INTERVIEW WITH JOHN C. OBERHEU
BY GEORGE GENTRY and MARK MADISON
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MR. OBERHEU: My name is John C. Oberheu. The C is for Carl. That's O-B-E-R-H-E-U.

MR. GENTRY: Can you give me a little biographical background; your date of birth, where you went to school and those kinds of things?

MR. OBERHEU: I was the son of a Missionary. I was born in India, the son of a Lutheran Missionary on April 2, 1931. There were seven kids in our family and we lived there until I was eleven years old when the war broke out; World War II. We had to come to the States. The government advised all of us citizens to get out of India because there was danger of a Japanese invasion. We came to the States and lived in western Kentucky in Paducah. Then my Dad got a Minister's job in southern Illinois in the little town of Almstead, Illinois. I lived there through High School. I went to High School at Mound City, Illinois. I went to the University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale. I got my degree there and went into the Army Medical Corps for two years. I came back with the GI Bill and got my graduate degree. It was a Master's degree in Wildlife Management.

MR: GENTRY: What date was you degree?

MR. OBERHEU: Undergraduate was in 1953, and graduate was in 1956. So when I got my Master's degree, after a period of about two weeks I took my orals and graduated, I got married and moved to North Carolina for my first job.

MR. GENTRY: Your first job with the Fish and Wildlife Service was when?

MR. OBERHEU: Well that was with the State of North Carolina. I worked for the State of North Carolina, Wildlife Resources Commission for about six years starting in August of 1956. Then in early 1963, I took a job with River Basins, USFWS in the Raleigh office. Bill Lawson was my Supervisor. He left while I was there and Jerry Stegman came and was my Supervisor. I guess they must of liked my work because they sent me to the Regional Office for a detail to edit some of the reports of some of they stuff that they were working on. They must have liked me enough there that they decided they were going to offer me a job in the Regional Office. My field time in the FWS was just a little over a year. Then I went to the Regional Office. Spencer Smith was my Supervisor. I worked with him for about two years. Then I took a job as the Pesticide Staff Specialist.

MR. GENTRY: What would be your overall area of expertise during your career?

MR. OBERHUE: Well, I've got a lot of different things. Not many people, I guess, have jumped between different disciplines like I have. I've been in River Basins, and the River Basins Regional Office, like I said. Then I was in Wildlife Services, which also included Animal Damage Control and Wildlife Enhancement and Pesticide Surveillance and Monitoring. That was our official title. Now there were only five Pesticide Specialists in the whole country. There was one for each Region and there were only five Regions at that time. We were a close-knit group because we were trained together. And part of the historical thing is the training we had at Bowie State College in Maryland. We went for two weeks of orientation there when they first kicked off Wildlife Services and Fishery Services. This was following a report that was done by the Leopold Committee, which wanted to change the face of Predator and Rodent Control. They had a lot of bad PR and stuff. They wanted to change the way Predator and Rodent Control did their work so they'd have a more environmental kind of approach. We were the first group that got in on this. At this school in Bowie, Maryland; I should mention Bill Stickle and Lucille Stickle, both worked at Patuxent and were in the forefront of the Pesticide research thing. Bill Stickle especially was such a dynamic person, with so much enthusiasm and intenseness, when he was teaching us about the vital ness of this pesticide work. They were wanting people in the field that could be the eyes and ears of the research people so they could pick up things that were happening. This was just following Rachel Carson's book, and of course part of our preparation was to read *Silent Spring,* which we did. So we had some background, but he gave us all kinds of stuff that they were working on. DDT at that time was in very widespread use. They suspected that there were problems. They were finding residues of DDT in all kinds of different animals. They even found DDT residues in people. Walon Hayes was the Director of Communicable Disease Center in Atlanta. He was a very well known Toxicologist. He did a special study on DDT, feeding it to prisoners. Now this sounds impossible in today's climate.

MR. GENTRY: What time period was that?

MR. OBERHEU: I don't know just when the study occurred, but it must have been shortly before we were taking over because they were aware of the residue problem but they could not document any problems that DDT has caused to anything. They couldn't even tell that DDT was affecting any animals.

