

INTERVIEW WITH HAROLD MILLER
BY JERRY FRENCH JUNE 18, 2002
Also present Mrs. Velma Miller and Mrs. Pat French

MR. FRENCH: Today is June 18, 2002. This is Jerry French and I am sitting in the home of Mr. Harold Miller. Harold was the Refuge Clerk at Salt Plains from probably the 1940s up until he retired. He spent forty-three years in government service. Harold has had a long career and got to work with everybody; from me, on one end of the scale, clear up Lynn Greenwalt on the other. Harold, if you would...I know that you grew up here and that your parents sold land to the Refuge when it was first established. Would you care to tell me a little about that?

MR. MILLER: This is Harold Miller speaking now. My parents owned a farm on the north side of Salt Plains Lake. They settled there in 1920. I grew up on that particular farm. A portion of it was purchased by the Corps of Engineers when they built the dam in 1938-1941. After four years service in the Air Force, I returned back to the old sand hills to raise my family. I married my childhood sweetheart, Velma. We only lived three or four miles apart as children. Then, in 1946 when I returned to the farm I was offered a job by Seth Lowe, who was at that time the Refuge Manager of the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge. I started to work in October of 1946 and continued until December of 1984. I enjoyed a long time with the Refuge System.

MR. FRENCH: Would you tell me just a little bit about your Military service? I know that you spent a little time in Italy, didn't you?

MR. MILLER: Yes, I was in the service for approximately four years, with the Air Force. I settled down with the 15th Air Force Command in [sounds like Berry] Italy. My duties there in Berry were as a File Clerk. I did quite a bit of copy writing for the Officers in charge of my Unit.

MR. FRENCH: I believe you also worked down in Texas on what is now or near Matagorda Island on the peninsula which was actually a bombing range.

MR. MILLER: Yeah, I was assigned there in my early years with the Air Force. It was the Matagorda Peninsula. At the time I was stationed there I think it was two different units on the island. One of them, the one that I was connected with was more or less a target range area. Were as the Matagorda Island was managed for ground target practice. Also, Matagorda Island was not being used by the Whooping Cranes at that time but it was under the control of the Department of the Interior, the way I remember it.

MR. FRENCH: Harold and I worked together from 1974 until 1977. He used to tell me all the stories. Harold, when you first started at Salt Plains was there any public use at all? Or were the gates pretty much locked?

MR. MILLER: The way I recall, there was very little public use. In fact, all of the gates were locked and we weren't even permitted to destroy anything. We couldn't even cut limbs off the trees around the houses. The Refuge Manager at that time thought that the only thing we could kill was feral cats, so he carried a gun to kill the cats.

MR. FRENCH: Through the years, you've worked with I don't know how many different Managers. You've worked with many Assistant Managers. Probably one of the most prominent men you ever got an opportunity to work with was Lynn Greenwalt. This was almost one of his first assignments wasn't it?

MR. MILLER: That's right. The way I remember, he was Assistant Manager when he came in, but it was his first assignment I believe under that title. He was a great man to work with. He made snap decisions that were usually right on target. He was correct in most of the decisions that he made.

MR. FRENCH: I recall one time when Tex Dale, who was the Foreman here for years; he said that when he worked with Lynn, it was very difficult. Tex was a very short man and he said that Lynn was so tall that they'd start somewhere and he was almost having to run to keep up with Lynn. Lynn would be in a hurry to go somewhere and he wouldn't run, he'd just walk. His stride was so long, it just kept everybody else in a sweat keeping up with him!

MR. MILLER: It was not only in walking. We had to hurry to keep up with him mentally. He was so sharp it seemed like. He had an excellent memory and related real well with the crew. But he didn't try to hold that over us. He was just one of the family in the Refuge System. We all got along real well with Lynn. I appreciated his ability to make decisions and to the right thing that needed to be done at the right time.

MR. FRENCH: Well, while we're talking about refuge family; one of the great refuge families which is still around is the Beatty family. You got to work with Les Beatty, Sr. and of course you remember Les Beatty, Jr. when he was still a young man. Would you like to tell us a little bit about the Beattys?

