

National Heritage Team of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Oral History Program

Subject/USFW Retiree: Margaret Willis

Date: January 17, 2007

Interviewed by: Bob Streeter

Bob Streeter:

Hello this is Bob Streeter, it's January 17th, 2007, and I'm at the National Conservation & Training Center. I used to be with the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and I'm now retired from the Fish & Wildlife Service. And I'm here with Ms. Margaret Willis, who's recently retired but still coming back to do a little bit of work with the North American office. And we'd like to visit a little about what her memories are of the early days of the North American Office when it was in Washington when it was just coming together from being the Wetlands Act Office and then the Minneapolis Plan Office was moving together. So Margaret, when did you first come to join the office?

Margaret Willis:

I came to join the Wetlands Office I guess it was in August of 1991. I had come from the Duck Stamp Office over to the Wetlands Office on detail because this office was new coming to Washington, and you were just getting your staff together. And the first person that I met when I came was Holly McVeigh, who was your secretary-computer person, a little bit of everything! In the office at that time there were only four staff people. The next person that came onboard was David Smith, he was the wildlife biologist. Then Dr. David Weaver, you had just hired him, and he was the grants person, kept the books and everything. Then I met Bettina Sparrow. The office began to take shape and we got more and more staff.

Bob Streeter:

Mike Tome came about that same time?

Margaret Willis:

Yes, Mike Tome came. And then we had a young lady that was in college, I can't think of her name, but she was also a secretary, but we had more people to answer the phones. Then we also were doing grants, which the grants came in from the people in the field, I believe, and we had to Xerox each copy of the grants.

Bob Streeter:

Yes, these were proposals at that time.

Margaret Willis:

They were called proposals, and these proposals had hundreds of pages, and everything had to be kept in chronological order. And we were worked day and night copying and copying and putting stuff together.

Bob Streeter:

Because they had to be sent out to the reviewers then?

Margaret Willis:

Yes, we had to send them out to the reviewers. We would put them on the floor and then we'd get down on our hands and knees and stuff them, and then we'd have a time where all of the staff would take turns stuffing so many envelopes because they all had to go out that one particular day. And it was a fun office, but it was a very busy office. The staff traveled a lot, the executive director traveled, the assistant director traveled, everybody traveled, so there was a lot of travel arrangements that had to be made.

Bob Streeter:

And they had to have travel vouchers.

Margaret Willis:

Travel vouchers had to be completed in the travel. Then we had what we called was the Council, and I think there were about ten council members, and you had three or four meetings a year at different places. Then that's when I came in to do a lot of making travel arrangements; airline and hotel, setting up meetings.

Bob Streeter:

Now these people that traveled, were they just standard Fish and Wildlife Service people or were they people that needed special treatment in some way? Who were they?

Margaret Willis:

No, they were NGO's, state directors, whoever; they were members of the Council. And like somebody we had...

Bob Streeter:

Let's see, Matt Connelly from Ducks Unlimited.

Margaret Willis:

That's right from Duck Unlimited; we had somebody from TNC, The Nature Conservancy.

Bob Streeter:

National Rifle Association that first year.

Margaret Willis:

Yes, and then we had...

Bob Streeter:

Four state directors.

Margaret Willis:

Four state directors, I believe; I think there were ten members total and one alternate. And wherever the meetings were, and these people were from different parts of the country, maybe one or two were local. That was more travel, getting them ready, getting stuff prepared for the meetings, plus we had to have coffee!

Bob Streeter:

Probably some of these people had never traveled under government travel before, so you had to kind of educate them and their secretaries.

Margaret Willis:

Them on the government travel per diem and what we paid for, what we couldn't pay for. We did not reimburse the non-government travelers for their airline tickets; all airline tickets had to be purchased by the government, and they received the per diem for their lodging and their meals, and we paid them for incidentals like taxicab fares and parking, stuff like that, etcetera.

Bob Streeter:

So you came in August of 1991. It probably didn't take very long before you were enmeshed in the workings of the office and probably one of the people that knew the most about what had to be done?

Margaret Willis:

Yes, because I had worked in the Duck Stamp Office where we did a lot of travel for the judges. And in the Duck Stamp Office we had six judges for the contests, and I did all of the travel for them, the arrangements and everything. So coming over to the Wetlands Office, I had an idea of what I had to do, and I knew more about it than anybody else in there, by Holly being new coming from the private sector it was brand new, and plus Holly was our computer guru, she kept everybody's computers up and running. And the office was a very busy office, and then we got more and more staff. And then some people left, got moved on to different jobs. But I would say the North American Office, the people were very friendly, everybody got along. And it was so nice when our executive director would tell us that he was going to have lunch for us, and it would always be a Mexican lunch. Everybody was so happy, "Bob's buying lunch today --- Bob's buying lunch!"

Bob Streeter:

But it was only Mexican; he didn't get anything else, huh?

