

INTERVIEW WITH LARRY SISK
BY DOROTHE NORTON, AUGUST 8, 2002
ROSEMOUNT, MINNESOTA

MS. NORTON: We are going to do this interview so that the National Conservation Training Center will now be able to add it in to the Archives. Can you please tell me your birthplace and the date?

MR. SISK: I was born January 16, 1941 in Stafford, Kansas. It's right the near the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. It's an area I used to hunt ducks on.

MS. NORTON: What were your parent's names?

MR. SISK: Lawrence Sisk and Marie Oleander. My mother's maiden name was Oleander.

MS. NORTON: What were their jobs and education?

MR. SISK: Dad worked in the oil fields. We moved around Kansas with the oil play. He eventually ended up as a Manager for a mud products firm in Great Bend, Kansas. My mom was a housewife. She stayed home and raised us kids, me and my brother.

MS. NORTON: Where and how did you spend your early years?

MR. SISK: I spent my whole growing up time in central Kansas. I helped farm on the homestead, east, in Rice County, Kansas. I also worked around the oil patches and at various ranches around the area. I did just whatever job I could come by. I spent most of my time hunting and fishing ever since I was about eight years old.

MS. NORTON: Did you have any jobs as a child?

MR. SISK: I started working on the farm when I was eleven years old.

MS. NORTON: What high school did you graduate from? When and where?

MR. SISK: I graduated from Great Bend Senior High School in Great Bend, Kansas in 1959.

MS. NORTON: What university did you attend, and when did you go?

MR. SISK: I attended the University of Kansas from 1959 until 1964.

MS. NORTON: What degree did you get?

MR. SISK: I had a degree in Zoology with a minor in Botany.

MS. NORTON: What aspect of your formal education equipped you for the future?

MR. SISK: I think that mainly it was my association with Dr. Frank Cross, who wrote the book *The Fishes of Kansas*. He kind of got me interested in raising Catfish and getting out in the woods and seining ponds and stuff like that.

MS. NORTON: Did you have other mentors, or courses that especially stuck with you? Would you consider Dr. Cross a mentor?

MR. SISK: I didn't really have any mentors. I was basically going by my personal belief in working in the outdoors and doing something for nature.

MS. NORTON: Did you have any adverse influences?

MR. SISK: From college? Just the fact that we were under threat from being drafted to Vietnam all of the time.

MS. NORTON: Did you serve in the military?

MR. SISK: Yes, I served as a volunteer from 1964 to 1967 in the U.S. Army.

MS. NORTON: What duty stations did you have?

MR. SISK: I was in the U. S. on various assignments and then overseas in Germany and Austria.

MS. NORTON: Did you get any decorations?

MR. SISK: No, just it was just another federal job.

MS. NORTON: What was your job?

MR. SISK: I was in the Army Veterinary Corps.

MS. NORTON: Did your military service relate in any way to your employment with the USFWS?

MR. SISK: None whatsoever that I know of.

MS. NORTON: When, where and how did you meet your wife?

MS. SISK: I met my wife while I was trout fishing in Austria. I got caught in a rainstorm and went to this little guesthouse to get out of the rain. That's where I met her.

MS. NORTON: When and where did you marry?

MR. SISK: We married in Austria in August of 1966.

MS. NORTON: How many children do you have?

MR. SISK: I have two children. One is Seesa who was born in Austria and Tom, who was born in Spearfish, South Dakota.

MS. NORTON: What are they doing now?

MR. SISK: My daughter is a manager for a bookstore. My son is a production manager for a video reproduction firm.

MS. NORTON: Why did you want to work for the Service?

MR. SISK: I had had a love for the outdoors ever since I was a kid growing up. My dad used to give me a handful of .22 shells and send me out across the farm hunting jackrabbits. I used to fish with my grandmother and other people ever since I was a little kid. I just loved the outdoors. I think I fought fires with the Forest Service in Idaho back in 1960. I decided I wanted to continue working in the outdoors.

MS. NORTON: What was your first professional position after the military?

MR. SISK: My first position was at Senecaville National Fish Hatchery in Ohio, with FWS. Back then it was the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife.

