

Tom McClure interviewed Jay L. Vestel 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 Jay Vestel 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. Jay, 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.

Jay Vestel: Tom, I am Jay Vestel, and I'm happy to give my permission to make this recording available to anybody who wants to hear it.

TM: Sounds great. Today, Jay Vestel is joining us from Salt Lake City, Utah. Just a little bit about Jay. He was born in Dallas, Texas. He graduated from the University of Memphis with a BA degree in communications. Jay was the vice president of sales and marketing for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums in Silver Spring, Maryland from 2008 to 2014. He also was vice

president of marketing and development for the National Forest Foundation in Missoula, Montana between 2005 and 2007. He was vice president of field development for the National Park Foundation in Washington DC in '97 to 2005. He was senior vice president for the Bozell Bonneville Advertising Agency in New York City and Salt Lake City from '94 to '97. And he was senior vice president of marketing for Children's Miracle Network in Salt Lake City, Utah from 1983 to 1984. An Arkansas connection, Jay served as vice president at Arkansas Children's Hospital Foundation in Little Rock from 1979 to 1983, and as vice president for development and public relations at Le Bonheur Children's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee from '72 to '79. Jay has also served for 12 years on two local nonprofit boards. They are the United Methodist affiliated Crossroads Urban Center and Utah Clean Energy in Salt Lake City. Jay, once again, welcome and thank you for being here today.

JV: You bet, Tom. It's good to talk to you again after all these years.

TM: It has been a while. Well, first, we're going to ask you some questions and have you consider these questions, but also want to encourage you to include other things that you would like to say that are outside these four questions. The first question is,

will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

JV: Tom, I'm happy to do this. In fact, I want to take you guys back a little bit further in this interview than perhaps some of your other guests will. Just the other day, I got my Sierra Club renewal notice, and I noticed that it said on there that I'd been a member since 1975. And knowing the interview was coming up with you, I thought I should roll my clock back and even start at that point. In 1975, I was living in Memphis, and I was interested in backpacking. And I found that there was a local Sierra Club Memphis group that was part of the Tennessee chapter headquartered in Knoxville. And I hadn't been involved very long when I was appointed the group outings leader for the Memphis group. Now, that group was always invited to participate with the East Tennessee group that was headquartered back in Knoxville, but it took all day to drive from Memphis to East Tennessee where all of their outings were held. So almost by default, the outings that I was arranging and was leading almost always headed west across the Mississippi to places like Blanchard Springs, the Sylamore Ranger District of the Ozark National Forest, and the places in what eventually would become the Leatherwood Wilderness. It was from that

experience back in the late '70s that I learned about Arkansas and its natural areas and all the things, places there that were worth protecting that were absolutely equal to anything that was being promoted by the Tennessee chapter back east in the Smokies. So in 1979, I took a new job at Arkansas Children's Hospital. And I was familiar with how the Sierra Club had been working in Memphis and in Tennessee. So it was just natural for me when I first moved there to try and seek out other Sierra Club members in Arkansas. And I got to admit that when I first moved there, Tom, I didn't have any idea that the Ozark Society existed. I didn't know what it was. I was just aware of what was going on in Sierra Club. Well, at the time in 1979, Arkansas was actually a part of the Ozark chapter of the Sierra Club, which also included Missouri. And the majority of those members were in the St. Louis area. And I'll be darned, but it was just as far from Little Rock to St. Louis as it was from Memphis to Knoxville. And so we were kind of out there on our own. Well, soon I was contacted by the chapter director in St. Louis because he'd heard about what I'd been doing in Memphis. And I had written him and asked him if there were some other members in Arkansas I could get in touch with. And he actually gave me the names of a handful of people. They weren't holding any regular meetings at

the time. And I thought, "Well, the heck with that." So I actually started putting up flyers in local outdoor camping stores in the independent weekly newspaper in Little Rock on the local NPR station, basically just announcing that there were Sierra Club outings. I was going to be the outings leader, and if anybody was interested, to contact me. Most of those areas that I was going to, that I was backpacking to were new to me. They ended up being places that today we know as Hurricane Creek, Flatside, Richland Creek, and others. I would announce that I was meeting on a Friday afternoon in a Walmart parking lot, and I'd welcome anybody who showed up to carpool with me to a trailhead. We'd be out for two or three nights experiencing wilderness, talking about the need for protecting these places, and that's kind of how we got started. Tom, that's how I met you. That's how I met Ray Hanley. That's how I met Mickey Freeman, Melissa Thompson, Bill Coleman, Barry Milton, Jim Stanley, Frank Golf, Marian Hines, and many, many others whose names I can't remember. They faded out of my brain after these 40 years. Well, those outings led to interest, which led to involvement. And soon, we were holding real live Sierra Club meetings in Little Rock, and people were showing up. And somebody, I don't know who it was, twisted my arm, convinced

