

**The David and Barbara Pryor Center  
for  
Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

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**Arkansas Memories**

Kenneth L. Smith  
Interviewed by Janet Parsch  
November 8, 2022  
Fayetteville, Arkansas

## Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved in the Pryor Center archives. The transcripts, audio and video files, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at <https://pryorcenter.uark.edu/>. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio and video recordings in addition to the transcripts to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

## Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first five minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first five minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 18th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms.
- Brackets enclose
  - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing; and
  - annotations for clarification and identification.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

## **Citation Information**

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**Janet Parsch interviewed Kenneth L. Smith on November 8, 2022, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.**

[00:00:00]

Janet Parsch: Ken Smith and I are here today in the Pryor Center of the University of Arkansas. Today is November 8, 2022. Happens to be election day. Um—my name is Janet Parsch, and I will be—uh—helping Kenneth Smith—um—reflect and offer commentary on one of the key subjects of the Buffalo River—uh—the battle for the Buffalo River. Ken—uh—was instrumental in—uh—saving the Buffalo River, if you will. Uh—his acquaintances, though, with Neil Compton and Neil Compton's family are the topics for today to talk about. Uh—Ken met Neil Compton and his mother-in-law, Edna Putman, and Neil's wife, Laurene—um—way back when. He's going to tell some stories about that today. Uh—and at some point we would also like him to talk about Evangeline Archer, and we will see how that all goes. So my interviewee is Ken Smith—uh—who I have known, my husband and I have known now for probably twenty years or so. So, Ken—uh—if you want to introduce yourself, and we're gonna talk about Neil Compton and let you just offer some reminiscences of Neil and family and whatever you would like to say today.

[00:01:43] Kenneth L. Smith: That is a lot to say. There—I have a lot to say over what happened over at least ten years in what was—was called—the so-called Battle for the Buffalo River, the controversy about how to—ah—develop it, manage it, and so on. And early in that period, I was determined that I would leave Arkansas, go back to grad—go to graduate school, really, in California. And there was a person with Arkansas Game and Fishing Commission who—uh—suggested that—uh—my role and knowle—in New Orleans about the Buffalo River problem, that—uh—it could be best taken over by a doctor up in Bentonville, Arkansas, Dr. Neil Compton. And I had never met the man, but Harold Alexander, who was with Arkansas Game and Fish, knew him or knew about him and thought that he was intensely interested in the Buffalo River and what ha—might happen to it.

[00:03:04] At that porsh—point back in the early 1960s, it was the subject of a debate about, well, have—we want to have a dam on the Buffalo. A lot of the developers or the Corps of Engineers, too, at least, had suggested that the dam would fulfill part of their plan for fo—flood control in the White River Basin. What amounted to was a more ea—immediate problem was that a little valley, canyon, called Lost Valley on the Newton County toward the—up toward the Buffalo River headwaters—at the

Buffalo headwaters, really, nearly—that—uh—it was ne—I had proposed that it be a state park or something equivalent and had been in touch with the brand-new organization called The Nature Conservancy and—about protecting Lost Valley, done a little mapping and exploring and that sort of thing. [00:04:20] Well, what happened all of a sudden, just on the eve of my departure for the West Coast to school and handing the project to ne—the Lost Valley project to Neil Compton, Dr. Compton, he—uh—had to accompany me to see a very damaging timber cut right in the heart of Lost Valley on virgin—virgin beech forest there—just right there on a slope overlooking the—the heart of the scenic area. And—bulldozed a road in there. And—uh—so what we wound up seeing was a bulldozed road very do—very fresh.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:05:13] KS: And that—it was startling and dismaying. I remember family from here in Fayetteville had been up there just to see the fee—scenic area, and then had—in Lost Valley, and they were calling out and crying that it's something terrible had happened. Well, it had. It wasn't—and it was simply that—the old story of somebody valuing the dollar value of the timber cut and being able to make a deal with a local land owner to sell the timber, and it was too late for us to protect anything there.

But down in the heart of the canyon, at least it was—at least one narrow strip that was to—in the heart of Lost Valley that was relatively untouched. [00:06:22] Anyhow, Dr. Compton one—and one friend of his from Fayetteville came over and met me, and I think that was our first meeting there in the Lost Valley. We looked, and what happened was that I handed the Lost Valley project that I had begun, finding out what Lost Valley was like and mapping and the—there were a few hundred acres that I could—thought was worth saving in that lower watershed overlooking the area that had been—where the timber cutters had worked. Anyhow, Lost Valley became Dr. Compton's, essentially, as I learned very soon that Neil Compton—his dream was much more than Lost Valley. He loved that place, Lost Valley, too, that little canyon, but much more because years before, when he was young, just a student, he and a student friend had floated a lot of the middle lower Buffalo. And the friend's brother, uncle, or whatever it was—anyhow, they, Neil and his young student friend, both here at the university at the time in the 1930s, they wound up having a—being boat handlers for this man who was bent on fishing, and it was down on the middle and lower Buffalo. And as Neil said, after they got off that trip, hot summer sun, sunburnt, tired, cross—he had no

