

Tom McClure interviewed French Hill 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 Congressman French Hill 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. Congressman Hill, 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.

French Hill: This is French Hill in Little Rock, Arkansas, and yes, I do consent for this to be part of the public record.

TM: Thank you. And today we have, as you heard, Congressman French Hill joining us by phone from Little Rock. And just a little information about Congressman Hill. He is a ninth-generation Arkansan and a magnum cum laude graduate of Vanderbilt University, majoring in economics. He is currently serving in Congress, having represented the 2nd District of Arkansas since 2015. Before his time in Congress, he was the founder, chairman, and chief executive officer of Delta Trust &

Banking Corporation. From 1989 to 1991, he served as the assistant secretary of the treasury for corporate finance. And in 1991, he was appointed by President Bush to be executive secretary to the President's Economic Council. From 1982 to 1984, Representative Hill served on the staff of Senator John Tower of Texas, and also on the staff of the US Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. Congressman Hill has been president of the Rotary Club of Little Rock and was the 2003 chairman of the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce. He is an avid outdoorsman and a longtime supporter of the Boy Scouts of America, the arts and humanities, tourism, and historic preservation in Arkansas. Once again, Congressman Hill, welcome and thank you for being with us here today.

FH: Great to be with you, Tom. I really appreciate the chance to talk about wilderness with you.

TM: We have some questions for you to consider, but we also want to encourage you to include other things that you would like to say beyond the four questions anytime you want to. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

FH: Well, Tom, it's been an important part of my life, and it's a story that comes in two chapters. The first chapter, in some ways, was perhaps

the most interesting because it was at the very earliest days of finding consensus in Arkansas that our beautiful state should contain wilderness areas. I was an employee of the United States Senate between the fall of 1982 and the fall of 1984, and that turned out to be the perfect time to be in place to contribute in a modest way to the development of what we know as the Arkansas Wilderness Act of 1984. I worked for a Senator from Texas at that time, John Tower. He'd been in the Senate 24 years. He was a very, very senior Republican and chaired the Senate Armed Services Committee and served on the Senate Banking Committee and Budget Committee. I worked for him over on the Banking Committee staff, helping run the Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs. But my dear friend, childhood friend of mine, I was the child, he was the friend, Don Hamilton, and many involved in The Ozark Society that you know well, including yourself and Bill Coleman was very involved as well, were beginning to advocate for a specific wilderness set of proposals for Arkansas. And there were competing ones with ideas that were more in line with the US Forest Service suggestions from the 1970s, and some broader, including one offered by my predecessor, Ed Bethune, who represented the 2nd Congressional District of Arkansas at that time. And those competing interests between Senator Pryor and Senator Bumpers and the House members were what I learned about

when I was a staffer for John Tower. So with help from Joe David Rice, then at the State of Arkansas Parks and Tourism Department, we took the statistics of who visits the Ouachita and Ozark National Forests and Hot Springs to Senator Tower. And it was no surprise that, at that time, and I'm sure it's not a lot different today, 60% of the tourists that visited our outdoor recreation sites in the state were from Texas. So my pitch to John Tower was it's very unusual for a senator from another state to sponsor a neighbor's wilderness legislation, and maybe it's even more unusual for a very conservative chairman of the Armed Services Committee, John Tower of Texas, to co-sponsor Senator Dale Bumpers, a definitely center-left member of the US Senate at the time, and in some ways, relatively outspoken critic of the Reagan defense policies, which John Tower was critical to implementing. So as I told the Arkansas Historical Association back in April of 2009 in a talk I gave on this, opposites attract. So John Tower, at my request, co-sponsored the Dale Bumpers bill for an Arkansas Wilderness Bill based on the fact that Texans loved to come to Arkansas, spend money, and see our beautiful special wilderness and natural areas. And that got a lot of press in the Arkansas newspapers, some press in Texas. I think it was an important catalyst for the Senate process. So my commitment to supporting wilderness areas actively in a legislative context goes back four decades now as that