me to become the official leader of the Little Rock Group of the Ozark chapter of the Sierra Club. This required me and my new wife, Eileen, to travel to meetings in St. Louis several times a year, always on my own dime, which was kind of difficult. And the problem was that when I would get there, the Ozark chapter agenda was 90% focused on Missouri related issues and specifically on the chapter struggle to gain traction on any wilderness bill for the state of Missouri. And those folks were not even considering wilderness potential lands in Arkansas. Funny, but it was at one of those Ozark chapter meetings in St. Louis that I learned they had a guest speaker. The speaker was then Sierra Club President David Brower. Meeting him, I didn't know anything about his background or the full story of his legendary leadership in the world of conservation. I just thought he happened to be the club president. Well, after his speech to the chapter, he seemed approachable. So I went up and introduced myself. I told him about the energy that we were creating in Arkansas and asked him if he thought it'd be okay to establish a separate chapter, the Arkansas chapter of Sierra Club, separate from the Ozark chapter. Well, he didn't say no. He put me in touch with the Sierra Club administrative staff in San Francisco. And after a short time and some paperwork, the Arkansas

chapter was formed, and I served as its first chairman. Heck, I just wanted to go backpacking, and now I had to help guide all this enthusiasm for wilderness in Arkansas into what would really be effective advocacy. We had to do more than just wear Dump Watt T-shirts, which were famous at the time. We had to actually dress up, wear coats and ties and use every opportunity we could get to get in front of congressmen like Dale Hammerschmidt, Ed Bethune, Senators Pryor and Bumpers, how it all worked and the calendar of meetings and hearings, frankly, are lost to my memory. Compounding it all, after a short four years in Little Rock, I was offered this career building job in Salt Lake City, which I accepted, moving myself and my young family to Utah in November of 1983. So my efforts after then were simply to phone in encouragement to the others I named earlier, who were doing the lobbying, testifying, and shepherding of the Arkansas Wilderness Act of 1984 across the congressional finish line. Except for one other small action. As I recall, as the Wilderness Bill was being drafted, the head of the Ozark National Forest was recommending that the present Richland Creek wilderness be limited to half its present size. This was due to a small, I think it was five acre inholding, right in the middle of the forest. You, Tom, found the owner of this land, contacted him,

and he was apparently a willing seller. I remember you calling me and asking me to go in half with you to purchase that inholding. Well, it was an offer I couldn't refuse even if I was never going to see the place. Well, the rest is history. You and I donated the land to the Forest Service, stated in a hearing that we wanted all of this acreage in Richland Creek to be preserved as wilderness, and that the full Richland Creek area we lobbied for is today preserved in perpetuity. That's not a bad investment, even for a guy who has spent the last 40 years backpacking the deserts of Utah. I still can close my eyes and think of the falls on Richland Creek, and I'm at peace in the world, and I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to be a part of that.

TM: Well, thank you, Jay. I will just go on to the second question here, but that was some really good insights and some good history there. Thanks for going through that. The second question is, will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas and what value these areas have for you and for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

JV: Well, Tom, I'm an old guy now. I'm 75 years old. I've been lucky to have three kids and five grandkids, and I've raised all of them to spend more than a little time out in the wilderness. Almost all of that's been here in the Rocky Mountain West, but it's something that's always been important to me, and I think it's been a good thing for our family and raising them with the same kind of values that you and I share. I hung up my backpack a few years ago, but I still head out with a pop-up camper that we've been blessed to use and enjoy the Utah outdoors, mostly on forest service and DLM land that is unprotected as wilderness. These wilderness quality areas are consistently under threat from a state legislature that doesn't want our federal government telling Utah it can't do what it wants to the land that belongs to all Americans. I don't understand their logic, but that's what it is. Given our current political climate, the chances of moving a comprehensive Utah wilderness bill forward are really slim. I tell you this simply because I've seen and been on the losing end of a wilderness advocacy struggle since moving from Arkansas 40 years ago. You guys in Arkansas are so fortunate to have done what you did when you did. Could the same wilderness bill be enacted today? It's hard to say. Be grateful for what you did back in 1984, because these areas are

protected in perpetuity for future generations so everyone can benefit. I didn't know it at the time, Tom, but what we were doing was what I've come to learn is a concept called cathedral thinking. When the architects of the Great Cathedrals of Europe began their work, they understood that it would take many generations and centuries to complete their designs far beyond one lifetime. We were using cathedral thinking in preserving Arkansas wilderness. They will stand as living cathedrals for long after we're gone.

