

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES ENGEL
BY DOROTHE NORTON JUNE 5, 2002

MS. NORTON: My name is Dorothe Norton and I am on the committee to collect interviews from retirees. And I am happy that I got to come here this morning and see you again because it's been a long time. I think you have a wonderful place here and lots of antiques. When the tape is completed, we'll send it in to the national archives at the National Conservation Training Center. So if you don't object, I'll start the interview now. Can you give me your birthplace and date?

MR. ENGEL: November 2, 1937 in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.

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

MR. ENGEL: Glen and Maxine Engel.

MS. NORTON: What were their jobs and education?

MR. ENGEL: My father was a very skilled Machinist. He was a machinist foreman at the Byrne [sic?] paper mill; at least that's where he ended up. He had a fourth grade education. My mother Maxine, I think she went through possibly eighth grade, possibly ninth grade. She was a homemaker.

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

MR. ENGEL: Right in Wisconsin Rapids. We hardly moved out. We made few trips to Illinois during my youth, but for the most part, we stayed right in Wisconsin.

MS. NORTON: How did you spend your early years?

MR. ENGEL: There was an awful lot of play in my early years. My first job was picking strawberries and I graduated into picking beans and peas, and working the fields. From that, I went into the minnow business. I worked for a bait dealer for several years. That took me through High School. Then in college as a summer job I worked in the Highway Patrol, and worked out on highway crews.

MS. NORTON: Did you hunt or fish?

MR. ENGEL: I hunted and fished very much, five days a week during the week, and two days on the weekend. It was a continual thing. There were four of us about the same age that hunted and fished together. We developed lifelong friendships from that. The three of us that are still living still get together.

MS. NORTON: What hobbies, books or events influenced you the most as a child, and as you were growing up?

MR. ENGEL: Probably, the field of music. My folks had me start in a band and orchestra. I played saxophone, clarinet and drums. The bait dealer that I worked for certainly influenced me in terms of outdoor activities. And a High School Biology teacher probably was the greatest influence that made me decide to go to college.

MS. NORTON: What High School did you graduate from, and where is it?

MR. ENGEL: Lincoln High School in Wisconsin Rapids. I graduated in 1955.

MS. NORTON: What University did you attend?

MR. ENGEL: The University of Wisconsin, at Stephens Point. When I first started of course, it was Wisconsin Teacher State College or something like that, but it did convert over to the University of Wisconsin.

MS. NORTON: Did you go directly from high school into college?

MR. ENGEL: Yes.

MS. NORTON: What degree did you earn?

MR. ENGEL: I earned a bachelor's degree. Then I went down on a scholarship to Houston, to the University of Texas to work on my master's.

MS. NORTON: Oh, and when did you get that?

MR. ENGEL: I didn't get it. I had a disagreement with my major professor and I left a little early.

MS. NORTON: What was your bachelor's degree in? What field?

MR. ENGEL: For my bachelor's, I had a triple major; Biology, Conservation and General Science.

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

MR. ENGEL: The Biology/Conservation degree, and the training that I received at the University of Wisconsin. I had a number of job offers; anything ranging from the Corps of Engineers out in California to the State of Wisconsin wanting me to become their

Entomologist. The Fish and Wildlife Service offered me a job in Nashua, New Hampshire at the Fish Hatchery.

MS. NORTON: Did you have any mentors or courses that especially stuck with you?

MR. ENGEL: Probably Entomology. To a certain degree I still follow that today.

MS. NORTON: Were there any adverse influences?

MR. ENGEL: Dorothe, you that that I am a very nice guy, so there couldn't have been anything adverse about me!

MS. NORTON: Of course. Let's try the Military. Were you even in the Armed Services?

MR. ENGEL: No.

MS. NORTON: What about your wife? When was she born, and what were her folk's names?

MR. ENGEL: She was born in 1942 in northeast Minneapolis. Her name was Jane Luendowsky. [sic?]