staffer in the US Senate for chapter one of my involvement. Chapter two, you flash-forward 30 years later and I joined the Congress as a member in 2015, becoming the congressman from the 2nd Congressional District, the same district that Ed Bethune represented back in 1984. And I set about to look at the possibility of expanding Flatside Wilderness area in the 2nd Congressional District. And I went back to those original proposals from 1984 and what was included and what was not included. And I was aided in this work mightily, frankly, by my good friend and our senior Senator John Boozman, because we had to go through a very detailed effort to convince the House and Senate committees that expanding Flatside was in the nation's interest and should have support on a bipartisan basis in Congress. We first were able to modestly expand Flatside back in 2018. President Trump signed the bill into law in January of 2019 for about a 640-acre tract that the US had coded as wilderness and managed in that methodology, but it had not been so formally designated legally and put into the area. So we did that in 2018, good support in the Senate from Senator Boozman in helping make that happen. And the bill designated that 640-acre addition as the Bethune Woods in honor of Ed Bethune's amazing work 40 years ago to bring wilderness to the state of Arkansas. Following that, the committees, the House Natural Resources Committee, Senate Agriculture Committee, really insisted

that we have a study of the proposed additions to Flatside and that Congress authorize that study, that the US Forest Service carry out that study, and that only after that study could the Congress effectively evaluate it and then make a decision on any other acreage to be designated. So that's an important step. It's a time-consuming step. So in Fiscal 2019, in the appropriations legislation, Senator Boozman and I included a provision to require that study of the Flatside Wilderness area, and if adjacent lands might well meet the 1964 Wilderness Act defined eligibility. And that study was completed in spring of 2021, and it was, I thought, quite good, and answered all the questions. And then we spent, with your help, Tom, and others and The Ozark Society and other interested parties, we looked through that and ranked the acreage that they thought could be included. We worked with the committee staff on the House Natural Resources Committee, and we then introduced the Flatside Wilderness Additions Act, which proposes to add 2,200 acres of existing US Forest Service land to the existing wilderness area based on that study. And I am currently advocating for that bill as we speak. We have an agreement among House Natural Resources leadership, myself, to add this bill for a markup in the weeks around this scheduled phone call that we have today, so I'm looking forward to that. And once we get that bill through the committee, then that will, I think, facilitate our ability to

put it to work over in the Senate as well. So it's been an amazing 40-year legislative journey for me from a young staffer in my 20s to a member of Congress in my 60s to help improve the wilderness experience and the wilderness access here in the state of Arkansas.

TM: Well, thank you very much for your insights on that and your going through the steps that led you to the present day. The second question that we have is, will you please describe how you feel personally about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas and what value these areas have for you and for the people of Arkansas as a whole, both now and in the future?

FH: Well, this is such an important question, and for me, it's almost a spiritual question. I'm at my most peaceful and happiest when I'm out deep in the forest or just in green space, in the wilderness. I say that in a general way. We know for a fact, through scientific studies, how beneficial exposure to nature is to human development, particularly for kids. And unfortunately, in our last century of extraordinary urbanization of the society, which was concerned about the founders of the Boy Scouting Movement, as you well know, in the early part of the 20th century, it was just deemed essential that people have outdoor skills, outdoor experiences, that they understand nature, they understand the cycles of nature, and that they reap the benefits that

John Muir talked about in his writings that's captured only out in the wilderness. And so in addition to that urbanization trend for a century, now we've had this maybe more pernicious trend in the last 15 years, which is social media and mobile phone applications, smartphone applications. Despite all the benefits thereof, people just cannot separate themselves from something plugged into a wall, and they can't even find how to go to the grocery store without putting it in a GPS app on their phone. It's really sort of, if you're as independent as I am and untethered as I am prone to be, it's just debilitating, I think, what we've sort of realized in society, so much so that the Nature Conservancy did a poll a few years ago. I love quoting it. They asked adolescent kids, "Hey, why don't you go outside and play or go to the park or go on a camping trip? Why do you want to stay inside?" And their answer was, "That's where the plugs are." So I really think that now more than ever, Americans need the benefit of and the incredible restorative nature of being out in wilderness. To go further is to also say why wilderness areas, as opposed to just national parks or national rivers or taking a hike in a city park with your dog, all those things are important, all things are good and they're all restorative, but there's something exceptional about going out into literally the middle of a roadless wilderness area filled with the iconic geological or topographical or natural features. But the principle feature is, as I say,

