

Tom McClure interviewed Ray Hanley on April 4, 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 Ray Hanley, for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas, on April 4th, 2024. Ray, 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.

Ray Hanley: Ray Hanley, and yes, I give permission to the Pryor Center to make the material available to anyone that desires to hear.

TM: Okay. Thanks, Ray. Today, Ray Hanley is joining us by phone from Little Rock. Ray was born in Hot Springs, he graduated with a BA in business administration from Ouachita Baptist University in 1973. During his career, Ray was the Arkansas Medicaid director for 16 years. He was an executive with Electronic Data Systems and Hewlett-Packard for eight years. And from 2010 to 2022, he was the chief executive officer and president of the Arkansas Foundation for Medical Care. He retired in 2022. Ray has been a Sierra Club member since

1980, is a member of the Ozark Society and the Wilderness Society. He is the author of 20 books on Arkansas History. He is also a columnist for the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, producing Arkansas Postcard Past five days a week. Ray has also biked in 25 countries on five continents. Ray, thanks again for being here, welcome, and we'll get started here in a minute.

RH: All right. Well, thank you for inviting me.

TM: You bet. We have some questions for you to consider.

RH: Okay.

TM: But we also want to encourage you to include other things other than the four questions if you would like to.

RH: All right.

TM: So, don't feel limited by the four questions. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

RH: Sure. If we fast-forward back to the fall of 1980, I think I was 29 at the time, doing child warfare work, hadn't hiked or camped much since I was a Boy Scout in Malvern, back in my mid-teens. But I heard this TV spot one morning that Sierra Club was going to do a backpack in

the upper Buffalo Wilderness, and the phone number if you were interested. And I thought, well, I think I want to do that. So, that's where I met Jay Vestal first [unclear], and had to go borrow the backpack and the equipment from friends, and rounded up a couple of friends from the office, and we met the group to do the hike. It was led by Mickey Freeman, and there must have been 30 people, it was a big group. And we camped out the night before, and then hiked down Terrapin Branch, which is no trail. If you've been down Terrapin Branch if you're up the Buffalo Wilderness, you know that's not a trail, that's just climbing down one waterfall after the other. But to the bottom, and crossed the river, and camped by an old chimney in the home place, it was great. Nothing like I'd ever done. So, it got really, really cold, and the group sat around and a little alcohol came out, and then somebody started reading Vance Randolph's *Pissing in the Snow*. And the time that went around, the stories were around for a while, and Vance Randolph died later that month, and I used to swear it was probably because he heard these folks down in Arkansas were making fun of his book. I don't know. But that was my first introduction to wilderness and backpack, and I came back home, and I got really interested, and joined the Sierra Club, and started going to the meetings with Jay and others. Had a chance to go back to the Upper Buffalo Wilderness in the spring of '81, and this time down from Curtis

Cemetery across the river, camped in the same spot, it rained all night, we couldn't get back across the river. We were trapped in the wilderness. And our cars were a mile away, but there was no way to cross the river. So, this group of a dozen or so started hiking in the woods the opposite direction, and along about dark, we came out on a dirt road, flagged down a hog truck, he was on his way to buy hogs, paid the man enough where he put us all in the truck, and put us way back around to our cars. So, my first two experiences of the wilderness were the Upper Buffalo, and I've been hooked on the woods and the wilderness ever since. 1983 rolled around and the Arkansas Wilderness Coalition was formed with various groups, Sierra Club, Ozark Society, and others, it's where I became reacquainted with Utah, and we both grew up in Malvern, but having been involved in politics my whole career working for three governors, one who became president, I really appreciated the unique bipartisan forces that came together for the wilderness bill with Ed Bethune, the Republican, and Dale Bumpers, which is just a remarkable partnership that let the whole coalition get behind. And of course, nobody worked harder on this than you did. But I will remember the wine and cheese on top of Flatside Pinnacle with Ed Bethune, photograph of it ended up in Arkansas Times Magazine, and to sit on top of the mountain there with the US Congressman to look out at what needed to become a