MS. NORTON: How did your career with the Fish and Wildlife Service or any other jobs affect your family after you got married?

MR. ENGEL: When we got married, I was already working for the Service in Nashua, New Hampshire. I had been working there for six months. The career, with it's many, many moves; I believe we moved eleven times during our time, drew us to be a very, very close, tight family.

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

MR. ENGEL: I decline to answer that.

MS. NORTON: O.K. When and where did you marry?

MR. ENGEL: We married in Wisconsin Rapids in 1962.

MS. NORTON: You said you had one child, a daughter?

MR. ENGEL: Gretchen.

MS. NORTON: What is she doing now?

MR. ENGEL: She is a lawyer. She works for the Death Penalty Center in Durham, North Carolina.

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

MR. ENGEL: The Service was a very, very professional organization that demanded the absolute best of the individuals. It had very high standards. Of course, I felt very much in tune with its mission.

MS. NORTON: What was your first professional position, State, Federal or other?

MR. ENGEL: It was Federal, working for Region 5 National Fish Hatchery in Nashua, New Hampshire. I was a Fish Biologist. That was the title, but like everybody else, I ground liver. We fed liver at that time. And we reared Trout.

MS. NORTON: Where did you go from there, from Region 5?

MR. ENGEL: I stayed in Region 5. I went from Nashua to Pittsford, Vermont also a National Trout Hatchery. Then to Courtland, New York the training school for Fisheries. From there to Craig Brook, Maine. Then I left Region 5 and went to Pink Bank [sic], Virginia. From there, which was also a Trout Station, I went up to Jordon River, Michigan, which was a Lake Trout Station. From there, I went into Washington, D.C. for the training program. I came back for a very short duration at Jordan River and then came into the Regional Office in Minneapolis.

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

MR. ENGEL: I started out at the large sum of \$4,040.00 a year. That was some total. I can tell you Dorothe; after we got married we lived from paycheck to paycheck.

MS. NORTON: What year did you start?

MR. ENGEL: That had to have been in 1962.

MS. NORTON: Were there promotion opportunities?

MR. ENGEL: Oh yes. There were promotion opportunities. All of those moves that I went through provided opportunities for upward mobility and movement.

MS. NORTON: That's good. Did you socialize with the people that you worked with?

MR. ENGEL: Oh yes, very much. I made some lifelong friends. I knew many. I got to know almost everybody in the Service at one time.

MS. NORTON: What did you do for recreation in the field?

MR. ENGEL: I hunted and fished, played music. I played a lot of cards. I know that you were from the drinking social. I never really got hooked up into that.

MS. NORTON: How did your career affect your family?

MR. ENGEL: We lived in some very remote areas. And the moving around during the whole career made us a very close family.

MS. NORTON: That's very good. Why did you leave the Service?

MR. ENGEL: I left the Service because I was diagnosed, and had a very severe case of Lyme disease. I simply could not work any more.

MS. NORTON: That's too bad because they would have liked to have kept you longer I'm sure.

MR. ENGEL: It wouldn't have been too much longer because I was getting fairly close to retirement anyhow.

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

MR. ENGEL: I had some superb training. When I was in Fisheries I went to Courtland, New York to the Fishery Training Center there. It was superb training. Art Phillips, Pile, and all of those people were very, very dedicated and it was a wonderful opportunity. I also had the opportunity to spend a year in Washington, D.C. on the Inter-Departmental Training Program. Again, that was just superb because I had a chance to work for the State Department, for Congress, for Forestry. I worked all over the City. I even worked directly for Spiro Agnew. It was just a wonderful opportunity and superb training.

MS. NORTON: What hours did you usually work?

MR. ENGEL: Long hours.

MS. NORTON: What were your day-to-day duties?

