

ORAL HISTORY

Of

Charles Foye

**Deputy Asst. Regional Director
- Human Resources (Retired)**

Interviewed by
Dorothe Norton
On March 7, 2005

Oral History Project
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Conservation Training Center
Shepherdstown, West Virginia

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FWS Position: DARD - Human Resources
Interviewed by: Dorothe Norton
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DN: April 7, 2005. This interview will be between Dorothe Norton and Charles Foye. Thank you. Okay, well Chuck, do people call you Chuck?

CF: No, most call me Charles.

DN: Okay, well I am so happy that you have the time that we can do this today. So, I want to know, first of all, I want to know when and where you were born.

CF: I was born in Goldsboro, North Carolina on June 14, 1940.

DN: You are young!

CF: Thank you. (Both laugh)

DN: Okay, so what were your parents' names?

CF: My father's name was James Henry Foye and my mother's name was Lucinda Coley-Foye. I grew up in Goldsboro and graduated from high school there. I had a great time - absolutely great time.

DN: Did your parents have an education and what did they do?

CF: Neither of them finished high school, but both were very, very smart and wise. It was a very segregated time, and a very impoverished time as well. As a result, they were not able to finish school because they had to work in order to help support their families - things were very, very difficult. They share-cropped for a while, my grandfather did, and he eventually bought lots of land, but because of a very segregated society and of discrimination, he lost all of his land. So, that obviously hurt my father and he always felt bad about it. At that time parents did not share a lot with their children, as they do now, and our father used to relate to us how he wished his father had talked to him because he thought maybe he could have helped out in some areas where my grandfather lacked some experience or education. My father felt he could have helped him in those areas. But, my father, though he did not have a high school diploma, was a very intelligent, very smart man and my mother - I've always stated that she was one of the smartest and wisest people I have ever known.

DN: You are lucky to have had smart parents...

CF: I am...I am so thankful for that. There were many things that they have passed down to us, and they are just dear to me still.

DN: How did you spend your early years? Did you help them?

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CF: Actually, when I was born, they had moved off the farm. We lived just outside the city limits. I had a great childhood growing up. My parents were very interested in me and I had seven brothers and sisters. There were eight of us; one foster brother included in that eight. He was like a real brother since my parents raised him from the time he was just a baby. I have no regrets from my childhood. I had loving parents, had great support from school, excellent teachers who were very interested not only me, but all the kids, because they recognized that we lived in a society that was very discriminatory and their main motive was, and I still remember this, “to prepare us for when integration came”, so that we would be on the same level educationally as our white counterparts. They knew that some of that was not quite possible, only because we did not have equality. You’ve heard the term “separate but equal”. Well, it was separate, but not equal since our school labs did not have the same kinds of equipment; sometimes the books were not always the latest editions, and so there were a lot of stumbling blocks. But, we were taught not to let the stumbling blocks prevent us from moving ahead. So, we were encouraged to excel, simple as that, we were taught to excel even though the playing field was not level. I communicate now with several of my classmates and it is amazing how blessed most all of us have been. I have classmates that work on the NASA program, engineers, some well instrumental in the development of the first 747, some are chemists and some have just gone off to do great things as Federal Government managers.

DN: You have good friends.

CF: Oh, we had the highest academic cumulative grade average, at that time, of any other graduating class, and that was the class of 1958. So many of our students went on to achieve great things. It is always fun to go back to the class reunions to see how well everybody has done and how well they look.

DN: Did you have any hobbies or any special interests you enjoyed when you were growing up?

CF: I had a lot of hobbies. I liked school, of course, but I always liked electric trains so that was one of my hobbies; I always enjoyed reading and debating. We loved to debate various issues including, philosophical issues.

DN: Did you ever have a job before you graduated school?

CF: For three years, I worked at a summer camp in Connecticut that was established by my high school principal.

DN: Did you go on to college?

CF: Yes. Initially, I got a scholarship, but it was not enough for a full-year and my parents could not afford to pay the remainder. My father had lost his job and he really felt bad

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that he was not able to send me to school. The company he worked for closed and, of course, he had been there for probably about 40 years, but they did not have a retirement plan, so he was at the end of his life without a pension. When the plant closed he was around 63, so he had a couple of years to wait until he was 65 to get Social Security and he had no retirement benefits. I really felt bad about it, so there was no way I was going to ask him to send me to school. Since I had some brothers living in Buffalo, New York, I moved there. I enrolled at Erie County Technical Institute. But again, as jobs were tight in Buffalo, I could not afford to continue because I was laid off. Fortunately, I was living with my brother and his wife. Later, I took every exam that came up including the exam for Federal Government employment. That's when I had my first job in Washington, D.C. with the Department of Agriculture as a file clerk/mail clerk, and later took the Post Office exam. I got a job in the Post Office in Washington. I transferred back to Buffalo and subsequently went into the service with the notion of going to school. I joined the Air Force in 1966 and was discharged in 1970 and began my schooling while in the Air Force. I moved back to Buffalo and enrolled at the University of Buffalo and graduated in 1974. I took some postgraduate courses at UB toward a Master's in Public Administration. My BS is in sociology. I had taken a job with Greyhound as my first management position and worked for them for approximately a year. Then I took a position with the Veterans Administration, just to get back into government because at that time, I had about 10 years, including military time. So, I worked at the VA, still going to school, but then I took a promotion to the Social Security Administration, while I was still going to school. When I graduated, I accepted a managerial position with Erie County government. I worked there for about three years to gain more management experience in order to qualify for the Federal Government's Professional Series at the Corps of Engineers as an Equal Employment Opportunity Officer.