idea of saving the Buffalo, but later—the Buffalo River, but later on he was getting back to the Buffalo River and dreaming about it to—during his work-time service in World War II when he was stationed at a medical clinic down in the South Pacific, that began to become his dream of—future for himself there in Bentonville. He was already married. Had a small child. And they—well, they had—he was down there in the South Pacific throughout the war, and then when he came back, the first thing he was thinking about was not only his family, but the idea of saving much more of the Buffalo River because he had seen it first hand and was mightily impressed by it. [00:09:27] It—I thought he was crazy. I didn't think anything was equal to that little side canyon up on the Buffalo that—flowing in the—Clark Creek flowing into the Buffalo. That was Lost Valley. That was my goal. Well, he had much bigger vision. And it came about that he traveled with me, and within a year or two, I had the opportunity to go with a new conservation group which is—he was one of the main founders, probably the most important one, in establishing the Ozark Society. And he had a—he sent me an entire list of goals for the Ozark Society. Some of them were, perhaps, in—dreams based on his own outlook and experience, but it included that much larger natural park along the Buffalo



River. And so that—I was in—by that time out on the West Coast and bounced over into the National Park Service just by coincidence without any idea of a connection to Arkansas. I just liked places like, well, Mount Rainier was where my first assignment was in the National Park Service. And it was marvelous. But then I came back and I—on vacation—I guess it was about the time I was at Mount Rainier in Washington, I came down, and by that time was—this Buffalo River promotion happening in Arkansas. And it wound up that I was floating part of the Buffalo. Well, I think the very first one was in Newton County, a one-day float with a couple who were allies of Dr. Compton. They came from up in the Kansas City area.

[00:11:44] There were—it was beginning to coalesce that—gather a lot of people who were wanting to protect that river. They started the—some of them, the people from the Kansas City area, had begun to come down and float the Buffalo and find it—found it was among the very finest float streams in the whole middle stretch of the United States. They knew already about the Current and Jacks Fork Rivers in Missouri, and later on I would be able to float those, too. They were fine streams. But—yeah. The Buffalo was—had the more spectacular scenery, anyhow, I knew that. Anyhow, Dr. Compton and I remained in

stuch—touch, and I then—it coalesced or organized in the form of something called The Ozark Society. It—that—it was a long name at first: The Ozark Society to Save the Buffalo River. It—well, it has become more than that. But they did—they were the prime group in protecting the Buffalo River right here in Arkansas, and here I was bouncing around, and for about ten years I was in the National Park Service without any fixed habitat, I guess you would say. But later on I gave up that employment and wound up becoming a, what should I say, a—an environmental writer of sorts in—here and [*laughs*] working out of Fayetteville doing books. Through . . .

JP: Were you . . .

KS: . . . that thing. It was Dr. Compton, though, who was at the spear point, I guess, or focus.

[00:13:54] JP: Were you in touch with Dr. Compton during that time period? Before you started writing *Buffalo River Country*? Were you in touch with Dr. Compton all the time, or was it coincidental that you got in touch with him again?

KS: With Dr. Compton I was—in those years I was in the National Park Service by choice and coincidence, I guess you could say, in many places through the 1960s. Gosh, I started out at Mount Rainier in Washington state. And then later on the next bounce

was to Yosemite further south. I was supposedly a trainee learning the, well, the upkeep of the facilities in the park service in those western parks, and over ten or twelve years that I was actively in the field it was, well, ten or twelve different places here and there. It wound up that I was in—even in Washington, DC. It was also as a so-called engineer or facility manager. National parks have, well, many facilities besides the work of nature. There is the roads, the trails, the buildings, the utility systems to serve all of that. [00:15:34] So during that time, I was in touch from time to time with Dr. Compton. He was not only practicing medicine and working around—in those years, at least in the earlier years, he was the—I guess you could say that he was the number one baby doctor in Benton County because he delivered many children there. And he had to work around that schedule. And then also he was in the naval reserve that stemmed from his service in World War II in the navy, and I mentioned that clinic he ran down in the South Pacific during the war. And he, well, he was there, and yet he stayed in touch with me, and when I landed in San Francisco, California, for a time—I think that was during my first year of the Park Service—he was able to get out there. And he was interested in trying to found a—form a conservation group, something equivalent to the

Sierra Club, which was getting a name in California for protecting and advocating parks in the western US. And they had done a lot of work along that line, creating national parks, protecting Yosemite Valley. A Sierra—well, we have a whole list of 'em along in the West, and I remember Dr. Compton came when I was there in San Francisco, and I told him where the headquarters of the Sierra Club was. I hadn't been there, but it was right in the phone book and not far from where I was working in San Francisco. I did not follow him to the Sierra Club headquarters. That would've been sort of an overlap or conflict of interest there. I was working for an organization protecting parks, and here was another organization, the Sierra Club, protesting a lot of what the Park Service might be doing in—toward overdevelopment, roads and that sort of thing especially.

[00:18:19] JP: So in San Francisco, you met with Dr. Compton. You happened to see each other? And did you talk about the Buffalo River?