MR. ENGEL: Well depended on what job I was in because I switched jobs. When I first started out of course, I was the Fisheries Biologist. After I got through with Washington,

D.C. I became a Fish and Wildlife Biologist. I worked for the old Technical Services. I worked on Indian Reservations. I did a multiplicity of things. Then, when I took my last, and major job as Endangered Species Coordinator for the Region, that pretty well grounded me in fish and wildlife and plants.

MS. NORTON: What tools or instruments did have to use, or did you use in your job?

MR. ENGEL: I still have calluses on my ear from the telephone. I think that was a major, major instrument. It was a matter of communication. I've got calluses on my rear end from the airplane rides. I was out on Monday morning, and back on Friday afternoon. So between the airplane and the telephone, the rest were beside themselves.

MS. NORTON: Did you work animals or just fish?

MR. ENGEL: I worked with fish early on. But then I got into the real animals, the humans, and my job became solving human problems.

MS. NORTON: What support did you receive locally, regionally or federally?

MR. ENGEL: I had the best of support from the Regional Directors. This went back to Buell and certainly carried forward with Harvey Nelson, Jim Grittmann. I could walk into their office at any time and they would sit there and listen. And I had their ear. Likewise, when I was in Washington, D.C.; and I spent much of my regional career in Washington; I had the ear and support of the Director. I could walk down the directorate corridor and I could walk into any one of their offices and I felt comfortable. They provided the support.

MS. NORTON: How was the Service perceived by people outside of our Agency?

MR. ENGEL: Early on, it was perceived as the elite organization. There was no question. We were perceived by other government agencies as the scientific arm of the United States government. From outside agencies, like States, we were perceived to be of the highest quality and having the highest integrity in the fields of wildlife, fisheries and biology.

MS. NORTON: How were Agency, community relations?

MR. ENGEL: Many of the communities that I served in; communities is one thing that I am not sure how much the Service at that time recognized it; but the Service played a great deal in the line of community. In Pink Bank, Virginia for example, several of us at the Pink Bank National Fish Hatchery actually started the local Fire Department, the local Emergency Squad. It was a mountainous community, fifty miles from the nearest Hospital. We took extensive, off-duty training in First Aide. And we became the center

focus of the community. As a result, they built the entire Fire Hall, and that became the community center. This was true in many of the communities that I went to. From the State perspective; this varied from department to department. Some of the departments had a difficult time working with the States, and the States had a difficult time working with the Service. In the Endangered Species Program, at least in Region 5, I had one of the most beneficial coordination contacts of the eight States, of anybody in the Region. It was absolutely superb, and to this day many of the old State Coordinators still contact me. Most of them are retired. A few of them aren't. I did go back to an Endangered Species Coordinators meeting and was welcomed with open arms. I established superb contacts there.

MS. NORTON: What projects were you ever involved in for the Fish and Wildlife Service?

MR. ENGEL: I suppose the biggest project was the Endangered Species Program. The 2000 Program that we got into where we set up specific goals and specific monetary needs for all of the endangered species within the Region. And I think that was one of the major ones. Of course, depending on what part of my career; in Jordan River, Michigan we were involved in Lake Trout Restoration Program for the Great Lakes. That certainly was a fine program. I have been involved in many Dorothe, as you are well aware. I worked all over the Service. There wasn't any office in the Regional office that I couldn't go in and raise a little "Cain" and I did, generally. So whether you talk about Realty or Engineering or Law Enforcement, we were all involved, and it was a team effort.

MS. NORTON: What were any major issues that you had to deal with?

MR. ENGEL: Major issues range from the Wolf, which was exceedingly controversial. It was the Easter Timber Wolf. Early on in my endangered species career, Mr. Hodgins and I were suddenly transported up to Eely, Minnesota and we had my bloodbath debut. It calmed down after that but there were many people up there that just simply threatened both he and I. Most of those folks, we calmed down. I became very good friends with a number them.

MS. NORTON: How were those issues resolved?