MS. NORTON: What did you do there?

MR. SISK: I was a trainee under Arden Trandahl, who was the manager and Jack Bollow who was the assistant manager. I basically was learning fish culture techniques for catfish and bass and different pan fish.

MS. NORTON: Where did you go from there?

MR. SISK: I went to Garrison Dam in North Dakota. From there I went to Spearfish, South Dakota to the Training Academy for Fisheries. Then we went to Jordan River NFH in Elmira, MI. It's a Lake Trout hatchery. From there we went to Hebron, Ohio and then to the Regional Office in the Twin Cities.

MS. NORTON: What were the pay and benefits like when you started?

MR. SISK: Lousy! I could have gotten more money working for the State of Kansas. I applied for a job there.

MS. NORTON: But did you have promotion possibilities with FWS?

MR. SISK: Well that's what drew me to the federal government; the pension plan and the promotion possibilities.

MS. NORTON: Did you socialize with the people that you worked with?

MR. SISK: Well in the early days we always did because we had a lot of fun together. Every Friday on the hatchery the women would all fry up chicken, and we'd all buy beer and sit out on the lawn and eat fried chicken and drink beer. We just enjoyed being together. It was like a large family.

MS. NORTON: That's good! How did your career affect your family?

MR. SISK: It's hard to say how it affected them. I know my wife gave up a lot coming to this country to begin with. I think that just the disruption of moving around so much was very hard on my wife and on the kids. In those days you had to move around because you had to get the varying experiences that the government wanted.

MS. NORTON: Why did you leave the Service?

MR. SISK: I retired after thirty-seven years. I just decided that I had done enough time I guess.

MS. NORTON: What kind of training did you receive for your different jobs?

MR. SISK: I guess outside of my personal interest in the outdoors, where I learned a lot about trapping, hunting and fishing, my college work in zoology and seining catfish for the State of Kansas. I learned the things I needed to know about fisheries from Dr. Cross. Basically most of the training I had for my jobs was on the ground; working at different hatcheries around the central region at that time, which included North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska.

MS. NORTON: What hours did you work?

MR. SISK: In those days, we didn't care how many hours we worked because when you are raising fish, and in fish culture work, you've got to be there when the fish are ready.

On Jordan River for instance, the lake trout always hatched on Christmas Eve. So you spent all of Christmas Eve and Christmas day working with the eggs and the hatching fish. A lot of times you worked a lot more than just an eight-hour day. You worked according to the schedule of the fish; their breeding cycles and that kind of thing.

MS. NORTON: What instruments and tools did you use?

MR. SISK: In the old days we used a lot of stuff that we built ourselves. Mainly we were using hatching troughs and hatching jars, phernal pails, milk cans sometimes, to haul fish in. There were just basic tools, mainly. In my first year at fish hatcheries I probably skinned out thirteen road kill deer just to feed the catfish!

MS. NORTON: Did you witness any new Service inventions or innovations?

MR. SISK: Oh yeah, there was quite a few in fish culturing work. We knew more about the diets of the fish. In fact, when I was in training school at Spearfish I worked on the Lake Trout diet that was used initially for raising Lake Trout. The improvements in the diets and in the ways the fish were handled. We knew more about chemical treatments and how to do them properly. There were a lot of advances, even in fish disease and it's relation to nutrition. Cataracts for instance; we knew more from the nutrition what caused cataracts in fish and caused blindness. We learned a lot about the physiology of the fish and that kind of thing.

MS. NORTON: Did you work with any animals other than the fish?

MR. SISK: In terms of muskrat and beaver control on ponds, I used to get rid of a lot of them!

MS. NORTON: How did you feel about those animals?

MR. SISK: I didn't like it. In February when it's cold, and raining in Ohio and having to stand out there and dig our muskrat dens to keep your dikes from leaking!

MS. NORTON: What support did you and your programs receive locally, regionally federally?

MR. SISK: Back in the 1960s and 1970s there was large support for the fishery program. I was working with the farm pond program back then and there was a huge degree of support from the SCS and from local farmer and people who built these farm ponds all over the country that we stocked. There was a real advantage between the two agencies and working with the farmers trying to create these small fisheries all over the farms of the Midwest.