Margaret Willis:

No, because most of the people enjoyed it because some people had never had it. And we knew that you and Karen used to go out to Mexican restaurants and you had a good flavor for good food. And the Mexican lunches were always, and we used to have so much fun.

Bob Streeter:

And Margaret, what was the relationship as you saw it of the North American office with other offices, for example, the Refuges, Migratory Birds, etcetera? What was the interaction that you carried on there?

Margaret Willis:

Well, we worked together some but not a whole lot because our office was just different.

Bob Streeter:

Well, one thing I remember is that if we ever needed anything done, it required signatures of somebody or moving it through the system, but Margaret Willis knew how to move it.

Margaret Willis:

Only because Margaret Willis got to know a lot of people.

Bob Streeter:

You knew people and people knew you and liked you.

Margaret Willis:

And I was able to get a lot of things that we needed, and whenever people would say no, and if they knew you and they liked you and you were nice to them, and I made a lot of friends along the way. And one person was Judy Lundberg when I first came, and she was also one of the people that recommended me to Bob Streeter to work there, and Judy Lundberg was a special lady; she would give you her heart if she could, she was just so kind. And if you needed something and if she didn't have it, she would get on the phone to somebody else's office and said that she needed such and such a thing and she would give it to you.

Bob Streeter:

I know from my perspective that that was the invaluable, that you couldn't buy people; you couldn't train people that had those connections like you had, so that was very important. I also know it wasn't just the Wetlands Council, but there was also the North American Waterfowl Management Plan Committee, and I think they traveled in Canada and U.S. and once or twice to Mexico, and I think you made travel arrangements for them also didn't you?

Margaret Willis:

Yes, I also did the travel for the Plan Committee.

Bob Streeter:

And I remember that those people like "Red" Hunt from California, he never called me, who'd he call if he needed to know what was going on?

Margaret Willis:

He would call me.

Bob Streeter:

That's right! Because you could get it done, whatever he needed, and you had developed such wonderful relationships with these people that were in the different states and other organizations.

Margaret Willis:

Yeah, I had quite a rapport with a lot of very, very nice people.

Bob Streeter:

Who was the most difficult person other than maybe outside of the two of us, who were the most difficult to get along with in terms of the travel and trying to satisfy them when they? People that you knew well or?

Margaret Willis:

Some of the people I had to work with the assistants, not directly with the person, the traveler, but I had to work with the assistants who wanted me to put out the red carpet. And I thought that everybody was treated the same way, nobody got to fly first class. The assistants would say, "Well, he doesn't fly coach." And I would say, "Well, everybody flies coach that works for the government, we don't pay for first class." And some of them were very irritated with me and they would go over my head and say, "Well, let me speak to Bob Streeter." And I would say, "Sure, just a minute" and put them on. And Bob would talk to them and after he finished with them then he'd transfer them back to me and she would say, "Okay, you can make the travel arrangements."

Bob Streeter:

Well, we had a good working relationship and I had absolute trust in Margaret Willis and what she was doing. That if there was something that would need to be done differently she would let us know.

Margaret Willis:

And I had a job where I really was working with the people and I liked what I was doing. And I found it was a lot of fun and it was also a learning tool, I was learning a lot of things that I did not know about wetlands, so that was the education for me in that office. And I learned a lot about different things and working with some very difficult people, but in the end we all were friends, everybody, nobody departed angry or whatnot.

Bob Streeter:

And I know this is an interview with you but there some things you won't tell about yourself. I know that some people have some kind of difficulties at home and they'd bring it to the office, and where they come in late and leave early, or they spend a lot of time on the telephone, etcetera. Margaret Willis was a person that came to work to work, and if there were problems at home she left them at home, if there was somebody to talk she might get it done and get it done quickly but she didn't spend time on the telephone. And then she set that example for others; we had some young people that came and worked in our office, she would become kind of a mentor to them and point out that there are certain standards here that we're going to maintain. Do you remember being that kind of a person?

Margaret Willis:

Yes I do, and I received some flack from some people about it because they felt that they were young and they wanted to do whatever.

Bob Streeter:

Yeah, they saw that maybe some of their friends in other offices weren't working as hard.

Margaret Willis:

That's right, but in our office everybody worked together. And one time I remember we were very busy and you came out of your office with your suit on and you got down on the floor and helped us stuff these envelopes. You said, "Everybody is working, this is a job that has to go out and I'm down here, everybody." And we just had fun doing things, everyone was working together and we just enjoyed it. And people would say, "I can't believe that Bob Streeter is down there doing that."

Bob Streeter:

We were all doing what had to be done.

Margaret Willis:

I said, "When something has to be done, everybody pitches in and gets the job done."

Bob Streeter:

What do you recall about Joint Venture Coordinators? Did you have any involvement with them?

Margaret Willis:

Only a few; the Joint Venture Coordinators we worked most with was the ones that traveled to Washington. And one was Seth Mott, Charlie Baxter, Carl Madsen a little, and Steve Moran.

Bob Streeter

There was a gentleman by the name of Mitch King.