wilderness area was a pretty remarkable experience. So, like everybody else, I got involved, I wrote letters, and I talked to people, I even... People that know me know that I draw cartoons, and I actually got a cartoon published in the *Arkansas Gazette* of a bear standing on top of Flatside Pinnacle, booting the man off with a chainsaw. So, that was one of my little roles there. But then you fast-forward to the field hearings at UALR, to talk about the bill that Dale Bumpers put on, and you and I were there, Tom, my wife, Diane, and I both signed up to speak. By happened chance, I'd run across a book before the hearing of *Reader's Digest Most Beautiful Places in America*. Flipping through that, I came to a photo taken from the top of Flatside Pinnacle, looking over the proposed Flatside Wilderness, in a book of the 50 most beautiful places in America. So, I used that as a prop in my testimony, and talked about that, and we were obviously there opposed by Green Bay Packaging up in Martin, who had designs on the [unclear]. We were opposed by something called, I think, the Air and Water Users Association, which I thought was a little bizarre name, I'm sure they must have focused group tested that. I don't know. My wife, Diane, testified, and she uses a prop, our daughter, who was only a couple of months old, Rachel, in a car seat, and she talked about that we didn't have the right to decide for Rachel's generation to take this away, to log places like Flatside that needed to be preserved for the

future and her generation. So, the hearing was a remarkable event. We got married in 1981, and looking through the wedding album, I actually had a bumper sticker on the back of my Volkswagen Rabbit that said, "Watts wrong?" W-A-T-T-S, about the Secretary of the Interior, James White, who we all remember, who obviously opposed any wilderness designation. So, that's what I remember about the legislation, just the remarkable, broad specter of people that came together to support this in the extraordinary vision and the leadership that Dale Bumpers [unclear] provided.

TM: Well, thank you, Ray, that brought back some memories. Question number two, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas? And what-

RH: Oh, absolutely. And I can do this on a personal basis. I can do it from a business perspective. I was a businessman for the last 20 years of my career. I understand the business, and the need to make a profit and sell things. But to me, it's 40 years worth of memories. My two daughters from the time they were toddlers were hiking in the Arkansas wilderness areas. One daughter born in '83, the other in '86, crossing icy creeks in the winter, nice campfires, hot chocolate, and laughing, and it just never occurred to either one of them, but that was something that you didn't do. Going out in the winter and hiking,

even when they had to be carried over the creeks, and the Upper Buffalo, that's just what you did, it was fun. And to this day, they still hike and backpack. But I've got albums full of photos from all these backpacking trips and outings, just lots and lots of memories of family and friends enjoying the wilderness. And I've long been drawn to Newton County, where obviously a good chunk of wilderness exists, I bought a log cabin and 57 acres in Newton County back in 2010, and then I set about to publish a pictorial history of Newton County, which included a whole chapter on the Buffalo and the wilderness that surrounds it. So, that's from my personal view, what it means to me, but again, the businessman in me understands that what exists today that was not part of the public discussion 40 years ago when we were involved in this, was what outdoor recreation means to the Arkansas economy. Unique perhaps in mid-America, the resources, the outdoor resources that Arkansas has, and the crown jewels or these wilderness areas like the Upper Buffalo, like Flatside Pinnacle that is so accessible from Little Rock, Richland Creek, places that we all know. And this just would not have been part of the public awareness. But even today, your conservative politicians talk up the value of Arkansas outdoor recreation is part of the economy. So, where the Air and Water Users are and the opponents today, I don't know, but they've obviously

faded into the background, and I think there is broad support for what came out of that legislation all those years ago.

TM: Well, thanks, Ray.

RH: And I-

TM: Yeah, go ahead.

RH: Well, and just to post script to that, we got to worry about overuse now of these areas, and with the population of Northwest Arkansas going to hit a million people in the next 10 or 12 years, I hope we can come back at some point and talk about expanding some of these areas, and maybe going back and see if a couple of them got left out of the bill could still be included. So, that's just a point to factor in, I think.

