

INTERVIEW WITH MIKE WILLETT
BY DOROTHE NORTON, NOVEMBER 14, 2003

MS. NORTON: Good morning, this is Friday, November 14, 2003. My interview this morning is with Mike Willett who retired from FWS in Region 3 a year and a half or so ago. Thank you Mike! My first question for you is where was your birthplace and what day were you born?

MR. WILLETT: I was born in Troy, Ohio on January 27, 1945.

MS. NORTON: What were your parents' names?

MR. WILLETT: My father's name is Joseph Willett and my mother's name is Eleanor.

MS. NORTON: What were their jobs and education?

MR. WILLETT: My father was in the military. He was in the Air Force. My mother was a Nurse in the Army during World War II. After the war was over, she no longer worked.

MS. NORTON: Just raising kids!

MR. WILLETT: Right!

MS. NORTON: So where did you spend your early years then, not all in Ohio?

MR. WILLETT: No, we started in Ohio and moved to Florida and then back to Ohio. Then we moved to Kentucky and then to Germany. Then we went to Washington, D.C. and then back to Ohio. When my father retired we were at Wright/Patterson Air Force Base.

MS. NORTON: How did you spend your early years then, learning about all of these new places? Did you have any hobbies or books, or anything that spent a lot of time with?

MR. WILLETT: I did do a lot of reading in those days. It was all of the usual books that boys read; The Hardy Boys and that kind of stuff, mysteries and adventure stories. I liked sports in those days.

MS. NORTON: Did you play baseball or anything like that?

MR. WILLETT: I did. It wasn't usually organized. It was just the guys getting together in the backyard, that kind of thing.

MS. NORTON: Did you every have any jobs as a child, before you graduated from high school?

MR. WILLETT: Yeah, for one summer, in about the eighth grade, I worked for a guy who had a dry cleaning store. He would hire kids to take circulars around to houses. He'd take us out in his car to neighborhood and then he'd let us out. He'd sit in that car while we went out and delivered circulars. Later, when I was in high school I worked at a drive-in movie in the summer. I worked at night up until about 4 o'clock at night. I guess that's about it.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever hunt or fish?

MR. WILLETT: I did a lot of fishing, and some hunting. My father has always been a fisherman and a hunter. But I didn't really get into the hunting as much as the fishing. I would go out and hunt with my father, grandfather and uncle. It was the getting together that I enjoyed; not necessarily the hunting. But I did enjoy fishing, and I still fish some but not as much as I used to.

MS. NORTON: Do you eat what you catch then?

MR. WILLETT: Yep!

MS. NORTON: My favorite is a crappie that is caught in the winter as opposed to fresh in the summer. Those seem to have a different taste. But boy, when you catch them through the ice, they are really good. What high school did you go to?

MR. WILLETT: It was in Troy, Ohio. It was called Troy High School. I graduated in 1963.

MS. NORTON: Did you go on to college?

MR. WILLETT: I did. I went to college for four years in Ohio and graduated in 1967 with a degree in Biology. Then I went into the Air Force. I was in the Air Force for four years.

MS. NORTON: Where were your duty stations?

MR. WILLETT: I was stationed at Duluth Air Force Base for four years.

MS. NORTON: What did you do? What was your job?

MR. WILLETT: I was a Missile Launch Officer.

MS. NORTON: All in Duluth?

MR. WILLETT: All in Duluth. Most people don't realize it, but there was a Missile Base at Duluth at one time. That's where I worked. It was actually up on the north shore at French River, Minnesota.

MS. NORTON: Was it interesting?

MR. WILLETT: No! It was a terrible job! That's why I got out of the Air Force because I hated the job! I didn't hate the Air Force; I hated the job.

MS. NORTON: So your military service didn't relate in any way to your employment with FWS?

MR. WILLETT: No.

MS. NORTON: Are you married?

MR. WILLETT: Yes I am.

MS. NORTON: Can you tell me when, where and how you met your wife?

MR. WILLETT: Well, this is my second wife. We met about eighteen years ago. We belonged to the same Ski Club. But we didn't get married until about two years ago.

MS. NORTON: Do you have any children?

MR. WILLETT: I have two children from my first marriage.

MS. NORTON: What are they doing now?

MR. WILLETT: My daughter works for General Mills here in Minneapolis in Golden Valley. My son is still a student. He is a Ph. D. student at the University of Iowa. He is married to another student.

MS. NORTON: What is his major?

MR. WILLETT: His major is Anthropology.

MS. NORTON: Interesting! Now we'll go to your career. Why did you want to work for the FWS?

