

Tom McClure interviewed Bill Pell on April 10, 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 Bill Pell for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas on April 10th, 2024. Bill, 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.

Bill Pell: This is Bill Pell and I am willing to make the audio file and other materials available to the Pryor Center and others.

TM: Okay. Thank you, Bill. Bill Pell is joining us today by phone from Hot Springs. Just a little bit about Bill. He grew up in small town, Ohio, the elder son of a civil engineer and a school teacher. He was a nature lover from an early age. Bill completed college degrees in botany and ecology before enjoying a long career pursuing those professions. He has a BA in botany from Kent State University and an MS in botany and ecology from Washington State University. Bill worked as an ecologist for the Nature Conservancy, the Arkansas Natural Heritage

Commission, and the USDA Forest Service for nearly 38 years, much of that time in Arkansas and Oklahoma, but also around the United States on special assignments. He retired from the Ouachita National Forest in December 2016 as their longtime staff officer for planning, recreation, heritage, and wilderness. Bill remains active in conservation and outdoor recreational pursuits and is a voting member of Friends of Lake Washita, a board member of Friends of the Washita Trail, and a member of the Ozark Society and the Nature Conservancy. Welcome, Bill, and thank you for being with us today.

BP: Thanks, Tom. It's a real pleasure to be here and have a chance to reminisce about the history of wilderness in Arkansas. As you read, I grew up as a nature lover, and one of the things I saw happening in Ohio was widespread loss of nature. This would have been in the 1950s and 1960s. And I remember from a very early age having this, I'll say a teenager, wanting to "save nature." It was an evolving passion that I've always had, or at least since my teenage years. I guess I never thought until it happened that I could make a career out of that early passion for saving nature. But those degrees in botany and ecology led me to take a job with the Nature Conservancy in 1979 that brought me to Arkansas. Frankly, I had never set foot in the state of Arkansas before, but I was the, I'll say, the original ecologist for the Natural Heritage Inventory. These were inventories of Nature

Conservancy set up in almost every state in the country back in the late '70s. And so we weren't the original Nature Conservancy field office, but we were a small group of specialists and a data person. Our job was to do an inventory and try to find the best examples of outstanding natural communities, whether they be aquatic or terrestrial, outstanding habitats for rare plants and animals. And it was really a dream job, even though I wasn't that familiar with the vegetation and fauna of Arkansas. I had gone to school, had worked on a PhD in ecology in Tennessee, and of course, had worked in Ohio or been in college in Ohio. So I had some experience with the kinds of vegetation and wildlife here. It's funny that the timing, when I arrived in 1979, rare too, and I'm going to assume that most of your listeners will either remember or be familiar with the rare two analysis that came out, surprisingly for me to rediscover just two months after or before I got here. I don't know if that was fate or what, but part of my work with the Natural Heritage Inventory was to take a look at those roadless areas and what a great time I had. I got to ramble all over the Ozarks and Ouachitas, looking at these primitive, hard to get to, for the most part areas and camp out in them, backpack, botanize, write up reports on their quality. So I guess my involvement consisted mainly of contributing to the inventory of what was out there in the way of special communities and to some degree, special plants, other

members of the Heritage Inventory Team and the Natural Heritage Commission staff also participated in taking a look at those rare two areas and others. And of course, I remember riding around with a certain dentist who had an orange truck and I think Dr. McClure took Wednesdays off and we would tool around and talk about wilderness and really looked at quite a few of the ones that might become wilderness. So that was my main involvement in efforts to protect wilderness up to about 1984 when the Arkansas bill passed, I later served on two of the wilderness steering committees, the ones for Black Fork Mountain, which is truly one of the treasures in my mind, and also Canyon Creek, which of course, was the first and the oldest wilderness in the Ouachitas.

TM: Well, thanks, Bill. That was for question one. Did you have anything else to add on question one for involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas or are you ready to move on to question two?

