

Tom McClure interviewed John Leflar on April 16, 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 John Leflar for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas, on April 16, 2024. John, 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 available and related material available to others.

John Leflar: I'm John Leflar. I am more than willing for my information to be used by the Pryor Center to help people remember this time in our history.

TM: Thank you, John. Today, John Leflar is joining us in person here at the Pryor Center on the Square in Fayetteville. just want to tell you a little bit about John. John was born and raised in Bentonville. He has a BS degree in education from the University of Arkansas and a master's degree in divinity with emphasis in youth work from Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. John taught shop and social studies for more than 20 years at Rogers High School. In his earlier years, John

floated in a wooden John boat and on an inner tube on the White River before it was inundated by Beaver Lake. John also worked with the Boy Scouts and went with scouts to the Boundary Waters Canoe area in Minnesota. When Beaver Lake was filling up, John collected native wildflowers like lady slippers to save them before they were covered by the lake water. He served multiple terms as chairman of the Sugar Creek chapter of the Ozark Society. John, once again, welcome. And we're glad to have you here with us today.

JL: Thank you.

TM: We have some questions for you, but we will allow you to color outside the lines as well. If you want to say something that's not included in any of these questions, just go right ahead. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

JL: Well, I was very fortunate to be involved with a group of really sharp folks who represented the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, and a number of other organizations. And the opportunity to work collectively towards this goal was a big deal for me. I was representing the Ozark Society at the time. Neil was doing less and less public appearances and travel and the like. And so I had the privilege of spending a lot of time with Neil Compton in his basement, going

through his files and getting the background material we needed for the statements that we needed to make in Washington. He had notes from a previous wilderness study. I believe it was called the RARE II Study from the time before that. And it was extremely helpful to be able to work with Neil and all of his resources from back then. All I had to do is update it according to what the current proposals were at that time, and then to do the footwork and appear in the places and give testimonies and the like.

TM: Okay. Thanks, John. Question number two, will you please describe how you personally feel about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas and what value these areas have for you personally, and what valued that you think they have for the people of Arkansas as a whole, both now and in the future?

JL: Well, it sounds a little smug, but I feel a little bit of pride when I go in the area of one of these wilderness areas, even if I'm just traveling by. The idea that it's set aside and protected means a lot to me, and to know that folks have the opportunity to go out and see that kind of untouched area in the Ozarks. I just came back from a week-long time over near some of these wilderness areas and had family members go over and spend time there this last week, and their reports on what they saw and what it was like mean a lot to me.

TM: Okay. 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?

JL: Well, again, the quality of the people that I got to work with, obviously Dr. Compton, but also Ellen Neville. There were people from the Sierra Club and so many other organizations. It was a big deal. Going to Washington, DC, to testify in front of House and Senate subcommittees was a huge opportunity to do something, to make a difference in the state of Arkansas that would last for people for generations to come. So when I hear people talk about going over to those places, it gives me a good warm feeling inside to hear that.

TM: Well, thank you, John. Would you like to add anything from these first three questions that you think needs to be emphasized, or beyond those first three questions, that you think needs to be emphasized about the history of wilderness protection in Arkansas that you think the public should know or that they should consider?

JL: Well, the wilderness areas I believe right now are an underutilized resource in a sense that they're not set up to be utilized. They're set up to be preserved. And folks and organizations make pilgrimages to go to these places and see the undisturbed stuff. I enjoy Hobbs State Management area outside of Rogers, but that place was logged.

Roscoe Hobbs was timber and Thai company. It's beautiful to be able to be out in land that is set aside for recreation and the like, but the impact on the tree populations and all the other things is obvious.

Even though those are state park areas and protected, the wilderness areas have a different variety of species and you can see them in their untouched habitat, and that's a big deal.

TM: Okay. Is there anything else that I haven't mentioned that you would like to mention that I have not asked about?

JL: Sure. That's a great question. I try to always use that, what did I forget to ask or what could I add? I'll say this, for whatever the challenges are going to be to people in what I'll call the environmental community in Arkansas, in days to come, I just want them to be able to look back at this and see that it is possible to work together and to achieve great successes. I know there are things coming up all the time and I try to participate with other folks in some of the decisions and some of the opportunities to protect resources and to provide recreation. I just want folks to know that it can be done. It's been done in the past. It was done by people before me and I was fortunate to be able to participate some. And it can be done on whatever comes up. It just requires commitment and time and coordination with good people.

TM: Okay. Thanks. Thanks, John. Would you like to add anything else to your earlier comments?

JL: Oh, I think all the different people you're interviewing will cover this from all the different angles, and I'm pleased that you're having the opportunity to do this. Again, the privilege I had to take over Dr. Compton's files and notes and be able to use them at that time was, again, you couldn't ask for better.

TM: Do you have anything else that you would like to mention or any other stories or comments that you would like to make?

JL: Oh, gosh. I'd like to push the idea that these areas are not just for tree huggers and a few Sierra Club members. These areas are open for hunting, for fishing, for hiking in, backpacking. You just don't get to drive your four wheel drive right down the middle of it, but there's a lot of recreational use besides just people from the university going in to study plant varieties. I encourage folks to get out and explore the areas. And they're spread across the state. They're not all just in one small area. So it's an opportunity for folks, say, down at Flatside or other areas to go and experience this.

TM: Okay. Any other thoughts about wilderness that you would like to share or that you think the public should be cognizant of or think

about as we go into the future of having these as a part of our landscape?

JL: Again, the experience of going into these wilderness areas and just sitting on a big rock. I mean, I love places like Devil's Den State Park and things like that, but the hand of man is obvious on them. And seeing what our pioneer ancestors experienced is a big deal.

TM: I appreciate those comments. Let's see. Is there anything else that you'd like to add at this point or you feel like we ought to go ahead and close out?

JL: Again-

TM: We have plenty of time.

JL: ... the thing I would mostly encourage folks to do is when you have the opportunity and you're in the right part of the state, spend some time in some of these areas. The wildflowers that my father raised me seeing down in the White River bottoms and the like are found in a lot of places there. The lady slipper orchids, there's trillium everywhere. There's all kinds of lovely stuff to see, wild azaleas, get out and enjoy it.

TM: Well, thank you very much, John. And if you have other things to mention, we've got some extra time, or otherwise, we can just go ahead and wrap it up. Do you have anything else you want to add?

JL: Well, some of the paperwork that I sent you and photographs of documents, I assume they'll be included with this and people will be able to go to those for references and the like.

TM: Absolutely. We will.

JL: The various testimonies given in front of the House and Senate subcommittees by all the different people that traveled to DC were really thorough and covered all the bases. I think going back to see the historic documents on it will give people tools to use or examples to use in future environmental work.

TM: Good point. And thanks for mentioning that. Any other thoughts that you want to share?

JL: No, just pleased that the Pryor Center made this space available and you were here doing the interviews and we'll be sorting and sifting through it and figuring out how to put it in a format that'll be usable for people in the future.

TM: That sounds great, John. Thank you so much for being here today. I'd like to thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and also the Ozark Society for sharing your perspective and your thoughts and advice and memories regarding wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. Also, just want to mention that the Pryor Center will be providing you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. Do you have anything else to add? Okay.

JL: No. No. Just glad I was invited.

TM: Well, I'm glad you were here and just want to thank you again and I'll just say goodbye for now.