MR. GENTRY: Was this in the 1960s?

MR. OBERHUE: This was in 1966 when we had this in Bowie, Maryland. So it was a very exciting time for me. This was a new thing. I had no chemical background or anything, but I found out that I didn't need that. The other guys that were working with me didn't need it either.

MR. MADISON: So where was your focus? Was it on the impact of DDT on birds or on fish?

MR. OBERHUE: Well, you know, we were looking for all kinds of things like that. As I said, they still had not found it. I didn't finish about the pesticide study that Walon Hayes did. He fed this to prisoners. They found that residues increased, but they could not tell any adverse effect at all. So DDT had a clean bill of health and yet it was proliferating the whole world. They were even finding it up in the Arctic where DDT had never been used. Bill Stickle gave us this training and explained all of this to us, he said, "We're looking for any sneaky effects". He called them "sneaky effects". He told us that there may be something in this that affects reproduction in these animals. It would be a indirect effect. You would see it directly. Its not killing critters outright, but it can be a problem. They were so enthusiastic about this training that they had us in for evening sessions. And he really had an infectious way of charging you up so that you wanted to so this.

So we were the eyes and ears of the Regions. And one of the things we did was Pesticide Monitoring. We killed Starlings at definite, selected stations. I don't know how many throughout the country, but each year, twice a year we would collect ten Starlings from each site. Starlings were picked because it was good species that ate both plant and animals things. It was found in every state. It was a pest animal. You didn't have to worry about collecting them. We used to go out and collect Starlings, maybe even in the center of a city. We learned that if we were in a government vehicle and we went with a shotgun; we shot them off of electric lines mostly; as long as we were in a government vehicle and acted like we were officials, people very seldom ever questioned us. One sample that I got was in downtown Panama City right in front of the Post Office. There was a big Starling roost where they came in there and roosted at night. I got the Game Warden with me and he notified the Police. We went there in the evening when all of the birds were coming in to roost. We loaded the shotgun with five shells and the Game Warden went out there. The police stopped the traffic and the Game Warden went out there and fired five times into the trees. We got out sample all at one time! There were some interesting things like that.

MR. MADISON: What were you finding in the Starlings?

MR. OBERHEU: They found DDT of course, pretty much nationwide, but they were able to find hot spots. And we were first learning about other kinds of things. They were also checking for Heptechlorine, Dealdrine and some of these other chemicals that were so called 'hard pesticides. And there was a new chemical we worked with, Dursban that Dow Chemical was coming out with. Chemicals had to go through a registration process and we had a guy in the Washington office, Dr. Dale…. I can't even remember his last name, but anyway, he was…made that was his name, Dr. Dale. He reviewed the applications of chemical companies when they would register a new chemical. They had to have the label on it and tell of the hazards. He would recommend what would have to be on there to protect wildlife. Well, he needed information. He didn't have it. So

anything we found on adverse effects of chemicals, we were sending to Dr. Dale. He would use that in his review of pesticide registrations. As I say, it was exciting times. Myrex was being applied. The USDA had a program of applying Myrex through the twelve southeastern states. Everywhere where there were Fire ants, they were going to kill Fire ants with putting Myrex on them. They were going to try to eradicate Fire ants if you can imagine.

MR. GENTRY: In your studies into DDT, when did anybody first get an idea that it was a problem?

MR. OBERHEU: I should finish that up; the breakthrough on DDT came when they found soft shells of Pelicans. Pelicans in their nests were sitting on shells that collapsed because they were soft. When they checked these eggs, they found a high content of DDT. So they figured that this was the source and they started checking. Eventually, it turned out that one of these "sneaky effects" of DDT that Bill Stickle talked about was that it made the eggshells soft. And this was happening eagles and pelicans. Pelicans were wiped out in Louisiana, which used to be the Pelican State. And for a while Pelicans were just wiped out. They were reintroduced from Florida there. Eagles of course and Peregrines were also affected by that.

MR. GENTRY: From the time someone discovered there was a problem, which you guys did, how much time and how complicated was it to move from that information to stopping the use of DDT? Where you all involved in that?

