

Tom McClure interviewed Ellen Turner 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 Ellen Turner 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. Ellen, 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.

Ellen Turner: I'm Ellen Turner, and I certainly agree for the Pryor Center to use this interview in any way they wish.

TM: Okay. Thank you. Today, Ellen Turner is joining us in person here at the Pryor Center on the Square in Fayetteville. Ellen was born and grew up in Hope, Arkansas. She graduated from Hendricks College in 1972 with a degree in biology. She was awarded the Arkansas Audubon's Ruth Thomas Scholarship and spent two weeks off the coast of Maine at a National Audubon Society ecology camp. That experience led Ellen to St. Louis University where she received a master's degree in field biology. Ellen has been a lifelong educator in both formal and

informal education. She taught biology and AP biology at Rogers High School and served as education director at the Ozark Natural Science Center. Ellen has helped established a two week outdoor science program, Aegis, which stands for Arkansas Enrichment for the Gifted In Summer program for high school students in 1985. That program continues today at the Ozark Natural Science Center. Ellen also served as president of Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society, as well as president of Arkansas Audubon Society. She was also education program manager at the Audubon Center at Vent of the River in Southbury, Connecticut from 2002 to 2007. Ellen then taught principles of biology at Northwest Arkansas Community College in Bentonville for 11 years, retiring in 2018. She now teaches Master Naturalist classes and currently serves on the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. Ellen, once again, welcome and thank you for being here with us today.

ET: Thank you.

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 beyond the four questions. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

ET: Yes. And I'll tell you, because I know that you have already interviewed some superstars in that whole wilderness designation effort. And so I describe myself as second tier in that effort. And one of the things that really impressed me about the whole effort was the organization. So, when I say I was second tier, I was president of the Arkansas Audubon Society at the time. And we were one of nine organizations that were members of the Arkansas Conservation Coalition. So, as you know, the coalition was the umbrella over that effort and then the individual groups depended on their leaders. So as president, it was my job to encourage my members to participate, to write letters, to be informed. And I thought the whole effort worked just incredibly well. I was, just to give you some dates, I was vice president and president, so that this is the way it works with the Arkansas Audubon Society from 1981 to 1984. So technically I should have been vice president 81 and 82, president 83 and 84. But as it turned out, our president moved away in 82. So, I actually served three years as president of the organization, which gave me a lot of experience. The other thing that I had done, and I have to explain a little bit about the Audubon Society here. Arkansas Audubon Society is the older Audubon group in the state, and it was established for people who loved to go out in the field and watch birds, and they kept meticulous records. And back in the day, those records were on note

cards and little card files that ... And in fact, Doug James, Dr. Doug James and Joe Neal, who wrote *Birds of Arkansas*, used those records to pull that book together. And the other piece of that is that we paid a certain fee to be an affiliate of the National Audubon Society. So the Arkansas Audubon Society brought together all the chapters of the National Audubon Society and then other groups that weren't affiliated at all. So, it was kind of a loose association, but there were a lot of people that were part of it. And because we were affiliated with National Audubon Society, they provided us with field people. Ed Pembleton was one, Ron Klataske was one, and they were in constant contact with the National Audubon Society Advocacy Office. So, we had skilled leadership helping us do our part in lobbying or whatever was necessary. And another thing that happened, one of those field representatives, Ed Pembleton, pushed me to attend a lobbying workshop hosted by the National Audubon Society in Washington DC in the spring of 1982. And I understand now, Ed realized what was coming. He knew that I needed to be in this leadership role, and he made sure that I got the best training to know how to rally the troops and talk to my representatives and senators and so on. The other thing about what we did back then that makes me smile is we were those old fashioned organizations that had committees and there were no computers. We probably had a few word processors early in the

game, but you couldn't Facebook message someone, you couldn't text someone, you had to pick up the phone and talk to them. And I remember a lot of phone calls because we would reach a crunch point and we would have to get in touch with everybody and be sure you write your letter. And I wrote many memos for the members of the Arkansas Audubon Society telling them, "Here are the points you need to make. This letter needs to be sent by this date. This is where you send it. " So there was a tremendous amount of work that went on behind the scenes and those second-tier levels, those of us that were heading some of these groups. The other thing that we had going for us with Arkansas Audubon was a cracker jack conservation chair. Her name was Florence Mallard, and this is important. She was a retired school secretary and anybody who knows anything about school secretaries know that they are probably today's CEOs. They know how to run things. And she's very well educated and just totally devoted to conservation efforts in the state. But the funny piece of this is that if she sent a press release, we could almost always guarantee that it was not only going to be on the paper, but the headline writers were going to have fun with it because, of course, we were a bird watching organization and her last name was Mallard. And so it would be "Mallard leads bird watchers to a new birding site" or whatever. So we had a lot of fun with that. Florence was, she was a very pleasant