MR. WILLETT: Well, that wasn't my desire at the time. My desire was to work for the Park Service. But there weren't any jobs with the Park Service at the time. I needed a job and I was offered one with FWS so I thought that would be a good second choice. I started working in 1973.

MS. NORTON: What was your job?

MR. WILLETT: My first job was Administrative Assistant at the Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge, in Winona, Minnesota.

MS. NORTON: Where did you go from there?

MR. WILLETT: From there I went to the St. Paul Area Office. When Area Offices opened in 1976, I believe it was, I applied for the St. Paul office and was able to get that one. I was then the Administrative Officer in the Area Office. When the Area Offices closed, from there I went to the Regional Office at Fort Snelling and I worked in Budget and Finance for Dale Gaving. Then there was a change, I don't even remember the circumstances, and I moved to Contracting. I was a Contracting Officer for six years. Then the job of Chief of Budget and Finance came open about 1989. Then I applied for and got that job. That's the job I had until I retired.

MS. NORTON: When did you retire?

MR. WILLETT: In 2000.

MS. NORTON: When you first started with FWS, what was your grade and title?

MR. WILLETT: It was Administrative Assistant and I was a GS-7.

MS. NORTON: What was your grade and title when you retired?

MR. WILLETT: Chief of Budget and Finance, and I was a GS-13.

MS. NORTON: Very good! So you had promotion opportunities then whenever there were different positions available?

MR. WILLETT: Yes.

MS. NORTON: When you started with FWS, after being in the military, what did you think the pay and benefits were like?

MR. WILLETT: I should back track and maybe say a few things about further education. I had the degree in Biology and I was going to be a Biology teacher. I decided while I was

in the Air Force that I wasn't going to do that. So I went back to school and got a degree in Business Administration. Then I got a job which I hated so I took the Civil Service exam trying to work for the Park Service and that's the point that I got the job with FWS.

MS. NORTON: What was the job that you hated, before you took the Civil Service exam?

MR. WILLETT: It was a Management Trainee job in a company that made batteries. It was just a terrible atmosphere to work in. As a trainee I was working in the factory along with some other management trainees. There was a lot of antagonism between the workers and the management. The workers hated their jobs and the management didn't like their jobs either. I wanted out of there. Luckily in those days they had the Civil Service Exam. I took the exam and did pretty well so I got a call one day from Dan Miller. He said that they had a job open in Winona and I took it right away.

MS. NORTON: I must have been a nice job done there too. It's a pretty town.

MR. WILLETT: It was a nice job. A good job. I enjoyed the people I worked with. I enjoyed the town. The only reason I left was for advancement.

MS. NORTON: Did you socialize with the people that you worked with in your different positions?

MR. WILLETT: We did in Winona a lot. We would get together with the other people who worked there; the Manager and the Assistant Manager and some others who worked in that area every couple of weeks.

MS. NORTON: Were there any recreation things that you did?

MR. WILLETT: I'd go fishing every once in a while with some of the guys.

MS. NORTON: Any ball teams?

MR. WILLETT: No, we didn't do that. Later I played softball for the team here at the Regional office for few years, until I got too old for that.

MS. NORTON: You're not too old yet Mike! So how did your career affect your family?

MR. WILLETT: Well, the only real move I made was when I first got the job I was living in Minneapolis and I had to move to Winona. Then three years later I moved back to the Twin Cities area. That wasn't a good move at the time because my wife at the time has

just gotten a job in Winona. So we had to decide if she was going to keep her job and we stayed there or are we going to move with my job. It wasn't a good situation.

MS. NORTON: So you didn't leave the Service until you were eligible for retirement?

MR. WILLETT: Right.

MS. NORTON: So what kind of training did you receive for all of your different jobs?

MR. WILLETT: For the first one practically none. It was just on the job training. I replaced a guy down there; Bart Foster, do you remember him?

MS. NORTON: No, I don't.

MR. WILLETT: He had worked there for like thirty years in that one spot. So he was very good, and he continued to work for a few months while I was working.

MS. NORTON: So he could kind of break you in?

MR. WILLETT: Right.

MS. NORTON: Is he still alive Mike?

MR. WILLETT: I would doubt it. He retired in 1973 and he was in his sixties then.

MS. NORTON: I don't recall seeing his name on that list that I am working with.

MR. WILLETT: Later, especially when I became a contracting officer, there's a lot of formal training that you have to take to be a contracting officer. I took a lot of classes there. I would take an occasional class that would help me with the budget and finance stuff. Then I had to have a lot of practical training on things like the federal financial system, the FFS and that kind of thing.