MR. OBERHEU: DDT was, as I say, they found all of these residues, Robins was a big thing up where they were treating for Dutch Elm Disease. The leaves had DDT on them when they fell down. The worms got the DDT. And they found high residues in worms. And they found high residues in Robins. But of the Robins that died, some had high residues and some did not. It didn't make sense. What really killed the Robins? Was it DDT or something else? So they eventually found that the amount of DDT in the brain was diagnostic. After you reached a certain level in the brain of the animal, then it was diagnostic. Bill Stickle and the other people at Patuxent determined this with their studies by feeding captive animals or birds. Once they got that, DDT was the criminal. They started cutting it out. You know the rest of the story. Gradually DDT residues have dissipated or gone into the silt and mud so that it's not available.

MR. GENTRY: Was there a big argument at that time with the chemical industry about stopping the use of DDT?

MR. OBERHEU: There really was. An example of this would be the Myrex, when I started talking about Fire ants. As I say they were using Myrex in a twelve state area. They had hearings on this. They had old B-17s [airplanes] and they were going over the city of Atlanta. You might remember this if you lived in Atlanta. They were treating the

whole city by strips. The question came up as to whether they should keep this going or not. In the State Legislature, they had a Hearing about Myrex. I testified for the FWS at that State Hearing. The USDA folks were there and were saying that they had done studies and checked a lot of things. "This Myrex is completely harmless. We've tried all kinds of things and we can't find the first thing that caused any problem". It came time for me to testify and I testified that my concern was 'it's absurd to think that we can put this chemical on such a wide basis, and even though it's at a very light rate and it kills the Fire ants, what other critters does it kill?' I felt that it was ridiculous to think that with this kind of widespread use of a chemical that only one thing in the environment would be affected. Of course, that's a theoretical argument and they kind of scoffed at that. They said they had hard experiments and data to show. A report that came to me as Pesticide Specialist in the Region, from one of the wildlife refuges that a scientist had been passing through South Carolina from the Smithsonian. He had stopped there. He was a studying ants. He happened to stop by the refuge and mentioned that he couldn't find any ants there. The ants were wiped out. That was big news. I took that and wrote it up in a report. I talked with Bill Stickle about Myrex. And Myrex is a very chlorinated hydrocarbon and by it's chemical structure it's one of the most stable chemicals that there is. So you would expect it to last a long time, and to move into the water environment and eventually into the Ocean. So I sat down and wrote a letter based on what Bill had told me and what we had from the report from the refuge in South Carolina, and sent that forward to Washington. Shortly after that they started doing studies of Myrex and they found that it was bad for Crabs and Shrimp and it affected marine things and that it was very persistent in the environment. To make a long story short, Myrex was eventually, they dropped this program. And Fire ants today, are with us throughout the southeast. You probably know this. We live with them just fine. But we were able to head off something that would have, or could have caused a lot of environmental difference.

MR. MADISON: That was one of Carson's points. When you read Carson did you know she had been a former Service employee?

MR. OBERHEU: I never met Rachel Carson, but I read her book and had the highest respect for her.

MR. MADISON: Did Lucille and Bill mention that she had worked for the FWS?

MR. OBERHEU: Yes, of course. Another thing that ought to be mentioned is that after Bill and Lucille retired; and this was years later; I happened to go through Franklin where they were living, Franklin, North Carolina. I found out that they were there. I called them up and went to visit them. My wife and I went and had dinner with them. The Patuxent facility where they worked had been named…of course Lucille worked up until she was the Director. I don't know if it was all of Patuxent, but I think maybe it was. They named this building after Bill and Lucille Stickle, which is… and that was back when Research was with the FWS.

MR. GENTRY: That's a whole other thing. I think when I came on with the Service is when they dropped the Research arm. What was that all about? What era was that, that in someone's wisdom that the Service no longer needed a research arm?

MR. OBERHEU: That was the period when Spencer Smith was the Director.

MR. GENTRY: What period of time was that?

