there were so many, but if I could recommend anybody who reads my testimony to take a trip up there to Aldo Leopold's Reserve in Baraboo, Wisconsin, I would say it was time worth spent. I had the privilege of meeting his daughter, Nina Bradley, and we had nice visits, and looked at her scrapbook of growing up with her dad and his love for the natural world. And that was really one of the many, many benefits of getting involved with the wilderness ever. I'm ashamed to say I never heard of Aldo Leopold until I was about 50 years old, and why he is not a regular reading material and on the lips of every biology teacher in this country, I don't know. I mean, it ought to be a required reading in our schools to read Aldo Leopold and Wallace Stegner and all the many great ... Of course, I go back to Henry David Thoreau, who is to me the father of all of this teachings and knowledge of the natural world and the importance of it. And if you hadn't been to Walden Pond, you ought to go and just spend some time up there and read Walden over and over again, because he has so much wisdom in that book. And I always wind up with the one statement he made was, "The vast majority of people lead lives of quiet desperation." And I think that that's just what they need is the tonic of wilderness. It's so important for everybody to have a relationship with a natural world. And I grew

up with undeveloped timber at the foot of my street, and each day we would be down there in the woods discovering every type of snake and lizard that we could find, catching [inaudible 00:31:19] and all the rest. And it's obvious to me that children need that, and it could be that wilderness areas will be all that they'll ever have. The way development and our loose land use laws are enforced for the sake of the almighty dollar. And that seeing the plight encouraged me to get on the planning commission, and I realized in that experience how greed just saturates the minds of so many people down at city hall and official responsibilities all the way up from there to that James Watt, who was so terrible, in Washington. And so many others are up there just like him, just wanting to cash in on our national resources so they can line their pockets. But at any rate, we have a great challenge ahead, and I think wilderness areas are key to understanding and working out those problems, which may or may not be solved, because there's no guarantee what we'll have. I think underlying all this conservation is the need for world peace. We are now experiencing over there in the Ukraine some of the most useless, pointless destruction ever known. And after Hitler's madness, I would have thought that we would have gotten past that, but we apparently haven't. And I think every wilderness person ought to work that. So, I realize I've gone far beyond the subject, but at any rate, I think that

concludes what this portion and of the interview. And I'll get back to Tom's questions and try, and my printer went out so I couldn't print them out, but I wrote one, there have been numerous articles which ought to be referred to by anybody who cares about this wilderness, and one of them was done by Scott Trotter, another one French Hill did. I did one. They're all in the Ozark Bulletin, but they kind of wrapped the whole thing up and condensed about six years of energetic effort into a few pages, but I'm trying to sort out my notes and then get back to Tom's question here, and my printer went out and my ...

TM: Well, Don, I'll just read this next question for you, and you've touched on a lot of things already, but maybe this will trigger something else that you want to say. The question is, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas, and what value these areas have for you personally and for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

DH: Okay. I wrote an article called, "Whittling Down the Wilderness", published in the Ozark Society Bulletin Summer of 1983, and that pretty much covered the stalemate we reached with the forest service and the timber industry over our wilderness, which I think in the long run fortunately worked out pretty well, but we need to be protective

and on guard for even an expansion of those areas, because they're one of a kind and there won't be any more of them. And it took so long to get them done. It's hard to believe that we met out there in 1970s, and it didn't get passed until 1984, and it was after a lot of hard work effort and so forth. We had the hearing here in Washington, also first in Little Rock, most effective. And without those hearings I don't think things would have gone quite as well. And like I say, Scott Trotter wrote one of the best articles and so, and French Hill wrote a good article on the whole wilderness story in Arkansas, but ...

TM: Don-

DH: I'm not sure what the next question is.

TM: The next question, I just wanted to ask if there's anything else you would like to mention that I have not asked about, or would you like to add anything to your earlier comments?

DH: Well, I think I pretty much covered the waterfront, and again, there is a voluminous record on the hearings which are far more informative than anything I could say, but it's a record of the hearings in Washington, and it contains all the testimony of all the many people who testified and added so much in a combined effort. And again, I say Tom McClure was undoubtedly the biggest leader that's not to

leave anybody else out, like Kirk Wasson and so many that worked so hard to get the job done, and are still working, because this idea of wilderness has to be understood, and I think the best way to understand it is read *Sand County Almanac*, but don't forget ...

TM: Stegner.

DH: Don't forget Wallace Stegner. And someday I would like to go see the Gila. I've never been. I've been to a lot of the others particular, and particularly in Colorado, they have one out there that is over half a million that is one of my favorites that I like to go to. So anyway, it's time to go to the wilderness areas and appreciate him if you can't do anything, but just go to the edge of one and look at it. That'll raise your spirits and make you feel better, and thanks for the opportunity. I hope I've covered everything, perhaps too much and others not enough, but I do appreciate all the hard work that so many people did to get the bill, because back in the '70s it looked pretty bleak with the both forest supervisors firmly opposed to wilderness, period, let alone the areas we wanted. And we wanted about 115, 120, and they willed it down to 90,000. But thanks to Tom McClure and Kirk and all, and Ed Bethune, they've increased Flatside a little, which was a miracle to even have that. And it's so close. It's probably the best, biggest urban wilderness area that is close to an urban area where so many people

can use it and enjoy it, but it's definitely for all time if we can just keep the tree chopper and the miners out of it. And the fight goes on, as Neil Compton said on the Buffalo River, "We can't sit back resting on our laurels." We're going to have to get out there. Young people have to get involved, and I hope that happens, because if it doesn't, they're going to be the losers and I'll be long gone, dead and forgotten, but I do hope they'll pick up the ball and we'll have more Neil Comptons and Harold Grimmett and Earl ...

TM: Alexander.

DH: Alexander and all the rest. We could stand about a dozen more, Neil Compton. So anyway, I thank you for the opportunity to say something, and I hope that I've covered what needs to be covered. I, by the way, got copies of the transcript of these hearings, and I'd like for all this material to get in the hands of the Pryor Center and they could work with the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville Archives. I donated about 12 or 13, 14, maybe as many as 15 transfer cases of documentary material that I used from the early 70s into the 80s and then beyond, because don't anybody think that the fight for wilderness ended in 1984.

TM: Well, Don, thank you. Go ahead. You were going to say something else?

DH: Did yeoman's work on these plans for the wilderness areas and meeting with the Forest Service, and although we've had a complete changeover in staff, and I think they're much more progressive and positive about wilderness than they ever were. Still the fight goes on, like Neil said, and we need to keep up with our wilderness areas and protect them, because if people like us and like-minded people in the future don't, nobody else will. And I certainly wouldn't, with all due respect, our government bureaucrats, put the matters in their hands along, particularly as long as the lobbyists can get to them and influence them along the way they want to. And I think that concludes what I have to say. I have lost track of the time, but according to my watch, it is 2:20. So, if that's sufficient, I'm ready to sign off, unless you have something more specific.

TM: No, and I just want to thank you, Don, on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today and telling us what happened decades ago that led to the wilderness areas that we now have here in Arkansas. And I also want to mention that the Pryor Center will provide you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. So, we'll just go ahead and sign off. I just want to thank you again. (Unclear).

DH: Okay. Thank you, Tom, for all you do and continue to do. And I'll look forward to seeing you and see what they have.

TM: Sounds great. Thanks.

DH: Okay. Bye-bye.