MR. ENGEL: Some of them should have been resolved years ago. And I have to blame the Service that they are not. The Wolf should have been declassified years, and years ago. I started that project. The Eagle should have been re-classified and taken off of the list years and years ago. I started that project. And because of one reason or another they are still ongoing problems, or at least they are perceived as problems. From a biological standpoint, I don't think that anybody can argue with me that the Bald Eagle is saved, the Wolf is saved and they should be off the list. And I don't care what they say!

MS. NORTON: What was your most pressing issue?

MR. ENGEL: People. People and people problems. Whether it was financial problems, biological problems; if you got down to the root of it, the problem was people and how they perceived. It was a matter of changing people's minds to solve the problem.

MS. NORTON: Has your perspective or opinion on that issue changed?

MR. ENGEL: No.

MS. NORTON: What was the major impediment to your job and to your career?

MR. ENGEL: The major impediment Dorothe, I would have to be honest, would be the political correctness that descended upon the Service. It made the job exceedingly difficult. Some of the government policies that were put into place; performance pay for example, caused many, many problems with the staff throughout the Service. The government had gone to this policy and it was a very, very difficult task to administer and in a lot of cases, it was not administered appropriately. It simply wasn't. Those were the difficulties. It wasn't the Biology. There were some fantastic Biologists out there. And it wasn't the Administration; it was government political correctness policies.

MS. NORTON: Who were your supervisors?

MR. ENGEL: I generally viewed my supervisor as the Regional Director. There were some intermediaries there that sometimes helped me, sometimes got in the way. But the bottom line was that I worked for the Jim Grittmans and the Harvey Nelsons.

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

MR. ENGEL: If I had to pick one, I would say T. R. Chastain. He was a Hatchery Manager at Pink Bank, Virginia. T. R. did not have a college education, but he was a fully respected Manager, just a superb manager. He knew how to handle people. He knew how to handle people problems. He and I worked very, very closely and he probably had the most influence of anybody in the Service over me.

MS. NORTON: Who were some of the other people you knew?

MR. ENGEL: Like I said Dorothe, there weren't many people in the Fish and Wildlife Service that I didn't know. There were perhaps a cadre up in the Lamprey Chokers, and the animal chokers, I didn't know all of those folks. But the Endangered Species Program took me out to many, many of the field stations. And I spoke many, many times to Refuge groups, to Ecological Service groups, to their field stations. There weren't many people that I didn't know. And there weren't many people who didn't know me.

MS. NORTON: How about outside of our Agency? Was there anybody there that you knew that should be could be able to work for the Service today?

MR. ENGEL: There were many, many people. And I brought in a few of those people on training programs. Inga Berneilson from Wisconsin. Like I said, I had excellent relations with the States. Whether it was the Ron Nickateras, or the Jim Wilsons. Jim was from Missouri. Ron was from Wisconsin. Carol Henderson from Minnesota. Right on down the line. In all eight states, those folks were just fantastic. Then we had to go into Washington, D.C. I spent a lot of time there and I would be over at the Forest Service and there were many people over there that were helpful. I worked with folks at EPA, and they were helpful. There were any number. And I certainly can't forget the outside organizations. I was familiar with folks in the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, Help Our Wolves Live. There were many that Law Enforcement touched on. As you recall I was, part of my job was on the Permit Committee so we got to know some of the nuts that were out there trying to take care of baby Robins that fell out of the nest, to genuine caretakers. There weren't too many folks in the environment that I didn't rub elbows with at one time or another.

MS. NORTON: What Presidents, Secretaries of the Interior and Directors of the Fish and Wildlife Service did you serve under?

MR. ENGEL: C. B. Morton was in Washington in 1972, along with Spiro Agnew, Richard Nixon. I met C. B. Morton. He was a very memorable old man because he stood probably seven feet tall. He was just a huge man, and when he shook your hand it was like putting your whole arm in an envelope. He was a very likeable person. Several of the Secretaries following that. Some of the more conservative Secretaries. I had an opportunity to meet several of them.

MS. NORTON: Did changes in Administration affect your work at all?