that very untethered-type experience where you're in a roadless area and out on your own with or without GPS connection, hopefully I think without, but for safety's sake in the modern age, probably not. So I just think it's very important for now and in the future that we preserve this opportunity because we know of its health, behavioral health, physical fitness benefits of being out in an outdoor recreation sense, but as I say, even more importantly, untethered and in a structuralist wilderness-type environment.

TM: Well, thank you. Question 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?

FH: Well, it's just, I have to go back to basic principles. I was raised in the Little Rock area and I had the great, great fortune of a remarkable father who loved to explore the outdoors under all weather conditions, fearlessly, both in canoeing, backpacking, and hiking. And he had a young, young to him, sidekick, Don Hamilton, an exceptional 50-year member of The Ozark Society and other conservation groups as well. And I learned so much from the two of them about wilderness survival because they were always in trouble. And in all of our explorations over those years when I would have been eight to 12 years old, they would be a car stuck in a Ford, or a canoe turned over on the Illinois

Bayou or the Big Piney in February in freezing conditions, and somebody's knee has been twisted and they can't walk and we've got to build a fire and we have all of our stuff in a garbage bag. I mean, I have so many childhood memories of exploration in the nooks and crannies of Arkansas. It made me not only a passionate conservationist, but it made me passionate about the experiences in wilderness. And I know I'm an advocate for conservation and wilderness because of the example of my dad, Jay Hill, and his good friend and my good friend to this day, Don Hamilton, and those early adventures I had as a boy, which really facilitated the work I've done in Scouting and in conservation, and certainly in my passion for wilderness. I first saw a Flatside Wilderness area in January or February 1983 with snow on top of Flatside on a very cold, brisk day with Don. This is when I worked back for Senator Tower and Don took me to the top of Flatside on that snowy day to look out over the proposed area. And so I just have to, in this particular question, pay tribute to all those childhood adventures I had with my dad and with Don.

TM: Well, thank you very much for sharing all that. The fourth question that we have is, would you like to add anything that you think needs to be emphasized about the history of wilderness protection in Arkansas that you think the public should know or consider?

FH: Well, there's a lot of comments, I think, in the public sphere these days about why do we need wilderness? We've talked a lot about that today, and I constantly hear that from some of my colleagues in the Congress, many of whom represent Western states where the United States government, through the Forest Service or the BLM, the Bureau of Land Management, may well own two-thirds or 80% of the land in a particular state. And so they have a very different relationship with our stewardship questions than we might have in Arkansas. And so I'm frequently asked the question, why do we need more wilderness areas? In their view, that Western state view is that they want less federal land in outdoor recreation. They want more federal land in private hands. They want more federal land in productive uses, and I certainly respect all those views. But as I've outlined in this interview, I think wilderness is essential to the human spirit, to human development, and to human peace and prosperity and physical and behavioral health. And I think the idea that we set aside a small percentage of our public lands, whether it's in a National Park designation or in a US Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management, that is something that we should do, where we don't do development on purpose, that we preserve these areas basically as they were. And I think the government, since the 1964 Act, has worked hard with local stakeholders to identify the best examples of that, because there are

very few places in America that are truly "untouched by man" or truly roadless. But the idea that we work really hard to designate those areas inside our existing public lands on a modest basis, I think will have lasting long-term resources and benefits for the American people. And so I think it's important that we have a new generation of advocates for supporting this investment in wilderness, and that's why I'm proud to do my small part in that to follow on the bipartisan strong advocacy that we've had for the past 60 years.

TM: Well, thanks again. And is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about or ...

