

INTERVIEW WITH BILL ASHE
BY MARK MADISON AND GEORGE GENTRY
MARCH 15, 2003

MR. GENTRY: Let me get you to identify yourself. This is March 15, 2003 and we're in Vero Beach. No, we're not in Vero Beach; we're in Melbourne, Florida.

MR. ASHE: Well, almost. My name is Bill Ashe, A-S-H-E. I was with the Fish and Wildlife Service from 1953 to 1990.

MR. GENTRY: What was your date of birth if you don't mind.

MR. ASHE: It was May 28, 1929. I was born in New Haven, Connecticut.

MR. GENTRY: What is your educational background?

MR. ASHE: I went to the University of Connecticut and got a BA in Forestry and Wildlife Management.

MR. GENTRY: Do you claim any area of expertise?

MR. ASHE: I started out in Reality as a Forester, and then did just about every job in what was at that time the Branch of Lands, then the Division of Reality. I then became an administrator; I was Deputy Regional Director in Region 5, and a whole host of other things.

MR. MADISON: Why don't you tell us about the first job you had with the Service.

MR. ASHE: That's very interesting from my standpoint. My first job, as I said, was with the Branch of Lands, which was predecessor to the Division of Reality. In my first trip in the FWS was down through Okefenokee, to Santa Bell, which later became the Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge and the Florida Keys. That was the first trip that the Service made as preparatory to the National Key Deer Refuge. I came down with my boss, a fellow named Bob Lyons, a capable guy. We began the first activities for establishing that particular refuge. We didn't see any Key Deer at the time. In fact, there were two; there was a Life Magazine crew that spent three weeks looking for Key Deer and they couldn't find any. From that time, actually the Key Deer and the Refuge was the inspiration of the Regional Director there at the time; a guy by the name of Jim Silver. That's another story. There are people who are visionaries and inspirers and then there are people who come and get the same job done. Sometimes they are the same people, but not normally. I did a lot of work in each one of the areas. And in fact, I just came from Santa Bell [Ding Darling]. One of the reasons I don't normally like to get into these interviews; but one of the things I wanted to...and because I thought I could bring across

a point. And that is neglected. Over there I went through the Visitor Center, they have a fantastic set up over there. And there is a testimony to Ding Darling. And there should be testimony to him. Ding Darling got across a Presidential Order which established that particular Refuge. But really, and it did start it. And I don't mean, it really didn't do anything but Santa Bell was the result of a fraudulent General Land Office survey in the 1870's. So while they set aside certain federal lands on Santa Bell, because of the fraudulent survey none of the lands north of the Periwinkle Drive and Santa Bell Kepi could be identified so that they were not disposed of in the normal way federal lands are. It was later determined that most of the lands, or much of the land was actually conveyed to the State by the Swamp and Overflow Grants of the 1850. So because of the fraudulent survey and the fraudulent surveyor, a man named Horatio Alger Jenkins, that part of the island was not developed for over one hundred years. That then gave us the opportunity, and I was a part of the small group; there were two of us, to work out an exchange with the State of Florida, which merged the Title, and which was the basis for that Refuge. I say this because what we neglect is we honor certain people who were the inspirers. But much of the work that established the National Wildlife Refuge System, and this is multiplied by many hundreds of thousands; is done by the people you see here now, in the field. They are the Biologists, the Reality people, the Refuge Managers. They are the ones basically, who have gotten the System to where it is today.

MR. MADISON: Tell us more about Jack Watson.

MR. ASHE: Well, Jack was a character. He was like many of the early Refuge Managers. He was not [well educated]. He didn't have a Master's Degree, or a Bachelor's Degree. He had probably the quickest gun in south Florida. He was a Law Enforcement person converted into a Refuge Manager on the Key Deer Refuge. At the time, poaching was a big problem in the Florida Keys. And these people were rough. The "conchs" of the lower Florida Keys were a rough element. It took a guy like Jack Watson to bring order. Many of us outgrow our usefulness and he wouldn't have been a Refuge Manager today. But he was a Refuge Manager and a refuge *protector* back then. He was probably of the same character as Paul Kreigel. Paul was a German immigrant and I am sure he wasn't educated in the ways that many of our Managers are today. But he, with his shotgun, brought order and control to this particular area.

I had an involvement too, on Pelican Island in the 1950's and 1960's. The State of Florida was conveying their Water Bottoms, the wetlands. That was the nature at the time. They were in a development mode and they would sell anything to get money and establish development. We were told, and actually two of us made the recommendation; a fellow by the name of Rudy Rudolph and I. Rudy was a Refuge Biologist. We worked out a lease with the State of Florida for about five thousand acres of the water bottoms around the island itself. So now, with the recent additions, and they've done a great job in adding lands; I guess the refuge is in excess of five or six thousand acres. But I went down yesterday to see what they did, and it is super.

MR. MADISON: What are you most proud of? What are the highlights of your career?

