

INTERVIEW WITH GALE MONSON
BY JERRY FRENCH DECEMBER 13, 2002
Also present Larry Smith and Pat French

MR. SMITH: I was interested in your comments about the squatters and the concessionaires along the river there. Primarily at Imperial, I guess it was.

MR. MONSON: Also at Havasu Lake.

MR. SMITH: But when I came, when I moved in to the Regional Office here at Albuquerque in 1974, why, they were still having problems with some of those things. They had a large release of water from that dam there in about 1982. We flooded a lot of them out when they raised the Colorado River water level. So that got rid of some of them that way.

MR. MONSON: Our chief antagonist on Havasu Lake was the Bureau of Reclamation. If I ever disliked any organization, it was the Bureau of Reclamation.

MR. SMITH: I've got to tell you, my youngest son works for them!

MR. MONSON: They started dredging right through [unintelligible] Swamp. They knew I didn't like it, but there was nothing I could do about it. It just so happened that this dredge they had, which cost them a hundred and fifty thousand to build to clear the sand out of this Colorado channel; they were just taking the sand out of the channel and putting it up on a levee. They were destroying wild habitat by the acres. I was at the Regional Office; I was called in there. While I was there John Gatlin called me in and he said, "We just heard today that the dredge sank! It's sitting on the bottom of the river. And it's a good thing you're in here or you'd get the blame!"

MR. FRENCH: The last time I was out there Gale, they were up on the Bill Williams unit raising Cottonwoods and trying to get rid of some of that Salt Cedar. They were raising the cottonwoods on the Bill Williams unit and transplanting them; trying to get them going down on the riverside where you were fighting them forty years ago.

MR. MONSON: The Bill Williams Refuge was part of the Havasu Lake Refuge for many, many years. After I left up there, they took Havasu Lake out of the refuge and turned it over BLM. This was a good idea because BLM inherited all of those squatters and those concessionaires. It so happened that through a lot of politics, mainly politics, and probably the exchange of some huge amounts of bribe money a man by the name of, oh, I can't think of his name now; but he decided he wanted to own all of that country next to Havasu Lake on the east side in Arizona. He managed to acquire the whole thing. Now we have there, Lake Havasu City. It is a city of pretty close to a hundred thousand people, I believe now. When I was there, there was not a thing there; not a thing! McCullough was the man's name. There was nothing there. And during the War when I was there in World War II, I remember going from Parker Dam to Needles and back again in the boat.

MR. SMITH: The Crisscraft?

MR. MONSON: Yeah, the Crisscraft. I think I saw one other boat out and I think that was a squatter at Needles Landing. So things have really changed along the river.

MR. FRENCH: I believe that's right. Mr. McCullough is the man who owns the chain saws.

MR. MONSON: Chain saws and outboard motors.

MR. FRENCH: From the money he made from that is how he bought the London Bridge and moved it to Havasu City. That was all...and as you say, Mr. McCullough is the one who did that.

MR. MONSON: At one time it was on my refuge!

MR. SMITH: My first assignment out of the Albuquerque Regional Office was in 1974 when Mark Nelson sent me out. He had me fly in a private plane out to the Planet Ranch; part of Bill Williams to kind of do a biological reconnaissance of that area. I was picked up by the Refuge Manager from Havasu. He had an add-on air conditioner on the car. It was a hundred and seven degrees and I hadn't anything in quite a while.

MR. MONSON: One of the problems in the summer was getting our cars air-conditioned. The Regional Office took the position that it was a waste of money and pampering the refuge people. So every time a sent in a purchase order for air conditioning for our vehicles, George Parker would say 'no'. Finally, I pointed out to him that the vehicles of the Arizona Game and Fish Department all had air-conditioning in them. The vehicles of the Bureau of Reclamation all had air-conditioning in them. That finally convinced him to okay air-conditioning in our cars. That made a lot of difference in life on the refuges!

MR. SMITH: I guess he needed to have an extensive visit out there during the hot season!

MR. FRENCH: Well, if you remember, in the old administrative manual there was a map of the United States and a line. If you were below that line, you could have a white roof on your car. Do you remember? We had the old green vehicles.

MR. MONSON: That was after my time I guess.

MR. SMITH: Did you say that you had a residence there at the Desert Museum? Did you live on the grounds there? Presumably, they had air-conditioning.

MR. MONSON: Yes, it was a swamp cooler. Now it's being used as an office that has air conditioning.

MR. FRENCH: Gale, one of the things that we are trying to do find people who died on the job. Do you remember a man named Ike Kindler who possibly drowned out at Imperial Lake back in about 1946? He was trying to rescue some duck hunters.

MR. MONSON: No, I don't remember that.

MR. FRENCH: That's okay. We're chasing these things down. It's just one of those many things. We are trying to backwards and pick these historical things up. When you were down at Cabeza; do you want to talk a little bit about the burrows that you fought with?