KS: I did not have anything, at least in those years, I don't remember ver—doing, advocating anything as long as I was in the Park Service. But if Dr. Compton should appear, then I could say, "Well, the Sierra Club headquarters is presently—is down here in downtown San Francisco." And I don't even recall

s—well, I know that I met him or was in touch with him, but he was doing the advocacy, and even at that early stage I didn't know whether I wo—even agreed with what he was saying. But it turned out that he was right, and I was only not as—didn't have as broad a vision for the Buffalo River as he did.

[00:19:31] And but as I—I think it was a year and a half after I had become a Park Service person that I had accumulated enough annual leave, vacation time, that I could lump it together and get back to Arkansas and actually float the Buffalo River from—well, from the buff—present—Buffalo Point, as it's called now, but it was Buffalo River State Park. And we did about three days of floating on the Buffalo, and they—I had only seen old-time maps of that area that were not very informative. And when I saw that part of the Buffalo River from—well, high Buffalo—what is now Buffalo Point, Buffalo River State Park, on down for another twenty-odd years—miles, rather, down past Rush Creek, that I knew that, well, Neil was right, I was poorly informed. And it was all spectacular, beautiful, and moreover a tremendous recreation resource for people who could even do the mac—more active recreation floating the river.

[00:21:07] JP: Was that float trip with Dr. Compton? Who did you go on the float trip with? Who was on that canoe trip, the first

one that you went on?

KS: I'm having trouble hearing, here.

JP: Who went on that canoe trip with you?

KS: I think the very first float of the Buffalo that I had was one day with Harold and Margaret Hedges, who were guiding forces or leading lights or whatever you call it in this organization from Kansas City. The Ozark Wilderness Waterways Club is what they called it, OWWC. And they invited me to go and see the Buffalo—well, I think it was from Pruitt in—up on the upper part of the bu—middle—upper middle, I'll call it, on down. A one-day float. And so there were other people who were very active in floating the river, canoeing. Canoeing was a new sport then, and after World War II, the Grumman Aircraft, who had been doing aluminum shells for aircraft in the war wound up with—well, manufacturing the Grumman canoe, which was more rugged and very well-liked with people who would—were beg—just getting into worl—into canoeing as active sport and—after World War II. So they're the—I guess my first float was one day with Harold and Margaret Hedges. Or maybe it was a—so far back in time that—I know that. [00:23:17] Harold was steering one canoe, and I was in the other one in the bow, of course.

The passenger is in the bow. And Margaret, I guess, was in the

stern of this second canoe. And then Harold and this radio reporter from—announcer from Harold—Harrison, Arkansas, whom I had never met before, but he was wanting to get interested and see what was happening, and somehow he got in touch so that there were two canoes, two people in each canoe down the Buffalo on that o—that weekend. It became much more organized and widespread. The Ozark Wilderness Waterways Club, OWWC, was from out of the Kansas City area. [00:24:17] They had been inspired in part by a man who had, I guess, come out of the East, New England, and he wound up being a biology teacher in one of the state colleges in Missouri. And he—these things kept coalescing and combining, and here is this man from the East, New England, I think, who inspired the formation of the Ozark Wilderness Waterways Club in the Midwest. And it went on from there to something much more widespread, more powerful, more timely, for those years after the war. It was first of all aluminum canoes, and it—then later on it became, well, whatever it was. Fiberglass was the first plastic version, I guess. A little bit fragile and tending to get holes punched into it. [00:25:28] But all of that was happening as Dr. Compton and this organization that he inspired called The Ozark Society were promoting protection of the Buffalo River.

The local congressman felt that he was committed at that time to the Corps of Engineers proposed dam, or maybe two dams, on the Buffalo River. And so he never—and he never backed off that. He felt that, especially with the people close to the river in Searcy County, who were interested in seeing, I guess, development of tourism-related whatever, that they—they wa— had something that they were advocating, and he had promised to help them, and so he never backed off of that. [00:26:30]

What resulted was that he was getting along in years and not as vigorous as he might have been at a younger age, and he simply dropped out of the battle eventually because John Paul Hammerschmitt came along and saw that—he—that a program to protect the river was much more in tune with what the local economy could sustain and advocate, I guess you could say. And so I'm getting a little off track there in talking about that. [00:27:14] Dr. Compton did meet one time with the leader of one of those groups promoting the what I'll call tourism on the Buffalo, I guess, or economic development of a different sort. And they just couldn't have a meeting of the minds. The other man has his idea of a program, and they—and Dr. Compton was trying to say, "This is probably a much better in tune with the future than what you might be—have imagined in the past." It—



Dr. Compton had a unique combination or group of collaborators, I guess, a core group, I would say. Every one of these park proposals has had a leading proponent, it seems. Back in the nineteenth century, it began with John Muir, *M-U-I-R*. John Muir in California. And he was—promoted, of course, protection of those big, spectacular places in the West, Yosemite National Park and—especially. And while those people were a couple of generations at least ahead of what was ha—about to happen in Arkansas, they were models, I would say, for what we later on—they, Dr. Compton and his people who were working with him. They were going to do what Muir had begun earlier, I would say, Muir and others had begun. It goes even further back in the promotions of creating the parks in the East. [00:29:38] And so that—every one of these park ideas has been no sudden flash of creation. You know, we've proposed it, and then maybe we've passed the—we have legislation, and the job is done. It's more than that. Very slow and tedious advocacy. I was still in the park service there for several years and bouncing around, and I felt that as an engineering graduate from the school here in Fayetteville that I was not exactly a good combination to work with some of these park-ranger types. They were good people. All—most of 'em were. There were some of 'em that were—as

