

INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS R. WEST
BY DOROTHE NORTON NOVEMBER 14, 2003
WEST HOME IN BLOOMINGTON, MINNESOTA

MS. NORTON: It's November 14, 2003. My interview this afternoon is with Doug West, retired. He was formerly with USFWS in Region 3. Thank you. Good afternoon Doug. It's good to see you!

MR. WEST: Hi Dorothe! It's been quite a while!

MS. NORTON: Yes, it has! The first thing I'd like to know is your birthplace and date.

MR. WEST: My birthplace was a farm about twenty miles southwest of Duluth on Hay Lake in Carlton County. The date was April 11, 1928.

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

MR. WEST: My father's name was Marcus Wallace West. Mother's name was Grace Lillian Ferguson West. My mother had one sister. Both of them went to The Duluth Normal School, which is now known as the Duluth Branch of the University of Minnesota. They were in the education program. They both taught at country schools. My dad was a farmer. He and an older brother moved up to this land in Carlton County that their father had purchased earlier on speculation.

MS. NORTON: So you spent your early years up on the farm? What town did you say it was where you were born?

MR. WEST: It was five miles south of Carlton. Carlton is on Interstate 35 just southeast of Cloquet.

MS. NORTON: So how did you spend your early years? What did you do? Did you have any hobbies, or books that you liked?

MR. WEST: Well, I liked birds. I was interested in that sort of thing. I guess I got interested in it through The Farmer magazine, which had a bird club for subscribers who were primarily children. I signed up for that. Actually, my Mother died when I was two so I was living with an Aunt and Uncle. This was the same Uncle who had made the trip up to Carlton County with my Dad. They had adjoining farms. And they had a son who was two years older than me, plus three older sisters. For a few years, I was the youngest one in the family. It was very enjoyable.

MS. NORTON: Did you have any jobs as a kid, before you graduated from high school?

MR. WEST: Oh yeah, actually in 1939, about two days before Hitler started marching through Poland, I moved to Minneapolis. My Dad had taken a job. He did not do any farming after my Mother died. He had trained as a Mechanic and also as a Cook and Baker. He worked in an automobile factory in Michigan. He was working for the VA Hospital during the later part of the Depression. He and I “bached” [were bachelor roommates] it at a rooming house for three or four years until I started high school. By the time of my sophomore year I was old enough to pretty much do my own cooking. I also had a part time job after school at Ho’s Food Market on West Lake Street. It’s now called Lund’s.

MS. NORTON: Ooh, that’s a fancy one!

MR. WEST: I had spent one summer working up near Black Duck. It’s about twenty-three miles from Bemidji, I believe. I spent another summer on a farm near where my Dad was born and raised. This was close to Dodge Center. I think one of the neighboring towns was Claremont. The folks who owned the farm had Claremont as their mailing address. I worked for the Minneapolis Park Board for about three summers on the boat docks at Lake Harriett and Lake Calhoun. That was about it for summer work.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever hunt or fish when you were a kid?

MR. WEST: We lived on a lake, but it was too shallow to support fish at that time. A local Dentist tried several times to get Northern stocked. They were stocked, but being too shallow a body of water it would freeze out in the wintertime. I didn’t do any hunting up there when I was living there. I did try, after I had moved to Minneapolis when I was in high school; both with firearms and bows and arrows. I was unsuccessful at both.

MS. NORTON: Where did you go to high school? And what year did you graduate?

MR. WEST: West High School in Minneapolis. I graduated in 1946.

MS. NORTON: Did you go to university after that?

MR. WEST: Well, this was 1946 and I had an Aunt in Minneapolis who was a business lady and quite knowledgeable about current conditions. She knew how the returning Vets were doing in college. They weren’t there for a good time. They were there to learn. They were really holding down the top end of the curve. I was not the type of student that I thought I could compete with them. So I joined the Army myself. I signed up for three years, which gave me the GI Bill.

MS. NORTON: What were your duty stations in the Army?

MR. WEST: After basic....

MR. NORTON: Where was basic?

