

ORAL HISTORY
Of
Albert Novara
(Retired)

Interviewed by
Mark Madison
On April 19, 2000

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

Oral History – Albert Novara

Location:

Interviewer: Mark Madison

Interview Date 04/19/2000

(There are two interviewers. The second person is not identified. For simplicity, MM will be identified as the interviewer in this transcript regardless of which one is talking.)

MM: The other person in the room is Mark Madison. And we're doing an oral history. All right, we're taping, good?

MM: Al, usually our first question is what did you do before you came to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service?

AN: I was employed by the Illinois Department of Conservation: the name of which later was changed to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

MM: All right.

AN: Also while working for the IDNR I held the positions of: Federal Aid Coordinator, District Wildlife Manager, and my last position with IDNR was Assistant Land Manager in charge of wildlife and waterfowl management areas.

MM: I have been calling you Al because that is on your resume.

AN: That's okay, my full name is Albert.

MM: Oh okay. I'm trying to read this.

AN: You can't read it, huh? Okay.

MM: All right, and then what happened after that?

AN: We'll I got to the point where early in my state career the administrative aspects of my job was not my "cup of tea", I longed to return to the field where I could work in waterfowl management. It was during the summer of 1978 that a position came open with the federal government for a Flyway Biologist (airplane pilot). I applied for the position, was interviewed by Ross Hanson and Duane Norman and selected for the position. Due to previous commitments with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, I was not able enter federal service until early 1979.

MM: And what year would this have been?

AN: That would have been '79, following when I was first selected in '78. And my first assignment... do you want me to go into the... what I did?

MM: Yes.

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AN: Okay. My first assignment was working with Bill Larned in the section of waterfowl populations surveys in southern Manitoba.

MM: Okay.

AN: Learning the ins and outs of aerial surveying, it was a very, very interesting time of my career, learning a lot of things. And, the most interesting thing that I experienced was the expanse of northern habitat types, all of things that I had read, and my formal education, and growing up and the stories that I had heard, to see this magnificent country firsthand was just almost overwhelming to me. I just couldn't believe that they were paying me to do it.

MM: Well, what did it look like, for those of us who've never been in Manitoba?

AN: Oh, it was just beautiful. I was up there in the spring and everything is just coming alive; you see a lot of birds and... just the expanse of the habitat. I mean, it just seems like it goes on forever, and then seeing the demarcations in the habitat as you go north. I mean, that was just very striking to me.

MM: What type of plane were you flying back then?

AN: Back then I... let's see, it was a Cessna 185.

MM: Okay.

AN: And that was my first experience with a tail dragger, so it took a little bit of adjusting to, because I learned to fly on a tricycle-type plane.

MM: How do you adjust to that?

AN: Well, it's difficult, but I did not have too much trouble.

MM: Is it hard to learn how to take off with a tail dragger?

AN: No. The landing is a little bit more critical, but the takeoffs weren't too bad, but the landings got a little tricky. And then for the rest of my career, usually we would be paired up, like when I flew with Doug Benning in Mexico, it was all tail dragger time. So, you get used to it, but it is a little bit difficult at times.

MM: What happened after Manitoba?

AN: Okay. Came back and I was stationed at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. That's where all of the trainees were stationed at that time. Some of them, like

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Doug, I think, well they were out there briefly, and then we were assigned to a duty station. And then, you more or less stayed there in training until one of these older fellows retired or left the station, so that's what happened in North Dakota.

MM: So you were like a vice president?

AN: Yes, about as important as the vice president.

MM: You were like the vice president.

AN: Yes. About as important as a (undecipherable). So then the Jamestown area was open and had survey responsibilities in the central flyway, so my wife and I packed up and we went to North Dakota, which was really different. I had never lived up there. I grew up in southern Illinois. And, we really liked it there. As a flyway biologist in the central flyway, we continued to do surveys in Canada and the central flyway. We worked extensively with the sandhill crane stuff in the spring on the Platte River, in Nebraska. We also were conducting Mexican surveys every year.

MM: What years were these up in the central flyway?

AN: '80 through '91.

MM: How were the sandhills doing back then?

AN: Oh, they were great. We pretty much had a good handle on them. They all seemed to congregate on the Platte River in the spring, and at that time we did not have a lot of them outside of our survey area. Now, that's become quite a problem now. The same survey area, you know, they fly and they (undecipherable) and a lot of them are outside of those traditional areas. So it was very interesting. We were doing a lot of aerial photography and looking at our counting expertise. We would count flocks and we'd end up with about 400,000 birds and then we have the aerial photography. Everything we counted, somebody took a picture of and they were looking at our accuracy. It turned out quite well. I think we were in about the 90% range. Doug Benning did a lot of research to confirm our accuracy. Doug Johnson also did the statistical work that reached the same conclusion.

MM: (Undecipherable) because they were concerned that the (undecipherable, two people talking at once).

AN: Yeah. We knew that there was bias in our aerial surveys, and you were dealing with large numbers.

MM: Right.

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AN: As opposed to the duck-type survey stuff that we did, where you're online and you don't only count big numbers like that. So, we'd always have a problem when you've got large concentrations, like in some of the wintering counts on Canada Geese and what-have-you, and it is kind of a baseline type thing.

MM: How do you count them? I mean, this is a good question.

