

Tom McClure interviewed Lissa Thompson on April 16, 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 Lissa Thompson for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for the Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas on April 16th, 2024. Lissa, 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.

Lissa Thompson: My name is Lissa Thompson, and I am willing and I give my permission for the Pryor Center to use this interview and share with the public.

TM: Sounds great. Thank you. Today, Lissa Thompson is joining us by phone from Memphis, Tennessee. A little bit about Lissa. She was raised in Little Rock. She has a BA with honors from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and also attended earlier for most of her academic work at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas with a dual major in fine arts and Spanish. Lissa also has an MLA, Master in

Landscape Architecture, from Harvard University Graduate School of Design. She is a licensed landscape architect with a practice based in Memphis, Tennessee. Professional projects are located across the region, with both public and private clients. Her work has primarily included parks, greenways, trails, botanic gardens, and open spaces, as well as healthcare and educational facilities. Lissa is a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects. She was a full-time visiting professor at the Faye Jones School of Architecture, Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Arkansas in 2008. Am I right there, Lissa, that that's part of the university?

LT: It's in the School of Architecture. It's the Department of Landscape Architecture in Fayetteville.

TM: Okay. Is it part of the University of Arkansas?

LT: Oh, yeah.

TM: Oh, it is. Yeah, it's the school. Okay. So anyway, she was here in 2008 and her volunteer and civic involvement in Memphis has included serving on the boards of Memphis Heritage and the Wolf River Conservancy. She was appointed to Shelby County, Tennessee, Mayor Lutrell's Green Building Task Force, and Mayor Wharton's Sustainable Shelby Initiative. Lissa served two terms on the University of Arkansas

School of Architecture, Dean's Advisory Board. Pryor volunteer conservation work in Little Rock was with the Sierra Club and was with the Arkansas Conservation Coalition. Lissa, welcome and thank you for being with us here today.

LT: Well, I'm happy and pleased. I thank you for asking me to participate because this wilderness effort was a team effort and I'm proud to have been a part of it.

TM: Okay. Thanks. And we have some questions for you today to consider, but we also want to encourage you to include other things besides the questions that you would like to say. So feel free to do that. The first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

LT: Okay. Well, quite a bit of time has passed, but thinking back on it, I think it started around 1982 with some of the friends of mine who were members of the Sierra Club. I can remember meeting over at Jay Vestal's apartment. And Tom, I think you were there. We were starting to assemble background information and assess some of the potential eligible areas, thinking that Arkansas really kind of was in a timeframe where it was important to protect some of the national forest lands. It was kind of time was of the essence, but we poured over maps and we visited the sites and assembled a really nice binder with maps and

written descriptions as a reference to take to potential supporters. And then I think part of that group became the core of the Arkansas Wilderness Task Force, which I was a member. And then I continued with the promotional effort. At the time, I was practicing graphic design and I also had ties to the local communications professionals in Little Rock, but I put together print materials about wilderness in Arkansas with maps, graphic images, and a lot of description of what is wilderness. Also, an audiovisual slideshow that many of our conservation colleagues would take. It was an old-fashioned 35-millimeter slide with an audio program. Mel White helped put that together. And I know Don Hamilton, I think he kept us at, he was a big fan, but that was part of our public awareness campaign and then collaborated with some of the other conservation coalition members. There were other conservation groups in the state and we all kind of shared beliefs that protecting wilderness was important. Jenny Jackson with the League of Women Voters was one I recall working with closely. Scott Trotter from the Audubon Society. And I think Tom, you're talking to, was it Stuart Nolan and Paul Means from the Ozark Society. Don Hamilton, I think was active then and much later with the Wildlife Federation, but we sort of put our energy together. And then on the ground, I accompanied, along with some of our other team members, some of the legislators and their staff, including Senator Bumpers and

