

Tom McClure interviewed William 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 Bill Steward for the David and Barbara Pryor Center of Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas on April 4th, 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 Steward: My name is Bill Steward, and all of that is okay.

TM: All right. Well, today Bill Steward is joining us from Little Rock. Bill was born in Strong City, Kansas. He has a BA degree from the University of Arkansas, graduating in 1965. He was the owner of Mill and Mine Supply Company in Little Rock, which sold industrial supplies and equipment. He retired in 2011. Bill was also in the US Army Reserve from 1966 to 1972. He was president of the Lakeside Country Club, and a member of the board of directors of the Little Rock Downtown Rotary Club. He was also president of the Central Arkansas Executive

Association. Bill received the Ozark Society's Neil Compton Award in 2020. Bill, once again, welcome and thank you for being with us today.

BS: Glad to be here.

TM: We have some questions for you to consider, but we also want to encourage you to include other things beyond these 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?

BS: Well, mostly mine was to take groups and backpacking trips into the various wilderness areas and show them what it was and so they'd know what it was and they could help with what needed to be done. In my line of work, sawmills and lumber companies were major league customers. And when we were starting to do the wilderness stuff, I just had a fear that I was going to get a call from a major league customer that did not particularly support wilderness and say to me, "Bill, we know that you're in the conservation group, and we've got a letter here that we would like for you to send to people." Oh boy. I mean, I had that happen on some other stuff one time and Dan and I kind of had to change the way we did some stuff. I mean, somebody spends a million bucks a year with you, and they want you to rethink your position a little bit, it just kind of changes things up. So anyway. But mostly what I did was to take groups into those areas and show

them what it was. And usually it was an overnight trip. What we tried to do was we would basically hike in sort of into the middle of an area and then set up camp and then go for a hike. And we knew where we were, so it would probably be dark by the time we got back. And that in itself was an excitement for some people, but we did. Dan and I did the... we did a lot of that.

TM: Well, thank you. Second question is, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas, and what value these areas have for you personally and also for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

BS: Well, we've got these, and wilderness really is not for everybody. I mean, they're virtually set out to keep people out. And I think of some of the things that have happened that I kind of have mixed emotions about. But for instance, ice storms, I can remember a couple of ice storms we had that basically closed roads into wilderness areas that had been there, and been in hard use. And when the ice storm got through, I think about Hurricane Creek, and going into getting into the Greasy Creek area. After the ice storm, I didn't go back for years. I mean, it was hard to get in there, and I just gave that up. But I think we need them and that people can go to the edge and look at them and say, "Well, there it is and we won't mess with it." So there you go.

And one thing that is a discussion is whether we use fire in the wilderness areas. In Arkansas, the only place we use fires in the lower Buffalo. And I support fire. I think we should. I think they should all be burnt, but it's the only one that does have control burns. And I'd like to see those go to the others as well.

TM: Okay. Thank you. 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 here in Arkansas?

BS: Well, one time I remember Hubert Ferguson called me, and he said that he understood that I knew all about Greasy Creek. And Hubert is a person of significance. And I said, "Well, I've been in there." He said, "Well, do you know all about it? " And I said, "Well, I've been in there. I kind of know what's going on in there." He said, "Do you know all about it? " I said, "Yes, sir. I know all about it." And he said, "Well, good." He said, "I want you to take me and my family in there." And I thought, "Okay." So I said, "Okay." And so he told me what weekend. And he said, "There'll be just two sons and a daughter and a couple of others." And I mean, he told me, he said, "Here's the way we do things. We will do all the cooking and furnish all the food." That sounds like a deal to me. And Greasy Creek is in the Hurricane Creek

Wilderness. And basically at the top of Greasy Creek, there's about a four-acre lake. Well, it is not widely known that that lake is there, or maybe you would call that a pond, but it's a nice little lake. And getting to it, there is no trail. You just got to know how to get there. And so we got there and Hubert was just blown away with this little lake. And then we set up camp, and then we headed down the Greasy Creek. And we reached one point where, to me, it was kind of the high point of Greasy. And we got there, and Hubert said, he said, "Steward?" And I said, "Yes, sir." And he said, "I believe this is the best rock jungle I've ever seen in this state." It was a significant waterfall and stuff going on there and that he thought it was the best rock jungle he'd ever seen in the state. I thought, "Wow, that's a big deal." That was a trip. And then I know one time, John Gill and Brian Day, Brian called me and he said that he and John Gill wanted to go into the Lower Buffalo Wilderness. He said, "We've heard there's a mine in there that you can get to." And I said, "There is." And he said, "Do you know where it is?" I said, "Yeah, I know where it is." And he said, "Well, can you get in there and out in a day?" And I said, "Brian, we usually take two days to do that trip." And he said, "John Gill isn't going to do that." He said, "Can you do it in a day?" And, "Well, it's going to be a long walk in a day." And a 16-mile mine is once you get to it, and it is not easy to get to, I would think the mine is probably a