throughout government, there are a few bad apples. [*Laughs*]  
Maybe I was. At least I was uninterested apple that was not interested in being transferred to some of those places where they had an opening or, "Smith, can you be—go to such and such a place?" Well, by that time I was—had decided to simply cut loose and, well, the long story short is, here, I moved to Fayetteville and became sort of a freelance artist, writer, whatever. [00:31:18] They—getting back to Dr. Compton, the important thing about that I have realized in this effort to summarize his efforts on behalf of the Buffalo is that he had, of course, these people working with him out of Kansas City, Little Rock, and so forth. But nobody was as central to the effort as Neil Ernest Compton MD, Bentonville, Arkansas, because he was driven, he was intelligent, he had gotten a degree in geology and iolo—and botany, I believe. He was one of these people who the detractors would say that he was a nature lover. Well, he was a lot more than that. He loved people, too. And he had backup in the—in his wife, Laurene. She was a constant help. Of course, he was in the—I think the first child was born before his overseas service in the military, World War II. And so the van—the young child, I guess, and—that would've been Ellen, the daughter, the oldest of the three. They were living in a rented

house on North Main Street in Bentonville, and they were part of the core group. Well, Dr. Compton was practicing medicine and then later [*unclear word*] there was establishing of that practice in Bentonville. They were sitting there one—at one point even before that during the war looking across the street at a vacant space, a ravine, and a narrow, wooded valley and some level around—land around it, and so Laurene and her mother really conceived the idea of Compton Gardens. That spot. [00:33:43] They—and then when Neil came back, Dr. Compton came back from the war, they had—they were living elsewhere in Bentonville, but as soon as possible, they were building a house on that plot of several acres. And Compton Gardens is what it was called later on, but it was simply the Compton home. Well, who built the home? Who planned the home? Well, most of it was done by Laurene and her mother. And they had an unusual chance to do something creative. And Neil got—the son-in-law was certainly all for it, I'd call it. He was, at that time after the war, he was beginning to transplant native trees, American beech and that sort of thing, whatever he could locate out in the woods sometimes and—onto that tract so that presently they—the Compton home, converted to other uses as a public place, was there on 312 North Main, as I recall. That was the address

there in Bentonville. The Compton children were grown and left, but then of course the Waltons, who lived practically next door to the east, know—had knew the Waltons all for years, ever since Sam and his family moved to Bentonville. They acquired the Compton tract of several acres, and it has become part of that group of public spaces, I will call it, including quite a few of those now-mature, large trees or shrubs that Neil Compton had planted over there in those early years after World War II.

[00:36:13] I want—I would say there that it was not just Dr. Compton who was conceiving what happened in Bentonville, but he also had his dau—his wife, then her mother. And Edna Putman, who had grown up in the Upper White River Valley here, and then married—lived in Fayetteville for a while and then was—they moved up to Bentonville. And Eddie, as we all called her, she was a quiet, older person that showed up at the dinner table at times during my visits there at the Compton home. And she—I did not realize at first her interest and good sense, but she had both. [*JP coughs*] She would, when we were—during the battle for the Buffalo River, I would sit and watch one of Dr. Compton's sort of homemade but very authentic, convincing films about the Buffalo, for example, and the mother-in-law was there, and she was watching with interest because, while she

was not an outdoors person, she believed in the volume—the value, I will call it, of the—of what he was doing for the benefit of the Ozarks, the ar—North Arkansas. [00:38:13] Laurene, her daughter, Neil's wife, of course was not only raising the family but also when—also because Eddie, Edna Putman, her mother, was living there at one end of the Compton home. She needed attention, too. Not that much, but Eddie was pretty much common sense and self sufficient. And at one time, by the way, one—late in Edna's, Eddie's life, she sat down with me there and told me that—I guess her husband had died of an infection of some sort way back, but she wound up inheriting the clothing store, especially the women's store in Bentonville, Putman's. And so people came down from St. Louis or somewhere. One of the suppliers wanted to buy the store. She said, "No, I think I would wanna try to run a business myself." And [*laughs*] she did. And it was a—and as I learned, she had a—her own approach, which was, I would say, based on one word: Caring. Caring for her customers, for the people who came in the door. She would learn, in that store, little women's clothing store, especially, that—what their interests were, their favorite colors, styles, and everything. And then when they went to market for the next season, maybe late summer, early

fall, they might go to denu—to Dallas or fort—or I should say Dallas or St. Louis, wherever the market shows were, and she not only had what was the general clientele might like, but even narrowed it down to one specific customer who liked a certain color of beige or green or whatever it was in a certain style, and she was looking for thing for that customer. She was not requiring the customer to buy it, but she would certainly remind the customer on the local telephone or—that they might find something that she might be interested in, the women's clothing. [00:41:11] It was that approach that I learned in one session just sitting there hearing Eddie late in her life that—Edna Putman—that I realized that she was more than just an attentive person at Neil's movies, home movies, but also a very caring, savvy, interested person. Yes, she was right there in downtown Bentonville, and in the early years of Walmart, I guess she and Sam would go down to the corner drugstore or wherever they served coffee and maybe sit at the same table. I don't know what they ever—they were in two different businesses, but there were two different people there in Bentonville who were innovative, energetic, caring about their clientele, and I had a personal interview with Eddie, and I realized that she was no ordinary person, she was distinctive, beautiful in a way. Just a

rather ordinary-looking, elderly woman when I knew her, but she knew a lot more than what might show on the surface.