person. She had a very pleasant voice and I think sometimes some of the people that she interacted with in her conservation efforts were caught off guard because she was brutally honest and she was not afraid to say anything that needed to be said to get the right things done. So we had some really good people in place there. So that was basically my role. We also had, I'm hesitant to even begin naming names, but we had some people that really were important to me, Art and Martha Johnson, Martha Gillum, Jane Stern, Florence Mallard, Bill Shepherd. I could go on. There were a lot of just really good folks in the Arkansas Audubon Society who did what needed to be done.

TM: Well, thank you, Ellen. Question number two, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas yourself and what values these areas have for you personally, and what value you think they have for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

ET: I think, so I save things and I found the Arkansas Audubon newsletter that was published March 15th, 1984. So that's when everything seemed to be hanging in the balance and we were beginning to, you know, everybody was beginning to be warned thin and we wanted something to happen and we'd done all that we could. And so this is the message. I'm just going to read you some pieces of that message that was ... So I had a president's message in every edition of the

Arkansas Audubon Newsletter, and again, this was March 15th, 1984.

"Dear Audubon Friends, the most important environmental issue of the decade in Arkansas is unresolved as the Arkansas Audubon newsletter goes to press. Our two senators, Dale Bumpers and David Pryor, introduced their long awaited wilderness bill just prior to the adjournment of the last legislative session. Their bill, which would create 11 wilderness areas encompassing 117,000 acres in the Ozark St. Francis and Ouachita National Forest closely resembles that of representatives Ed Bethune, whose wilderness plan calls for 119,000 acres. Both bills are endorsed by the Arkansas Conservation Coalition, which originally proposed the 11 areas after a long period of careful study." And again, there's the Arkansas Conservation Coalition leading the process. That was just a really, really important part, I think, of our effort. And then I talked a little bit about some of the things that other current issues of brave concern for anybody that cares about the environment. So I listed some of those and then I said, "But none of these issues is likely to have as far reaching an effect as that of wilderness designation. Today's Arkansas must set aside the wild places of tomorrow now for when the areas that are presently suitable for wilderness designation have been clear cut mined and otherwise consumed, there will be no tomorrow. The 11 proposed wilderness areas represent an almost insignificant amount of land set aside for

posterity. Surely 6% of the total acreage in Arkansas's vast national forest is not too much to ask. For most of us though, those intangible amounts that represent wilderness can't be expressed by dollar amounts or in statistical terms or by percentages. We go to quiet places to restore our souls. Indeed, those special moments beside crystal clear Ozark streams and a moist north facing Washington slopes are essential to our spiritual, if not physical wellbeing. We want our children and our children's children to understand the comfort to be found in that kind of solitude. We want to save a green space for them that cannot be violated by vehicles, concrete, or chainsaws." Aldo Leopold had a way with words, and this is the way he described his yearning for wilderness. 'I'm glad that I shall never be young without wild country to be in. Of what avail are 40 freedoms without a blank spot on the map?'"

TM: Well, thank you very much for reading that. And it's interesting to see the thinking that you and Audubon folks had back at that time, right before the bill was passed.

ET: Just-

TM: Yeah. One more?

ET: Yeah. Well, just to comment about that. I read this last night and I thought, I remember how I felt. It was a plea. It was, "We've got to gather up our energy and do one more thing, friends." So I actually ended the letter with some information about what they need to do next. And then I said, "If by February 27th, if wilderness legislation," that was actually when we testified, "If it's not too late to contact your senators and representative and let them know that you two want 11 blank spots on the Arkansas map." So that was my desperate plea to call the people to action.

TM: Thank you for sharing that now and doing that then. Question number three, do you have any special stories that you would like to tell about experiences or the experiences of others regarding efforts to protect wilderness areas here in Arkansas?