mile back in there, and that's our jumping off point when we go into the Lower Buffalo. I mean, that's a two-day trip, or maybe three days. There's just so much to see. I mean, the mining that went in there, that went on in there is just significant. And I mean, I see a lot of stuff that I saw. I mean, we saw the people. So we headed in there and it was a long hike for a day to get in and out. And we finally got to the mine and John Gill looked at it and said, "Well," he said, "I've seen this now." And I said, "Well, let's go in there. I mean, we've got lights." He said, "Let's go in there and wander around a little bit." John Gill said, "I'm not going in that thing." So Brian Day and I went in and I guess we spent at least an hour, maybe two hours wandering around back in there looking at stuff. And there's one thing that is significant, and there's a piece of drill stem into the wall where, I mean, they were going to drill something. And so this piece of steel is sticking out about six feet, and it has stalactites on it. And it is really neat. I mean, here's a piece of drill string that's got all these stalactites on it. And I've looked at that several times and thought, "I would really like to have that." I mean, it should be illegal to take it to start with. And I don't think you could get it out. I don't think you could cut it off without busting all the dirt stalactites, so that'd be a bad deal. But I remember those trips as being kind of particularly interesting. And Bob Robinson. Bob is a writer and I've taken him into that area, and he'd never been

in there before. I mean, he's been a lot of places, but he hadn't been in there. And he and I spent several days in there, and there's basically an old wrecking yard that's been there long enough that it's part of the wilderness. And a whole bunch of old cars in there, and Bob was just blown away with that. And he took a bunch of pictures and did a story, and that was part of the story. And a couple of other places that Bob and I went that he hadn't been to before, that was always a good trip. So that's about it.

TM: Well, thank you, Bill, for that. Those are some great stories. The last question, number four, 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?

BS: Oh, a couple of things that have happened, and I don't know whether they're of interest to me. When we were done talking to the Forest Service people about... What am I trying to say? Where you've spent some time in there.

TM: The Blue Hole area?

BS: Yeah, Blue Hole.

TM: Yeah.

BS: Don Hampton and I were talking to the forest supervisor for that area, and he had with him this guy who marked timber. I mean, he was the one who took the spray thing and marked the timber. So we're talking about, we'd like to say this, and that wasn't really high on their agenda. And this guy that marked the timber said to me, he said, "You see any stumps down that valley down in the Blue Hole valley?" And I hadn't thought about it, but I said, "Well, no." And he said, "Well, because I've been marking timber in this area for a long time, and I just always thought that area right down there was just too pretty to mark." I mean, we're going to Congress to get stuff done, and here is the guy who's going to make the decision. And his boss just said, "Don't tell them stuff like that." But he said, "I just never marked any timber down in there." And the next time I was in there I paid particular attention to that. There were no stumps in that whole watershed. And isn't that interesting that do all you want to, but there's a guy down there on the ground that's going to make the decision. And we had the same thing happen over in Flatside. There's a road that virtually came into the middle of it, and it had to be left open. And so this fellow was with the Forest Service, and he kind of saw things our way, and he was going to be retiring for too long. He said, "I'm going to close that road." And I mean, that road was on the map that he left open. And he said, "I'm going to close it." He said,

"It'll be years before they figured out it's closed." And he took a bulldozer in there and cut the road. And you know what, it's still cut, and nobody's going to come in that area in a car, that's all there is to it. And some little things like that that can happen that you go to Congress all you want to, but there's somebody on the ground that's going to make the final call. And sometimes it works out or sometimes it doesn't, but that's always interesting to me.

TM: It is. It is. Thank you for telling those stories. Well, is there anything else that you'd like to talk about, or mention that I haven't asked about or that you would like to add to your earlier comments?

BS: Well, one thing, the wilderness is... I think about the Buffalo River versus wilderness. And with the river, there's just a lot of people and a lot of folks who kind of think of wilderness and the Buffalo River is kind of the same. But wilderness is not for everybody. I mean, that's just all there is to it. It is not for everybody. We can all appreciate it, but as far as being in there, it's not for everybody to go into. And that's all there is to that. So there you go.

TM: Okay. Well, thank you. And once again, thanks on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today and sharing with us your perspectives, and your memories and your stories about wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. Bill, also, the Pryor

Center wants you to know that they will provide you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. So thanks again, and I'll say goodbye for now.

BS: Okay. Thank you, Tom.

TM: You bet.

BS: Bye-bye.

TM: Bye.