TM: Thank you, Jay. And moving to question number three, do you have any special stories? You've already included a couple, but do you have any other 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?

JV: Tom, I have two that I want to share. The first, before the Arkansas chapter was made separate from the Ozark chapter, anything that we proposed to do had to go to the Ozark chapter in St. Louis for approval and blessing. And when I first presented the outline of a proposed Arkansas Wilderness Bill that contained a comprehensive nine distinct wilderness areas, I was told that this proposal was a preposterous undertaking. We were advised

that our Arkansas group should focus on one or two wilderness areas in the hope of maybe seeing even one of them pass as legislation. When the Arkansas Wilderness Act of 1984 actually passed, there was some pretty sheepish communications from the Missouri contingent to me and others congratulating us and asking us how we actually accomplished what we did. I had a good laugh about that. I don't know what wilderness areas ever got passed in Missouri, but we pretty much set the gold standard with the largest, I believe, acreage of wilderness anywhere between the Appalachians and the Rockies at the time. The second story I want to tell you, I just got to add this in, is a memorable backpacking trip that we took to Hurricane Branch, which is in the Hurricane Creek Wilderness area. Our group went one spring weekend a few miles down a drainage and crossed a creek where we set up camp. That night, there was a tremendous downpour. The next morning, when we all finally got up and got out of our tents, we couldn't get back across the raging creek and up to our cars. Without extensive maps beyond where this area was we were hiking, we ended up hiking up to a road because we couldn't cross back across the creek. We didn't know how long that road meandered before it got to a bridge that would take us back to our cars, which we literally could

almost see from where we camped. Well, we met a farmer who was hauling pigs in a truck. We stopped him, we talked to him, we explained our dilemma, and he agreed that after he dropped off the pigs from the back of his truck, he would return and take a dozen soggy backpackers about 20 miles to a bridge and back on the other side of the creek to our cars. It was a pretty interesting story. And somewhere in my files, I've still got a picture of us standing in the back of the pig truck. I actually tried to present this story as a feature about a backpacking planning gone wrong story that would appear in Sierra Magazine, but they rejected it as too preposterous.

TM: It is a good one.

JV: Well, it's Arkansas.

TM: Yeah. Do you have any other stories, or would you like to add anything that you think needs to be emphasized that the public should know or consider regarding wilderness protection here in Arkansas?

JV: Well, I will just add this one thing. You mentioned early in the recording that I had a part of my career that I spent with the National Park Foundation and the National Forest Foundation. I

was doing fundraising for these national conservation organizations. The specific focus that I had in both of those situations was in developing local leadership groups in support of national parks, for example. So I established a local group of citizens in support of Glacier National Park in Montana, in Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, and the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and many others, mostly in the Western US and Alaska. And I know from firsthand experience what it takes to have consistent local leadership by people who love and care about parks and wilderness to help preserve them for future generations. And I guess my closing comment would be, I hope that for each of the wilderness areas that there are in Arkansas, there are local people who see the value in them, both the value for the local economy that it generates and the value simply for them being there for the spiritual inspiration that people get from using these areas. I hope that those kinds of groups that are formed or in formation that can help keep these places preserved in perpetuity because even though a law has been passed to set them aside, it will take the work of future generations to keep them in a way that we all want them to stay in perpetuity forever.

TM: Well, thanks, Jay. I just wanted to ask one more time, is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked you about or would like to add anything to your earlier comments?

JV: Well, it's been hard in one sense. I mean, we've certainly enjoyed living here and being a desert rat and climbing the [unclear] mountains and all that kind of stuff. But those places were really special to me in the years, both in Memphis and in Little Rock. They were my go to places to get my centering done, to enjoy my time outdoors with friends and backpacking. They're memories I will never forget. And who knows, maybe someday some little vial of ashes of mine might end up in Richmond Creek, wouldn't be a bad way for me to end up.

TM: Well, it's a beautiful spot. Well, I just wanted to, again, thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today to share with us your stories and perspective and memories of wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. Also, let you know that the Pryor Center will be providing you a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. And again, thanks. And I'll just say goodbye for now.

JV: All right, Tom. Thank you much.

TM: Thank you.

JV: Good to talk to you.

TM: Same here.

JV: Bye-bye.