MR. MONSON: We didn't have too much of a problem with them on Cabeza. On the Kofa, they were running out of our ears! We used [unintelligible] until they passed the Wild Burrow Protection Act; Wild Horse Anti Project. So now it's against federal law to shoot a burrow on federal lands. We used to shoot them every time we saw them. I remember being with Amonson one time and we came upon a bunch of about thirty burrows. He was a pretty good shot. I've forgotten now what size of rifle it was. We saw those burrows and they just stood there and looked at us. He got out of the car with his rifle. He had a whole bunch of cartridges handy. In the next five or so minutes he had knocked down at least half of them. When one of them is killed, they just stand there. They don't run off. We got rid of a lot of burrows that way. We let it be known to the Game and Fish Department people that they were welcome to shoot all of the burrows they want or that they could see. So that went on until Wild Horse Anti law was passed. That put a stop to it. They have to trap them and move them out. I understand it's still a big headache on Imperial.

MR. FRENCH: Yeah, they are still having quite a bit of problems with them. You've mentioned many names that people are very interested in. Would you talk a little bit about your relationship with J. Clark Salyer? Many people are interested in what J. Clark was like.

MR. MONSON: Of course, you know he was a human dynamo. He was appointed to the job by J. N. "Ding" Darling, who was picked out by Franklin Roosevelt to be the first Chief of the new FWS. Ding was interested in refuges but he had to find somebody that really would take hold of the job. He knew Salyer from having had contact with him in Iowa. Salyer was a high school teacher. He made a name for himself by being very active in waterfowl conservation. Ickes was really the man who picked Salyer. He brought Salyer to Washington and Ickes took him over and told him that they had to have these refuges, "You go out and get them." Salyer took that as a command and I don't know how many years he spent out on the field lining up these refuges; buying them and getting them any way he could. Many of the refuges are there today on account of J. Clark Salyer. It was too bad that he became blind. It was very sad, of course. When he relinquished the job as Chief of the Refuge Division it was a sad day for everybody. I've forgotten that name of the man who first succeeded him but he came down from Region 5 in Boston. He was Chief of the branch when I moved to Washington.

MR. SMITH: Didn't Dick Griffith have that job?

MR. MONSON: No that was a ways later. Fran Gillette had the job most of the time I was in Washington.

MR. FRENCH: Gale, you had an amazing career. I look down through these notes, and it's amazing. I thank you very much for your time this afternoon. If you've got some other things you'd like to add, or Larry if you have some others questions; but I think you've been very succinct in the whole thing. Like you say; from the day you were born, right on through your whole career. It was just an amazing career!

MR. SMITH: I think you started in 1933, and I was eight years old when you started your official job!

MR. FRENCH: [To Mr. Smith] And I've always thought of you as one of the old timers! I wasn't born until he was just about ready to ship over to India. So that kind of shows the progression of time through this thing!

MR. MONSON: Yes, it's hard for me to believe that I am 90 and sitting here talking to you. It really is!

MR. SMITH: I'd be curious to know if there are any other Refuge Managers that are that are that old, surviving today.

MR. MONSON: Tom Baugh; you both know him don't you? He told me that I was probably the oldest ex-Refuge Manager. It got to me, and I got to thinking about it. I told him that I realized that maybe I was. I remember Luther Goldman. He was Refuge Manager at ...

MR. FRENCH: Laguna Atascosa was one of them.

MR. MONSON: I think he was first hired to manage the Salton Sea Refuge. Then he went to Bitter Lake, that's where I first met him, and subsequently to Laguna Atascosa and Santa Anna. Then he went to Washington. In Washington he was our Photographer for years.

MR. SMITH: He advised me on buying cameras at one time.

MR. MONSON: He was a very good photographer. His favorite camera was a Hasselblad. He took a lot of wonderful pictures.

MR. SMITH: He is still living today?

MR. MONSON: He sure is. I heard from him during the early part of this year saying that his wife, Betty, had died. He was absolutely devastated. I think he is still living in the same house in College Park. He's been there for years and years.

MR. SMITH: You'd think he'd be older than you?

MR. MONSON: I think so. I think he outdates me by, oh, I don't know how many years. But I know people who retire and lose their interest real quickly. They don't give a hang about refuge history or nothing. But I'm not that way. I keep on being interested in refuges. I am afraid that some people think I'm too nosey, but...

MR. FRENCH: Well, if it wasn't for people who were concerned, we wouldn't have any of them today. But there are people like Larry; Larry continues to fight for them. And you've been retired for about fifteen years now?

MR. MONSON: He's doing more than I am.

MR. SMITH: I retired in 1984.

MR. FRENCH: Okay, so we're getting close to eighteen years on you. And you're still fighting for them. Well, I will conclude this. And Gale, again, I thank you very much for your time.

MR. MONSON: You are very welcome.