MR. OBERHEU: I'm not sure; I'd have to look it up. They created a thing called Biological Services at that time. It was sort of a separate unit and it was intended to provide biological information that could be used be Ecological Services in all of their studies and by Endangered Species and so forth. They got pretty powerful and got a lot of money. And of course when Spencer Smith was there, his history was the old River Basins or Ecological Services now it's called. That was important to him and he was putting emphasis where he felt it was important. So these research guys had a separate unit that was called Biological Services. I can't remember the guy's name who was the leader of that. But I think they got to feeling pretty strong and decided that they needed to have their own organization. They tried to get out of the…the way I understand it, they wanted to become their own agency, within Interior. Instead of doing that, once they got it in to Congress, they decided to put them into Geological Survey. So now, Research is in Geological Survey, which it should be with Fish and Wildlife when they are doing Fish and Wildlife type research.

MR. GENTRY: How has that impacted the mission of the Service now?

MR. OBERHEU: I think we still work with them pretty much. It's still a good working relationship. But it's not even two difference divisions; it's between Geological Survey that is in Interior and Fish and Wildlife. It's still works, but it's not a logical organization.

MR. MADISON: What happened after Pesticides? What else did you do in the Service?

MR. OBERHUE: After Pesticides I was a Regional Biologist with Refuges for a while. The Alligator Council was an interesting thing during that time. The Alligator was still not listed as endangered, but it was causing great concern because populations were way down. They were still able to sell Alligator hides and about the only place that they were doing well was on refuges where they were protected from the hunting. In the southeast they formed an Alligator Council. I don't if that was the full name. But anyway, it involved all of the states that had Alligators and the Fish and Wildlife Service. We established a system of censusing Alligators. There was a guy in Louisiana, I can't remember his name; he had a Cajun name; he was a Professor at LSU who was kind of a leader of the thing. In the census technique you would go out at night and set out a route. You would follow that route in the same way, and at the same time of the year and

everything maybe two times a year. You would count all of the Alligator eyes that you would see at night. That's the way you tell Alligators at night. But it was just a way of getting a relative abundance. All of this data; I monitored those that were on the wildlife refuges because I had to establish the lines, or had people do that. And we had to keep track of when to send out the Alligator Census reports and get those back. Then we turned them all over to this Professor at LSU who compiled it. But they got enough information to support the listing of the gator. Once they got it listed then the commerce in Alligators was stopped. So no longer could they sell Alligators. It was illegal to ship them out of the country. No body was buying them and if they did they were in danger of getting caught and of big fines. That's when Alligators turned around and started recovering. It didn't take long. Alligators have a good biotic potential. They reproduce a lot when they are given the ability. What had happened before that was that they were getting all of the big alligators and the little ones don't reproduce until they get up to about six feet. So they weren't letting any of the reproduction go on. Once that was changed, alligators started recovering. That was a success story.

MR. MADISON: Are there other species that were prominent when you were a Regional Biologist?

MR. OBERHEU: No, but later on in my career I went to the Washington office. I worked there about three years. I worked in what I guess was a historic thing. It was a real disappointment in my career, because it was important when I went into it. They had what they called a Mammals and Non-Migratory Bird Program. This was when they went to program management. I worked for Jim Langford who had come from Region 4. Nat Reed was Assistant Secretary. Nat Reed has a pet peeve, which was the importation for the pet industry; importing pets and all of the abuse of the animals that were imported. He wanted regulations to stop that so it was his pet project. Jim Langford had it and he selected me to be the head guy to write the Injurious Wildlife Importation Regulations. So we set out to do that and we had to contact people and find out…the importation of animals was restricted I think, under the Lacy Act. And they had what the called the injurious wildlife that were prohibited; things like the Starling and the English sparrow and things that were already established here. They were things that were already on the list of things that couldn't be imported. Who would want to import them anyway? They were already pests. But they had the machinery set up, but they needed to refine the list. So Nat Reed's approach was to have a clean list. Instead of putting things on the list after they were a pest, "Let's have prohibited list. And we won't let them come in." The best way to do that was, "We shouldn't be letting anything in because we can't check all of these animals to see it they're going to be pests. What we'll do is only put animals that we know will not be a problem"; they will not escape and become established. That would be the clean list. The approach was to just list those that could be imported. We were figuring that there would be just a very few. We started into this thing thinking that. Of course when we had our first cut made and went out with it to the public; you have to coordinate and put it in the Federal Register and all