Susan Reiff, we took them out to see for themselves some of these wilderness areas because we were sure they would appreciate the wonders of these proposed sites. And then we also, I had photos from a trip we took with Ed Bethune, Bob Irving, Mary Miller Smith, Tom, you were there, Neil Compton, Bill Coleman. But I think those were moving experiences and they appreciated the values of these special places. And I recall Tom, you and I really advocated the importance of Flatside as representative of the Washington Mountain Geology with the parallel ridges and the fabulous views. And that was an important destination for people in the central Arkansas area with the proximity to the large population center. And then later, I went to Washington, DC, to enlist support. We called on all our Congress people and went to everyone's offices, Bumpers and Pryor and tried to get them on board. And we were lucky to have gotten tremendous support from Bumper's office. And then later testified at the hearings, the US House of Representative, the chair of the subcommittee on public lands at the time was John Seiberling. That committee hearing was May 26th of 1983. And then later in April, it was on the 6th of 1984, came down to Washington DC from Cambridge, Massachusetts, because at that time I was in graduate school and spoke before Senator Bumper's committee, what was that? The committee on energy and natural resources in the US Senate. So over time, I mean, that's what? At

least a couple of years participated in a lot of activities. But like I said, it was a huge group effort, but I think everybody saw not only the need to protect these special places in the national forest, but also the multiple benefits it would bring to the state and the citizens of Arkansas as well as visitors.

TM: Thanks, Lissa. That brings back some memories. And 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 what value you think they may have for people in Arkansas in general, both now and in the future?

LT: Oh, golly. Well, I think at the time, at least personally, it was maybe focused on some of the recreational values, the spiritual benefit, being in places where you could get respite and a sense of solitude and be with your friends and family in a peaceful environment, but also very aware of the scenic value while at the same time aware of some of the special habitat and ecological benefits. But I think over time, there are more issues that have come to the fore like carbon sequestration and heat mitigation. I think as the years have gone by, we can see how important these stands of forest are for our wellbeing. And I think it's also panned out that the economic benefit, I mean, the national forest and our recreational areas in Arkansas, I mean, that's why it's called

the Natural State, right? So you don't want the quality of these areas diminished and they need to be protected. And I think you can see how many people come to enjoy these beautiful outdoor settings, but I think you have to remain vigilant because there's a perception that there's a lot of undeveloped forested land that is protected. I think we encountered that a lot when we were working on the wilderness proposal. And I think you need to look at probably adding to the system because we still have a lot of fragments. I mean, when you talk about ecological values, you've got to have migration routes and sufficient contiguous land areas to support the populations of the various species. And I think we still have a situation where you've got pieces and they're kind of isolated from one another. And I think on private land, you just don't get enough territory for all of those species to thrive. But I think for everybody's health and wellbeing, we get an awful lot that we get multiple benefits for sure.

TM: Well, thank you for those thoughts. And for the next question, it's about stories and just wondered if 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.

LT: You know, that's a hard one. I think if we had a group of us gathered in a room, there would be quite a few that would come up in conversation.

TM: Well, you've mentioned some already, and if you think of one that you want to mention, just jump right in. But the other thing that I wanted to ask on question number four, I'll just go to that one.

LT: Okay.

TM: Would you like to add anything else that you think the public needs to know or consider regarding the history of wilderness in Arkansas? Something that you think maybe is not evident to the public that if they knew it, they might feel differently about it.

LT: Oh, golly. There are a lot of different ways to look at that. I mean, I think everybody probably has an understanding of how the wilderness areas contribute to our quality of life, whether it's in Arkansas or some other state in the US or in another country around the world. But I think the effort, that example of getting these wilderness areas designated, it shows how much the citizens care about these public lands and there's a lot of power and a good idea and people coming together to work for a cause that has merit, values or shared values and benefits. I think it was initially kind of a daunting task, but I think

everybody thought, "Well, it's something that needs to be done protecting these special areas and let's just put our nose to the grindstone." And I think there was a lot of enthusiasm, but again, I think for the public, it's important to realize that not every acre of the national forest is protected. And I think there's been a lot of improvement in forest management practices. I think that at the time, that was part of what prompted the initiative because we were seeing a lot of less than desirable practices. And many of these were land areas that were almost inaccessible because they were so rugged and that's why they still remained fairly pristine. And a lot of the... If you look from the air at Arkansas and it looks like it's not developed, a lot of that's farmland, a lot of it's in private ownership and then you sort of whittle down in what's in public ownership, it's even that much less that's under any kind of designation that provides protection. So I think you have to really be mindful and vigilant. But thankfully, I think some of those who are charged officially to manage the national forest are coming a little more from a stewardship perspective, but I think everybody who cares, whether it's for the scenic values, the recreational benefits, now that it's getting so hot, trying to reduce temperatures in the state by maintaining good forest cover, worried about protecting water quality, got to watch those forest practices so we're not putting too much sediment in the stream if you care about

