

Tom McClure interviewed Kirk Wasson on April 10, 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 Kirk Wasson for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas on April 10th, 2024. Kirk, 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.

Kirk Wasson: This is Kirk Wasson and I give my permission to use my audio for whatever purposes.

TM: Well, thank you, Kirk. Kirk is joining us today by phone from Sherwood, Arkansas. Kirk was born in Little Rock and raised in North Little Rock. He lived there for 60 years before moving to North Pulaski County where he lives today. Kirk has an electronic school certificate and is a retired telecommunications engineer. He has worked for Motorola Entergy and the Science Application International Corporation. Kirk was a volunteer with the Boy

Scouts for 17 years. He is a life member of the Ozark Society and past president of the Arkansas Wilderness Coalition. Once again, Kirk, welcome and thank you for being with us today.

KW: Well, thanks, Tom. I'm honored to be able to do this. I'll start out with the first questions of my involvement in Wilderness. I got involved in 1982 just as the proposals for the wilderness started coming out. So I wasn't in the RARE II, but I got in in time enough to be able to testify in the 1983 hearings. And I was scout master of a boy scout troop at the time and understood how important these areas were. And I was able, after meeting Don Hamilton, was able to go to several meetings at his office where they had maps laid out on tables and was picking out the amount of acreage these wilderness areas would have. So that was kind of exciting. But mainly, I got involved as soon as the wilderness was designated and got involved with the wilderness management plans and what we were going to do with the wilderness after it was established. I served on several of the subcommittees, in particular, Flatside Wilderness and Leatherwood Wilderness, and was on Dry Creek Wilderness and a couple of other ones, developing the plan, the management plans. And I continue working with the Forest Service and the

National Park Service to continue managing or developing plans to manage these areas.

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

KW: Yeah. I grew up with conservation. My dad, even though I didn't know it at the time, he was a big conservationist. And he always hunted and fished, but he never took any more than he could eat in a day or time. We never had a freezer where you stockpiled meat or killed anything that you couldn't use. And then we were never allowed to throw anything, any trash down or pollute in any way. He was always very conscious of the land and how it had been abused and overused at times. And of course, we migrated to the national forest because all the public lands were being fenced off and he was charged to hunt. So we migrated to the national forest where we did our hunting and we were seeing the clear cuts and the pine plantations coming up and wanted to do something about it, but really didn't know what to do. And then when the wilderness concept of wilderness in Arkansas come around, I really got on board. In fact, my dad

was on some of the subcommittees helping with management of these areas. And I just wanted some lands set aside just to leave alone and let sit there for 50 or 100 years before we decided what to do with it. And people got in a big hurry about wanting to manage and build trails and that sort of thing and these wildernesses. And that's one of the biggest things I'm proud of. And along with Tom McClure, we've been able to keep trails out of our wilderness areas for the most part.

TM: Okay. Kirk, thank you. Question three, 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?

KW: Yeah. My main story is, like I say, my dad and I hunted the national forest. And one of our favorite areas was out at Flatside Area, which is now Flatside Wilderness. And we would hike up over a mountain and into the heart of that area to turkey hunt. And one morning, we always hiked in there before daylight, get set up where we was going to turkey hunt. And we'd gotten into our favorite place. And as the started turning daylight, I looked down through the woods and I started seeing these orange blobs on the side of the trees. I kept looking at them thinking it was

something else. And when it finally got daylight enough, I could see these orange markings on all these trees. And I just quit hunting and got up and walked down through there and noticed all the trees had a big spot on them to be harvested. And then I even picked up the cans, the guys that did the painting, and I put that trash in my pack, and I walked on down a little further, and they had cleared out a big landing, a two or three acre landing to load logs up on, and it cleared the old logging road leading out of the wilderness. And I remember leaving there that day so mad that they would destroy this area. And I found out later that it was 100,000 board feet timber sale that they had already approved for that area. So I got home that day and I picked up the newspaper and there was a picture of Tom McClure and Ed Bethune standing on top of Flatside Pinnacle talking about trying to protect that area's wilderness. And boy, that was the news I wanted to hear and just lit a fire under me as far as wanting to do something about protecting wilderness. And sure enough, with the work of Tom and Ed, we got that area in there and that timber sale was canceled, and I still went back in that area and picked up the paint cans and was so glad we were able to stop that. And the other reason I really got into it, Bill Stewart, a good friend of mine, and was a good friend of Don

Hamilton's, introduced me to Don. And Don come to our scout troop and showed his slideshow of the different wilderness areas. And Don was real instrumental along with Tom McClure and getting me involved and really telling me what to do, how to write the letters, how to make calls and how to get more people involved. And in the same time I started, I'd been a member of the Ozark Society since 1975, but I really didn't go to meetings, but I got more involved with the Ozark Society meeting and even become a conservation chairman of the Ozark Society for about five years. And that's really about all I had to say on that one.

TM: Okay. Thank you, Kirk. And 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 or that you consider the public should know or consider about this whole issue?

KW: Well, I know we continue to work on trying to get more wilderness areas and it takes a lot of the public to write letters and make phone calls, sometimes just to make their representatives aware that there is issues out there and there is lands out there that could be protected. We've proved over and

over again that a lot of the timber management practices are really not working. They keep saying they're restoring the forest, but they're really not. And the timber sales are below making any money. They pay more money for maintaining roads and doing the harvesting than they do making off of the timber. So it's a money losing proposition. So it makes sense to me just to protect those areas for recreation and to let future generations do something with them. Like Tom and I was talking the other day, it doesn't take you very long to go into a place like Caney Creek Wilderness, which has been designated since 1975 to look at how the trees have grown and the understory has changed in that area to know what that area looked like 400 years ago. And in another 100 years, it's just going to be amazing what those areas will look like and be a true representation of what the natural country used to look like.

TM: Okay. Thanks, Kirk. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about?

KW: No. I think I've pretty well covered what I wanted to say. I just appreciate all the work that you have done as well as a lot of other folks. And I'll close by saying that all this work that's done is from no selfish reason or monetary reason. It's just people

that recognize that we need these kind of places for future generations. And it's something a lot of people don't think about is what the next generation needs or what we should leave for them.

TM: Well, thank you, Kirk. 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 perspective and your memories and stories about wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. Did you have anything else you wanted to add before we close out?

KW: No, I just appreciate it.

TM: Okay. The Pryor Center will be providing you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. So thank you again and I'll say goodbye for now.

KW: Okay. Thanks.

TM: Thank you.

KW: Bye.