TM: Well, thanks. And question number three 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?

RH: Yeah. I think about the debates that we had, and talking to people, and I remember the biggest opposition that was spoken to me and misunderstanding was, well, it would ban hunting, you don't have the

right to stop hunting, and I said, "No, no, no, you don't understand, this doesn't limit hunting." So, we had to have that conversation with a lot of people. I think about the lifelong friendships, Jay Vestal, and Mickey Freeman, and obviously becoming reacquainted with Utah, and we were a couple years apart in high school. My friend Marion Hines, and Jim Rawlins, who wrote the first guidebook on the Ouachita Trail before Tim Ernst. And I can remember hiking into the Black Fork Mountain Wilderness, which is probably still maybe the least visited wilderness area, over close to Mena, and anybody that knew Jim Rawlins, who had been deceased for a couple of years, but this is a man that backpacked with a vengeance, and his goal was to have the lightest backpack. I think he even [unclear] holes in the handle of his toothbrush. But I remember camping on top of Black Fork Mountain in this stunted oak forest, with Jim sitting inside an old stone chimney, stay warm, it was cold, it was raining, and we could, at one point, look across the valley toward the Queen Wilhelmina State Park, and we're camp there in the rain with campfire and try to keep going, and we can almost see into the lodge at Queen Wilhelmina, and think about those folks over there, drinking wine and having their own entertainment. And then I think about a trip to the Flatside Camping in Flatside Wilderness one night, 10 degrees, coldest I've ever been out, burned a lot of fire, a lot of wood that night. I think about a trip to

Hurricane Creek, I've been to the Hurricane Creek Wilderness a number of times, but in the mid '80s, I had a chance to take a family of Czech refugees on an overnight backpack up there, and these are people that had fled the communists in the Czech Republic by just putting their stuff in the car, that they could carry, and acting like they were going on vacation with no attention on coming back. And they ended up, by some mistake, resettled in Little Rock with the Catholic Diocese, and we got acquainted with them. And so, I had this family camp in the Arkansas Wilderness, who'd fled the communists a couple of years before, camped above Hurricane Creek, it rained, it rained hard, but they had a great time, and I still have photographs and things from that. So, to come from a communist depression to experience the Arkansas Wilderness is one of the memories that I've got.

TM: Well, thanks for those good stories, Ray. Question number four 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 about or consider?

RH: I think that they need to know and understand how much harder it was to get it done than it should have been. That we were never talking about more than... Always less than 5% of the national forest.

We were never talking about taking land off limits for hunting, it was simply preserving a small slice for the benefit of future generations and recreation that you probably couldn't get otherwise. And I think a lot of that people don't understand. The *Democrat Gazette* periodically does big articles with photographs, usually done by Bob Robbins in Fort Smith about hiking some of the wilderness areas, and the Ozark Highlands Trail, and people read them, but they don't understand how hard and what a near thing it was getting this done 40 years ago. And that's what people need to know, when we tell the story of this, they need to understand what a battle it was, and to have what we have today.

TM: Well, thanks. Thanks again, Ray. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked you about?

RH: I don't think so, Tom, I think that's probably the extent of my notes. I was just glad to play a small supporting role in this to you and others. And it's something that I've always been proud of, and still get to enjoy today, even at my end stage.

TM: Would you like to add anything to your earlier comments or have you said what you want to say?

RH: I think, Tom, I have said pretty much what I needed to say.

TM: Well, I would just like to thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today to share with us your perspective and your stories and memories of wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. The Pryor Center-

RH: Oh, you're welcome.

TM: The Pryor Center will provide you with a copy of this audio recording, and thank you again. You were starting to say something else.

RH: No, I was just thanking you for the opportunity and tell you how highly I regard the Pryor Center and certainly Governor and Senator Pryor, who I knew well.

TM: Well, thank you for being here again, and all of your comments, and I'll just say goodbye for now.

RH: Thank you, Tom.

TM: You bet. All right.

RH: Bye.