

Tom McClure interviewed Ed Pembleton 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 Ed Pembleton 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. Ed, 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.

Ed Pembleton: Thank you, Tom. I'm Ed Pembleton and I am pleased to give my permission for the Pryor Center to use this recording for public disposition.

TM: Thanks, Ed. Today, Ed Pembleton is joining us by phone from Manhattan, Kansas. Ed is a native of Missouri and attended Central Missouri State University majoring in biology and education. He also has a master's degree from Texas Tech in zoology with a secondary area of study in museum science. This educational background led him to work for the Museum of Science and History in Little Rock. For

seven years, he was able to do research and explore the Ouachita Mountains and the Arkansas portion of the Ozark Plateau, including most of the areas that would later become designated wilderness areas. From Little Rock, Ed moved to Manhattan, Kansas to work with National Audubon Society as a Regional Representative for Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. Part of his work there involved wilderness protection in Missouri and in Arkansas. Okay, Ed, once again, welcome and thank you for being with us today and participating in this project. We do have some questions for you to consider, but we also want to encourage you to include other things that you would like to say. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

EP: Sure, Tom. I really appreciate this opportunity to contribute to the oral history of this project. As you mentioned at the time, we were trying to protect Arkansas Wilderness. I lived in Manhattan, Kansas, was a regional rep covering five states. Which I told people I mostly spent a lot of time driving, but I was all over the five states. And it posed a bit of a geographic and time challenge to be involved in Arkansas Wilderness. As explained in my bio, I had experienced most of the Arkansas Wilderness areas proposed and knew you from previous work in both the Missouri Wilderness Bill and the later efforts to protect the

Irish Wilderness of Missouri. So as unlikely as it may seem for someone in Kansas to be involved in Arkansas Wilderness, it was a familiarity with the places and the people that drew me to be involved. And, Tom, I have to say that you were a big key to my involvement. With all I had to do in the region, being involved in a particular issue, and particularly Arkansas Wilderness, which was geographically the furthest distance from my office, had to be an issue that would actually produce results. And since I knew you and how serious and dedicated you were about wilderness issues, how considered and inclusive you were with people and how absolutely organized you were. I point out an example of that. I never had to wait when I called your dental practice. You always accepted my calls after a very short time on hold and we could get [unclear] business done. I was always amazed at your organization. So, when I told you I would do what I could, especially getting the Arkansas Audubon Society and seven Audubon chapters involved, I knew it would be a good investment in my time. We'd built a strong chapter system at the time, had really great and active chapters in Little Rock and Fayetteville, and had recently formed two new chapters centered in Fort Smith and Heber Springs. And so those were both geographically advantageous and becoming very active, as well as a chapter in Hot Springs that was starting to get more active. So as improbable as it seems maybe to

some people, that led me to become the long distance representative in Arkansas wilderness based in Kansas. So that is why I got into it. And when you know the land and the people, you really have an urge to help out with these things.

TM: Well, thanks, Ed. Question number two is, will you please describe how you feel personally about protecting wilderness in Arkansas and what value these areas have for you and for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

EP: Well, I have a range of feelings, Tom, that had then, and I still have, and I'll try to categorize them. The first thing at the time, I had a lot of fear and concern about Arkansas wilderness areas and the national forest because I was concerned that the fish and wildlife or the forest service was so focused on commercial forestry production and management, and especially converting forest to pine plantations. I thought maybe they'd be able to convert most of the national forests, especially the Ouachita National Forest to a giant tree farm. And the Forest Service had just lost a court case holding the use of 240 or Agent Orange, as it was nicknamed, for suppression of hardwoods. And that lawsuit had taken quite some time to get them out of that business. The other thing I saw happening, and particularly when I'd lived in the state areas that remained, wilderness were being whittled

down, and the production mindset was just get a little closer to each area and develop new roads. Motorized recreation was growing, and I could see that with the coming of ATVs, off-road bicycles and motorcycles, we would see the pressure for opening more roads or reopening roads had been closed. So those immediate threats just kept me awake nights. The other feeling that came to mind was I loved those areas. I had been backpacking and hiked, canoed in the Wichita since I was in undergraduate school, and I was familiar with the quality of almost all of the areas proposed for wilderness protection, except in extreme western end of the Ouachitas. And I knew and visited special places like Twin Falls on Richland Creek, and that was just included, and I knew it deserved protection, and we needed to get it done. And just the general landscape of the Ozarks and the Ouachitas, which are strikingly different, but I knew that some portions needed to be set aside with a wilderness designation as a best management prescription, that they would be there in the future in as close to natural conditions as they could be. The third thing I saw was just the logic to protecting those areas of wilderness. It was obvious then, and more so now, that Arkansas National Forests were facing massive changes due to demands of development, production, recreation, directly on the forest, and then the external demands that were starting to occur in the forest resulting from climate change, acid