ET: Well, I think, again, I had been sent to that lobbying workshop and I realized, I don't have any great stories to tell, but it was rewarding to have gained some of those skills and to have the guidance of Ron Klataske and Ed Pembleton and working with ... I have many, many, many wonderful friends in the Arkansas Audubon Society and that feeling of camaraderie, and which I felt with others, like members of the coalition, the Native Plant Society. I mean, I think we pulled together as a conservation community in a way then that I wish we

could resurrect because we were a very powerful force. There were just so many of us, and we all came from a different angle, and yet we had one voice. Everybody was in agreement on what we needed to do. And I think there's a model there that we probably should call upon other times. But I did want to say this, after it was all over, there was a little desperation in that letter that I wrote, and I'm sure others did as well. And we were worn out. When everything was over, everybody was exhausted because it was physically taxing to work all day and take care of your kids and then have to write all those letters at night. But also, it was emotionally exhausting, just the stress of wondering if it's going to ever happen. And so we really didn't, and I think felt a little guilty. Some of us afterwards, we didn't really reach out and thank the people that led us on that. And Tom, you were one of those people. And so Florence Mallard, once again, our conservation chair for the Arkansas Audubon Society was on top of that. And we actually gave quarterly a conservation citation to a... and it didn't have to be anybody in Audubon. I remember one time we gave it to Neil Curry with the Arkansas Wildlife Federation and other people from other organizations that did some extraordinary things for conservation. And so Florence was like, "I want to make sure that Tom McClure gets a citation." So I'm just going to read a little bit of the conservation citation that she wrote for you. "Dr. Thomas McClure receives the

conservation citation from Arkansas Audubon for his work in spearheading the successful campaign for preservation of Arkansas wilderness areas. Tom attended dental school in Kansas City, Missouri. And while he was living in Missouri, he became involved in their fight for wilderness areas. Under John Carroll, director of Missouri State Parks, he learned the ways of lobbying and gained valuable experience in the legislative field. When he returned to Arkansas to begin his dental practice, we were working on Arkansas wilderness. The experience he gained in Missouri gave a big boost to our efforts. All through the wilderness campaign, Tom was always there to keep things moving with his leadership, enthusiasm, and in determination, although he will be the first to name everyone who helped, his polite, low-key manner set the pace for everyone involved. In view of the present political climate, it was a tremendous victory when over 91,000 acres of US forest service land in Arkansas was designated wilderness. Thank you, Tom."

TM: Wow. Not sure how to respond to that one. Well, let's just move on to 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 consider? And also, I didn't mean to cut you off on stories. If you have any more stories, please share those.

ET: Well, I think I want to respond to that, not necessarily talking about wilderness per se in Arkansas, but kind of what happened to me following that. So this experience was really important to me. I learned so much through it. I made connections with some really extraordinary people through all of that experience. And in 1987, I was appointed by then-governor Bill Clinton to serve on the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. And I realized Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission sets aside natural areas. And while these natural areas are not wilderness, they play a role in protecting the natural diversity, biological diversity of the state in a different way. So the wilderness areas, of course, are in the two national forests, but we have several eco-regions in Arkansas that are not represented by that wilderness. So I have seen my role with natural heritage actually kind of filling in another gap that ... And basically what natural heritage does is it sets aside natural areas that are representative of the original landscape in Arkansas before the time of settlement. And those places are getting harder and harder to find. So obviously, in many of our projects, we are actually also doing restoration. I would emphasize that the work of the Natural Heritage Commission is science based and we continue learning. So some of our practices from the early years have been changed. And one of those changes that has been made under the leadership of our chief of stewardship at the time, Tom Foti, was to

transition from buying small tracts of land or setting aside small tracks of land to working with our partners. So private, state, federal... working with multiple partners to protect larger swaths of land, which gets closer to the wilderness concept because you have contiguous pieces of land which ensures in some cases that you're going to have an interior forest that's protected or a larger prairie. And this is important too. And so that's kind of been my direction to go after the wilderness bill. At this point, I have served three terms, part or all of three terms, which I think at this point spans 23 years, and that's a lot of time to have been involved with the protection and stewardship. It has been one of the most rewarding things that I have ever done in my life. And at this point, we are protecting about 77,000 acres. As a lifelong educator, again, I see these natural areas as having potential to educate more of our people all over the state, about our biological diversity.

TM: Okay. Thank you, Ellen. Was 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?

ET: I think I'm good.

TM: Okay. Well, I would just like to thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today to share with us your

thoughts and perspectives and stories. And also the Pryor Center wanted to let you know that the Pryor Center will be providing you with a copy of this audio recording. And so I'll just say thank you once again and goodbye for now.

ET: Thank you.