

Tom McClure interviewed Paul Means 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 Paul Means 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. Paul, 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.

Paul Means: My name is Paul Means, and yes, I give my permission for the Pryor Center to share this interview with others.

TM: Thank you, Paul. Just want to mention some more things about Paul. I appreciate you joining us today. And Paul is joining us by phone from Little Rock. Paul was born in Hot Springs, Arkansas. His education includes a BA degree from Vanderbilt University and a JD degree from the University of Arkansas, Little Rock School of Law. Paul served as assistant attorney general of Arkansas from 1978 through 1979. In that position, he represented the state of Arkansas in the case of McElroy versus state, wherein the Arkansas Supreme Court upheld the

public right to canoe on Arkansas streams. From 1980 to 1981, Paul served as the chief legal counsel for the Arkansas Department of Pollution Control and Ecology. Then between 1982 and 1986, he was employed by the Arkansas Power and Light Company as manager of government affairs. Then in 1977 through '88, he served as the director of the Arkansas Department of Pollution Control and Ecology. Then after that, he was employed by Energy Arkansas Company as manager of public affairs from 1989 to his retirement in 2018. Paul was also chairman of the Pulaski chapter of the Ozark Society in 1984 and was conservation chairman for the Ozark Society at various times from 1979 through the early 90s, 1990s. He was the conservation chairman for the Arkansas Canoe Club, as well from 1982 to 1983. Once again, Paul, welcome, and thank you so much for being with us today.

PM: Well, thanks for inviting me to participate in this project.

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

PM: Yes, I'd be glad to. I would like to start by a little background about how I came to be active in the wilderness effort. In college, I was in college in Tennessee and I took up whitewater canoeing with the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association around 1970. They were in a very active campaign at that point to stop a dam on the Duck River there in Tennessee. And being a college student, I got involved in that effort. And I learned a lot there about how to work on preserving a national area and the politics of it. After graduation, I returned back to Little Rock and took a paddle with a group of guys, several of whom belonged to Ozark Society. And then led me to join the Ozark Society in the early 1970s. And by 1979, I had become a conservation chairman of the Pulaski chapter of the Ozark Society. And in 1982, I became chairman of that chapter. And so the Ozark Society, as I'm sure others have said, was an active supporter of wilderness areas. And uniquely in 1981, when I went to work for Arkansas Power Light Company, there were two other members of Ozark Society that happened to work in the same office building. Bill Coleman, who I believe is also in an interview, office was right almost next to mine. And downstairs, a few floors was John Houston, a member of the Ozark Society. John had been a journalist, and I'd had some political experience, and Bill was a great organizer, and we spent a lot of office time strategizing and planning activities to support passage of the

Wilderness Act. So it was kind of a fun thing. We would sneak into each other's offices instead of doing real work, work on wilderness. I think one of the key things to passage of the Wilderness Act was creation of the Arkansas Conservation Coalition, which brought together a number of conservation groups. As far as I know, this may have been a first Arkansas. I know that the Ozark Society worked pretty much on its own to preserve the Buffalo National River. And the coalition, I believe, was Bill Coleman's idea. My memory's a little fuzzy, but as part of the Ozark Society leadership, I worked hard on recruiting the other groups like the Canoe Club. We brought all these folks together, and I think that gave us a way to coordinate contact with all these various group members to synchronize letter writing campaigns, to have different groups emphasize different points. And so we gave a broader message, and the regular meetings of that coalition helped sustain our effort over a period of years. So I think that's really an important part of our strategy for passage of the Wilderness Act. A second part of the strategy that I was involved with was communicating with the public and the media. Because of my background in politics, I had a little insight into what things out there influenced politicians. And some of those are articles in the Arkansas Gazette at the time, and there had been some negative comments about wilderness. So, I thought as chairman of the Pulaski chapter, I

would try and refute some of those. I got in touch with Bob McCord at the *Gazette* who ran the guest editorial page and he let me be a guest writer. And so in 1982, I wrote a guest column in *Arkansas Gazette*, and I talked about the benefits of wilderness and refuted some of the arguments. And it was, I think, a pretty good successful effort. It got quite a few inches, and it was more than just a letter to the editor. It was on the editorial page with other folks. And then also on behalf of those arts society, I testified at various hearings, including the Senate energy hearing in Little Rock here in February of 1984. So that was kind of my involvement. We'll talk a little bit later here, a little bit about the message I tried to convey is we made these efforts.