rain, one of the things we were concerned about at the time. So the opportunities to set aside areas that would qualify for wilderness under the Eastern Wilderness Act were diminishing rapidly. So there was an obvious need for some set of areas to serve as benchmarked, and they would be benchmarked for the recovery from past actions and serve as comparisons for current and future management forces so we could see what types of impacts we were having both in the forest and externally coming from outside. As an example, the forest service up in Missouri, Mark Twain National Forest was already experiencing a lot of effects of even-aged management they had practiced, and they were beginning to see whole populations of red oaks dying off in pretty large quantities. And they had no areas where there was not been, very few areas anyway, that had significant size for any kind of composite comparison, other than those designated as wilderness. And when I asked about ones outside the wilderness, they said, "Oh, we've got a watershed." And I said, "How big is it?" And they said, "Well, it's 14 acres." Well, that's no size of piece of ecosystem to compare what was happening. So it just was plain as obvious could be that they needed some kind of benchmarks. The idea of part of wilderness was a hand of man should be absent in forests and the hand of man had already stricken most of the national forest in the east, and it was not strictly applicable, but setting aside areas as wilderness was our best

hope for discovering any kind of best management practice in the future, how to deal with air pollution, water pollution, climate change. So that's probably... I thought was the best way to see how the ecosystem reacted to whatever we were doing. When it comes to values that these areas have for people of Arkansas and the nation, actually, the first was the scenic and recreational value. Now that we as a society are beginning to realize the mental and physical benefits of nature due to reading Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*, we now know that natural areas really do a lot to improve mental and physical health for people and having natural areas without motorized recreations will become even more important in the future. Just having open spaces, especially wilderness areas that are accessible, and some of these are well within walking distance or a short drive and walk of major cities can offer the kind of solace and solitude that provides the mental and physical health that we probably need to keep people on an even keel. Then if you look at the scientific and management benefits, having a variety of ecological settings in national forest offers many more ways to investigate the forest, the watershed dynamics, and what types of changes are going on. So I think those are the two major areas. We'll never have true old-growth forests comparable to the time of settlement. Too many species already been lost from the assembly of trees in the eastern wilderness, but having wilderness

areas that help us regain some acreages that resemble old growth, or at least mature forests will give us an idea of what the dynamics are of trying to produce trees that are long in age and very productive. So I, again, see two big benefits. One's scientific and recreation and the other ones are scenic and recreational, and then scientific and management are two major benefits.

TM: Well, Ed, thanks for that. And the next question that we have 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?

EP: Well, Tom, I do. The Ouachita National Forest released a draft impact statement for the proposed Belle Starr Wilderness. You won't find that name as a wilderness area due to the fact that we managed to do better than that, but that draft impact statement came to our Audubon office in Manhattan, Kansas. And when I received it was so outrageous that I had heartburn because in the very introduction, the Forest Service stated something like, "Other than the insistence of some advocates, there's no demonstrated need for additional wilderness in the Ouachita National Forest." Well, my blood was boiling. I told my boss that my upcoming trip to Arkansas would be extended a few days so that I could present testimony at a Forest Service public hearing.

And I read the introduction to him and he readily agreed that would be a good use of my time. So after doing a lot of chapter business in Arkansas, I spent a day or two quested away someplace. I don't remember exactly where, but I was preparing comments before the hearing. And I planned to arrive, my arrival at the hearing location just before the hearing would begin because I understood the Forest Service procedure and they would put you on the speaking lineup in the order which you signed in. So I wanted to sign in last so I could hear what others had to say and be the last one to speak. I sat off on one side because I got there late and sat by myself and I listened really intently and took notes. You and my other conservation colleagues presented testimony that was on point, what one would expect and very cogent and well put, but it was actually the opponents, or at least the supposed opponents, to the wilderness that gave much more surprising testimony to me. Our supposed opponents included a mayor and a former forester and a business person and a range of good citizens. And obviously they were organized, well-prepared, rehearsed, and most of them had a set of points that they all made. They did not want the US Forest Service. They didn't particularly like the Forest Service and they didn't want their areas around to be herbicided. They didn't want them clear cut. They didn't want new roads. They didn't want them drilled. They didn't want them