BP: Well, I can remember also going to a lot of Sierra Club meetings and strategizing and sharing impressions about different areas. And I'm afraid after 40 years, I don't remember if I contributed in other ways. It's possible. I was reading Bill Shepherd's testimony before the Department of Agriculture subcommittee that held hearings, I believe,

in 1983, at which point we'd been working together for several years and we often shared documents and reviewed each other's work. But honestly, I don't remember if I did that or not. I should have mentioned that in 1981, I officially moved over to the Arkansas National Heritage Commission and worked there for 10 years. So I think that's about it.

TM: Okay. Let's go to question two. Will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas personally and what value these areas have for you personally? And also maybe as a second part, how do you see wilderness areas as important for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

BP: I'm really proud and happy to have played a small role in protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas. I think many people saw wilderness as an antidote to what the Forest Service and Weyerhaeuser were doing, clear cutting tens of thousands of acres a year. And it played a huge role in helping turn things around to where we truly think as the people valued and felt empowered to take care of the national forests in a way that maybe we hadn't before. I personally feel that these areas really do provide outstanding opportunities for solitude, which is important to me, but I think increasingly important to others. So many people want to experience solitude and be inspired by nature in places

where they don't have to hear vehicles or chainsaws or anything but wildlife. And of course, and the wind through the trees and the creeks babbling and roaring, as the case may be. And I say that knowing that it's not always true. One of my favorite areas, Black Fork Mountain is situated where you can actually hear the Kansas City Southern railroad on occasion, but then it's quiet again, truly inspiring places. I think we have plenty of other places that are being managed and some places that have been managed so heavily that you could argue that there's not a whole lot of diversity left, there's not much to experience. And so the wilderness areas are outstanding examples of places to experience connection to wildness, a connection to nature, and also a real contrast to the areas that are managed. Of course, I am not anti-management at all, but I think we need those strong contrasts to what we're doing on other parts of the land. So maybe we can be inspired to do better elsewhere, be inspired to say what little bits of natural processes and forces that we can. I think that the wilderness areas are only increasing in value to the people of Arkansas, and that will surely continue to be the case. One of the areas that I probably argued with Dr. McClure about more than any other, and was maybe the most controversial one was Flatside. But nowadays, people get to experience that area and it is becoming a real gem that thousands of people can see, hopefully not all at once, see and experience and be

inspired. So clearly, it was a really good move at the time and I think everybody that comes, not everybody, but a lot of people who come in contact with wildernesses have a really positive perspective on them, whether they be actual nature fanatics like I might be, or hunters who also can be nature fanatics, but people from all walks of life really treasure living in what's called the natural state and having these mostly undisturbed areas to explore, or even to just know that they're out there. And that's, I think, all I have to say about that question, unless you have a follow-up.

TM: No, that was great. Thank you for all that. Question number three has to do with stories. And 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 in Arkansas?

BP: Well, I just mentioned riding around with you, Tom, in your pickup, and I don't know if I was vociferous. I probably wasn't vociferously against Flatside, but you had to really fight for that one and hats off to you for having the vision to persist and to see the value of that area. And despite all odds, you made it happen. I know you had help, but I have special stories about two wildernesses, one in the Ozarks, one in the Ouachitas. Hurricane Creek is another one of my favorites, and the botanist and I, the botanist for the original Natural Heritage Inventory

was Richard Davis, and he was an instant friend. I actually met him in Washington DC when he was getting training for the program and I was interviewing for the program and somehow we just clicked maybe because we're both botanists. He led me into Hurricane Creek Wilderness on an adventure, and it was probably January or February. And of course, it's gorgeous any time of the year. Winter is a special time when you're really unlikely to encounter many people, and you may encounter rough weather. We backpacked, I think it was a two-night, it could have been a one-night trip, but we camped next to Hurricane Creek one night. And I remember it getting very cold. It got down to 20 degrees and I'm prone to frozen feet that may be a leftover from growing up in Ohio and getting frostbit. I don't know. But had one of those inflatable, self-inflating, supposedly insulated pads to sleep on, and I stupidly put my head on it instead of my feet. It wasn't long enough to cover my whole body. So I woke up at three in the morning and said, "Richard, we got to build a fire. I'm going to die." So we built a fire and those wet rocks started cracking and popping like firecrackers. But I tell the story... Oh, Richard's plan had been to go all the way through the wilderness. We started at the north end, came out at the bottom, as we say. We were going to hitchhike back to whatever vehicle we had left up near Pelser and we finally got out to a muddy road. I swear, we sunk in up to our shins, if not our knees. It

