

Tom McClure interviewed Dana F. Steward 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 Dana Steward 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. Dana, 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.

Dana Steward: My name is Dana Steward and I do give permission for this use.

TM: Thank you. Today, Dana Steward is joining us from Little Rock, she has spent a career as a teacher and a writer. She is the author of *Editor of a Fine Age: Creativity as a Key to Successful Aging*, August House, 1984. Dana also is the author of *A Rough Sort of Beauty: Reflections on the Natural Heritage of Arkansas*, University of Arkansas Press, 2002. Dana also received the Ozark Society's Neil Compton Award in 2020. Once again, Dana, welcome and thank you for being with us today.

DS: I'm so happy to be here.

TM: We have some questions for you to consider, but we also want to encourage you to include other things that you would like to say that are beyond the four questions if you want to say them.

DS: Thank you.

TM: Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

DS: Two things come to mind that were very important to me. One is to actually take people there, because I think in taking people there, particularly young people, scouts and our own family and Ozark Society trips, just for them to realize what it means to be in wilderness. And the second one would be the fact that a lot of my writing and the publication, particularly *A Rough Sort of Beauty*, was my effort to allow people to know how much... There are a lot, a lot of people who really do value wilderness and value this protection. The book itself started, the *Rough Sort of Beauty* started based on my being really distressed by a quote that a former governor made in an environmental hearing where he said, "Nobody cares about that stuff, but those tree huggers." And I felt like he was wrong. And so, *Rough Sort of Beauty* is a collection of about 40 different people from all

walks of life, writing about their favorite place in Arkansas, their favorite natural place. And that was very important to me, and it happened to be a very successful book from UA Press.

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

DS: Neil Compton in a book called *High Ozarks: A Vision of Eden* says this, "Whether or not, some of us arrive on this earth with an innate awareness of its miraculous attributes, I do not know." In my case, I think I was born with an awareness of the innate benefits of the natural world. I'm an only child, I have always loved being on my own in wilderness, we had a little cabin, shack really, up off of the Fourche River in the mountain, and even as a young child, I was allowed to walk up into those woods by myself at some distance. And it's a great value, and I think it's a value for anyone once they are aware of it.

TM: Okay. Question number three 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?

DS: Oh, Tom, that one, that was just really hard to think about because of course we do. And the difficult part was picking two or three and not boring you to death. My most special experience with wilderness is walking in the Upper Buffalo area, way above Cass, and getting the opportunity to see a bear in the wild, a bear of nice size. I was alone, every year I try to do one walk simply alone by myself in an area that I don't expect to see anyone else and so on, and that's what I was doing. I was about five miles back in, above Cass, walking on a kind of a land bridge, but between two valleys, and I encountered a great old big bear. And I can't tell you the influence that had on my life.

Another, I guess, would be being in the Blue Hole Special Interest Area, which as you know, Bill and I have a special love for. We've been in there probably 35 or 40 times since the 1980s, and seen it in every season and so on. And in walking in Blue Hole, two things that come to mind that to me, this is either a value of wilderness or not. We're walking up [unclear] Hollow and it's August, and so the stream is not really running, you would just come from one pool to another, and every pool had a water moccasin getting cool in that pool. And that's either your idea of fun or not. And the other is probably the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life, again, in Blue Hole. When there were a group of us in there camping, we were up on a bench because we tried to camp away from the water, not to do anything to

damage the water of the Blue Hole. And when we were doing that, it was, oh, about this time of year, because the buckeye, it was probably an acre of just red sea of buckeye, and the butterflies were there. And I caught it just the middle afternoon when the sun was coming through the trees, and the butterflies were, it literally looked like they were levitating. Those are two that I don't think you just see anywhere, I think you need wilderness for that. Now, the efforts to protect wilderness, here's the thing that matters to me about that, is nobody could protect wilderness on their own. There have been voices like you, and so many others that had to take that to Congress, but it's not a one-man job, as you know. Hundreds of people were involved in that. And that's really important to me because wilderness is an isolated thing. Some people worked on this who will never be able to go into wilderness, and it is not accessible, it's not intended to be accessible. And the reason for that is for it to be protected as it is, and that can't happen if you have a lot of folks. So that's my take on that.

