

Tom McClure interviewed Joe David Rice on April 2, 2024, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

TM: 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 protection of wilderness areas in Arkansas during the last 50 years. I am Tom McClure interviewing Joe David Rice 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. Joe David, 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.

Joe David Rice: Certainly. My name is Joe David Rice, and I give the Pryor Center permission to share this interview.

TM: Thank you. Today, Joe David is joining us by phone from Little Rock. Just a little bit about Joe David. He has a BA degree from the University of Arkansas and a master's degree in urban and regional planning from the University of Illinois. He is the former owner of a canoe outfitting business on the Buffalo River and a former owner of the second largest cave in Arkansas. Joe David served under five different governors as the tourism director for the State of Arkansas. He is the author of the two volume Arkansas Backstories and has

written three mystery thriller books. Once again, Joe David, thanks for being with us. And we have some questions for you to consider, but we also want to encourage you to include other things besides the questions that you would like to say. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

JDR: Well, sure. You mentioned that I went to the University of Illinois and my specialty was environmental planning. Graduated from there in 1976, and I found myself working for the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism a few years later. My official state title was Outdoor Recreation Planner. And back in those days, Tom, I had two main responsibilities, to review the environmental impact statements of major development proposals across the state and to produce the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan or SCORP, it was affectionately known by those of us in the business. As a result of my job, I was involved in the RARE II process of the U.S. Forest Service. For your listener's benefit, I should mention that RARE was an acronym for Roadless Area Review and Evaluation, which was a nationwide effort to examine areas for possible inclusion in the country's wilderness system. The original RARE I recommendations were abandoned by the Forest Service when federal courts determined that the agency had failed to fully comply with the

regulations of the National Environmental Policy Act. So RARE II produced the second roadless inventory and a lot of heartache for people across the country here in Arkansas in particular. To this day though, I can't recall the exact number of RARE II sites in Arkansas, but I can guarantee that I spent many days personally visiting each and every one of them in the state. I should also mention that I had two very supportive people that were above me at Parks and Tourism. Richard Davies was executive director of State Parks and he was my direct supervisor. And Jo Luck Wilson, executive director of the Department of Parks and Tourism was the big boss. I'm proud to say that both encouraged me to thoroughly examine each proposed wilderness area and come up with a recommendation from the department. As a result, the department played what I feel was a key role in the Arkansas Wilderness Act of 1983. It's my opinion that people across Arkansas felt pretty confident the Department of Parks and Tourism was looking after the best interest of the state. So I drafted the department's official position on the proposed wilderness areas and had the privilege of being sent to Washington, D.C., where I testified before a congressional committee on behalf of Arkansas Wilderness on April 6th, 1984, which almost was within four days of exactly 40 years ago. One thing I wanted to stress in our conversation today is Governor Bill Clinton's support of all this. He was well aware

of the department's position in favor of major wilderness editions here in Arkansas, but you got to remember that Clinton was under a good deal of pressure from the state's powerful forest industry to really minimize wilderness designations in the state, but I never got any orders to tone down our support of additional wilderness areas. I should also mention that I belonged to the Ozark Society back in the mid '70s, but failed to renew my membership when I took the job at Parks and Tourism. I didn't want anybody to claim that my work as a state's outdoor recreation planner was colored by my ties to the organization. So I think people were wondering why I didn't be an Ozark Society member, that's exactly why. But I think I played a good role in the wilderness area work back in the late '70s, early '80s, and I'm proud of what I did back in those days, Tom.

TM: Well, thank you, Joe David. And our second question is, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas personally, and what value you think these areas have for the people of Arkansas as a whole, both now and in the future?

JDR: I think that my thoughts about the value of wilderness were summarized in Arkansas's 1985 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, of which I was the author. It was about 200 pages, and it included three full pages about the importance of wilderness

areas to Arkansas's residents. And we had done a public survey asking a statistically reliable sample of the state's population about a whole lot of recreation questions. And one of them was whether or not they favored wilderness designation in the state. And 70% of the people in Arkansas favored that. But strangely enough, we also had a follow-up question that asked them if they could identify a wilderness area, and 91% said they could not, which I think certainly pointed out some needs for the Ozark Society and the other conservation areas in Arkansas. But one quote, I look back in that 1985 plan, and I found a quote that I wanted to share with you. In it, we wrote, "As more and more people seek the special experiences that wilderness offers, land managers must make certain that the very characteristics which attract visitors in the first place are no way diminished." I think that was an important statement back in 1985, and I think it's probably even more important here in 2024. I think a further testament to my attitude about wilderness is the fact that six years ago, my wife Tracy and I bought property adjacent to the Ponca Wilderness of the Buffalo National River. We spent hours hiking through our land onto this 13,300 acre track to enjoy each and every visit to this wild back country. So I personally made an investment next door to a wilderness site and guarantee that it's very important to my psyche.