MS. NORTON: How do you think the FWS was perceived by people outside of our agency?

MR. SISK: I think in the early days, before 1978, we were perceived as a very professional, scientific agency that had a lot of credibility in terms of what we said, people listened to even in the waterfowl regulations; I think we had more credibility in the early days.

MS. NORTON: So agency and community relations were good?

MR. SISK: I think they were very good because everybody knew where we were and we worked with local clubs. We worked with the local groups like Toastmasters and the Lions Club and Kiwanis and groups like that. We gave talks, and I personally used to give a lot of tours for inner city kids on the farm ponds; talking about frogs and turtles. Once I even got snake bit! I grabbed a snake in front of the kids and it drew blood on me. They were all "ooohing and awing". It was quite an experience for them! They had never seen a snake bite a person before!

MS. NORTON: What projects were you involved in? Were there any special projects at different hatcheries or in the Regional office?

MR. SISK: At the Senecaville hatchery I was involved with restocking the Walleyes back in to the western basin of Lake Erie. We raised the fish there and then I hauled them up to Toledo. The state people met me there and we stocked the western basin. That's probably the genetic stock that's now being caught in Lake Erie; the large Walleyes there. The other thing was when I was in Hebron, Ohio I got the chance to work with Dr. Milton Troutman who wrote the book *The Fishes of Ohio*. We were working with the suspected Blue Pike, and he was the expert on Blue Pike from years ago. We never did find a true Blue Pike but we did see what we thought were hybrids. Another project I worked on was that I wrote the first paper ever written on the usage of hatchery chemicals while I was at Garrison Dam, North Dakota. It was utilized by the Service for a few years. At Spearfish I worked on Trout diets, and specifically a diet that was later used for Lake Trout at Jordan River in Michigan where I would transfer to after I left Spearfish. Other projects that I worked on that I had a high degree of interest in is that I worked on the Treatise of the Great Lakes with the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. And I did help write sections of the 1978 Water Quality Agreement and also the protocols. I worked directly with the Great Lakes Water Quality Programs Committee for a number of years. I had a high degree of interest in that because I wanted to see the Great Lakes restored. To my way of thinking, the Service allowed me to interact and to be involved in a number of projects that I thought were worthwhile.

MS. NORTON: Would you consider those as just projects, or were there any major issues that you had to deal with?

MR. SISK: In terms of major issues; those were always management calls. I was just a “worker bee”. When I was working on the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreements we had to make decisions at the negotiating table. Those issues revolved around industry trying to weaken the standards that were being applied in the Great Lakes. We had to hold firm and make sure that the agreement progressed towards the future to allow for the cleanup of the Great Lakes. To me that was the one major issue I was involved in.

MS. NORTON: Has your perspective or opinion on any of these issues changed with time?

MR. SISK: No, in fact I think the Service has weakened its professional stance towards trying to address issues. I blame that on the implementation of the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act, which basically created a spoils system within the federal bureaucracy and deluded the professionalism that the Service had prior to that.

MS. NORTON: What was the major impediment to your job in your career, if there was one?

MR. SISK: A lack of decision-making.

MS. NORTON: Who were your supervisors?

MR. SISK: I had many supervisors because I was at a lot of stations. Arden Trandahl was my first supervisor at Secenaville National Fish Hatchery. Bill White was my supervisor at Garrison Dam, North Dakota. Chuck Sowers was the supervisor at Spearfish. Artie Stolz was my supervisor at Hebron, Ohio. I just hit a mind blank on who was supervisor at Jordan River, and that it unfortunate.

MS. NORTON: What about at the Regional office, which you retired from?

MR. SISK: John Christian was my supervisor when I retired. I worked in three programs at the Regional office. I was in Fisheries, Ecological Services and in Refuges. Refuges was just a temporary assignment.

MS. NORTON: Who were the individuals who helped shape your career?