of this stuff; we got all kind of people, the pet industry, the zoos, the research people at universities, pet collectors; the importers of reptiles and amphibians and all of that stuff. Then we had to regroup and go back and contact all of these people. We had experts in each discipline; mammals, ornithology, and so forth. We went through an extensive process getting animals that we could import safely. It was growing to be a really big list and there was a lot of difficult. To make long story short; it got to be so big, and so cumbersome we wrapped it up and had the list all done. We ran it all of the way through the process of two environmental impact statements, two requests for comments from the public and you have to analyze and summarize all of those and respond to all of them. All of that's done and all it takes is the Secretary of the Interiors signature to put them into law. A Congressman from California, whose name I can't remember, came forth and said, "Now wait a minute, before you do this, I want to have a Hearing in California because you are affecting the fish import people in my District." So, we did that and that was the end of the Injurious Wildlife. It never resurrected. They took all of that correspondence, and all of the voluminous files that had been accumulated and put it away and forgot it. And to this day, they have never changed that. They've added a few more injurious species to the list but still there are all kinds of potential pests coming in and exotic things that are being introduced. Congressman Dingle, who is now prominent, was the one that held the Hearings on this. We presented information to him on it and that was part of our review process too. So it was very exhaustive. But it was a big disappointment. Two years of my career went into injurious wildlife regulations and they all went to naught. That's part of the frustration of working in a bureaucracy, and that's what makes it so hard for people to go to the Washington office and work up there. Because well, what kind of fulfillment do you get out of that? I learned a lot and I met a lot of interesting people. For my career, I guess that was good but I never felt like I produced anything in that two years.

MR. MADISON: We've got to break off here.

MR. GENTRY: Two quick questions, real quick. With all of that frustration, bureaucracy and politics, why in the world would you show up here for a retiree's reunion like this? There must be something about working for the Fish and Wildlife Service that brings you back. What is that?

MR. OBERHEU: I have had a tremendous career. I've been able to work with people who I really admire. I have been to places as a result of my work, and when I worked in the Washington office I was able to visit Alaska several times. There were places in the southwest that I had never been. I was able to see beautiful places and meet a lot of interesting people. I was Supervisor of Refuges for many years and I went to all of the Refuges in Region 4; I went to just about every one of them except the more recent ones. I have been to them and can appreciate them. The people in Refuges are great, dedicated people themselves and it's a pleasure to work with them and be associate with them. So

my career has been rewarding. I haven't written my memoirs, but in my write up of my memoirs I'll say that I've had a rich life.

MR. GENTRY: What is you favorite habitat or ecosystem that you have worked in or visited? Describe to us what it was like. I'm talking about wildlife, the habitat that was there.

MR. OBERHEU: That would be hard to say. I think one of my biggest thrills was when we were selecting lands for the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. I was working in Washington at that time and I got to go to Alaska to help the Committee decide which lands would be selected. Gordy Watson was Regional Director there at that time and he took this group on a tour of various places where they were proposing to have wildlife refuges selected from these native claims lands. One day we took off from Anchorage and made just a fantastic days trip. We went up by Denali and saw that. We went to the Yukon Flats and we went over to the western coast of Alaska. We saw Walruses on and island. When we went back we landed in Bettles, Alaska that is just north of the Arctic Circle and refueled. This was in one of the old Interior planes. We took off from there and flew along the pipeline all the way to Prudhoe Bay seeing all of the beautiful views and wildlife habitats of the Arctic Range. We saw all of that and then came back. I have photographs of that. Even though you take them through the smoky window and it's not very good, it still helps you remember. Then, coming back in the evening with the sunset and those contours of the snow; this was in the fall of the year and it was still snowy up there. We crossed rivers where we saw natives fishing. It was an unforgettable experience. And so much wildlife habitat in one day, it was just overwhelming. It got dark before we got back to Fairbanks; you couldn't see any more so there was no sense in looking out because there weren't any lights below. But just to sit back and reflect on the sights that I had seen, and try to cement them in my brain so I could remember them. I guess that's probably the most memorable experience I had with wildlife.