TM: Well, thank you. For question number three, 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 in Arkansas?

JDR: Well, I'm going to start off with a story about my aunt and uncle, Darrell and Lula Bell Powers from Springdale, Arkansas. They were big hikers. I introduced them to places like Indian Creek on the Buffalo, and I really encouraged them to get out. And I had told them about the Richland Creek area, this was the days before it was official wilderness. And they wanted to go see Twin Falls on Richland Creek. And so they started above up near that cemetery and were coming down and they got turned around and they inadvertently spent the night in Richland Creek because they were down there without flashlights and it got dark. And I remember my three cousins, their children, panicked about their parents. And they drove over to Richland Creek, found their car, and eventually rescued their parents early the next morning. But that was sort of a family tie. As from my own personal experience, there's a couple of things I wanted to mention during my RARE II days. And again, that's that roadless area review and evaluation. I got, as I mentioned, sent to all the different proposed areas that were in the inventory. And I remember I was in the Penhook area, which to me was a pretty special place. And I

inadvertently disturbed a rattlesnake when I was trouncing through the woods. And I remember that rattlesnake quickly letting me know that I had crossed into his territory. I wasted no time yielding the spot to him. Also, another one of the areas I was particularly enchanted with was the East Fork area north of Hector. I remember I was walking along the stream that's Illinois Bio and I looked down at my feet and there was this perfect walking stick that had been beaver chewed. It was the right heft, the right length, and the right weight. I latched onto it, and over 40 years later it remains my favorite walking stick, and it has accompanied me for probably several hundred miles of trekking in probably half a dozen different states. Unfortunately, neither Penhook nor East Fork made the ultimate list to be included in America's Wilderness Network. Another thing I want to mention, it's not particularly positive, is a public hearing that I attended at Deer High School during the RARE II days. This is Deer up in Newton County. Deer Antlers is the name of the school mascot. I remember it was a very uncomfortable meeting with probably 95% of the people in attendance against wilderness designation. If my memory's correct, Tom, the local school board president presided over the session and he made it abundantly clear that he was opposed to the very idea of wilderness. I suffered through that meeting, and as I left, I halfway expected to see that the tires on my official state vehicle had been

slashed as I left the cafeteria gymnasium, but that was not the case. One thing I want to additionally mention is that I vividly recall during the whole RARE II process, and that was the failure of the superintendent of the Ozark National Forest to maintain a neutral position. I believe this individual was named Jim Crouch, and he went out of his way to make things difficult for those of us supporting additional wilderness designation. In particular, his decision to ram Dixon Road through the upper Buffalo Wilderness country north of Fallsville effectively reduced the size of what eventually became the upper Buffalo Wilderness area. I think it was a deliberate action on his part that, in my opinion, was inexcusable.

TM: Well, thank you for your comments there. And for question 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 that they should consider?

JDR: Yeah, I've thought a little bit about that question, Tom, and I have a couple of ideas. I'm 72 years old and I've encountered a good many people within Arkansas's wilderness areas over those years, most of them several decades younger than I am. And sometimes when I see these young corporate snappers out there with their fancy trekking poles and backpacking gear, I wonder if they have any idea about how

many hours of perseverance were expended back in the late 1970s and early 1980s to get these very areas set aside. I know they have no idea of the political turmoil those of us in the issue faced back in those days. Likewise, I really appreciate the unwavering commitment of Congressman Ed Bethune and Senator Dale Bumpers in support of the wilderness concept. Working together and representing different political beliefs, they made it happen. And Tom, I really miss those days of bipartisanship. To sum up, I'd say that Arkansas is known across the country as a natural state. Our wilderness areas today are absolutely vital to that image. That's pretty much what I've got to say on this topic.

TM: Well, I really appreciate you being here today. And if you have anything else to add or mention that I haven't asked you about or anything you want to add to your earlier comments or do you think we're about ready to close out?

JDR: I think the one thing I might add is these places will not protect themselves. And I think it's up to Arkansans to pretty much monitor the activities of these land managers to make certain that we're protecting the very areas that we set aside for those values. I hope that people can realize that they didn't happen just by accident and their protection certainly won't happen just by accident.

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 sharing with us your perspective and your memories and your stories about wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. I 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. Joe David, thank you again for doing this and I'll say goodbye for now.

JDR: Well, Tom, thanks. I really appreciate the chance to visit with you all and best wishes as you do this project.

TM: Thanks a lot.