MR. SISK: Everybody I worked with Dorothe. I think back very fondly on a lot of the technicians on the hatcheries and the people that I worked with in the Regional office. Maurey Splittstoesser was excellent. There was Keith Grye and Bill Martin. When I think back, I am just thankful to the people who helped shape me as I went along and taught me what they knew. In the old days you learned from working with people that you worked with. They were tremendous people.

MS. NORTON: Where were some of the people you knew outside of FWS? Would they have been able to work for FWS do you think?

MR. SISK: You have to recognize that when I worked for Ecological Services, which is the old River Basins group; most of those people came from outside of the Service, and from within the Service both. There was Harry Anderson, who was my supervisor in the Regional office when I first got there. He used to work for the Illinois Natural History Survey. He was an excellent birder. He probably knew more about colonial nesting birds than anybody I know of. He was a tremendous field biologist. Maurey Splittstoesser worked for the Illinois Natural History Survey. Many of the old River Basin folks came from Refuges, and from Fisheries and from all facets of research. In the Service the group was made up of people who had an interest in field biologist. They were basically naturalists who had grown up on farms and come from farm country. They liked to hunt and fish and knew a lot about the natural resource just from personal experience. The difference between them and the modern biologist is that the modern biologist believes that if it's not on a computer system, they don't believe it.

MS. NORTON: What Presidents, Secretaries of the Interior and Directors of FWS did you serve under? How many do you remember?

MR. SISK: That's a tough one! Bob Burwell was the first Regional Director, when I came to work for Region 3. I remember Bob personally. He came out to visit me when I was in North Dakota. He was a very nice gentleman. He was always very nicely dressed. Jack Hemphill was another one who took an interest in me. I really liked him from the standpoint that he tried to balance Fisheries, Refuges and everything in the Regional office; so did Bob Burwell. The guy that I remember most was when I went to the Refuge Training Academy at Arden Hills back in 1967. I got to meet John Gottchalk. I sat down and talked and had a beer with him. He was a very dynamic personality. There were some very influential people in Washington. Abe Tunnison was one; A. J. Douglas in Fisheries was one; we had a lot of support in Washington and a lot of people in Washington who tried to promote the Service politically.

MS. NORTON: How did the changes of administrations affect your work?

MR. SISK: The biggest change, and I mentioned it previously, was under Jimmy Carter who passed the Civil Service Reform Act in 1978. Jimmy Carter, I don't think, liked bureaucrats. He wanted a spoils system similar to the one he had in Georgia. I think that one Act probably changed the Service forever, in terms of making the entire federal bureaucracy more politically attuned. Now we have RDs who are politically appointed rather than being people who came up through the ranks. They are professional people. And I think that did more harm to the Service than any one thing I remember. The second

thing that harmed the Service very greatly I believe, is when they took the Research arm out of the FWS.

MS. NORTON: In your opinion, who were the people who shaped the Service?

MR. SISK: The people who really saved the Service were the on the ground field biologists. They were the people who were out there day to day actually doing the work. Politically, the Service, if you go way back in its history to Baird, and the people who started it; there have been a lot of people who field naturalists and had an interest in the outdoor resource who shaped it. The thing that really made it work were the people on the ground who actually got out and did the work.

MS. NORTON: What was the high point in your career?

MR. SISK: That's hard to say. I guess that the high point of my career was actually being assigned and entrusted to work with the Canadian government on the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.

MS. NORTON: Did you have a low point in your career?

MR. SISK: Well, there are ups and downs in every career. I think the lowest point was when I found out that I would never have a chance at any more promotions.

MS. NORTON: Is there anything that you wish you had done differently?

MR. SISK: Oh, I never look back and wish I had done things differently because to do things differently; I probably could have gotten a lot farther ahead in my career politically if I had been willing to sacrifice my family, but I won't do that.

MS. NORTON: What was your most dangerous or frightening experience?

MR. SISK: I guess that was the night I fell asleep with a load of fish and almost took out a couple of road signs in Indiana.

MS. NORTON: How about your most humorous experience?

MS. SISK: That was probably feeding fish in North Dakota one day. They warned me about the ice on the raceway walls. I stood up on them while I was feeding the fish. The next think I know, I am laying under that water watching the fish go over top of me. My feet went out from under me and I fell in the raceway. It's an interesting view; watching the fish swim above you instead of below you.