wildlife. I think a lot of people were also confused and may still be about what you can and cannot do in wilderness. So I think there's still a lot of education that needs to be done to say, "Yeah, they're open for camping, hunting, fishing, these wilderness areas, swimming, canoeing, photography, bird watching, all kinds of uses." The idea is not to keep people out, but just minimize the impact so that these lands can be enjoyed in perpetuity by everyone and support a diverse, healthy ecosystem.

TM: Well, thank you for those insights. Just kind of moving beyond the questions, is there anything that you'd like to add to any of the questions that we talked about or is there anything else that you'd like to mention that I have not asked you about?

LT: I'm just thinking it would be great. I think as part of the public school education, especially for children who are in some of the more urban areas to have programs to get them outdoors so they can just get a taste because I think the future is in the hands of those who are now the youth. I think you're probably like me. I played outdoors as a child. We lived in Little Rock, but had a wooded lot and I went to camp in the summer and we spent a lot of time in Hot Springs playing in the woods and in the water over there. And so kind of developed an awe for the natural processes and a love for the outdoors. And I think the

more you get people out just to have contact with nature, especially some of the schools that don't have recess, there are a lot of studies in their books on the nature deficit, but I think there's some exceptions. Of course, I think there's still people doing scouting and organizations that support hiking and backpacking trips. I think that's how a lot of us became good friends, those of us who were involved in the wilderness bill effort. We were all out hiking in the woods and listening to the birds and marveling at all the native wildflowers and jumping in the water beneath the waterfalls. And I think that direct contact really engenders a love for nature. And so we just need to get more kids out there.

TM: Good, good points. Are there other things that you would like to add or any other comments that you have?

LT: Well, this is kind of a side thought because driving back from Little Rock today, I think over time I've come to appreciate some of Arkansas's lowlands and there are some that are under protection, national, state, or nature conservancy ownership, but there's some really fabulous bottom land hardwood areas. So Arkansas's really lucky. Arkansas's heritage is diverse and rich, so I think we should celebrate that, but it's more than just the forest and the mountains.

It's really, like I say, got a rich natural heritage, and I think everybody should be appreciative and celebrate that.

TM: Okay. Thank you. And certainly there are some wonderful places in the Lowlands between Little Rock and Memphis and the refuges over there, and it's a great place to spend some time. Well, would you like to add anything else at this point, or have you said what you want to say, or do you have any other comments?

LT: I think that's all that comes to mind at the moment. I'll probably think of something else later, and as I said, the passage of time, it's not all as fresh as it used to be, but I'm convinced if we had some of us together in the room, there'd be more memories that would be prompted. And I have to say, I think we, going through that process, developed a lot of lasting friendships that I treasure to this day. And even though I'm back and forth and not in Arkansas all the time, and all of us, I mean, people have moved on. Jay Vestal's in Utah, Bill Coleman's in California. You're in Northwest Arkansas. There's still a cluster in Little Rock, but I think we all personally had that friendship benefit come out of it, as well as really feeling a sense of accomplishment with that final bill passage. And again, if we can add some more land to the areas, it's going to be better for all the species that are dependent on a good amount of contiguous land area though.

TM: Well, thank you for all of your insights and your thoughts on that. And of course, you know, I agree with a lot of it, and I appreciate you doing this interview and being a part of the project. And I'd like to just thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today and sharing with us your perspective and your memories about wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. Also want to let you know that the Pryor Center will be providing you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. So did you have other...

LT: I just want to thank you for putting in the time and everybody else involved and for the Pryor Center sponsoring the work. I know it's taken a lot of time from you and others to put it all together, but I think it's an important piece of Arkansas history, so thanks to everyone.

TM: Thank you. And thanks for being a part of it. And so I'll just thanks again and say goodbye for now.

LT: Okay. Take care.

TM: All right.

LT: I look forward to everybody else's interviews.

TM: Well, we will have them at some point, we hope here in the next few months.

LT: Good. All right.

TM: Take care.

LT: Thank you.

TM: All right, bye.