FH: Well, I think on the historic portion of what we all did together back in 1984, I'd say the only thing I would suggest is, as a part of the permanent record, is the talk I gave about that at the Arkansas Historical Association annual meeting at SAU down in Magnolia on April 25th, 2009. It really walks through using the benefits of the archive at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville in telling the story and pulling out the details of this fascinating connection between John Tower of Texas and Dale Bumpers of Arkansas and their collaboration to help be one of the cogs in the wheel that produced the Arkansas Wilderness Act of 1984.

TM: Well, thank you. And I'm glad that information is there and appreciate you making sure that it was put down and recorded that it all happened and that it's there for people to use and learn from in the future. Also, would you like to add anything else that I haven't asked about or to your earlier comments? So this is your time to color outside the lines and do and say anything you want to, and we've got plenty of time left and so just wanted to see if you had anything else you wanted to add.

FH: Well, I think we've covered it. I mean, my main mission as we record this in the spring of 2024 is to complete my mission of expanding Flatside Wilderness area for 2,200 additional acres to be designated. And Tom, I will say this, that I've learned in listening to my colleagues in the House and Senate, I believe that the way that you and I have worked on this together for the past nine years, along with The Ozark Society, is a model for the proper way for wilderness areas to be considered across the country. Because as I noted a few minutes ago, the western state members have a lot more controversy about this, just because of land management challenges in the West generally, changes in water use, lack of land for development next to a city that's growing, and yet the city's boundaries are encircled by the Bureau of Land Management, for example, or where wilderness areas are proposed by people outside the district, which is a big issue in our

country politically, where someone makes a recommendation that doesn't even live in a particular congressional district, "Oh, this area should be a wilderness area." So the one thing I've learned over the last few years, and I think we've modeled very, very "good behavior," in quotes, how we've structured this, is that we go first to the local area, county judges, Quorum Courts, the Game and Fish Commission, Arkansas Parks and Tourism, the Chambers of Commerce, the governor, local legislators in the area, neighboring landowners, the forest itself, in this case, in my case, the Ouachita National Forest in Perry County, Arkansas, and outline the goals that we have and the logic for that and see if that's embraced. And then we do this very thoughtful, legislatively directed, and I emphasize that because that's what I've heard from my colleagues, legislatively directed study that the Forest Service assess the land for inclusion under the 1964 Act and subsequent amendments as to whether this would qualify as a wilderness designation, and then go about and have Congress direct that that acreage be included with the full support, as I say, of local citizens. That is, in my judgment, the way to advocate for these sorts of land management and land practice issues, where we really do it in the right way and we build consensus. And I think that will encourage people in the Congress to be more supportive because there's a resistiveness on the part of parochial members of Congress from a

district where a whole group of people that don't even live in the area are saying, "This must be set aside as wilderness," and yet no effort's been made to build consensus among local government officials or local citizens. So that's one big-picture comment I would make about wilderness generally, and it's one reason why I also support legislation that's pending in the House and Senate the last couple of Congresses on a law called Recovering America's Wildlife Act. This would shift from the federal government to state conservation and wildlife agencies, the design, implementation, and enforcement in and around habitat for endangered species. Instead of making this a one-stop shop up in Washington that's heavily politicized and doesn't really recognize local conditions, Recovering America's Wildlife Act, the proposal would shift some of those dollars to state agencies, like the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, to build their own consensus around the enhancement of habitat for helping recover a particular species that's in trouble or threatened. And I think that's the kind of, again, grassroots approach that we will get better, more timely outcomes to set conservation goals than we do trying to get a one-size-fits-all approach dictated from some headquarters building up in Washington.

TM: Well, thank you for those thoughts. And if you don't have any others at this point, I would just like to thank you again on behalf of The Pryor Center and The Ozark Society for being here today to share with

us your perspective and memories of wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. The Pryor Center also will provide you with a copy of this audio recording. And do you have anything else that you would like to add before we sign off?

FH: I don't think so, Tom. I just want to thank you for your decades of leadership, not only in Arkansas, but across the country in wilderness designations and analysis and preservation. And I'm grateful to all you've done for the movement your whole career.

TM: Well, you've done a lot in your career as well, but thank you, and thanks again for participating in this project and I'll just say goodbye for now.

FH: Thanks much.

TM: Bye.