

Stewart Noland interviewed Tom McClure on May 21, 2024, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Stewart Noland: 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 Stewart Noland interviewing Tom McClure for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas on May 21st, 2024. Tom, please 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.

Tom McClure: My name is Tom McClure and I give my permission for the Pryor Center to use this tape for however they want to.

SW: Tom grew up in Malvern, Arkansas. He received a BA degree from the University of Arkansas in 1975 in zoology. And he received a dental degree from the University of Missouri, Kansas City School of Dentistry in 1979. Tom completed a teaching program at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, Connecticut. Tom practiced dentistry for 10 years. He worked for nonprofit conservation groups for six years. And he was a biology and earth science teacher for 20 years. Welcome, Tom.

TM: Well, thanks, Stewart. I'm glad to be here.

SW: Tom, I have four questions for you concerning wilderness protection in Arkansas. And just feel free to respond in the way you wish. Will you please describe your involvement and efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

TM: Well, I was in Missouri going to school in the late '70s, and I heard about this program called RARE II, where the forest service at the national level was looking at potential wilderness areas. And I had grown up in Malvern and explored all over the place, and saw a lot of changes going on in terms of the woods and streams. My favorite stream, the Caddo River was dammed up, and I knew that ... And something like this interested me. That somebody wanted to look at protecting parts of the national forest in a natural condition. So I got involved mainly with Sierra Club, but other groups as well in Missouri while they were doing their RARE II studies. And there were places like the Irish Wilderness and Patty Creek, and Piney Creek, and Devil's Backbone were some of the areas that they ultimately got protected the same year we did in 1984. But in 1979, I came back to Arkansas and started a dental practice. And also was interested in what was going on with the RARE II process in Arkansas. And both in Missouri and Arkansas, they were moving into a phase where there were going

to be proposals made and decisions made about which areas that were in the study should qualify for wilderness. And I think that came out at the end of the Carter Administration in 1979, the Forest Service recommendations. And of course, I and a bunch of other people thought they were way too low, and that there were many good areas out there that should be included. So the Ozark Society was one of the leaders here in Arkansas. Bill Coleman and others were organizing groups to go out and look at these areas. And there were dozens of people involved in this. And Bill, who's already been interviewed, did a good job of going through a lot of it. But I was inspired that so much was going on in Arkansas. And I was of course inspired by the quality of the wilderness areas that we had here, that we were looking at to protect. And the Forest Service recommendation, in my opinion, was way too low and left out some areas. So I kind of joined the effort and I met people like Don Hamilton and I'd kind of worked with Sierra Club mainly in Missouri. So I kind of gravitated toward the Sierra Club folks here in the Little Rock area, and we started ... we being that there was the Arkansas Conservation Coalition, which is made up of nine groups. And I may rattle some papers here to dig in and find that brochure and read those groups to you at some point. We're kind of looking at this as together. And it was groups like the Ozark Society, the National Wildlife Federation Affiliate, the Arkansas Wildlife Federation. The

League of Women Voters, the Audubon Society, and other groups were kind of meeting together to work up a proposal for this. And there was a wilderness task force that Bill Coleman and I, and Lissa Thompson and Jay Vestal were on to try to come up with a slate of areas and also some information that we could take to Congress. Because ultimately we had to get a congressman or a senator to promote this. And we had, of course, knew about Dale Bumper's reputation as a person who cared about nature, but we didn't really know about any of the rest of the delegation. And so we just kind of put together a brochure and took a lot of the information of people that had been out there. We went out on the ground quite a bit in 1981, '80, '81, '82. And then came up with a proposal that we thought was good and took it around to all the members of the delegation. I can still remember meeting Ed Bethune for the first time out at one of his mobile units, and we just talked about this. And he was one that we didn't really know much about, but we went to him and Bill Alexander and Burl Anthony and Senator Bumpers and Senator Pryor and John Paul Hammerschmidt and just told them what we thought should be done. And that we needed more wilderness areas than what the Forest Service was proposing. And Ed Bethune seemed to be the one that was the most interested. Bumpers was interested, but not quite ready to make a move on it. But we were worried about areas like East Fork and