Margaret Willis:

Mitch King, that's right yeah, Mitch King came in quite a bit.

Bob Streeter:

Do you know what happened to Mitch King? He was our Joint Venture Coordinator in the Prairie Potholes at one time; do you know what happened to him?

Margaret Willis:

What?

Bob Streeter:

He became a regional director; he's now the Regional Director in Region 6.

Margaret Willis:

That's right, he did. He was the Assistant Director over in Main Interior for Federal Assistance, and then he left there and then got a regional director job.

Bob Streeter:

So some of the people became notorious, well not notorious but famous.

Margaret Willis:

They became famous, yes. I mean like David Smith; he came there as a wildlife biologist and then when they were looked up he was the director of the office.

Bob Streeter:

And if you look back over your, how many years in the federal government were you in?

Margaret Willis:

It was 21-1/2 years.

Bob Streeter:

What was one or two of the highlights that you can look back and think about? What will stand out in your memory as you go into retirement?

Margaret Willis:

One of the highlights is when I first came, when I went to work for the Duck Stamp Office. And it was a great office to work for, it was a small office, and we worked very hard. I had no idea what duck stamps were, I learned a lot about duck stamps, about hunting, stamp collectors, and all of those people. Then working there I worked with a very nice young lady who was the manager of the office, Norma Opgrand. And then we had a little dumpy old office around by the elevator. And at that time when I came in a new director came, Frank Dunkle, and he was very, very nice to Norma and myself. And one of the best things he did, he told us that we could have an office anywhere in the Main Interior, just let him know and he would see to it that we got the office. And we had a nice office where people could come into the office and see our posters and the stamps and everything, buy duck stamp pins and everything. But he was a very, very nice person, and I really enjoyed working there.

And then my second home was the North American Office. And I came there working for Bob Streeter, who I'd heard so many things about, and at first I was a little hesitant, but when I went there and met him and got to talking to him, I felt at ease, relaxed, and I said, "People just don't know, they tell you all kinds of things."

Bob Streeter:

It sounds like you had a very positive effect on everybody you met, because not everybody liked Frank Dunkle either, but he was nice when you were around.

Margaret Willis:

He was very nice to us.

Bob Streeter:

I think that reflects the kind of person that you are and what you bring out in people, Margaret.

Margaret Willis:

I try, and in the office I'm in now, I work with some nice people and some people who are not so nice. But I get along with them anyway, if they ask me to do something I tell them, "Sure, I'll do it."

Bob Streeter:

Well, you became an institution in the North American Plan Office. As many people came and went, you were there as the rock solid base and provided great support to me and I know to David Smith. And we thank you very much and appreciate what you did for the office and for the ducks too in the bottom line.

Margaret Willis:

It was a great 21 years, it doesn't seem like it's been that long but I can truly say that working for the Department of Interior and working for those two offices, I really enjoyed it, and it was about the best two jobs that I had in my working career. And working with great people, people that were positive, and I learned a lot of different things and I can really appreciate things.

Bob Streeter:

So now you can teach your grandkids about ducks and the importance of wetlands, right?

Margaret Willis:

That's right, that's what I do.

Bob Streeter:

So you will keep on with that. Do you have any specific plans in your retirement?

Margaret Willis:

I'm just going to do things that I feel like doing that I want to do until I really find something that I want to do permanently. But in the meantime, anybody that needs help or I can go in and help David and Mike; I don't mind doing it at all a couple of days a week. If I can help the secretary to get on track because a lot of things she doesn't know yet, I don't mind going in helping her, and I've given her my phone number and told her if something comes in she doesn't understand just give me a call, and if she doesn't understand it still I said, "Well the next day I'll come in for a couple of hours and sit down and help you."

Bob Streeter:

Well that's great. Your legacy has been made and you will continue to make it.

Margaret Willis:

Well, like I said, I truly enjoyed it and I enjoyed the people and the friendships, everything that I've made through the years, and I will continue to be friends with them and stay around.

Bob Streeter:

That's great. Well, thank you very much for visiting and sharing some of your memories of the North American Plan from the perspective, that's a unique perspective.

Margaret Willis:

It was great.

Unverified: Holly McVeigh (pg 1)

Key Words: Margaret Willis, Bob Streeter, National Conservation & Training Center, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, North American Waterfowl Management Plan, North American Office, Wetlands Act Office, Minneapolis Plan Office, Duck Stamp Office, David Smith, David Weaver, Bettina Sparrow, Mike Tome, the Council, Matthew Connelly, Ducks Unlimited, TNC (The Nature Conservancy), National Rifle Association, Forest State Director, Judy Lundberg, North American Waterfowl Management Plan Committee, Eldrige "Red" Hunt, Joint Venture Coordinator, Seth Mott, Charlie Baxter, Carl Madsen, Mitch King, Joint Venture Coordinator in the Prairie Potholes, Assistant Director of the Main Interior for Federal Assistance, wildlife biologist, David Smith, Norma Opgrand, Frank Dunkle,