MS. NORTON: What hours did you work? Not in the Regional office but when you were on the Refuge? Did you just work regular office hours?

MR. WILLETT: Yeah, I worked pretty much regular office hours. I did a fair amount of traveling because the Refuge is large. It's 290 miles long. We had five offices down the river. At that time, they didn't have administrative people. Just a couple of them had administrative people. I was doing all of the purchasing for all of the offices. So I had to do a lot of traveling to the various offices, which I enjoyed. It was fun. But I would travel at night.

MS. NORTON: And work the regular office hours during the day! Did you have any special tools or instruments that you had to use to do your job?

MR. WILLETT: Nope!

MS. NORTON: Until we got the computers! Did you receive any formal training for the computers?

MR. WILLETT: I had a few little courses, but not a lot. I just took a few local courses. I think I took one at the Science Museum, and one at one of the local colleges. But I think it was mostly just on the job training with help from the computer people and help from the other people I worked with.

MS. NORTON: So you never worked with any animals did you?

MR. WILLETT: No.

MS. NORTON: How do you think the Service was perceived by people outside the agency? Did the people, like when you were in Winona, know about the FWS?

MR. WILLETT: In Winona they did. There was a lot of contact with the local people. For instance, we had a lot of special use permits down there. We had several hundred special use permits for things like boathouses and things like that on the river. Also during hunting and trapping season, especially trapping, and that was a big deal down there; trapping on the river, they had to buy tags to put on their traps. They had to come in to our office to do that. So we had a constant flow of people coming in in the fall buying these trap tags. There was a fair amount in the newspaper about what was going on at the Refuge. We did have a public use specialist, full time whose job was to keep us visible. I think we were perceived in a mostly positive light. A lot of the old timers who kind of lived off of the river didn't like seeing us around.

MS. NORTON: Are those the people who had the houseboats and lived right on the river?

MR. WILLETT: Yeah.

MS. NORTON: Some of them lived there year 'round didn't they?

MR. WILLETT: Yeah. And they still do. They had to have a special use permit and they had to pay each year for that. It wasn't hardly anything, but they had to pay for it. That was a constant controversy, those houseboats.

MS. NORTON: I have friends that lived in Onalaska. I know one time when I was down there, they took me to theirs. They had a home in Onalaska too. It was small, but it was nice. It had a little deck out front. We could sit there and watch the other boats. They never moved it. Is that how most of them are?

MR. WILLETT: Most of them were permanent. Most of them had electricity and some of them had plumbing.

MS. NORTON: Those must be the people with money! What projects were you involved in during your career?

MR. WILLETT: When I was a contracting officer of course, each new contract is kind of a project. The biggest one I worked on was at the Mingo Job Corps Center. We built a dormitory down there. I was the contracting officer for that, which was a yearlong project. Other than that, I don't know of any others. I liked projects because I liked having a beginning and ending to something and end up with a product that I could say was either good or bad. But it didn't happen enough as far as I was concerned. Especially later when we didn't really have enough people in Budget and Finance and I didn't have the luxury of taking something and making a project out of it. We had a hard enough time just doing the regular day-to-day work. But we did have to do a lot of training and I suppose you could call that a project. When we started using the Federal Financial System we had to do a lot of training with the field people. It was a system that all of the financial information was entered at the source, in the field office so all of those people had to be trained in its use. That was an ongoing project.

MS. NORTON: That's probably changed now too, since I retired.

MR. WILLETT: I hope it has. It was not a good system. It hadn't changed up to three years ago, not very much at all unfortunately. I hope they eventually come up with something a little better than that.

MS. NORTON: Were you involved with any major issues that you had to deal with?

MR. WILLETT: I wouldn't say so, in the sense that other people like Assistant Regional Directors and Regional Directors and that kind of thing got involved. I wouldn't say that we dealt with issues. No, not really.

MS. NORTON: Was there ever a major impediment to your job or your career?

MR. WILLETT: The only impediment that I had, that I recognized was my own personal impediment that I wasn't in a position that I could move somewhere. I would have probably applied for and taken jobs other places if I had been in a position to move. But I wasn't really. But that wasn't an impediment that the FWS put on me, it was my

own. The only other impediment to the job I would say was at one point we lost the position called FFS Coordinator. She was Jennifer Koon. We advertised to replace that position. It was a very important position in our office.

MS. NORTON: What was that position called again?

MR. WILLETT: The FFS Coordinator.

MS. NORTON: That must have happened after I retired.

MR. WILLETT: I don't know. Do you remember when Jennifer Koon left?

MS. NORTON: Was she the little red headed gal?