MR. ENGEL: To a certain degree the Endangered Species Program was somewhat controversial. It didn't get reauthorized always on time. It was treated differently throughout; before I got into the Regional office no. The Administration really didn't affect me. It might dry up some of the funding for field stations, but over all it was the Regional office interface that caused more of an interaction, whether it was trying to cram through budgets, or policies or whatever. But the various Administrations did indeed affect the Endangered Species Program. The reauthorization of the Act. The views of the regulatory agencies, especially Ecological Services, Endangered Species and to a certain degree, Law Enforcement were distinctly affected by whichever Administration came in. And your support groups for those three that should...[end of tape]

But changes in the Administration, for example in the Solicitor's Office when the Administration would change, the Solicitor would certainly be affected and this would impact on your daily activities.

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

MR. ENGEL: The Service was shaped by the politicians from the political correctness, and the political correctness policies, which were put on the Service. The Universities certainly shaped the Biologists who in turn had a direct impact on the quality that was provided by the Service people. In later years, and today, I think the States have a major impact upon the Service. And they have a major impact on whether the Service is working or not working.

MS. NORTON: Now, we're going to get into some fun stuff. What was the high point of your career?

MR. ENGEL: The high point of my career Dorothe, was Endangered Species Coordinator. There's no question. I loved the job. I was in there for twelve years. I was once of the first Endangered Species Coordinators appointed. I came out of a very good job; Technical Services, and was the Acting Branch Chief of that. We had both the Animal Damage Control; we had the Wildlife Management and Fisheries Management under that group. And that was a superb job, but Endangered Species gave me much, much more freedom. And if you can have a highlight of twelve years, I was on a high for twelve years. Of course, I certainly wouldn't knock the year that I spent in Washington, D. C. That was certainly a highlight. There is no question whatsoever. Just superb.

MS. NORTON: Now we'll go the other way. What was the low point of your career?

MR. ENGEL: How about the Endangered Species Program in Washington, D. C.? [Both laughing] There were low points in my career; interfacing with some of the, a very small minority, mind you, but some of the people in the Service were quite in jobs that they quite frankly, never should have been in. They were either difficult to work for, or they were difficult to work with.

MS. NORTON: What do you wish that you had done differently? Is there anything in your career that you wish you had done in a different way?

MR. ENGEL: Not really, I felt comfortable with the background that I had. I wish I would have been able to push a few people in a higher position. I did continually strive to push good people towards the top. And if I had any failures, I am sure that it is in that area. I can name a few people; the Bill Harrisons, the Ron Rafschnieders, the Sharon Vassars; top of the line people, just absolutely top of the line people. And they should have gone on and on and on. A few of the people that I worked with did, indeed. And

they had an opportunity to do that, which I feel very grateful for. A number of those people that I pushed ended up much higher than I was. And I took a great deal of satisfaction out of that. But there were a number of people that should have, and the opportunities simply just weren't there apparently.

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

MR. ENGEL: Probably, being threatened at meetings in northern Minnesota regarding the Wolf. There were some pretty tough characters running around town that all had rifles in the backs of their pick up trucks. On a number of occasions I had been threatened physically by these folks. That was scary.

MS. NORTON: So now tell us what was your most humorous experience?

MR. ENGEL: There were quite a few of those. I'd have to give that some thought.

MS. NORTON: O. K. What would you like to tell others about your career? Maybe people that you would meet like men in college now, not knowing where they are going, or what they want to be.

MR. ENGEL: I had a very satisfying career. I couldn't have asked for a better career. I simply couldn't have. I had a top of the line career. I ended up with, as I said, the ear of the Regional Director; the ear of Director. I had my own budget, which really was unlimited. If I needed additional funds there were places one could go to get them tapped. As you are well aware Dorothe, I was one of the few people outside of Law Enforcement that had their own vehicles. I was one of the first that had a computer. There is a number of things there that made it satisfying. It's a career that I can look back on with a great deal of satisfaction. But I would have to offer to someone who is starting college today; it is going to be a difficult road to achieve unless the person is politically correct. And by that I would say; a white Anglo-Saxon male will have a difficult time. And I don't care how it's cut, when I came out of the Service, or when I retired it was getting to the point where if you were a "WASP" you had a very difficult time.