Flatside being logged before we could get them to get involved. There was a road flagged right up through the middle of Flatside, and a timber sale planned in East Fork that Don Hamilton and Bob Irving both appealed to try to stop that timber sale temporarily, at least. And fortunately, Ed Bethune kept getting more and more interested, and we took him out to Flatside. And we walked up on top of the pinnacle, as many of you who are listening to this have probably been there, but it's one of the best views in the Ouachitas. And he said, we told him all the things that we were concerned about. And we thought this area not only qualified, but would be a very good wilderness. And he said he wanted to chew on it for a while. He wanted to think about it. And so a few days later, he decided that he wanted to get involved. That he supported what we were trying to do. And that he would contact the Forest Service and ask them to hold up on their activities that were planned in these areas that we had proposed. So that was a big victory. Probably 1982 maybe is when that happened, maybe early '83. And then eventually, Senator Bumpers, who had been sympathetic to our cause all along, put in his own bill that was very similar, and then we had something going in the House and in the Senate. So toward the last year or so, Bill Coleman moved to Washington DC with his job and was doing some things up there. So I assumed more responsibility with the Arkansas Conservation Coalition.

And when we had the hearings here in Little Rock, I testified for the coalition on this. And also went to Washington and testified up there in May of 1983. And then this big hearing in Arkansas was in February of 1984. But we had a brochure we had a booklet that went through all the areas. And then we had also a slideshow that Lissa Thompson and Mel White did, and it really gave us a boost. It was about 11 minutes long, as well as I can remember. But it had music and some great pictures and some great ... And it talked about why this should be done and why it was not going to impact a lot of other things that people were worried about, and it just really made a big difference. One example I'll give you is there was a person who has now passed away named Chris Tolgren from Mountain Home, Arkansas, who probably showed this slideshow 20 times up there to different groups all over the place. And he got the Mountain Home Chamber of Commerce to endorse it. I remember one visit that Senator Bumpers made up there where Neil Compton came over and was part of the entourage. And Chris took them out and showed him all sorts of stuff. But Chris had an insurance agency there on the square and was an Ozark society guy who floated and was really interested. And he also went to Washington with us to testify. But Chris, when you walk into Leatherwood someday, and I hope you do, just remember that Chris

Tolgren was the main person probably that got that one set aside.

Let's see. I think that's about it for question one.

SW: Okay. Thank you, Tom. Please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas. And what value these areas have for you and for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future.

TM: Well, I think some of the ... I mean, everybody loves to go into an area. If they love nature, they like to go walk in a wilderness area. A place where the trees are allowed to grow big. Where there's lots of den trees, where there's down logs on the forest floor. Where it's you get a prime evil nature feeling when you're in a wilderness area, or in many of them. So people like to visit there and hike, or they like to turkey hunt or squirrel hunt there for the den trees, for the old woods. And there are birders love them. There are certain birds. Cerulean warbler is one that comes to mind and lots of woodpeckers that love the old woods so ... and sometimes people just want to show their kids, this is what the woods look like when great-grandpa was growing up. But there are other reasons, I think, to save these places and that provide benefits for me, and I think for the people of Arkansas, for sure. They are places that protect for the long-term, the natural history of Arkansas. And by that, I mean, the natural flora and fauna is protected, the water systems are protected. And by allowing these

natural places to exist, many native plants and animals that live there are able to survive as lands are being changed and developed and managed all around them that may not suit their habitat needs.

Wilderness helps us understand the people who came before us. It represents the environment that they had to contend with, which shaped their work, their play, their language, their art, their food, their clothing, their shelter. There was a person, if you're interested in wilderness at all, one book you should put at the top of your list is a *Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold. And when you start reading it, you'll understand why. But he has a wonderful essay on wilderness, and it starts out like this, so I'm going to quote from that. "Wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization. Wilderness was never a homogeneous raw material. It was very diverse, and the resulting artifacts are very diverse. These differences in the end product are known as cultures. The rich diversity of the world's cultures reflects a corresponding diversity in the wilds that gave them birth." So connecting with our past, understanding what our ancestors lived with and why they had sayings or why they did certain things, I think is an important part of our quality of life. Wilderness also serves as a baseline or control area that we can use to compare to areas surrounding it that are managed or developed. And by having this baseline area or model to look at, we can better

understand how our management is affecting other lands. If we don't have anything that's unmanaged that's left alone, then it's hard to compare if everything's changing. I'm a old biology teacher, so you've got to have a control when you have an experiment. The other thing that I think, and it's just sort of ... Jay Vestal talked about it in his interview, and he called it cathedral thinking. Where someone will work on a cathedral in the 1500s, and it was started in the 1400s, and may not be finished till the 1600s. But he's doing his part or she's doing her part to kind of continue something that's worthwhile. And I think that these areas that we inherited, we being just everybody in Arkansas, we have choices that we can make. And we can save some of them as they were presented when we first knew them to pass them on to next generations. Or we can develop all of them and then wonder where they went maybe. But I have a feeling that future residents will be glad to inherit these. And it's less than 1% of the state of Arkansas. So it's not a lot, but it's what we have. And I think it's something that we can be proud of that we are passing on these natural lands and wildlands to the next generation. And I think they will appreciate the fact that we pass those on and that they have some options to decide what they want to do with some of the land rather than us make all the decisions during our lifetimes. And certainly there were some made before our lifetimes. The other thing about doing this