MR. WILLETT: I think she was kind of blonde. She went to Washington.

MS. NORTON: Yes, I remember her.

MR. WILLETT: That was her job, the FFS Coordinator. She was in charge of training all of these people in the financial system. She did a good job but she left and we had to replace her. We weren't able to for reasons that I still don't understand. That position was vacant until three months before I retired.

MS. NORTON: Who is in that position now?

MR. WILLETT: To tell you the truth, I can't remember her name. We hired her three months before I retired and....

MS. NORTON: She hadn't advanced through the ranks? She was from outside?

MR. WILLETT: No, she was from outside. This was controversial because there were some good inside candidates who applied for the job. I have my own opinions on that which I will keep quiet and to myself! I didn't make the decision on who was going to be hired; it was done by my boss.

MS. NORTON: How far back can you remember and tell me who your different supervisors were?

MR. WILLETT: At Upper Mississippi Refuge it was Wayne Gooswell. He was the Refuge Manager. In the Area Office it was George Pickarus. In Budget and Finance in the Regional Office it was Dale Geving. In contracting it was Mel Anderson first, and then John Mullins. When I became Chief of Budget and Finance it was Tom Kersy.

MS. NORTON: You have a good memory, see? Who do you think were some of the individuals who helped shape your career?

MR. WILLETT: Wayne Gooswell at Upper Mississippi was very helpful, as well as Bart Foster who is the guy I replaced. Later I would say Tom Kercy was very helpful. He was instrumental in getting me a job when the Area Office closed. Then of course, he hired me as the Chief of Budget and Finance.

MS. NORTON: Who were some of the people that you knew outside of the Service? Do you think they would have been able to work for the Service, then or today?

MR. WILLETT: I don't know too many people who want to work for the federal government these days. Actually, I would recommend working for the federal government. It was a good experience for me. I suspect that there are going to be a lot of retirements in the next few years and there are a lot of chances for advancement. Young people don't seem to be interested like they were thirty years ago in the federal government.

MS. NORTON: I know that when I went work everybody thought I that I was really fortunate to get a job with the federal government. I always thought so too. Do you remember who was President, Secretary of the Interior or Director of FWS during your career?

MR. WILLETT: A lot of those I don't remember. If I heard the names I would remember the names. I don't remember who was Secretary of the Interior when I was first hired. I remember the Regional Director, Jack Hemphill. There was Lynn Greenwalt.

MS. NORTON: He was in Region 3 for a while before he went out to Portland.

MR. WILLETT: There was Turner. I remember him. And I am trying to remember the name of the woman who died. She was the Director of FWS.

MS. NORTON: I don't remember either. I'll have to look that up. How do you feel that changes in administration affected our work?

MR. WILLETT: I worked a lot with the budgets and surprisingly when we expected to have big budget cuts, we really didn't have them; like when a Republican would get elected. The Reagan years for instance, we didn't have a lot of big cuts that a lot of people thought we were going to have. So I don't think the changes in administration really affected us that much. I think we were a lot luckier than a lot of other federal agencies.

MS. NORTON: Who do you think were some of the individuals who shaped the Service in years gone by into what it is today?

MR. WILLETT: When you start talking about Directors and Secretaries and things like that, those positions are so far removed from where I was working on a day to day basis, I never really saw or even remember the kinds of programs that they had envisioned for the FWS. It did seem like whenever we got a new Director, we would go in another direction. They had their own ideas and projects that they wanted to get done. It never really affected me that much; at least my job.

MS. NORTON: That's good. What names did you hear more directly?

MR. WILLETT: Were you there when Hartwig became the Regional Director?

MS. NORTON: No, I wasn't there, but I've been to see him a couple of times.

MR. WILLETT: I think there were some real changes when he became Regional Director. It's just my personal opinion, but I think, he came with some instructions on what to do. And one of them was not to hire any. So we had a hiring freeze right away. It affected me because that was when we couldn't hire the replacement for Jennifer, which stretched for many years after that unfortunately. I think things changed a lot when he became Regional Director.

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

MR. WILLETT: The most enjoyable time I think probably was the beginning, working on the refuge at Upper Miss and working every day with all of the different district managers and people that we had in the office; and with the public too, which I didn't do after that. That was probably the most enjoyable. I guess being the Regional Budget and Finance Officer was a high point too.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever get any special awards or anything?

MR. WILLETT: Yeah, we'd get awards two or three times a year; Special Achievement Awards for various things. But there was nothing larger than that that I can remember.