was so muddy, and there was not one vehicle all the way back, but it turned dark and the stars came out and it was cold, and it was just like it was exhilarating to have experienced and survived on our own, a true wilderness setting. And I think when people think about wilderness, sometimes it's all a bed of roses or it's a pretty place, but we have to keep in mind or realize that it's a challenge. A real wilderness experience can leave you in pain or near death, but the exhilaration equals or outweighs all that effort and pain. And it's almost like a universal experience to have both. Can't just have one without the other. Hope that makes sense. The other one is all... No, I guess it's not all joy, but I can remember Black Fork Mountain before we knew about an old trail and Richard and I would climb up this nasty old woods road. It may have been used... There's a cemetery at the top and it may have been used primarily to haul caskets up the mountain and people actually... I don't think very many people lived up there, but enough to have a cemetery. But in the midst of that, I discovered or I came across what I called a dwarf oak forest with white oaks that were like 20 inches in diameter and 20 feet tall. And you could just tell by the way they were growing, that they were old. And so I had an increment bore, took some cores and later documented that those trees were 200 to 300 years old, and it absolutely changed my vision of what old growth could be like. Having lived in Ohio and

Washington State and Eastern Tennessee, I had a conventional idea about old growth. It always meant really big trees. Well, there are plenty of other kinds of old growth, and this is truly special. I've been up there when the fog was wafting through those old white oaks, and I've been there when it's clear, and I've been there by myself, for some reason. I don't recommend it, but if you're physically fit and can try it is a super experience to get up on almost any part of Black Fork, but that elephant forest is truly special.

TM: Well, thanks, Bill. For 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?

BP: One thing I imagine occurs to a number of folks, and it certainly occurs to me strongly, is it's been a nonpartisan effort and an era from the get go. Not that there weren't strong emotions pro and con, but it didn't split along party lines. And I guess I think that's pretty special and maybe it's true elsewhere, but we had strong Democratic Party support and strong Republican Party support for the 1984 bill. And to this day, I guess we don't have any Democratic members of the delegation anymore, but we still have Republican support for wilderness in the form of French Hill. And if we ever have two parties

represented in our delegation again, perhaps that bipartisan kind of effort can return. I think that's special about how this happened. Also, it's almost a cliché, but never underestimate what a small group of determined people can do if they put their minds to it. I think there's a more famous saying out there that goes like that, but I cannot dredge up where it comes from. Mike, do you remember that?

Mike Curran: No.

BP: Never underestimate, well, you guys will find it, or maybe you felt it because obviously the people that were dedicated enough to go to Washington testify and meet with congressional staff and write testimony really put their heart and soul into this effort, and they have a lot to be proud of. I took the opportunity to read most of the testimony from one of the committee hearings and it was really surprising to hear to read old friends testimony from 40 years ago and just an amazing effort. And of course, you and I know that there's more to be done. We have special areas out there that still could benefit from protection, but in the meantime, we can be proud of what we have. I think one thing that's drifted away that I would like to see come back is the emphasis on wilderness stewardship. And it's not that the Forest Service or anybody else has really abandoned that, it's just that we don't see much effort or much funding on the federal side

toward wilderness stewardship. There are lots of initiatives, but we don't have stewardship committees anymore that I know of within the wilderness areas in Arkansas. I'd like to see that come back and perhaps the Ozark society or other listeners will take that to heart and we can make that happen.

TM: Okay. Thanks, Bill. Just a couple of other things. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked you about?