MR. WEST: Fort McClellan, Alabama. I was at the placement depot just east of San Francisco; Stone something. I forget what it was. Then I took a train up to Seattle to their port of embarkation. I caught a troopship to Alaska, and a railroad from there to the big peninsula south of Anchorage. Whittaker was the Post Office, I think at the port of debarkation. The train took me up to Fairbanks and I was stationed at Ladd Field. It was later named Ladd Air Force Base. It was named after a World War II Army Air Corps pilot. I think he was killed in the Aleutians. I did criminal investigation work; writing up traffic accidents.

MS. NORTON: You did this while you were in the Army?

MR. WEST: Yeah. I did the usual Military Police work; gate duty, checking people in and out. I volunteered for a summer tour at Galena, which was a town on the Yukon River about half way between Nome and Fairbanks, and pretty much on a straight line between the two. This was a base built in the early part of World War II as a refueling stop for planes on lend/lease or that had been sold to Russia. They were following the Alcan Highway up and then across Fairbanks to Galena, Nome and on up to Russia. They still had a lot of equipment there. Myself and three other men were the fire department!

MS. NORTON: You were only in two years but you got to see a lot didn't you?

MR. WEST: I was in three years. I spent two years there. Approximately five months before I went to Alaska and another five months after was the whole time. I took my annual leave at the end. I was paid, but on leave for the last month or two of my enlistment. Instead of getting out in July I got out at the end of May. It came out on paper, so everything was fine.

MS. NORTON: Did you get any decorations while you were in the Service, any special awards?

MR. WEST: I was in prior to January 1, or December 31, 1946. I think it was about the first day of January, President Truman declared the end of hostilities. Six months from that date, which would have put it in the end of June, all draftees had to be mustered out of service. As a victim of circumstances, they gave me a Victory Medal.

MS. NORTON: So when you got out of the Service, you had the GI Bill. Did you go to college then?

MR. WEST: Yes, at the University of Minnesota. I enrolled in the Fisheries and Wildlife Management curriculum.

MS. NORTON: When did you get your degree?

MR. WEST: December 1954. By that time, I had two children so I wasn't always going full time. But I stretched out the GI Bill and we made it through without owing too much money.

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

MR. WEST: Well, I met her just before I graduated from high school. I was in a boy's organization called Demolay. She happened to be in another Masonic sponsored group called Job's Daughters. They were having an installation of officers and as a former officer of the De Molay, so I was invited down. I showed up with some of my friends and my wife happened to be serving punch. So we drank a lot of punch that day!

MS. NORTON: When and where did you get married?

MR. WEST: We married in south Minneapolis; at about 44th and Oakland, I guess it was, in a Church there in December 1950. We started dating in 1949.

MS. NORTON: You had how many children?

MR. WEST: We had five children.

MS. NORTON: Can you tell me what they are doing now?

MR. WEST: My oldest daughter works at Normandale College in the Financial Aide office. She has been there for several years in different jobs. It took a couple of years for her to get on a permanent status there. She enjoys it very much. My oldest son works for the Veterans Administration in Supply at the VA Hospital at Fort Snelling. He's been there a few years; better than ten, maybe pushing fifteen. The younger of my two sons [Bruce] is in Colorado. He is an Assistant Principal. He and his brother both attended the University of Minnesota. The older boy graduated with a degree in Mortuary Science but did not take a job in that field. The younger one got an Education degree. He taught Science in several schools. He had a double major in education so he had about four different fields he could teach in. His first job, more than just being a substitute teacher, was at a Girl's School in Denver. This was a school where the students were placed either by the Courts or by their parents who couldn't handle them. The staff appreciated my son coming there because he was young and athletic. If need be, when someone was making a break for it, they could call him and he'd run them down. He had a separate pass in his billfold that he could whip out and show any irate motorist that happened to

stop that he was authorized to do that; to tackle that girl! He is now an Assistant Principal in Jefferson County, which is the first county west of the metropolitan area.

MS. NORTON: Does he live in Evergreen, by any chance?

MR. WEST: No, he's down the hill. It's not too far away. I think they are in the School District.