MR. ASHE: I mentioned those because they were tied up in my first trip that I made with the FWS. There are a lot of highlights. I was recently asked to name the successes by Ted Williams, the Audubon writer. I gave him a few of what I thought were Refuge successes. A couple of them were some that I was a principle in. There are a number, and it's hard to say because you approach things from different aspects. Now, was it the work that was done to establish the Sevilleta Refuge, a desert refuge in New Mexico, a two hundred and fifty thousand land grant; it was a over grazed land and over utilized land that in the twenty-five or thirty years since we acquired it has shown tremendous recovery. Or, is it helping to establish Mason Neck, outside of Washington, which was the first eagle refuge. Or, is it the Great Dismal Swamp, or twenty or thirty others? I don't know. They all have a different story. They all give you a great deal of satisfaction in retrospect as to what was done and what the results have been of helping to establish those refuges.

MR. GENTRY: I don't know which Refuge this might apply to, and it may apply more to National Parks than Refuges except maybe at Okefenokee. But where the government; the FWS or whatever part of the government would condemn land. There are still places like at Okefenokee where families are still angry with the federal government over stuff like that. Did you have some experiences like that?

MR. ASHE: Oh yeah, we used eminent domain.

MR. GENTRY: And let's put this in a time frame. Was it in the 1930's?

MR. ASHE: It was in the 1930's and it went on up into the 1960's; the use of eminent domain was prevalent. Actually a lot of the adverse reaction came from the work of the Park Service. They were much more aggressive in the use of eminent domain. We did it. Much of it was what we called 'friendly condemnation' for title purposes. Some of it was arbitrary too. But you know, a lot of that reaction now... remember, economic conditions in the 1930's were a lot different than they are now. These people who resent it were happy to sell it, then. But with the advent of land value appreciation over the years, they look back at the past with a different set of values. They were well paid. I negotiated for a lot of lands. You talk to these people and say, "I could have acquired" those lands sold for one dollar an acre. I was cheated! Well one dollar an acre was the going rate at that time. Looking backward, you might think you were cheated but actually you were dealt with fairly. And the Service always, as long as I was with them, paid fair market value. Plus, sometimes a little bit more, to tell the truth, to get the land.

MR. GENTRY: Is there also a flip side of that with places like Archie Carr [Refuge] which I think the land was originally federal land and was sold to private landowners for

virtually nothing. Now, we are buying it back for millions. Did some of that sort of thing go on too?

MR. ASHE: I really don't know the Archie Carr situation, except that I wanted to drive threw it, and I did the other day. But I doubt if that was federal land. It may have been state land. I think most of land might have been patented out a long time ago. In those situations, if they were patented out, the payment was rather small. In terms of that, I was fortunate. In my early career for example, I would be boating up the St. John's working on a refuge at Lake Woodruff or the St. John's Refuge, and I would say, "Man, I am getting paid to do this work!" Now later on, I became an administrator and you dealt with problems of people and budgets and other things, so I figured that was the payback that came. I really had a very enjoyable career. I really enjoyed it. I like to think I did good work and earned my keep. Personally, I couldn't have picked a better line of work.

MR. MADISON: One of your legacies is your son. Tell us about him.

MR. ASHE: Yes. One of the things; I like to keep in balance. I rose fairly high in the Service. I was offered jobs beyond where I was. But it would have impacted my family and so I said "No, we'll do what we can here". I had children. If you've talked to my son Dan, he'll probably tell you about traveling to places like the Florida Keys and to Santa Bell when I was doing work there, and also going to Blackbeard Island or to the Piedmont Refuge in Georgia; places like that. I did like to take my family. I have five boys. He's the only one who has gone into this field. As a consequence, I am proud to say that all of my boys have done well, are doing well and turned out well. To me there's no better way of doing that than by introducing them to the out of doors, and to nature. And then let them make their own choices as to what their life's work is going to be. Of course, I am especially proud of Dan. You like people to follow what you've done. It gives you a good feeling. He's done well and he's going to do better.

MR. GENTRY: I have this perception about the refuges that in many, many cases we have taken land that nobody wanted; former military bases or clean up sites. Do you have any historical perspective on that?

MR. ASHE: Yes, you mentioned Okefenokee for example. Okefenokee falls in the same category as the one I talked about earlier; Seville. The bulk of Okefenokee, about two hundred thousand acres, was acquired from the Hebbard Lumber Company. The Hebbard Company logged Okefenokee from 1909 to 1937. I first went on Okefenokee, doing some work in about 1953, or 1954. That area was a mess! You could see from the aerial photographs that they did what they called 'high lead logging'. They had a small railroad system. It was a mess. I went back there, twenty years later. I had worked continuously, but that was the next time I was in the region. Twenty years later, you look at the aerial photographs and you couldn't see that stuff. Now, unless you are trained, you wouldn't notice what happened between 1909 and 1937. It tells you that