BP: I think you asked enough wide open questions that I could have answered anything I needed to, but I wanted to mention more special communities because I guess that was my forte as a plant ecologist in places like East Fork, I don't know if I'm the one who discovered them because memory dims after a while, but I remember just being delighted to come across these odd upland wetlands and they had overcup oak, which is a lowland swamp species. What are they doing at... And I'm going to forget the elevation, but I'm going to guess 1,200 feet, 1,400, maybe 1,600 feet in the Ozarks. It was just serendipitous and it made the value of those wilderness areas just immense because they do contain special habitats and special communities and they'll continue to grow and change over time, but they have maximum protection via the Wilderness Act and hopefully, won't be drastically changed by climate change, but I suspect they'll

remain some kind of special communities and certainly will see more old growth in the future. One of the things I was looking for as the heritage ecologist, of course, was old growth. I mentioned finding some that forced me to reevaluate my vision and pockets of true massive trees and the kind of old growth we would expect to see in the Smokies or someplace where the trees have grown huge and are also 300 years old, but massive. So we have to mentally allow for all kinds of old growth to be represented. And it is out there, thankfully, in our wilderness areas, as our outstanding habitats for plants and animals.

TM: Well, thanks, Bill. If you would like to add anything else to your earlier comments or have anything else to say, we have time, but if you're covered it, we can close out at this point. What are you thinking?

BP: I think I've covered it, but I'm open to prompting of something I've forgotten in the last 40 plus years.

TM: Well, I'm not sure I can remember it either. If you have something that's burning inside that you'd like to talk about, we can do that. Or we can just... You've really mentioned a lot of interesting things already. So it's up to you, but we do have a few more minutes if you want to tell any more stories or talk about anybody else.

BP: Sure. I don't know if this was burning inside me, but Senator Pryor, I'm not sure how large a role he played in this. I think he's listed as a co-sponsor by some folks. And is that the case, Mike, that he co-sponsored the bill? I know obviously, Bumpers had the lead and Bethune on the House side. Maybe you know Tom. Did Pryor have it?

TM: I think he did. I think he did co-sponsor, yeah.

BP: But David Pryor was really influential about forest management in general. And he tells stories about driving back and forth between Little Rock and Hot Springs. And I mentioned clear cutting only briefly. I really think that mobilized people in the late '70s because we could see or could imagine that very industrial form of management taking over the vast majority of the landscape, at least in the Ouachitas and a good part of the Ozarks and it was not... I came to understand that clear cutting itself is not the problem or bad. It can be administered in an appropriate way, but clear cutting was a great mobilizer for those of us who wanted to save some more naturalness than was going to be saved by, for example, my little agency, the Natural Heritage Commission. We managed to save a lot of smaller areas and even a fairly large piece along the Cossatot River working with lots of other people. But there simply wasn't any other opportunity out there to preserve large areas from what looked like. Mass devastation of

natural forces to be replaced with lifeless pine plantations, that I think is what precipitated a whole lot of effort, not just the Wilderness Bill, but I mentioned David Pryor, of course he soon came along and Mike came along and they were going to... Well, Senator Pryor at one point was threatening to ban all forms of even age management on the forest. So that passion that was stirred up by what people in industry and the forest service thought was the best way to manage. I mean, it was scientific. It was cost-efficient. It was frankly easy because they could carve out 40 or 80 acre blocks or Weyerhaeuser's case, even bigger ones. And it didn't take a brain surgeon or even a sophisticated forester to draw up the plans. I'm not saying it wasn't. It was more challenging probably to reforest than it was to take away the forest. Anyway, my opinion is that's partly why we succeeded in getting wilderness more wilderness areas in Arkansas, is that there were enough people galvanized to get the attention of the senators and the congressmen, and they made the effort to get out there and see things themselves. So I think they were also perhaps persuaded that there needed to be an antidote to, I'll call it industrial forestry everywhere that really seemed... I can remember thinking that Weyerhaeuser might well cut down to the very water's edge of the Costa River. Now, obviously that never became a wilderness because it was... Well, it did become a wildest city river, which is pretty close to wildness. So I just

throw that out as a perspective that that was a galvanizing force and we wouldn't be where we are without people having risen up and asked for something else. And with that, I'm going to excuse myself for a break.

TM: Well, thank you, Bill. And just wanted to mention that Mike Curran, who Bill referred to, is there with Bill for back up, and Mike will be doing his own interview as well. But I just wanted to thank Bill for being here today and lending your perspective. And I also wanted to let you know that the Pryor Center will be providing you with a copy of this audio recording. So thanks again, and I'll say goodbye for now.