DN: In St. Paul?

CF: No, in Buffalo, NY.

CF: I worked there from 1976 to 1978 and got a call from our regional office in Chicago wanting to know if I would be interested and willing to apply for a position in the Personnel Office in St. Paul as the Chief of Management/Employee Relations and Labor Relations. I accepted the position and worked for the Corp of Engineers from 1978 to 1988 in St. Paul. I also served as the Acting Chief of Personnel for one and a half years. Then I was offered a position at Immigration and Naturalization as a Labor Relations Officer and worked there for approximately three years. I then accepted a position with the VA Hospital. In that position, I did a lot of investigations regarding employment discrimination. Because there was just so much travel involved when I got a call from Fish and Wildlife asking me if I would be interested in applying for one of their open positions. I told my wife, "Just tell them yes!" no matter what the job. Until I transferred to Immigration, all of the positions that I'd taken were promotion opportunities. The latter three positions were lateral transfers, just to expand on the experience, and doing some things I enjoyed.

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DN: That's good. So when you went into the service, it was the U.S. Air Force?

CF: Yes, U.S. Air Force.

DN: And, where were you stationed?

CF: I was stationed in Plattsburgh, New York for the first two years and then I was stationed at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany.

DN: Did you get any kind of medals for your service?

CF: No, just whatever medal they give you for doing your four years. They did, however, make a strong appeal for me to stay in...to reenlist. I worked as a dental technician, which I enjoyed a lot, but I knew I wanted to go to school. When I first came out of the service, I was really thinking about becoming a dentist, but because at the time, I was about 30. I really started counting up the cost (my age, the time required, money to start a practice) and decided against it. I really don't regret my decision, as I had a great government career. I have also done a lot of community work while working with these agencies; trying to help women and people of color get into the government. When I worked in county government I was able to go before the New York State Civil Service Commission and present a proposal for legislation into law, to expand the opportunities for women and people of color, because their system was very, very culturally biased and I was able to point that out. Some things did get changed and I always felt good about that. I did a lot of work with various community organizations, working for economic development, housing and employment opportunities. I am still involved in pursuing progress in those areas. I have done that for probably 25 to 30 years.

DN: You are still young; you can probably do a lot more. I still have one more question before we go back to Fish and Wildlife. That is when and where, and how did you meet your wife?

CF: I met her at the VA in Buffalo when I began working there. We started out as good friends and has been my best friend ever since. She is the best thing that ever happened to me.

DN: When and where did you get married?

CF: We got married in Buffalo, June 11, 1977.

DN: Okay, and do you have any children?

CF: We have one daughter.

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DN: What does she do?

CF: She is the Chief of Staff for the school superintendent of Memphis city schools. She is doing very well. She worked here in St. Paul, Minneapolis actually, as the Director of Communications for the Minneapolis school district, under the same superintendent, Dr. Carol Johnson who retired from here and became Superintendent of the Memphis Public Schools. She then asked our daughter to become her Chief of Staff in Memphis, so it was a promotion.

DN: I love Memphis.

CF: Oh, I do to, my wife and I love Memphis. We just came back, in fact, a couple of weeks ago.

DN: I'm just going to clarify a few things. You were just happy to get a job offer because of the work that you had...

CF: Yes, I enjoyed the work that I was doing for the VA, but I did not enjoy the travel. I was just sick of the travel.

DN: Right. Did you have any more promotion opportunities?

CF: When I came here, I took a lateral assignment. I was Barb Milne's assistant. I was DARD for Human Resources and Barb Milne was the ARD.

DN: Did you socialize with any of the people that you worked with?

CF: Oh yes, that was the nice thing about that kind of job. You met a lot of people and one of the things that you worked towards, of course, was breaking down barriers, so you had a lot of interaction with managers and with just people in general. Almost every person, basically, because of their position, probably passed through our office in one capacity or another. Being part of the managerial team I had a lot of interaction with the staff leaders and the staff and also conducted training sessions dealing with equal opportunity and personnel issues. My background in personnel management allowed me the opportunity to deal with a lot of issues. EEO Specialists and Personnel Management Specialists can be more effective and efficient when there is an understanding of the regulations both are governed by.