to save these areas for the long term is that our knowledge base increases every five years to every 10 years to every 20 years. There's so much more knowledge. There's so much more understanding of nature. There's things that we had no idea were going on that we learn about. So it makes sense to me that 50 years from now, when these lands are still there, hopefully, there will be an understanding of our flora and fauna and our ecological relationships that we have no idea. The way one person put it one time was, "Wilderness may hold the answers to questions that we have not yet learned to ask." So another important player in the wilderness effort was a person named Howard Zahniser, who was the primary author of the Wilderness Act. He was Executive Director of the Wilderness Society back in the '40s and '50s. He was a contemporary, at least a younger version of a contemporary of Aldo Leopold. Leopold never lived to see the Wilderness Act passed, and actually neither did Zahniser. He died about two weeks before the Wilderness Act passed, even though he was the main person who made it all happen. But he said one time, and I think this is an important way to look at. People will say, "Well, there's so much wilderness out there now. We don't need to set anything aside. It'll always be there." But if you watch over a lifetime, there's a lot of places that aren't there. That they do get developed in different ways unless they're deliberately set aside. And here's what he said, "We

must recognize that all our land is destined to be put to some human use. If any of it is to be preserved in its natural condition, it must be as the deliberate setting aside of it for our human use of it in a natural condition." So that was Howard Zahniser. And that was one reason that they felt like they needed an act of Congress to seriously protect these areas because they had had seen some of them abused even though they had lesser protection. So the Wilderness Act gives some really strong protection. And it passed in 1964, and then the Eastern Wilderness Act, which looked at lands East of the Mississippi, including Arkansas, or I guess not East of the Mississippi, East of the Rockies, because Arkansas was included, is passed in 1975. I think that's about all I have in question three.

SW: Two.

TM: I mean, two. Excuse me. I'm ready for three, I guess.

SW: Tom, do you have any special stories that we would like to tell about your experiences or the experiences of others regarding efforts to protect wilderness areas here in Arkansas?

TM: Yes, I do. I also want to just mention some people as you know, Stewart, I've been involved in these interviews. I've heard all of them really. And I think that I wanted to just mention some people, and I

know this is always risky because there's a lot of people that I won't mention that deserve to be mentioned. But just from my perspective, there's some people who have not been mentioned that I know of or mentioned lightly that I think played important roles in the passage of the 1984 Act, which is the main one I'm familiar with. And I'll be talking about these different people. One of them, and it is kind of a story. I was kind of in the midst of this in 1983 probably or '82. I went to speak at some kind of an event in either Dardanelle or Russellville. And I was explaining our proposal and why we thought that this was a great idea, and it would be good for everybody that ... And it was a small amount of land, so people that didn't want wilderness or that wanted to do something that involved motors would still have the vast majority of the forest to do that in. But there would be some areas that were left alone and remain non-motorized. And I was not getting a very good reception. And I think I was probably a little green at doing this and maybe didn't do it very well either. But I remember a guy on the front row that stood up and people were talking and he just said, "I just wanted to say something." And so people got quiet and listened to him. And he went to bat for wilderness, and for me. And just was sensed to what the crowd wanted to hear and needed to hear about to correct misconceptions and to advocate for why these areas would be good. And I'd never seen him before and I didn't know who

he was. But after the meeting, of course, I walked over to him and said, "Thank you." And his name was Bob Apple. And Stewart's smiling at me here, he knows him. He worked for the National Wildlife Federation, but he lived in Russellville or Dardanelle and he was a boater. He was probably a hunter, he was just ... And people knew him, and that was one reason they respected what he said. So there were people along the way that helped, that were ... It was an intergenerational effort. People like Harold Alexander and Tom McCray and others that testified for this. And some of them worked behind the scenes, like Kay Kelly Arnold was with the Nature Conservancy. And they can't be as political, but they were very supportive and Kay did a lot of work in networking with people, and did what she could behind the scenes. And so there were groups out there doing all sorts of things. Some of the ones that were most involved are no longer with us. And I'm going to try to mention some of these folks that I know were involved and played a pivotal role. And I'm sorry that all of them aren't here to speak for themselves, but it just didn't work out that way. But one of them, of course, Dale Bumpers was key, and he's no longer with us. And we recently lost David Pryor, who also was a strong supporter of this in the Senate. One of the people that we all worked with closely was a woman who was Dale Bumper's chief aid on this, and her name was Susan Rieff. And Susan passed away last July,