[00:42:48] There was one other person, another woman, later on in the battle for the Buffalo more directly who was not in the family. We had Eddie, her daughter, Laurene. They were crucial. But then, she didn't—and Neil did not have enough time or enough knowledge of the people a little further south in the Springdale-Fayetteville area, especially about the Buffalo River. But there was one woman who happened to be—with whom I was acquainted, and she—I became acquainted with her in a sort of what I would call arrangement where she was able to buy a Volkswagen at European prices and—or [*laughs*] ape the European price. And then she and a friend here in Fayetteville drove the Volkswagen at an advantage to them, I assume, and cheaper than renting a car, and then they just drove it out to a boat out of the harbor, wherever it was in France, put it on a boat, and here it came to me. I picked it up in New Orleans the year before I—summer before I went to the West Coast. She became a friend also. She—and I guess the deal was made, certainly, when I decided I could pay \$1,200 or whatever it cost for a new Volkswagen in Munich, Germany, and—shipping and everything, and she and her friend picked up the car in Munich

and drove it down into Italy and up into France to a harbor where they put it on a—arranged to have it shipped to New Orleans. That was another one of these links, I would call it. Partly a profitable business deal for both the two women who picked it up in Munich and the person who picked it up later in New Orleans. I had that car for several years and made good use of it here in the—well, on that trip, that move to California, for one, and then several years after. [00:45:41] Anyhow, those things for Neil Compton—and it was that person in Fayetteville. Evangeline Pratt Waterman Archer was the long name after her foth—first husband, Waterman, Julian Waterman died, she married an old family friend, Laird Archer. And I only knew Laird Archer and Evangeline later on and other members in her family. But those arrangements, based partially on trust and perhaps maybe with an idea that it would be a better business deal for everyone concerned in Evangeline's case, and it worked out. And so that—but Evangeline became, I guess, the principal Fayetteville contact here for the Ozark Society. Evangeline was different. She was certainly not a—had a—didn't have the business acumen or anything like that unless it was arranged for her, but it worked for her that she could, time and again, when Dr. Compton was not available to see the departure of a group,



say, going to Washington voluntarily at their own expense but as a delegation to testify in favor of Buffalo National River—and I see one, at least one picture of a few of these people, both young people to go—people going to testify to Congress and then a few local people. Dr. Compton was probably not there because he was somewhere else having to meet his medical obstetrics schedule. He was—and so that he could not show up. Although every once in a while, I—well, one of 'em—it was down at the end of the line. I wondered whether it was Neil or somebody else that was identified as Willie Priff. Now who was Willie Priff? I haven't figured it out, but there it was.

[00:48:25] But at the other end of the line was this woman, and at one time in Harrison meeting a group—a trip arranged by the Ozark Wilderness Waterways Club, a—there she was at the Harrison airport as one of those groups, one of those meeting the Associate Justice of the Supreme Court who was quite an advocacy for preserving natural places. They took justice—can't remember his name, but anyway, he was there and was taken on the Buffalo River. Harold and Margaret Hedges were the leading promoters of that canoe trip. It was that group that formed in places around the country, Missouri and Washington, DC, in some cases, that just was what I would call ad hoc or just

for the occasion, but people were—once they saw that Buffalo River, they knew that they were—they had become friends of the Buffalo River. And that was doctor—this outdoorsman for the state of Washington who would—became an associate justice of the Supreme Court. He had come down and advocated, floated the Buffalo River. And so all those things kept together.

[00:50:10] And unfortunately—and I think the one thing, one regret that I have is that we didn't have a better working relationship with the people who were, at least in those days, thinking that the best thing for the Buffalo River was a dam or maybe two dams. Mo—some of those people were sincere in their beliefs. Most of the—that has, I guess, faded into the past, but I think we still need to look at that local population and remember that whatever is happening there needs to be done on their behalf as well as those of the outdoors group who were the original advocates. Well, the original advocates also include those people that saw the Buffalo as unique in—especially in vegetative life, I guess we'd say. Plant life, native plants. The people here at the University of Arkansas who were—advocated for the Buffalo River on that basis. And protecting, well, wild animals, nate—wild, original nature in whatever form it might be. And I think some of those things are still coming around. At