nature will recover if you give it a chance; and you manage and protect it well. I also, in my home town by the way; a good portion of Fort Devons lies. When I moved back into New England, in Massachusetts to work in Region 5, I moved to a town called Harvard, which is about forty miles west of Boston. Part of Fort Devons lies in Harvard, and in three other towns. A Refuge was established there. I figured, "Hell, if we could do it all over the country, we could do it there". The Refuge there started with seven hundred acres of former military lands. When the Army said in the early 19... "No way are we moving out of Fort Devons". I decided that we'd better do some work here because that's bad news. I knew they were going to move out, when they were so vehement. We through the Appropriations Bill in 1992, we got the FWS (I was out of the Service then) to do a study of what part of Fort Devons should be a part of this refuge. The Service did an ascertainment study and it outlined some areas. Those areas in large part have been turned over to the refuge. Some of them were contaminated. But because the refuge was there; and because of the active part of the towns... (I am a Selectman in my town by the way). New England has Town government as opposed to County government in the rest of the country. A Selectman is analogous to a County Commissioner. We got the Army to clean up those areas. And at least at Fort Devons, they had done an outstanding job. And they are still doing it. We're going to have a refuge there of about ten or twelve thousand acres when we're through. It's along the Nashua River. We're going to tie it in with the State Wildlife Management area that is to the south. So ten or twelve thousand acres in New England, is big stuff. It's not much in many areas in the west, but in New England that's big stuff. This will be an outstanding refuge. There will be grassland nesting birds, waterfowl, butterflies and a whole host of things. To get back to your question; I think a lot can be done with military lands that are disposed of. I know there's a concern, even my son has a concern about contaminated sites. But if you'll notice that when you go to contaminated sites, critters don't seem to be bothered by it. Go to John Heinz Refuge in Tinicum and look at what's been done there in the city of Philadelphia. And there are two dumps in that facility. I was involved in the early work of establishing that, although I had my concerns at the time too, because of that contamination. But what are you going to do with those sites? You can do a lot with them. The Service is disinclined to take it over because of the liabilities. But understand, the Fish and Wildlife Service doesn't own anything. The Army doesn't own anything. Those lands are owned by the United States of America! It doesn't matter which agency has jurisdiction. And I think we can do a lot, from a wildlife standpoint with many of those contaminated areas that the military are disposing. I don't know if that answered your question.

MR. GENTRY: Yeah! I just had this impression that we've taken land that people have over farmed, over logged, contaminated or blown up; you know, everything. There's just many, many of those around the country.

MR. ASHE: I met Ira Gabrielson a couple of times. Once was at a seminar when I was an undergraduate at the University of Connecticut. Then I met him when I was in Texas

at one of the refuges. We sat and we talked for about two hours. I mean, just a fabulous conversations with one of the icons of this business. He heard that I had worked in Region 4 before I had gone out to New Mexico. He asked me about the Piedmont Refuge. If you go in the Refuge office there; that was all agricultural land and there was real erosion; sheet erosion, gully erosion, it was a mess! Being a visionary, he thought that they could do something with that in the Refuge System. It came to the Service under what they called Title 3 of the Bankhead-Jones Act. These were farms lands that were acquired during the depression. And if you go there, that is one heck of a timber, wildlife refuge. And the only way you can tell what has happened to that in the past; you'll see these trees that are in the gullies and they have a sight index of about eighty. But on the top of the hills the trees have a sight index of about twenty because all of the topsoil was going in to the gullies. But again, you can do a lot with these abused lands if you give it some care, and give it some time. I think that what the Service has done with these areas, is I think, what the country is going to have to do with much of it's area to restore it's productivity, not only from a wildlife standpoint, but from any other standpoints too.

MR. MADISON: Silvia Conte is a classic example. That wouldn't have been a Salyer type refuge.

MR. ASHE: You're talking about the Silvia Conte Refuge? Well, maybe some other time I'll talk to you about that.

MR. MADISON: I know, we'd need another whole tape for that. But you know, the Service is doing like you suggested; there are thinking about types of lands that they might not have thought about. The other one that occurs to me is Rocky Mountain Arsenal. There's a polluted mess! It has coyotes and eagles.

MR. ASHE: Oh, it's the most polluted area they say, in the United States.

MR. MADISON: The critters don't seem to mind it.

MR. ASHE: You can go to Tinicum along Darby Creek. When they are first looking at that an EPA guy was there and he happened to slip into the creek. Man, he ran to the phone to see what the status of his shots were, because it was that polluted. But go there now. Go there now and you won't even notice. It still has a level of contamination because it takes time to correct that situation. But as in the case of Okefenokee, as is the case of Sevilleta, in fifty years you won't know it. We're in this business, as they said during the meeting, not necessarily for ourselves. We're in the business for our kids, our grand kids and beyond. I got a nice letter from... I got an award up in my home place. My son sent me a note. He said, "I thank you Dad. Any Mary and Michael thank you".

Those are my grandkids. That's what it's all about.

MR. MADISON: That's a good place to end. Thank you so much!

MR. ASHE: Your welcome.