MR. MILLER: Les Beatty was an excellent man to work with. He was real cooperative. Anybody who worked with him would enjoy and appreciate him. He was more or less an engineering mind. He developed a lot of our sites to make small ponds on the Refuge. His son grew up on the Refuge and graduated from Jet High School. I remember him as a young boy going to school.

MR. FRENCH: Let me borrow the microphone for a minute and I'll do some talking while you wet your whistle with that water. I know how this thing becomes. Harold and I had a good working relationship when I was at the Refuge. One of the stories that he

used to tell me was that one time he had found a sick Whooping Crane. The only thing they could do with it was to try to get it to a zoo. The only zoo around what was capable of handling a creature like that was the zoo in San Antonio, Texas. So Harold put that sick Crane in the truck and headed off. If you could tell us a little about that story, I'd appreciate it.

MR. MILLER: At the time this Crane was found, it was located by some high school students near Attica, Kansas. So we got word that they had this Crane up there that was not able to fly. So the Refuge Manager who was John Vanden Akker at the time, and I went up to Attica and picked up this Crane to see what was the matter with it or if we could help it. After several contacts with our Regional Office on what to do with the Crane it was suggested that it be taken to San Antonio, Texas to a zoo there for the Veterinarian to take care of it. Well, we debated who was going to take the Crane to Texas. But here it was Halloween evening and the Vanden Akker family was expecting a new child. The family of Harold Miller was expecting a new child pretty soon, but mine was due a couple of months later. So who gets the job to go to Texas? So I put this Whooping Crane in the front seat of the pickup. It stood on the floor on the right hand side of the pickup. I left Salt Plains Refuge at about eleven o'clock on my way to San Antonio. Just before we got in to Mineral Wells, the Whooping Crane began to gasp and get his breath and flopped a few times. Then he fell over dead. So here I was with a dead Whooping Crane wondering what to do. So I called and talked to Mark Nelson. He suggested that I locate some dry ice and pack the bird in the dry ice and take it on to San Antonio. They could decide what to do with it. That's just what I did. It was only a thirteen and a half hour drive at fifty-five miles an hour at that time. So they got the Crane. They got the Crane on a Saturday afternoon to do what they needed to do.

MR. FRENCH: One of the great things about working with Harold; of course that was back when those positions which did the administrative work load were called Refuge Clerks. I believe now they are called Administrative Technicians. Harold handled all of the typing and he would not use an electric typewriter. He had an old, black Smith Corona and he just pounded that thing to death. He did all of the filing and everything like that. But then, he was also available all of the time to assist with anything else. One of the interesting things was he was probably the only one on the Refuge who was capable of handling that motor crane. Harold, if you'd care to tell us a little about your experience handling that crane, and maybe digging some of the trash out of Sand Creek as it piled up against the bridge abutments?

MR. MILLER: I need to go back to my title. My title was Refuge Clerk/Laborer/Patrolman (and other duties as assigned), so [All laugh]. So I was outside at least fifty percent of the time. It seemed like it was fifty percent anyway. I'd help do the farming. We acquired an old motor crane from the military that needed transmission work on it and so forth. Who was going to run it? Since I had gotten familiar with some of the levers and so forth while we were moving the crane in, I volunteered to learn to

operate it. We used it then to dig out the trash around the culverts and bridges and so forth and the Highway 11 Bridge was stopped up quite often with debris like limbs, trash and mud. We had an agreement with the Highway Department that I would help clean that out. We put on an old clamshell bucket that was a little bit larger than it should have been for the size crane we had. And if we didn't put the outriggers on, why, it would pull it over to a pretty low degree of upsetting! Many a time, the banister held up the crane so it didn't fall over! Of course, not being an experienced operator, I dropped the bucket several times. It didn't break the cable, but I sure stretched it!

MR. FRENCH: We've talked about some of the Managers. I know that you worked with John Vanden Akker. One of the great stories that I recall was when I believe it was John who was sent to Salt Lake City, or maybe it was Bear River Refuge for an airboat. Would you tell your story about him bringing the airboat back over the mountains?

MR. MILLER: I am sure that was quite an experience for Mr. Vanden Akker. He had taken back to Salt Lake City. That was where he originally came from before he came to Salt Plains. He was to tow that airboat back to Okalahoma behind his car. Well, some of those passes were a little bit steep coming across Colorado so his car wouldn't pull it up the hill. So he just went back and started the prop on that old airboat and then he got in the car and over the mountain they came! It was a safe trip for them after all. And it's one that he remembers and would remember it well if he were interviewed on it.