least we're finding that in this changing world that a lot of things change, and we are going to have to be aware that maybe big things are changing, too. I know when you—I looked at a picture seeing the so-called drawdown of the big reservoirs on the Colorado River. They are near catastrophe, at least temporarily, but we were—they are—people in the local area thought if they drawdown behind the bow—dams, proposed dams on the Buffalo—well, Dr. Compton had photographed drawdown on some of the rivers or reservoirs up in Missouri, one of the reservoirs in particular, and showing that drawdown is not—yes, it can be temporary, it can be a bad thing or maybe it be—has an unforeseen consequence that is even badder than bad, and we see some of that in, I guess, on the Colorado River, for example. [00:53:33] In fact, we are just simply—more people wanting more of nature's benefits, and there's not quite enough to go around in the best way possible at all times. I think that Dr. Compton might—well, he was going photographing drawdown on the lakes up in Missouri on the White River and showing that a lake well filled is not necessarily going to stay there all the time and be a great tourist draw. I think we're going to have to live with drawdown of one form or another in reservoirs and sometimes—well, we've known it all along with

the Buffalo River and other rivers that there are these seasonal, low-level occasions, and we have to be aware that we are maybe—human use of the water is just a little more than we're able to deal with comfortably. I think we're going, either through—well, we're getting in my own idea, but I think it—Dr. Compton considered himself a conservative. It was—and looking back at it, I think liberal and conservative are—both terms are rather loosely used, and that neither the conservative nor the so-called liberal is right all the time. And I don't know how it would work out, but we're go off—veering off into my own speculation on the future is that we've got things for all of us to learn about nature's gift and how—gifts and how much is here and whether we need to adjust our thinking about the long term. [00:56:16] I'm not going to advocate anything except caution and knowledge that we need to be aware, learning more, not listening to the loudest voices, and deciding what is best for each of us, all of us now and on into the longer fu—term future. And I think that—I never did sit down and debate politics with Neil Compton, and obviously he was—I know in one case he was probably supporting imp—on impulse of somebody who was the loudest voice at the time. That lo—well, that loudest voice is—has disappeared now just with the time but—and a son-in-law

found they had li—a check written in support, and he decided that it—the check would be discarded instead of ca—sent to that man. In other words, Neil had his—Dr. Compton had his own—based on his knowledge and most of what he was thinking was—worked out well in the long run. One of them was, of course, the Buffalo River as a park and not being used for whatever whim might come up in somebody's program. It—we have to think that Dr. Compton and his mother-in-law, the one—Eddie, who looked and ran a business with good sense and care, and the business probably clothed not only Laurene the daughter and the grandchildren, but much beyond. Well, they—Eddie's funding, I guess, principally, helped establish what is now known as Compton Gardens, and of course the neighbors over across the holler to the east, they were friends, they were neighbors. [00:59:04] And one of the sons, I know, told me one time about scrambling around in the property there, in Compton property and that adjoining to the east. And so that they all functioned as friends of that place and then wider, other places that are worth being—having friends. And we think of even the Buffalo National River and anything else that these people have done, advocated for, that turned out to be worth helping, worth our help. In my personal view, I think that there's more of that

to be done, that the pressures of people on natural resources and discl— including space, green spaces, we would call it, that needs more attention and—so that we—the battles are not done. As Dr. Compton said, "We have not finished, and it will always go toward protecting more of those best places that are still with us." Those places being big places like Yellowstone or Yosemite, or smaller places like the—any wooded slope close into town. Now I'm thinking about that woodland is now becoming worthwhile as—in a much more fundamental and important sense than just scenery. It is protecting our atmosphere, our climate, and even the fact that there's a place for people to, goodness, go walking or ride bicycles or something like that that we need, too. And I think maybe Dr. Compton would be—I don't remember his being a bicycler, but he was certainly interested in everything that was space and nature. [01:01:52] And so we look to that and think of people like Eddie, though, who was watching those movies of her son-in-law and obviously with quiet approval. And Laurene. I can remember her going out on some of these camping trips and being right there by the fire. And she was paddling bow in a canoe or that sort of thing. More active, of course, than her mother, but she was there and interested, too. And this woman in Fayetteville, Evangeline Pratt

Waterman Archer, as I knew her, she grew up on the west side of Fayetteville, and for over a hundred years the family had the Pratt family place there. And she had a natural interest in that sort of thing. And through the Depression she and her sister had to sort of put things together, and there were more than one woman here in Fayetteville up—or this area, probably, who would—you know, rode horseback on what's called now Markham Hill. It is actually—would be better called Pratt Place, I guess, because the original homestead is right there on top of the hill. Pratt Place is towards some new different future under other owners, but it is—in my mind it is—what we all have to do is watch. Because it is not only the legal, financial owner, which I do not deny they have made sacrifices there, which I think may be—can be worked out so that enough of that place that is special in Fayetteville can be protected. That was where Evangeline Pratt Waterman Archer grew up. And I knew she was central in the Ozark Society. And she—through our other people here in Fayetteville who have known that place, too.

[01:04:37] So I ramble on here at some length, but the idea is that the challenge is always with us to protect those places that we love best. And well, there is more of that work to be done.

And let us learn about what we can there and try to do the—our

part, even now as I am at—am past youth, I certainly can think about places like that, and I am sure that Neil Compton would be looking to places—he had his own place down on the north side of Bentonville, northeast. Part of it is occupied by a museum. The other part up on the hill to the east I guess was where he was nurturing azaleas, and that was part of his—part of his estate is probably—I call it estate. His land interest. And he—that was part of his legacy as well as Eddie's and Laurene's and Evangeline Archer's for me personally. That is fundamental, and I think that you can judge it as you will about its importance but—for I think that it is—we're becoming to know more and more about green space, and certainly Dr. Compton always was thinking that way.