DN: Thank you. Okay, so talking about the equal opportunity and all . . .

CF: Yes, having a personnel background certainly gave me the opportunity to hopefully work more effectively with a lot of different components of Fish and Wildlife because usually all the EEO matters pretty much evolved around personnel matters...someone felt that

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they were discriminated against because of not getting a promotion, or were overlooked in some capacity or dealing with some qualification issues...having a Human Resources background, gave me an opportunity to, I think, be more effective in talking with Barb and others about various problems.

DN: Good. So did you ever do anything with recreation in the field, like play golf, bowl, or...

CF: I did not play golf, but I did bowl. Although I was not on a Fish and Wildlife's bowling team.

DN: You probably had a good average to, huh?

CF: It could have been better.

DN: Okay, so your career with Fish and Wildlife this time did not affect your family at all?

CF: No, no.

DN: So, you left because you retired?

CF: I left because I retired. I enjoyed working with Barb and the reason why I considered the job then was because I became a pastor in 1993. I was elected the pastor of our church in July of 1993 and so, even though I enjoyed working for Fish and Wildlife, when the opportunity for an early out came up, I had to consider it. Barb and I had great talks and she was very supportive and so I decided to take the early out. I think Barb had wanted me to stay because she knew that I had an opportunity to move into her position because she had the opportunity for a movement into the manager position that she holds now. So, I had to consider that because I knew that I would be considered for that position. I knew that I had good rapport with everyone and I had done a good job. I had good performance appraisals. Because it was a small office and I had more experience than anybody else in the office, and of course, because we only had one DARD, me. So when she left, someone would have to be selected from outside or another region, which would have been the only complication, and I do not really even think that that would have been an issue, because I think that the job would have been mine if I had wanted it. I got along well with Sam Marler, the Regional Director and got along well with Barb and had an overall good reputation in Fish and Wildlife. That always helps, as you well know, of course, having a good reputation, that you do a good job and are fair and those kinds of things. So, I knew that I had a very good shot at it, but when I weighed everything, I felt that I wanted to be able to devote my time to the ministry and it didn't hurt that my wife retired from the VA on the same day.

DN: That is very good. I am sure you are doing a very good job with that.

CF: Well thank you. I hope so.

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DN: You have a very, very nice church. I do not come out this way too often, but I have a friend who lives out here in Roseville. You did not need to receive any training then because you had had a lot of experience in the type of work that you had done the last time?

CF: Right, right.

DN: So, that's good.

DN: Was Mamie Parker still at Fish & Wildlife when you came?

CF: Yes, Mamie was there. I think I heard she is now in Atlanta?

DN: She's in Washington D.C.

CF: Oh, she's in Washington now...

DN: Oh, no she went to Boston and now she is in Washington.

CF: She's in Washington. Also, I am trying to think of his name, all of a sudden it just left me...he used to work with John Christian, in his department...

DN: Rick Lemon?

CF: No, he was African-American and everybody knew him there. I used to go to Pine Bluff, University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff, with him sometimes for recruiting purposes...Hannibal Bolton!

DN: Oh yes, Hannibal Bolton is a good friend...yeah. He has been there for a while.

CF: Yes, he has been there for a while. He was there before Mamie, I know. I think it was not too long after I retired that he went to Washington. So, yes I worked very closely with Hannibal and Mamie as well as John Christian, John Blankenship and all the managers. I attended the office staff meetings and of course when Barbara was out, then I was acting ARD. So, I had a lot of interaction with all of them. When some of the special projects came up, I was a part of the team.

DN: Did you think that any of the changes from the Regan administration in Washington affected the work that we were trying to do?

CF: I remember Molly Beattie; she was the chief, or whatever the position was called. She was the Director of Fish and Wildlife, right?

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DN: Uh-huh.

CF: I remember quite a bit of melee, I think she came out because she was at the refuge there...the one right here...

DN: The one right by Minneapolis here?

CF: Yes...

DN: Yeah, the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge...

CF: Yes, the Valley National Refuge. She was there, as well as all the employees, and I am not sure, but at that time I think they were talking about some reorganization issues, but I remember attending some of the meetings and some of the employees were kind of distraught because they knew what was going to happen. In fact, I wrote a letter to her, and she responded to the letter...I talked about some of the issues. I think they were talking at that time of reorganization and people were just uncertain of their jobs and I wrote her regarding some of the concerns that people had, because many of them shared that with me as they thought if anybody would listen, our office, Human Resources, would listen. I have that letter that I wrote.

DN: Do you have a copy of the letter she wrote back too?

CF: I am sure I do, I have a file.

DN: If you would like to donate that, to go with your interview, it would be nice.

CF: Sure, I will look for that, but it has been a while.