MS. NORTON: Do you remember Terry Gross?

MR. WEST: Oh yeah.

MS. NORTON: His wife Donna is a teacher. They live in Jefferson County in Evergreen.

MR. WEST: Oh, okay. Bruce's wife is a teacher also. Then I have two more daughters. Barbara has three boys. They live in St. Louis Park. She works for the local telephone company. She's been there for quite a few years in management. My youngest daughter is married and living in Rochester. She has three daughters. She is a homemaker. Her husband is in a medical transport company with his father.

MS. NORTON: Well now, we'll go to your career! Why did you want to work for the USFWS? Was it because of your degree?

MR. WEST: Actually, my first job with the Service was in 1953, as a student assistant on Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin. That was about a three-month appointment. I was interested in wildlife. As a young lad on the farm I had belonged to this Farmer magazine Bird Club. I was interested in wildlife. In fact, my Uncle saw that I was interested in it so he gave me the job of trapping woodchucks! They were a kind of a nuisance in the fields; the hay field particularly. To me it was something that caught my fancy.

MS. NORTON: What did you think of the pay and benefits when you started with the FWS?

MR. WEST: The students registered in Fisheries and Wildlife Management were warned before they ever signed up that they were not going to make much money on this job. It's not training that was in high demand. The supply of qualified employees far exceeded the number of jobs. So every place I went, people told me the same thing so I wasn't walking in to something blindfolded. It was adequate to get by as long as the kids were young and as long as we were living in a rural area. There were hunting seasons and I could go out after work and do a little hunting. I could take a few days vacation to go big game hunting.

MS. NORTON: What was your first full time position with FWS?

MR. WEST: That was in 1971, after I had worked for the State of South Dakota for seventeen years. I got starved out of that one. My oldest daughter was in college. My first job was with the Federal Aide Branch of FWS. I asked my employer one day why he selected me. He said, "Well, if I was going to hire a Game Warden, I'd hire the best poacher I could find because I wouldn't have to train him; he already knew the business." The job I had in Federal Aide was the same type of program I had worked for at the State level. The funding came through the Federal Aide office in Minneapolis. I was familiar with the regulations and I had a manual for when I was in the field.

MS. NORTON: So you started with FWS in 1971, and where was your duty station?

MR. WEST: I was at Fort Snelling at the Federal Aide office in the Federal Building there. They are currently in the same building.

MS. NORTON: Where did you go from there? Did you stay in the Regional office your entire career?

MR. WEST: Yes, I did!

MS. NORTON: Wow! That's a long time.

MR. WEST: It was! There were opportunities to move elsewhere and I knew that I was hurting myself by not taking transfers to other locations. But in my mind I figured that it's like working between one Region, or State and another, the problems and opportunities are about the same. The difference is in the faces you are looking at.

MS. NORTON: We have some things in common. I worked my thirty years all in Law Enforcement in the Regional office! I met a lot of wonderful people that worked in other divisions too.

MR. WEST: I am sure you trained a lot of people in that job!

MS. NORTON: Yeah! So if you stayed in the Regional office all of the time, did you have promotional opportunities while you were there?

MR. WEST: Yeah, I went up one grade. I did not get to a "13" because I had not worked in more than one region. I was able to get by. My wife was a Nurse, and she was working. This gave her justification for getting out of the house to go to work.

MS. NORTON: Did your career affect your family?

MR. WEST: Not adversely, no.

MS. NORTON: That's very good. Did you socialize with the people that you worked with, or do any of the recreation things in the field?

MR. WEST: Yeah, there were social affairs out of the Regional office in the summer time, at local parks where people would get together with the kids and families. Occasionally there would be a meeting I would go to. These were mostly in state, where I could justify driving myself, in my own personal car and take my wife along. Quite often at these State meetings there would be some of the wives of the State employees too. This was good.

MS. NORTON: When did you retire? And what was your title and grade when you retired?

MR. WEST: I was Fish and Wildlife Management Biologist. I started as a GS-9.

MS. NORTON: What was the date when you retired?