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

MR. WILLETT: The most frustrating time was when we had three people in our office in the Regional Office of Budget and Finance. Other regions had like eight or ten people. Portland had over twenty people in their Budget and Finance office at one time, and we had three. The frustration was that all three of us had to do everybody's job. We couldn't concentrate on any one particular thing. And I could do any special projects like

you mentioned earlier, which is what I really enjoyed doing and we just really didn't have time for that. I guess that was the low point as far as frustration is concerned.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever have any dangerous or frightening experiences?

MR. WILLETT: No, not really. The worse thing that happened was when I was driving while I was in Winona. I was driving one of the vehicles. All of the vehicles we had were surplus; we never bought a new vehicle in those days. I was driving and I pressed on the brake and the brake pedal went right through the floor. It was so old that it had rusted out. Luckily the brake still worked, but it scared the hell out of me because it went right through the floor.

MS. NORTON: Can you tell me what your most humorous experience was?

MR. WILLETT: When we used to laugh a lot was when we first started working in the Area Office and everybody there was fairly young. There was Joe Scott; I don't know if you remember these people; and Larry Smith, John Quam, and Lynn Gretner who became Lynn Kelly. We used to go out after work a lot, and just go to the local bar and have a few drinks before we went home. We would sit there and laugh about things that happened at work and other things for an hour or two. That was a lot of fun.

MS. NORTON: What would you like to tell others about your career, and about FWS?

MR. WILLETT: It was satisfying for me. I was able to work for an organization that I thought was important, that had a mission that I thought was important. I was able to progress in the job and in where I wanted to work. As far as I am concerned, I consider myself pretty lucky that I had the job and worked for that organization. I would tell other people not to hesitate to work for an organization like FWS that does have an important mission. There are a lot of dedicated people working for FWS. I was privileged, I guess, to work for them.

MS. NORTON: What were some of the changes that you observed in the Service, like in the personnel or in the environment? You worked with all of the different divisions within the Region, so you probably would notice a change, like in personnel, more than others might, if there was a change.

MR. WILLETT: I don't remember any real big changes, at least in personnel. In terms of the office environment, it was different in the various places that I worked; the field office, area office and regional office. It was a lot more casual at the field office as you might expect. It was very casual also at the area office. It was somewhat more formal, although never really formal at the regional office.

MS. NORTON: It went up and down.

MR. WILLETT: That's true it went up and down.

MS. NORTON: I can remember when Bob Burwell was our Regional Director. This was before you started. That was at the time when pantsuits became quite popular for women. Finally, Mr. Burwell sent out a memo stating what would be acceptable and what could not be worn. It was very interesting. And he was a very wonderful Regional Director too. So we felt good that we could wear a pantsuit, but not jeans back in those days. Of course, things change through the years.

MR. WILLETT: Yeah, they did. I got to the point where I didn't have to wear a tie! Although I am not sure Hartwig was too happy with that.

MS. NORTON: I remember Jerry Gross. I used to keep ties in a draw so that if he ever had to go to a meeting, and had to have a tie, I could give him one. What are your thoughts on the future? Where do you see the Service heading in the next decade?

MR. WILLETT: That's a good question; boy I don't know. I think that in the next decade it's still going to be a viable organization. It's still going to be alive and well and working. I think that there are too many interest groups that would like the FWS to go away. Of course, I have my concerns about what's going to happen with the federal government, as far as budget deficits and that kind of thing. So who knows what will happen to an individual agency? The FWS has to maintain some visibility and they have to cultivate their friends, I think. That's what they have to do to stay alive.

MS. NORTON: Well, that's just about the end here. Do you have any photographs or documents that you would like to donate along with your interview?

MR. WILLETT: I do have an old photograph that was taken at a regional meeting. To tell you the truth, I am not sure where it is, but I'd be glad to donate it.

MS. NORTON: Okay, if you find it you can call me and I can pick it up.

MR. WILLETT: It's all of the Refuge Managers from about 1974.

MS. NORTON: Oh that would be great, to have something like that. Are they identified?

MR. WILLETT: There is a sheet with it that identifies each person.

MS. NORTON: Is there anybody else that you think we should interview?

MR. WILLETT: I am not sure whom you've done. Have you talked to John Mullins?

MS. NORTON: Oh yes, I've talked to John Mullins and Merlin. I've done many.

MR. WILLETT: I assume you've done Tom Kersy too?

MS. NORTON: I have not done Tom. He has an unlisted phone number and he has not responded to the one message I sent out. I would like to interview Tom. I think he would be a good one. I will make a note. See, this didn't take long, and it didn't hurt! So I want thank you for your time.

MR. WILLETT: It's been fun!