[01:06:39] JP: Ken, how was Dr. Compton able to be a baby doctor?

He was in the naval reserve. He made films, he took photographs, he was writing to everyone. How was he able to do this?

KS: [*Sighs*] Well [*laughs*], I'm reminded of somebody said, "Busy, busy, busy." Well, it was not that he had good help, too, and his—I'm sure that his office assistants once in a while would be typing letters, or certainly Evangeline Archer. She was a proficient typist, and a lot of that was routed through



Evangeline, I think. The—I think a lot of it is what I've already touched on that they—he had a good, caring support group, a team, in Laurene and Eddie, his mother-in-law, and then of course Evangeline Archer came in later, and there were other people in the Ozark Society. I mention these few because I know—knew them best among all of the groups, all of the people in the Ozark Society, but once that ball got rolling, there were a lot of people from Kansas City I think of even sooner than Little Rock. Somehow that bunch of Kansas City canoers, they were the ones I noticed when I was in charge of distributing that first Buffalo River book. They were the ones buying 'em much faster than even the ones in Northwest Arkansas. Northwest Arkansas got caught up later on, but all of those people—it was not just a one-man show. And Neil would certainly would've—Neil, Dr. Compton, would not—would say that. [01:09:05] He did have his obstetrics schedule, I guess. And he knew that he had to leave—be at home for those events, and other people living in and around Bentonville especially, I guess, who—well, Neil was there at the very beginning for them. And it worked. And Neil had problems. I think—I don't know all of it, and I don't remember, but I remember going as a rider with Laurene to go to Tulsa. I think it—maybe to pick him up at the hospital, and

he was as—later in his career he was having problems with breathing or whatever it was. One thing he gave up fairly early in the game is smoking. He—and then I think, for example, how to—when I was out in California and coming back to see some of these people, I wonder, "I oughta have some sort of unique, reasonably priced gift that is—can be stowed compactly." Well, it wound up, I think, as twelve bottles of California wine at the [JP laughs] discounted price that I could bulk buy through the Park Service little informal stock there that was for park employees there at Yosemite. Well, I bought that case of wine and distributed it. I know with both Evangeline—I added a bottle of white wine or whatever it was, and I then early on learned that they did not drink. I don't know what happened to the bottle. The same way with the Compton's bottle. White wine. I thought—it was moderately priced California wine, a California product. And they simply politely accepted and then declined, I guess. But there was no—that was part of the overall lifestyle, I would say. A moderately lived style. [01:11:57] Evangeline did smoke and finally gave up. And they—but Neil had smoked cigarettes, I guess. You know, it was—everybody did it. And my father did it, heavily, and I think it was a means of escape for life's problems just to light up and smoke a

cigarette, but . . .

[01:12:26] JP: So Dr. Compton, in—my understanding is that he had a darkroom in the lower floor of their house where he made his films. Is that correct? Can you describe that?

KS: That was one of Neil's avocations in a way, but also it was focused on protecting Buffalo River. And one of the books that his—this generation has put out is a reminiscent book, I would call it, of all black-and-white photographs. And in that case maybe they were printed by somebody else. I'm not sure. He was a photographer on the run. And he was not one of these with a big negative and a formal setup looking for the right I—best place, best light. And but it was—it exuded or gave out to every viewer, especially the color movies that he did. It says, "Here is something that is done by a sincere advocate for something, and it is worth, well worth, extremely worth advocating through photography." I look at some of 'em now and—pictures of his, and, well, they were made by a man on the run, and if there was a little limb going out across the middle of the scene in front of a scene or a waterfall or whatever, he didn't have time to go and push that limb out of the way or anything like that. [01:14:28] He was one on the run. He was uncommonly sensitive to beauty and nature. And I think

whenever people see his pictures, they realize that there was a sincere and getic—energetic advocate for something that is exceedingly, extremely worth advocating for. So that is what happened with Neil. I look at some of his pictures, and I realize he was just run and fire, run somewhere else and fire with that camera or the movie camera. But it all came together to make a powerful statement in favor of protecting those places that he visited and were worth protecting. And that's what he did in his life, and it . . .

JP: So . . .

KS: We all are better for it.

[01:15:48] JP: So what were some of the—his characteristics that made him the person to do this and that allowed this whole struggle to be successful?

KS: He grew up there in Benton County and by what I would call a fruit farmer or apple farmer, maybe, who had—his father—the Compton people came first down from Iowa and then I think from further east. Never did very well, but his father did become county judge and—which meant that he really was mainly in charge of the road construction and maintenance in Benton County. And Neil had this natural-area interest and curiosity about the natural world. So there he was riding along

with his father, maybe a in Model A car or maybe even something even lay—earlier in 1920s, [19]30s, and getting out, and while his father was looking at road maintenance or projects, whatever, there was Neil getting interested in wildflowers or whatever that was there. And it wound up through his not knowing what to take in college—except that he took, here at the University, this—botany, plant science, in other words, extending that love of his of beauty and nature, and also geology. He was the one person, I guess, in that whole battle for the Buffalo who knew more about what was most crucial in that battle in terms of values to be protected. Geology, botany, and certainly later on medical science, which is related in many ways to the natural world.