MS. NORTON: At least you thought it was humorous! What would you like to tell others about your career?

MR. SISK: It's hard to say. For me, I was brought up in a very religious family, so to me working with natural resources is something that man should do as part of their stewardship of the land. To me it was a nature fit to work with the land and the critters. To me, if a person has a sense of mission and is not interested in money, but wants to do something that has a lasting affect on the environment, then, I would say that working in the biological field would be a very rewarding career.

MS. NORTON: What would you tell others about the FWS?

MR. SISK: It's hard to judge because the Service that I knew died after 1978. It's now very political. I think they've lost their scientific bent. I would like to see the Service get back to the use of naturalists and retain its credibility in the scientific arena. I think they need to reestablish the scientific arm. I think the Service needs to be rebuilt back to what it was.

MS. NORTON: What were some of the changes that you observed in the Service?

MS. SISK: Well, I think I mentioned it previously; putting politically appointees at the Regional Directorate level; the de-emphasis on professionalism within the Service; the destruction of the scientific arm by moving it over to Geological Survey; those were all negatives I think, and changes in the Services that were detrimental. A bright spot to me right now in the Service is the Sea Lamprey Control program, which since 1955 has probably lead the way in the Service in terms of field research and credibility with other agencies and with the Canadian government, and in terms of program accomplishment.

MS. NORTON: How about changes in personnel? Is there any difference from the time when you were hired?

MR. SISK: Yeah, it's changed a lot. Whether you like it or not, they try to be inclusive in their hiring practices. In the old days they tried to hire people basically, who were hunters and fishermen or grew up on farms and people with a rural background. Our society has become more urban and it's changed the way they hire. That in turn, I believe led to a decrease in the professionalism. I think you can learn on the job, but it takes a lot of effort and time out of the other people working to train somebody who should have some basic understanding when they come to the job.

MS. NORTON: What are your thoughts on the future? Where do you see the Service heading in the next decade?

MR. SISK: Well, I think they just hired a new Director, Mr. Williams, who I think will be very positive for the Service. He is a trained field man. He has worked with State agencies. He understands biology and people management. I am looking to see if he can maybe kind of resurrect some of the past and bring back some more professionalism into the Service.

MS. NORTON: Do you have any photographs or documents that you would care to donate or share along with your interview?

MR. SISK: No.

MS. NORTON: Whom else do you feel that we should be interviewing?

MR. SISK: A lot of the guys who should have been interviewed for history purposes are now dead and gone. Harry Anderson would have been excellent. Maurey Splittstoesser and Keith Grye would be an excellent one to interview. He was involved in some of the original FERC work, with federal power plants. He was also involved in the Winter Navigation Studies. He would be excellent. I guess in terms of political history, Jack Hemphill would be a good one if possible. I would like to see an interview with somebody like Art Murray who was the Technician at the Senecaville National Fish Hatchery in Ohio. He was probably the person who took me under his wing when I first came to the Service. He is an excellent individual. Some of the technicians who worked in the field could give you some insight into the changes in fish culture and fish distribution and things like that. Possibly Tom Shelldrake, who worked in the Columbia Fisheries and also in Region 3.

MS. NORTON: I remember him.

MR. SISK: He could have on insight into some of the fishery issues related to endangered species and that. In terms of the success of the Private Lands programs in Region 3, Dave Hudack who was the Supervisor at the Bloomington, Indiana field office. He would be an excellent person to interview. I am trying to give you a broad perspective of people who I remember who are still around. I worked with so many people over the years Dorothe. Ray Saddors would be an excellent one. Ray was involved in establishing the Trumpeter Swan Society. He was a personal friend of some of the old time biologists in Wisconsin.

MS. NORTON: Well that concludes our interview Larry. I want to thank you for the time that it has taken. I hope that your condition will improve.

MR. SISK: I think it will. I am an old Swede, you know. I'm tough!

MS. NORTON: We'll be glad to send you a copy of this when it is transcribed if you'd like.

MR. SISK: Yes, I'd like that.