MR. FRENCH: It's one of those stories of years ago when Managers used to do things like that; and it was expected of them. Any more they'd probably be sited for safety violations and everything else. He told you, you told me and now we're going to record this so that other people can hear about the way things used to be.

MR. MILLER: Well, the way it used to be, I enjoyed, because it was a challenge to me. It was not only a challenge but it was educational. I thought that if anybody else could do a job, I could do it too! So I was willing to try to do my best.

MR. FRENCH: Well, you did more than that because as we were talking about before we began the interview, when I started here I was probably a little greener than I thought I really was. I thought I was a little more experienced, but we'd start out on a job and Harold would say, "Okay, where you headed?" "Well, the Manager told me to go over and plow in field C-12," for example. And Harold would say, "Okay, when you get over there stay away from this corner of the field because there is a boggy spot and then there will be a sandy ridge that runs down through the center." He knew every corner of the refuge that I ever encountered. It was just a wonderful resource; as the youngest Assistant Manager, keeping me out of trouble. The only thing he didn't keep me out of trouble on was, I tended to get stuck a lot. I was always getting stuck. I'd bury the truck; bury it here, bury it there. The signal on the radio was to make a call and say, "Are there any taxis running today? Because I need a ride!" Usually, if there were any taxi

running, why, Harold was the one driving the taxi. He'd rescue me from where ever I was. We'd either get the pickup back upright, or I'd at least get a ride back to the Headquarters. That was the signal, "Are there any taxi running today?" He say, "Well, where do you need picked up?" I'd answer that I was over on Wilson Pond, or some such place. "I'll get you in a little bit".

MR. MILLER: Yeah, those were fun days. We didn't have four-wheel drive equipment so we depended on two-wheel drive to pull us through. That's what made it a family operation. Each of us depended on somebody else to help us out. I enjoyed doing some of the fieldwork, but if I left the office to go to the field, I made up for it. Because was behind in the office. Quite often it meant that there were longer hours in the office of an evening finishing up. If not that evening, it was the next day. So it was still a family affair. Got another question?

MR. FRENCH: Well, that's the stories that I have run into. We talked about Seth Lowe a little bit and we talked about John Vanden Akker. Do you want to make any comparisons or talk about any of the other managers you worked with? I don't know who all you worked for. I know you worked for Les Beatty for a while. How about some stories about Dick Hitch, Mr. Hitch, I should say?

MR. MILLER: Mr. Hitch, he was another great man to work with. One of his by-words was, "Sock-o-Son-of-a-Gun!" If he made a little error...one morning he put up the flag. I hadn't gotten out to do that morning and he put up the flag. It wasn't long till he looked out the window and said, "Son-of-a-gun, Sock-o, Sock-o!" He tore out the door and went out and put that flag up straight. That was pretty funny! But he was a great inspiration to me. He was a great man to work with.

MR. FRENCH: I never had the privilege of working with Mr. Hitch, but to everybody who did, he was never, 'Dick Hitch'. He was never 'Richard Hitch', he was "Mr. Hitch". I never heard of anybody who ever worked with him refer to him by anything other than, "Mr. Hitch". I think he's somewhat alone in that category because most people get a little more informal and refer to people by their first name. But not Mr. Hitch! He was always Mr. Hitch.

MR. MILLER: Well, I don't know how to answer that. He didn't demand recognition that way that I recall. But we all respected him and referred to him that way. He was a very good southern gentleman I guess you could say.

MR. FRENCH: Well, Harold we've had very good interview, and I always give people the opportunity to say any of the last things they'd care to say if they wish to. Then we'll get on back to our joshing, and story telling.

MR. MILLER: Well, I do want to thank you for putting my name on the list of interviews. Sometimes I feel so inadequate that I...I try to keep my stories right, and as they were. We'll just call it quits, and say that it was a true story. Thank you!

MR. FRENCH: Thank you, Harold. Just for the for the transcriber's information, the other people in the room are Harold's wife, Velma and my wife Pat. We're sitting here in Harold's ranch house here in central Oklahoma and enjoying some good spring water. We thank you much Harold and Velma.