and I just wanted to mention her and mention her role a little bit. She was extremely competent and did a great job in the office and working with us, and she was very human and easy to be around. And after she left Senator Bumper's office, I happened to run into him at his 60th birthday. And I knew that Susan had just left, and I mentioned it to him. And he said, "Man, I'm going to miss her," or something to that effect. But she was an important person in his office, and at the time was in her 20s, but she had already been to ... Had a master's degree, I think, and had done quite a bit in her young life. And then she went on after leaving Senator Bumper's office and had a long career working for the Department of the Interior. Was with the National Wildlife Federation at one point. And ended up on several boards, and ended up in Austin, Texas, running the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Association down there. So she was a very talented person, and we were fortunate to be able to work with her. The person that worked in Ed Bethune's office that did comparable stuff was Marsha Tarkington, or Marsha Hall now, and she actually did an interview with us. So we appreciate Marsha doing that. And those two were really some of the folks that we worked with in those two offices, and did great work. And we wouldn't have been able to accomplish as much without them. Wanted to mention also a couple of state agencies that played a pivotal role. Joe David Rice was involved quite a bit all the

way through, and he did an interview earlier. But his superiors at the time, Richard Davies and Joe Luck Wilson were also very supportive of it. And Joe Luck testified at the hearing, I know I'm not sure about Joe ... I think Joe David did too. Another agency that was quite involved in helping, trying to assess the natural values of the land was the Natural Heritage Commission. Harold Grimmett was the leader at the executive director at that time. Mina Marsh was the assistant director, I think. Bill Shepherd testified about the areas. Ken Smith, this is a different Ken Smith than the one that built the Buffalo River Trail. Ken and Mary Smith both also did interviews earlier. So this Ken is married to Mary. And then Bill Pell, who also did an interview and was with the Natural Heritage Commission during these times. But ultimately had a 25-year career with the Forest Service working partly with Mike Curran when he was the supervisor over on the Ouachitas. So those agencies supported generally what we were doing and made a big impact and I know influenced the members of Congress. I was mainly working with a Sierra Club group, and I just wanted to mention some of the people that I worked with that I know contributed enormously. Tom McKinney and Vicki Holleman, Barry Weaver, Art Johnson, all in Northwest Arkansas. In Central Arkansas, Alyssa Thompson, Jay and Eileen Vestal, Jim and Audrey Stanley, Ray and Diane Hanley, Mickey Freeman, and Marion Hines. Marion was much older than the rest of

us, but an avid hiker and camper And just seemed to show up at meetings and do things kind of like Bob Apple did. Just to be there and speak up in favor of this. And he was a retired engineer with the US Geological Survey. Then the Audubon Group. Ellen Turner, who was then Ellen Neville, who's my wife, was one in Northwest Arkansas. But also in central Arkansas, Lisa Halas, who was working with the Corps of Engineers in those days, did a lot. Florence Mallard, who was what a great name for president of an Audubon Society. And Fred Burnside and Barry Haas all. And I know I'm forgetting some other people, but Fred was on that initial visit with Ed Bethune when we went out to Flatside Pinnacle. And he also was instrumental in helping work out the compromise on the Poteau Mountain area that Ed Pembleton talked about. At the national level, Ed Pembleton, of course, the regional rep from Audubon, who you've already heard from, was pivotal throughout. And helped the Audubon folks in Arkansas quite a lot. In the D.C. office of the Wilderness Society, Peter Koppelman. And in the Atlanta office, Randy Snodgrass did a lot. I remember they came down and went into Richland Creek with us. Tim Mahoney was a really strong advocate for Sierra Club at the national level, and helped us in Arkansas and was really interested in Arkansas and Missouri. So those are some of the folks that helped. And I'll just stop there on number three.

SW: Tom, 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 consider?

TM: Yes. And I may make a little bit of noise here digging for ... I wanted to read you a list of the people that supported this. This is the Arkansas Conservation Coalition. And they are the Arkansas Audubon Society, the Arkansas Canoe Club, the Arkansas Herpetological Society, the Arkansas Native Plant Society, the Arkansas Wildlife Federation. Audubon Society of Central Arkansas, the League of Women Voters of Arkansas, Ozark Society, and Sierra Club. That was the coalition that came up with the proposal that ultimately became at least largely the bills that were proposed by Bethune and Dale Bumpers. Then I really can't, I don't think I can read all this, but there were half a dozen chambers of commerce. Including the Little Rock Chamber, the Mountain Home Chamber, the Conway Chamber, the Malvern Chamber, that all supported it. The Arkansas Industrial Development Commission supported it. Garden clubs from all around the state. And I'll just stop there. But there was a broad support for this in the business community and in the conservation community.