MR. WEST: Boy, I gotta think! It was 1992 at the end of the year. I think it was December 30, 1992. I didn't work until the 31st, I wanted to have a break in service in case I wanted to come back to work.

MS. NORTON: And did you?

MR. WEST: Yes, I did. It was not immediately!

MS. NORTON: I know because I saw you there! I said, "wait a minute Doug, you're retired! What are you doing here?"

MR. WEST: Well, they had some new people who needed some training. It was two new Biologists. They wanted someone to help them get a little bit more experience on the land acquisition and the land record work. That was the first job I had. I also closed out some projects that I had worked on previously that I was familiar with.

MS. NORTON: So your career was all in the division of Federal Aide?

MR. WEST: Yeah.

MS. NORTON: What kind of training did you receive for your job when you first came to FWS?

MR. WEST: I read the Federal Aide Manual some more.

MS. NORTON: Since you had the experience with the State of South Dakota, you didn't need any training?

MR. WEST: Well, I was looking at it from a different viewpoint. This would be not writing project proposals, but critiquing them. I was making sure that there was substantial character and design. There were also a number of people there that I could call on. For example; on fisheries work there were three fisheries employees there. I did not have that strong a background in fisheries work, but I worked away at it.

MS. NORTON: That's good! You didn't even work with any animals did you?

MR. WEST: Not directly. In the Regional office [with FWS] I didn't, but on the State level I did.

MS. NORTON: How do you think the FWS was perceived by people outside of our agency? I have always met people who thought that FWS was just like the state DNR.

MR. WEST: Well, some people thought very highly of the Service and it's employees. They agreed with the work they were doing, and they helped or assisted when they could. Then, there were things that the Service did that interfered with for example the freedom of operation by landowners. One of the biggest things originally was the Service's stance on agricultural drainage because of its affect on waterfowl and furbearer habitat. Later on, the Endangered Species Act that interfered with people who wanted to hunt Timber wolves, or wanted to thin them down to protect their own livestock. They definitely, well, they would have just soon not had a FWS!

MS. NORTON: What projects were you involved in?

MR. WEST: Wildlife Habitat; upland game, waterfowl, and small game habitat. Also Forest habitat and prairie and agricultural land. All of the States in Region 3, which I was in, had their own land acquisition programs. They were essentially buying lands for the same purposes that the Service did. But they were not necessarily in competition because there was so much land that needed to be bought. They were more or less cooperating with each other so that we were not in competition and not driving the price up. Some of the work was with the animals themselves, research and management of the animals. It could be furbearers; one state which I think was Wisconsin had somebody working on Martins and Fishers. Most everybody did some work on deer and upland game birds. And this was not just on the animals but also on their habitat improvements and how to keep the plants and habitat in a vigorous condition to support the maximum, or optimum levels of birds or mammals that they are managing the land for.

MS. NORTON: What were some of the major issues that you had to deal with?

MR. WEST: Well, sometimes I guess we might have had some difference of opinion with the State on a project proposal. In their minds it was justified, but in our minds we might be going part of the way but there might be aspects that we thought ought to be reconsidered. There's language written into the Acts themselves so that this land, where the habitat work was done...people back in the 1930's when this legislation was passed were concerned that these areas would become slaughter pens, or that they were set up just to kill animals. Our program did not deal specifically with the hunting or the killing of the animals. Any seasons to do that were set by the State. It was strictly under state control.

MS. NORTON: Did you have any real pressing issues? And if so, how was it resolved?

MR. WEST: I can think of one where there was a kind of an impasse on some habitat work on the spring ponds in northern Wisconsin. The way that it was resolved was that they did not have the really strong information that 'this was done, and this was the result'. So they agreed to do some companion research work along with this development which was dredging out ponds that had silted in with marl deposits, rock had formed. They were deepening the water level to make more trout habitat. It was too shallow. Fish would freeze out. They needed to be in deeper water like a spring hole to get through the winter. That was set up as a research project and it progressed. The study came up with good, useable information. They could quantify how much work needed to be done and so on. They knew what benefit, based on the research, what the carryover of the trout population would be. So that was a case where it was settled to everybody's satisfaction. Everybody got what they wanted. That sort of approach worked a number of times in different species or locations.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever feel that there was a major impediment to your job?