TM: Thank you, Paul, for going through that and giving us sort of some timelines there. Question number two is, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas personally in Arkansas and what value these areas have for you and that you think the value for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

PM: Yes. As I was saving my talk about the message that I tried to convey for this question. Back in the '80s when all this was going on, it seemed like a lot of the rank and file Arkansans who were opposed to wilderness had this perception that it would become some sort of exclusive playground for backpackers, birdwatchers, and

photographers looking for waterfalls and spring flowers. And somehow, they felt they would be excluded. And I think that was a shame. And so I have tried to communicate that wilderness is not that, it is a preservation of what the United States looked like when the first explorers came to Arkansas after the Louisiana Purchase. And so as part of our historical heritage and our pioneer heritage, and a lot of the residents of Ozarks and the Ouachitas kind of pride themselves on their settler pioneer heritage. It gives everyone here in Arkansas a chance to not go backpacking, but if you're willing to do a little walking, you can go in and hunt, you can go down the streams fishing for small mouth bass. I think with the right teacher, schools or college classes could take trips to a wilderness area to learn about the plants and see how Arkansas looked before there were roads and settlements. So I think an important part of the value of it is, it's a historical heritage as much as it is a wild area, because it lets us get a sense as you walk through a wilderness, what it would have been like to be an early settler or explorer coming through Arkansas trying to find a place to build your log cabin.

TM: Okay. Well, thank you. Question number 3, 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?

PM: Yeah. I think my most memorable experience occurred in 1979 when the Forest Service was doing the rare two studies of different places that could be wilderness here in Arkansas. And they were holding a series of workshops/public meetings to talk about it. And because of my background and interest in canoeing and kayaking, I was especially interested in the Richland Creek wilderness because I had been part of the group of kayakers who made the first ever trip down it. And so I was very personally motivated to see that one protected. But it had become a lightning rod. There was a lot of opposition to wilderness, and particularly the original Creek wilderness from the folks who lived around Richland Creek. And after 40 years, the names are fuzzy, but I remember that it was either the school superintendent or the principal at the Deer School District organized a pretty active campaign against wilderness, and I think he called his group the Society for Preservation of Ozark Culture. There may be others participating in this project. You have a better memory of the names and details of that. But in the fall of 1979, the Forest Service scheduled a workshop at the Deer High School in Deer, Arkansas. And a few of us in the Ozark Society thought that in the canoe club that we should go up and participate. I don't recall all the names of who went, but I know Stuart Noland with me and there was only five or six of us. And so we pulled into the parking lot there near high school and there

was a lot of pickup trucks and other folks gathering going in and we kind of hung off to the side and finally got up our nerve and walked in. And it was like an old cowboy movie, got kind of quiet. Everybody turned around and looked at us and it was no open hostility, but you could tell we were not welcome and people were whispering to each other about us and made us a little tentative about being there. It was intimidating. I think the Forest Service folks were also intimidated. They looked a little nervous also. But a lot of folks spoke against wilderness and we were kind of lonely voices speaking in support at this meeting, but we felt it was important to go on the record there at the same time as these folks. But what I remember most besides getting out and unscathed was remarks made by one of the local residents. He said in a very emotional voice that he and the other folks in this room live here in Richland Creek as part of our home and we care about it. I want it to stay just like it is. And why do you want to ruin it by making it wilderness? And this to me was sort of a revelation that they understood the value and wanted to keep Richland Creek as a wild area, but they were opposed to wilderness. And I think that was partly because they saw that they were not recognized as somebody that had an interest in it. And so as part of my messaging over the years, I tried to communicate to them that was protected for them also by making references to Teddy Roosevelt and Pioneers and

historical heritage. I don't know that I succeeded, but I thought that was interesting that although they were opposed to wilderness, they wanted to protect it, which seemed kind of like an oxymoron, but that's kind of how it was up in the Ozarks in those days.

TM: Thank you, Paul. Question number four, 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?

PM: I'd like to say something about the history of it in terms of today. It seems like the average American has begun to think of outdoor recreation as something that requires some kind of mechanical device. Instead of backpacking, folks now go mountain biking or instead of hiking, they want to drive off-road on their ATV, and instead of paddling a river, they want to go to an artificial whitewater park. And folks seem to be wanting to be outside, but drifting away from actually getting out in the national forest. And to enjoy wilderness area, you got to get on two feet and walk into it. And so I fear that folks will stop visiting wilderness areas because they don't want to give up their mechanical toys that they associate with the outdoors. And those of us who participated in passage of the wilderness age and pass away, that we need a new generation to step forward. And if we don't have folks

in that generation who actually go out and experience and utilize the wilderness areas, they may become forgotten and neglected, which opens them up to a developer coming along saying, Let's take away the wilderness designation. So I think it's important for all the organizations who were originally members of the Conservation Coalition to actively find ways and encourage them members to get out and go to these wilderness areas and experience them and use them to build up a base of folks to continue to support and protect them.

TM: Well, thank you. And just, is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about or would you like to add anything to any of your earlier comments?

PM: No, I really have nothing more to add other than I'm looking forward to listening to the other histories given by the other folks that are being interviewed as part of this project.

TM: That sounds good. Well, I would just like to, once again, thank you for being here on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society and for being here to share your perspective and your memories of wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. Also want to mention that the Pryor Center will be providing you with a copy of this audio recording

at some point in the future. So Paul, thanks again and I'll say goodbye for now.

PM: All right. Goodbye, Tom.

TM: Bye.