TM: Well, thank you, Dana. The next question is, would you like to add anything else that you think needs to be emphasized that you think the public should know or consider?

DS: Let me tell you a story. When I was teaching at Hendrix, I was teaching environmental literature, and we were reading some

materials because the Hendrix students helped me develop the book, *Rough Beauty*, I'm very proud of them for that. But we were reading a lot of materials and this kid was a freshman, not from Arkansas, but she had been to float the Buffalo already. And this article was speaking about the fact that it could have been dammed. In fact, I want to go back to that in a second. But in reading that article, somehow she got the idea that this was a fight that was going on right now, and she was horrified. And I can remember looking up into her wild eyes, and she said, "They can't do that, they can't do that. They can't dam the Buffalo." And we all laughed, but she's right. The article she was reading was an article by probably my favorite environmentalist hero in Arkansas, and that's a man named John Heuston. John Heuston, he was in publications, writing, he'd written for newspapers, but he had loved the Buffalo since he was a boy, and he was just Neil Compton's right-hand man and voice on much of that fight, and then carried that into wilderness, the articles he wrote very proactive in terms of his advocacy for wilderness. And in the book, the *Rough Beauty* book, he tells the story of how things get preserved. And he did it by using the story of a little boy named Warren, and Warren had been a hiker going everywhere in the Buffalo and in the Wilderness Series with, not yet designated, with his father and other Ozark Society members back before there was paving in the Buffalo River watershed, that sort of

thing. And at nine, Warren died tragically, and his father, one way of grieving that was, oh, six months after that, he was up at Buffalo Point with John Heuston, and they were overlooking wilderness, completely pristine, but they began to see markers and signs that that was to be developed. And Heuston says if that had been developed, we would never have had the national park because there was going to be a huge development on the other side of the river, clearly visible from Buffalo Point, and Warren's dad used his, Warren's, insurance money from his death to fund the fight about that. Makes me tear up even now.

TM: Yeah.

DS: So, [unclear]

TM: That's quite a story. That's really meaningful.

DS: Well, John-

TM: I have seen that plaque there at Buffalo Point, and as I'm sure a lot of other folks have.

DS: Yes. John Heuston told me, Tom, that until his death, he got calls from all over the country, from people who would see the plaque, and call him to ask for the full story. So, plaques matter sometime.

TM: Yeah, they do. Well, thank you, Dana-

DS: But-

TM: ... for telling that and your other remarks too.

DS: Yeah, sorry.

TM: Just wanted to ask you again, 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? We've got plenty of time.

DS: Well, I think there's nothing that is more important to me having been a teacher than doing whatever I can, and any of us can, to acquaint more people with the idea of wilderness, and that is that critical thing of exposing them to it as much as we can, and yet protecting it at the same time. I was more than gratified in teaching that environmental literature class at Hendrix, that they didn't care about many of my stories, but my stories of being in Arkansas, in the wilderness, in the parks, hiking the places that we went, resonated with every one of them. And so many of those students went on into environmental things, so many Ozark Society member's children like Stewart Noland's Ross, have gone into that preservation in a big way. And Neil Compton said another thing... I started with him, I'll end with him. He said, "It's never done. It's never done. The only way we will have wilderness,"

and as you know from your work on acquiring more wilderness, "is for people to care about it." And that takes a lot of effort, but I believe they do. I believe that former governor was dead wrong, and I look forward to working at that as long as Bill and I can.

TM: Well, thank you very much, Dana, for all those insights and comments and stories. And I want to just thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being a part of this project and being here today in sharing your perspective and memories about wilderness protection. Also want to let you know that the Pryor Center will provide you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. And just want to thank you again, and I'll just say goodbye for now.

DS: Thank you, Tom. Glad to be here. Bye-bye.

TM: Bye.