MR. WEST: In a way, yes. Part of this was perceived at least. I don't think other people in the Service felt it was an impediment; we worked with the States and not with the Service and for that reason other Service employees didn't think we understood their programs. I think we understood them. We didn't work, or assist them necessarily on a day-to-day basis because our funds could not be mingled with their funds. In a way, that probably put us in at a disadvantage as far as seeking a transfer from our program; say from Federal Aide to Refuges or Waterfowl Management or something like that. Until they had been there and done the work they didn't feel we understood it. In my own mind, I think we understood it as well as they did and maybe better, but... we could see their programs from a distance.

MS. NORTON: Do you remember whom all of your supervisors were? Like when you first started, who was your supervisor?

MR. WEST: You mean the top dog?

MS. NORTON: Who ever told you what to do.

MR. WEST: Dale Martin. He came from the state of Indiana. He had also kind of gotten starved out down there. After that was well, I can see his face... he came from Denver.

MS. NORTON: It's difficult for me too because Law Enforcement and Federal Aide didn't have that close of a working relationship. So I don't remember a lot of their names.

MR. WEST: Well I can picture them! His home, where he came from was in Wisconsin. But I am having a senior moment; I just can't remember the name. The next one was a Veterinarian by training. He came from New Mexico or Arizona. He was there for a while and transferred in to...he was the Chief when I retired. It was after that when he moved to Washington.

MS. NORTON: Do you remember who the Presidents and Secretaries of the Interior were, or Directors of FWS were that you served under?

MR. WEST: Lynn Greenwalt was the second one. There was somebody else for maybe a year or two before that, but I'm not sure. I can't come up with his name either. There were a number of them.

MS. NORTON: How do you think the changes in administrations affected the work that we were expected, or required to do? Maybe in the type of work you were doing it didn't matter what the administration was.

MR. WEST: I don't think there was very much. There were attempts at different times but between Federal Aide staff members, and advice from Solicitors and maybe even pressure from the States. When they found out about things, the State Directors had a group that could bring pressure if they felt it was needed.

MS. NORTON: In your opinion, who do you think were some of the individuals who helped shape the FWS?

MR. WEST: The big shaping work was done in the 1930's. There was the Pittman/Robertson Act, and the Dingle/Johnson Act. The first was started in 1936. Senator Pittman from Arizona and Robertson from Virginia, I think. He had been in the Virginia Fresh Water Fish Commission at one time. Somebody in Washington gave him a copy of this proposed P/R Act and asked him what he thought of it. He sat down and wrote a line or two on it. He said that if they would "include these twenty-three words in this Bill, I'll co-sponsor it." And he did! What he did was to make sure that any

land acquired with the funds would remain the property of the State Fish and Wildlife Agency. Lands could not be used by another entity like a Park board or a Forest agency or something like this. If the use was no longer justified, or could no longer accomplish its objective, the lands could be sold. Any funds earned were to be placed in to the State P/R or D/J programs. What it did was keep people from absconding with program funds or property. That made the program, or gave it some stature on the State level. It was a State responsibility to assure that these rules were lived up to. When land was no longer needed from program purposes, it could be disposed of, but the value had to be put back into the program, it wasn't a give away.

MS. NORTON: What was the high point of your career? There must have been at least one Doug!

MR. WEST: Oh yes! There were many. It's difficult to frame it. I didn't have a chance to work this out in advance!

MS. NORTON: Maybe one day, you met someone, or experienced something extraordinary, or maybe you got an award?

MR. WEST: Yeah, that happened too!

MS. NORTON: There's so many you can't think of just one special one, huh?

MR. WEST: There were a lot of different times. The first one was when I hadn't been there too long when my Supervisor took a job in Washington. So I was green as grass and we had a new Regional Director. And I was working under a new Supervisor who came in at the same time as the Regional Director did. I had about four or five new people to train at the same time. Maybe it was three people. I was recognized by the Regional Director for the job I did. The people all turned out good. The States did not rebel; everything operated smoothly.