DN: What was the high-point of your career with Fish and Wildlife?

CF: Um...I kind of enjoyed my entire time with Fish and Wildlife and the reason is that it was so different than other agencies I'd worked for. This may not sound good to a Fish and Wildlife Biologist, and I do not mean it as though it was not important because it was, but it was the first agency that I worked with that was not dealing with what I considered...let me give you an example. Immigration was dealing with illegal aliens; Corps of Engineers had lots of problems with environmental agencies regarding many of their projects that weren't considered environmentally friendly. When you get to an agency that deals with birds, wildlife, and endangered species, it was like, "This is great!" Is it really work? I know that Fish and Wildlife's mission is a really serious matter and a lot comes under a real serious issue, but a lot of it was different. Yet it was pleasant to deal with these kinds of issues as opposed to the others. Like the illegal aliens and all kinds of issues along that line, border patrol agents, union issues and problems, and sometimes border patrol agents doing some really stupid stuff, that you get

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into big squabbles or arbitrations with the union because someone is filing a grievance; management is taking an action that someone does not like, so you get into a lot of arbitrations and a lot of issues that dealt with people losing their jobs and those kind of things. So, to come to Fish and Wildlife and see an agency that was really involved in protecting wildlife, protecting the ecosystems and making sure that the wet lands were protected and things like this. It took me a while to grasp the concept really of what they were doing and why the interest in these things. Overall, it provided a great awareness to me of the importance of the environment, to be honest with you.

DN: Well, that's good.

CF: Because at that point many environmentalists were upset with the Corps because they were concreting over wetlands and you were not as environmentally conscious as you should have been. This caused many problems. I used to sit in some of those meetings of course, being a manager, so you heard these squabbles going back and forth, I was really amazed to hear the argument about geese, and how to protect them and how to protect an owl. This was a very positive thing, not a negative thing. So, it was kind of nice for me. It was fun. Also, what I was also moved by was the tremendous concern that wildlife biologists had for the environment. When I listened to them talking about protecting a particular species, it was most informative and educational, as well.

DN: Did you have a low-point when you were at Wildlife.

CF: No, I guess I'm the kind of individual that never allowed things to get me down. I mean, I really don't look at low-points or anything. So no, I really cannot think of any low-points.

DN: That's good.

CF: There is only one thing that I did not particularly like doing while I was there and that was the year-end EEO fiscal report that we had to do for Washington. It was just meaningless and nobody really paid that much attention to it. They went through the motions like they were, but that was really the only thing that I did not like to do while I was there...the year-end annual EEO report.

DN: Were there ever any dangerous or frightening experiences?

CF: No.

DN: When you were working in the fields...how about a humorous experience, were there ever any of those?

CF: Oh, there were several of those (laughing).

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DN: Dangerous or frightening?

CF: No, I used to do training in the field, but I really cannot ever remember anything dangerous. My entire experience was really very positive at Fish and Wildlife Service. I do remember that the worst thing, like I said was that report, other than that it was great. The report was not *that* bad, it was just the one thing that I did not like doing. Barb and I used to laugh about it. But, I did it anyway.

DN: Well, we're just about through here. What are your thoughts to the future like? Where do you think the service is heading in the next decade?

CF: You know that's a difficult question for me because unfortunately, I have not been able to keep up with all of the changes that are taking place. I can only say that because I am more informed environmentally as a result of my working with Fish and Wildlife and I hope that they will keep the emphasis on protecting the environment. Fish and Wildlife is part of the Interior Department and I know that the Interior is being tasked with looking at new oil reserves, looking for gas and now this is going to be a big issue because of the high price of gas. But, I still think that the service has to continue to insist on protection of the environment. This needs to be stressed. Looking in the Twin Cities and other cities and see how the poor animals, and I look at the deer and they almost have no place to live because we are building houses everywhere...all over the place... and let's face it, what I learned at Fish and Wildlife is that the ecosystem helps how we see things. You know, I learned so much and I cannot even put it all into words, but even with the burn-off and things like that...there is a reason for having burn-offs...all these things, because the environment will absolutely die if you did not have this ecosystem process going. So, yes I do, even though I am not as informed as I would like to be, but I certainly keep up with the political issues enough to know that somebody has to maintain the environment, or we are going to destroy ourselves. It is as simple as that. I certainly hope that we will not let the political aspect, or the lack of oil or gas, cause us to do things that are going to permanently damage the environment, in the long range, this is going to impact people's lives...just to satisfy our greed. It's as simple as that, and I'm not making a political statement.

DN: Well Charles, you did a very good job and I want to thank you very much. If you find the letter that you wrote to Molly and if you would like to donate it along with your tape, you can just call me or mail it to me and that will just be fine.

CF: Sure. Sounds good! I need to make sure I get your telephone number.

DN: Thank you.

CF: You are very welcome.