[01:18:20] JP: Do you know how he became an OB-GYN doctor and not a natural scientist? Do you know how he chose to become a medical doctor in obstetrics?

KS: I—[laughs] I think when he—somewhere along beyond what was high school in Bentonville that—he had to make some choice about his life's profession. And it became medicine. And he and a friend, I guess maybe the same friend with whom he floated the middle lower Buffalo, talked about, "Well, what are we going to do after we finish high school or"—and it was more or less—

somewhat on impulse, but it was also following his most basic interest in science, natural beauty, and it all came together, oddly enough, in delivering babies. That was—well, it was partly that it was an established and growing community, and just as his mother-in-law, Edna Putman, was fortunately in a growing market, I guess you would say, for womens who were wanting to have the right thing that they liked and was also of good quality and fit and all of that. So that while Eddie was working on helping women in that area for a couple of decades on the clothing choices, he was—had prepared himself for becoming a doctor, a caring physician—although he could tell me—he told me time or two that if people came into his office who had made the wrong choices, morally or anything else, that he was there and available. And he somehow made all of that fit in with his Buffalo River interest. [01:21:11] But he—his appearances in Washington, DC, for example, to testify on behalf of the Buffalo River were—it was—he probably did not provide the best speaking voice or organization, but I think that with all the backing that he had from others who believed just as he did that it came through that Dr. Compton was sincere, that he wanted—this was what he believed, and it was right, and certainly had all these other people. There were a few people who came and

appeared in Washington, even, in favor of something other than Buffalo River or that park. That was—they were more interested in a utilitarian sort of "Let's do business as we always have." But always repeating the past was not the best outcome. We still learning, I think, about how best to manage places like that or the whole environment. Goodness, when I saw a picture of the drawdown, as it's called—100 feet, they have 50 or 2- or 300 feet on—behind Boulder Dam over there on the Colorado. We haven't made the best case about the Colorado River there in the past, or least the whole management of the watershed. Really, what it is, I think, is that we just have too many people wanting too much right now.

JP: Dr. Compton . . .

KS: "Why aren't you letting water run down here to Mexico . . .

JP: Yeah.

KS: . . . where we're running—trying to raise cantaloupes?"

[01:23:29] JP: Dr. Compton was from northea—Northwest Arkansas, sixty miles away from the Buffalo River. He was able to—at one point I counted twenty-three chapters of the Ozark Society. What was in—what was with him or with the people he was able to organize to be able to do something like creating the Buffalo National River? What was the spirit of the time or his

spirit that enabled that to happen then?

KS: Speaking of the spirit of the time, I think it was partly that there'd been a pause of fifteen years or so, occasioned by World War II, where everything like that was on hold. I mean, protecting parks was just not on the agenda at all from about 1939 or [19]40 up to perhaps 1955. And so that—it was time, and then people were looking around and thinking about the whole what people wanted. Of course, some what—some people always want a better economy. Something that will let them live better someday, and sometimes these interests are pretty narrow when one man who has a—exploiting resources in some way or other wants—either wants to be a left—or left alone with what he's got or he wants more of the same kind, more of the same thing. But it—and his—and there was—well, I think we have—see that the times, they are a'changin', as they say, and we have to step back and look and see whether our priorities are being jigger—rejiggered in such a way or manipulated in such a way that it just isn't possible to get everything for everybody.

[01:26:11] JP: Ken, this has been delightful to be chatting with you today and to be letting you offer your reflections about Dr. Compton and some of those early times at the Buffalo River. I wonder if we should stop for right now and come back at the—



and have another topic on another day, if you'd be willing to do that.

KP: Well, I am happy to be here today. And probably have talked more than they—than is top-grade material for a more narrowly focused speech. But I think that what we've gone through as—in the last fifty years or so is create a what we call a national river over there and a lot of other park areas elsewhere. And it just keeps going on except that the challenges will never end. Buffalo National River is not a perfect, finished job that is good forevermore. It has new challenges, new problems, and we just keep on continuing to fight the Buffalo River battle in one form or another. [01:27:53] In the meantime, though, the good part is that we have so much of what was advocated to begin with. And it is there, and it is benefitting all of us, and sometimes it may be nothing more direct than having cleaner air or purer water or better whatever it is. But we—here we are. And the battle is not over. I think of—my thoughts have turned to things—well, in more recent years a laying out and working on hiking trails, particularly, trying to get the very best-built ones that yield the most benefit without the lee—with the least damage to the basic nature of the place. And then even in Fayetteville, I look at places and think that there are—wherever

we are there is more to be done. And the secret is, if you get involved, so much of it can be enjoyed in terms of the benefits to whatever you do to protect the country, the countryside—and also the people who—with whom you work voluntarily vary more on what needs to be done. What I think needs to be done, I think what most of us—as with the Buffalo River. Protecting the Buffalo River is the right thing to do. So. Go for it. [*Laughter*]

JP: Thank you, Ken.

KS: Oh, right, thanks for the chance to let me speak.

[01:30:10 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]