MS. NORTON: Did you have a low point in your career?

MR. WEST: Well, not really. There may have been days, but right now, I can't think of one.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever have a dangerous or frightening experience? Hopefully in the Regional office it wouldn't happen!

MR. WEST: No, I can't think of one of those either.

MS. NORTON: Well how about this? What was the most humorous experience you had in the time you were working?

MR. WEST: I mentioned that Dale Martin was my first Supervisor. He was well endowed with Hoosier humor. He was very down to earth. He was always coming up with something. He'd make an observation or something that was really quite humorous and put us in stitches for a while.

MS. NORTON: What would you like to tell others, people who don't work for the Service about FWS?

MR. WEST: Well, the first thing they'd need to know is that they shouldn't be high maintenance. They shouldn't need a lot of money to live on, is what I meant to say. You should be able to receive job satisfaction by something other than monetary means. It has to be the satisfaction you get for accomplishing something on the ground or seeing that a bad situation on the ground is improved. There might be one of the big projects that we had a number of times when we had to cooperate with the State people. I forget the name of this big lake for diving ducks that is northwest of the Twin Cities. It was famous for many years. Carp got in to the lake. The two agencies, the State and FWS got into the problem; they may even have had the National Guard helping out. I am not sure. They were treating the lake with Rotenone or other chemicals to suffocate the fish. It would shut down gill breathing so they would die. The Carp and Bullheads, the rough fish were bottom feeders and they would root out the aquatic vegetation and muddy the water to the point where the quality habitat was not there for the diving ducks. I want to say Lake Christina, but I am not sure. Anyway, they've done that for several years and improved the water quality for the diving ducks for six or eight years before it would get noticeable again.

MS. NORTON: What are some of the changes in the Service that you have observed over the period of your career, in the personnel, or in the environment for example?

MR. WEST: There's been a big change, and more and more effort and more and more people devoted to educating the public. The refuge at Fort Snelling, the Minnesota River Refuge is an example of that. What they've done is to set up compatible uses on these lands; uses that are compatible without unduly hurting the species which they were designed to be managed for.

MS. NORTON: What are your thoughts on the future? Where do you see the Service heading in the next decade or so? Do you feel that it will stay the same, or improve any?

MR. WEST: I am sure that it's going to change. It will probably improve. Agriculture is changing. As long as the changes are all compatible, I can see potential for improved habitat, improved feeding, and resting areas.

MS. NORTON: Well, this is the end of the interview! I'd like to ask you now if there is anybody special that you think we should interview. I've got a whole list of people, but there are some people who aren't even on the Retiree list; I don't know why. If there was anybody that you worked with closely or a lot?

MR. WEST: I can't think of people who are retired. Bud Fuques is in our office. He is extremely sharp.

MS. NORTON: Becky Johnson worked in there too. Becky is now married to Bill and they live in Brookings, South Dakota. I am hoping to make a trip out that way next spring.

MR. WEST: There are a couple of people who used to be in Federal Aide that aren't any more.

MS. NORTON: I am willing to take any names you can think of. I'll check any see about that Dale Martin.

MR. WEST: He died. He suffocated with Carbon Monoxide poisoning. They had just moved to Indiana from Big Fork.

MS. NORTON: Didn't we have, at one time, a man named Bill Martin who was in Federal Aide?

MR. WEST: Bill was in Ecological Services. Lucinda Corcoran is a good one. But she's not retired yet. Keep her in mind because she's a real sharp cookie. Jeff Gosse isn't retired either but he moved to Endangered Species. He and Bud can see things from a higher perspective. Mike Sweet is with Federal Aide now. He worked for the State of Illinois, Missouri before he worked for Federal Aide in the Service. He's got some perspectives too.

MS. NORTON: Well Doug, I want to thank you for the time that you've given me today. If you think you might be interested in going to the Training Center next April, I'll be sure and send you whatever information I get.