MS. NORTON: And what would you tell others about the Fish and Wildlife Service?

MR. ENGEL: The Service, in my view Dorothe, has deteriorated. I don't think there is any question about that. The standards for example; when I came into the Service you were required to have twenty-four college credits within your field. This, over the past few years, has gone downhill immensely. You're required now, as a fish or wildlife Biologist, to have something like seven credits. And of the seven, four of them can be in Geography. The standards for the Biologists has deteriorated. The quality of the

Biologists is quite frankly is not as completely uniformed high quality that it was in the past. It simply isn't.

MS. NORTON: Are these some of the changes that you have observed in the Service?

MR. ENGEL: Yes, that's one.

MS. NORTON: Do you feel the same about the personnel?

MR. ENGEL: That's right. And at the same time, in all fairness, and thank God, the States have, at least many of the States in Region 3, have come up measurably. They certainly have exceedingly high standards. The State of Missouri, the State of Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, exceedingly high standards. And they have a very well trained cadre of people. So many of the duties that the Service formally had now go to the States. There's no question about that, and the States can handle it.

MS. NORTON: What are your thoughts on the future, as far as the Service goes?

MR. ENGEL: I think the Service is going to hurt immensely by some of the moves that were made. The divorcing of Research from the Service, over to the Geological Survey. I think that's a major step backward. I think that if I were to predict something, I would predict that the Service would probably survive as the National Wildlife Refuge System.

MS. NORTON: So, where do you see the Service heading in the next decades?

MR. ENGEL: Depending on the politics they get involved; the regulatory agencies could be torn right out of the heart of the Service. The Ecological Services, the Tomopheloes [sic] people, and there's going to be many, many environmental programs that, or environmental issues that come up that those folks are involved with; many of which will be controversial. Depending on who the politician is, depending on how well the Administration can get their message through. If they can, the Service stands to gain a cadre of highly trained professionals. If it doesn't, on the other hand, and the regulatory agencies are stuffed back into the box, the Service is going to be hurting. And the only one that's going to be standing tall is going to be the Refuges. You know, you were from Law Enforcement, and it varied from Administration to Administration how much you could push, how much money you had, and those programs still go on today. On the other hand, there are some very, very disturbing things that are coming out in the media, very disturbing. This Lynx hair that was placed out in an area has received media that even gets to the town of Ludington, in Wisconsin; rural Wisconsin. And we know that there has got to be some kind of truth to it. That there were Biologists...the story we get is that this Biologist placed this Lynx hair out there to convince people that there were Lynx in the area, so that they could go ahead and do something with them for the Endangered Species Act. The Lynx hair was taken out of the Denver Zoo. When that

sort of thing gets down to rural America the Service's credibility is suffering immensely, immensely.

MS. NORTON: Well gee Jim, I want to thank you very much for this interview. You've done a good job. Do you have any photographs or documents that you'd like to donate or share with the National Conservation Training Center?

MR. ENGEL: Not really.

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

MR. ENGEL: I could give you a whole list of them.

MS. NORTON: O.K.

MR. ENGEL: I think people would recognize and would back up much of what I would say would be; Larry Sisk, John Ellis. I would recommend Dick Updergraff, because he still has a very large stake in the Service. His daughter is in the Service. Dick will be a straight shooter, I can tell you and as you well know.

MS. NORTON: I am going to start next week hopefully, to do Harvey Nelson and Art [unintelligible]. Then I am going to work these in as much as I can because they are right close to home. But I have certainly enjoyed being here with you today, and seeing your wonder place. And I want to thank you very much.

MR. ENGEL: Well Dorothe, I really thank you too.