mined and basically they wanted them left pretty much like they now existed. And so they kept repeating those points and it was obvious to me that they had some definite problems with the proposed area too. I wasn't sure exactly. I knew they didn't like naming it for an outlaw, but they valued the place and in some ways I felt like maybe they liked it for the same reasons we did, but they didn't trust nor like the managers of the National Forest. So I, on the fly, adjusted my oral presentation to focus on criticizing the US Forest Service for mismanagement and agreed to submit my written comments for the record and just skipped those and I concluded my presentation and I went directly over to meet our supposed opponents. My primary target, the mayor had departed, but I managed to engage Craig Wright, who was obviously one of the leaders in the group and he found out he owned an auto parts store and was big on taking his Jeep out on the minimal maintenance forest roads. So I said to Craig, I really appreciate his comments and I'd written in my notes and said, "Craig, there are a lot of things you don't want the Forest Service to do there. And do you know there's a law we can keep the Forest Service from doing all of them." And he asked what law that was and I responded, "Well, it's a Wilderness Act of 1964. Now there's something you don't like about the proposed area, but we can draw our own map and shove it right up the Forest Services nose." At that point, you

arrived and entered the conversation and Craig, being the leader he was, responded, "A small group of us ought to get together and talk about this." And the date was picked and turned out a date when I had to be in Connecticut. So Craig was about to walk off and I said, "Oh, wait a minute, you and Tom can do this and if you and Tom come up with a map and a proposal, I don't even have to see it. If Tom says yes, my full support will be forthcoming." And Craig agreed and you met with Craig and if agreement was coming, the map was forthcoming and you called me, I think even in... I was still in Connecticut, you said you had an agreement. I said, "That's wonderful. I'll look at it when you get it to me. Let's go with it." So I essentially left town, left all the hard work for you, and you basically turned our opponents into supporters who came to testify at field hearings, wrote letters, reversed their testimony to the Forest Service, and we came out with a much better proposal called the Poteau Mountain and it's two pieces, but it's a really great piece of real estate that we protected. So I really... well, appreciated your work on doing that. And it was just exactly the thing that made the whole process work. And I can go on with a few more like that, but I think that's probably the best example I can give of a special story. And I thank you for picking up when I left town.

TM: Well, thanks, Ed. You deserve a lot of credit for all of that that happened that ended up in that compromise. The next question that I have here is, 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?

EP: Well, I think one thing that I should say is having a record like this really makes a great difference because a lot of times you don't know how these things took place and they can be a devil to find out in most cases. So this will leave behind a nice collection of stories. But a couple of things that come to mind and one example that comes to mind is how much the influence of the wisdom of the founders and members of the Ozark Society had in the outcomes of Arkansas Wilderness Legislation. I'll give you a couple of examples. Years before, I'd asked Dr. Neil Compton, who led the fight on the Buffalo River, how he dealt with all the hate and threats and outright violence during his long efforts to protect the Buffalo River. And Dr. Compton, who always remained calm, cool, collected, responded something to the effect that did, "I always saw them as my opponents, not my personal enemies, and I respected them." And that was a great lesson for me. And I think it has filtered down through the wilderness efforts in the Arkansas area. And it's a lesson that is well worth learning that they all have a point of view and you need to listen and you usually

find more common ground and difference, but don't let it become a personal enemy. The second thing that comes to mind is trust your colleagues. With five states, the limited amount of time I had, I just thought it was critical to be able to get something going and turn it over to people on the ground that locally did it. So we had a lot of good chapters to do that. I was learning that as I organized new chapters, but I often would start something and had to move on to something else in another state. And so I was, in many cases, I had to leave something to be finished or completed with capable, dedicated, talented folks like you, and do the hard job of finishing whatever task got initiated with great results. And I told people that some of my proudest moments and accomplishments actually happened when I wasn't even in the room. In fact, I probably wasn't even in the state. So I thank you for bringing that forth. And I think that's a thing that you've got good colleagues to work, it's great to be able to move on to something else and not get in the way too much.

TM: Okay. Ed, is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about, or would you like to add anything to your earlier comments? Any other stories or thoughts that you had?

EP: I can't think of anything right at this moment. I just hope that people will appreciate what we've protected in the wilderness areas in

Arkansas and take care of what's there and keep an eye on the whole thing because the price of protecting something is eternal vigilance and you never get to let up. So I thank you for what you've done and all the folks that helped with the wilderness designations and I'm glad that you're still there and working on things.

TM: Well, I would just like to thank you again on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today and for participating in this effort to record some of the memories from the wilderness efforts over the years and for you sharing your perspective and your own memories and ideas about wilderness protection here in Arkansas. The Pryor Center will provide you a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. So thank you again and goodbye for now.

EP: All right. Thank you and keep up the good work.

TM: Thanks.

EP: Bye-bye.

TM: Bye.