SW: Tom, is there anything else you would like to mention that I have not asked? Or would you like to add anything to your earlier comments?

TM: Yes. I have a couple of things. I wanted to mention something that I thought was an important dynamic in the success of this bill. One is several of the main players, and I'll mention their names, Don Hamilton, who was a lawyer in Little Rock, Ed Bethune, Beryl Anthony, and David Pryor were all in law school together. They all knew each other. And I think they were either friends or friendly toward each other. And although Ed Bethune and Beryl Anthony were a ways apart on this bill, they knew each other and could work with each other. I know Don and Ed actually played on a baseball team with Brooks Robinson here in Little Rock for a while. So they had known each other since childhood. And Ed and Don did a lot of generating support together, they worked ... They spoke to rotary clubs. They got the business community involved. And I think that was really key to making this thing work. I think there were also a lot of talented people that sort of came together under a common flag or a common goal, not ... flag is not the right word. Goal to make sure that these areas were saved. And I think there was a general feeling among all of us that we were doing something that was worthwhile and something that would be appreciated by future generations. And if you dug deep enough in the details, you realize that it really wasn't going to curtail logging operations or mining or off-road vehicle use very much. It was just a few areas and the vast majority of the national forest would still

be open for those uses. It was just another use that fit some people, but not everybody. And so I think that was something that really came ... Kind of reached a peak when Senator Bumpers and Ed Bethune had their hearing in Little Rock. And we had over 100 people there. And my guess is that 80 or 90% of them were in favor of the wilderness. And I think that that kind of kept us going for the rest of the time, and we all had a good feeling that there was support all around. And I think at that point, all the politicians felt that it was a good thing for their constituency, and a good thing politically to try to save quite a few of these wilderness areas. And I think it helped when Dale Bumpers and Beryl Anthony sat down to do some of the final compromising. And Mr. Anthony spoke about that in his interview. I also wanted to mention that a person who I think played an incredible role, and that's John Houston. John worked for AP&L, and he and Don Hamilton were childhood friends. They grew up together, and they went hunting together, and they really loved Hurricane Creek. And John was a writer, and he wrote some of the most incredible pieces in magazines and in the newspaper about the value of wilderness that ... And it really inspired all of us. I wanted to mention too, Bill Coleman's leadership and hard work throughout the RARE II study days, and then on up all the way to the passage of the 1984 Act. He wrote a lot of the booklet, he did all sorts of stuff. And then I've already mentioned that

Lisa Thompson was an important player, as well as Jay Vestal, the other members of the Wilderness Task Force. And Lisa and Mel White's slideshow was a pivotal thing and very important. So I guess I'll just kind of end with a tribute to our two leaders, Ed Bethune and Dale Bumpers, who of course were absolutely essential. They saw the value of wilderness. They listened to the people around them, including staff members, citizen advisors. People probably like Tom McRae and Harold Alexander and Kay Arnold and others. And also to resource professionals, people like Joe David Rice and people in the ... Gary Tucker and other folks that were in favor of setting aside some of these areas too. And also to the members of the public. They listened to us and we felt welcome to ... They didn't necessarily promise everything, and we knew they had pressures coming from all angles. But the fact that they listened and held on and did what they thought was best made all the difference. So let me look here just a second, Stewart, and I will try to close this out. I will say one more thing that just to kind of summarize why we thought this was a good idea and still think it was a good idea. And if you dig into this, you'll see that there's only a few of these areas around, and that's why they're so precious. Our designated wilderness is only 5.6% of the Ozark National Forest, and 3.9% of the Ouachita National Forest. And if you add up all the wilderness areas in the state of Arkansas, it still comes up to less

than 1% of the land area. So if we're going to be the natural state, this is a truly authentic part of Arkansas. And I hope that people will support the idea of wilderness and protect these areas and take care of them over time so we can pass them on in an undiminished fashion to the next generation. So thanks, Stewart.

SW: Tom, thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today to share with us your perspective and your memories of wilderness efforts here in Arkansas. The Pryor Center will provide you with a copy of this audio recording. Thank you again, and I'll say goodbye for now.

TM: Thanks, Stewart.