AN: Well, I think everybody has their own method of doing it. I had experience in Illinois with flying goose counts, and I would tell people... they would ask me how I did. I would see a flock of birds whether on the ground or in the air and decide whether we're looking at tens, we're looking at hundreds, or we're looking at thousands. And, I used to have a pencil and I knew what 100 birds looked like and I would put on 100 and try to move it 100, you know, like that. And that seemed to work pretty good with me, I mean, on the counts. It's kinda (undecipherable).

MM: When you were first being trained, how did you learn what 100 looked like?

AN: Well, Jim Voelzer had a publication where they had rice grains on a piece of paper. I kind of studied that to get an idea of estimating numbers; it helped me refine my counting accuracy. Also, on the Canada geese thing, we had three people doing the same thing and you kind of compared notes, although the important thing is being consistent. You don't want an up and down type of thing. If you consistently count only half of the birds that are there, you can correct for that, but you can't correct for inconsistency.

MM: Right.

AN: For the (undecipherable, two people talking)...

MM: Well, if you're consistent you should have a trend too.

AN: Yeah.

MM: The numbers are going up or down.

AN: That's right.

MM: Even if you're off a bit.

AN: Yeah. So, anytime you get large numbers of any kind of birds, you run into this bias problem, but I think we got pretty good at arriving at fairly good accurate numbers.

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MM: That's fascinating.

AN: Yes.

MM: We never asked anybody this question.

AN: Yeah.

MM: We just... people say well, we go out and count.

AN: Yeah. And some people are better than others at it, you know.

MM: Now, when you do the photography, how do they count it? Do they pull it up and count the (undecipherable, two people talking) or something?

AN: Well, we did two different kinds. All of the habitat photography was done with the old World War II K-17 cameras. When fitted into the belly of the airplane, you pushed a button and the camera took hundreds of photos as you go across the habitat. The crane stuff was done with 35mm photography. And, we had a guy in the back and he was taking a picture. You tell him, "This is what I'm counting here", whether they were in the air or on the ground. And, we had that blown up and the poor secretary had to try to count all of those little dots. And then they would have a frame number and we would have a number assigned to that frame as to what the number was. So, yeah, it was harder for the people interpreting the photos than it was for us, (undecipherable). But the thing is, we're counting in an airplane, you know, you're not only counting birds and looking at habitat, you're flying the airplane and you're navigating, you know. I mean, you have to stay on these lines that you are flying and that was before they had GPS and all of the modern navigating equipment.

MM: So, obviously (undecipherable, two people talking).

AN: Yeah. So, you know, you've got lines drawn on a map and, you know, you've got to stay on that to see, you know, you cover the same areas, or that you don't include more area than what's in your transect.

MM: So while you are out navigating pre-GPS, are you (undecipherable, two people talking).

AN: Well, I haven't done too much of the GPS navigating, but that's all come later, but it's sure made things a lot easier.

MM: Yeah.

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MM: So you went all the way down to Mexico?

AN: Oh yeah.

MM: How was that down there?

AN: It was great. It was different and it gave me exposure to the big picture, the habitat. And the culture was different. I mean, dealing with those people, it's not the same hectic pace that we have in this country and people don't understand the urgency of doing different things. And, Doug and I handled quite a few. We used to seem to be paired up quite a bit down there and learning the ins and outs of all of these different airfields. But, what I remember about Mexico was the windstorms sometimes down there and the high altitude lakes that had a lot of birds that you wonder what they're doing there and some of the problems you have administratively. A guy doesn't get you a permit, and the airport Commandant ruled the roost. You can't even sit in your airplane unless you get permission and things like that. And a lot of things with the tourists were facilitated with money. Well, we were on government business, we couldn't do that.

MM: Right.

AN: And, that was a little bit different. And weather, getting good weather reports. A lot of times we'd call back to the states if we could. That was always a hassle, you know, just using the phone, and getting good accurate up-to-date weather reports. And, sometimes the airlines helped us with that. And, when we worked in Mexico, there was like several different groups. We had people that worked on the east coast; that was a crew. We had people working on the west coast; that was a crew. You had people in the interior highlands. So, during my career, I got to work all of the different areas and I especially liked that stuff on the west coast, down to Guatemala and Tapachula. We'd fly from Acapulco all the way down to Tapachula. That was a one-day type survey, and then you came back up through the central highlands, and you see things that just, you never get a chance to see that much habitat and birds and you see peculiarities, like you see canvasbacks in these high altitude lakes.

MM: Yeah.

AN: And we don't know, you know. Of all the different places that I worked, that to me was the most interesting. I mean, I love the Arctic and I love Canada, but Mexico was interesting.

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MM: Well, that's cool.

AN: It really was.

MM: That's very cool.

AN: Yeah. After I left the section, they have expanded some of the things, you know. Initially when the section was set up, you know, they were going down south as far as Venezuela, you know, to look at things in Central America. Matter of fact, I was hoping that Chuck Glover would talk about the first time they flew in Venezuela. They were going across this big lake and it was quite remote and he says... that they got real low and as they went by this one place where the Indians or locals were, a guy threw a spear at the airplane. Did he bring that up last night?

MM: No, he didn't.

AN: That's kinda different. And, I know that when Doug and I were flying in Mexico, sometimes we would see a farmer out there, using a mule or a horse to plow and he would have reins wrapped around him and we would go over a hill and come back and the horse was dragging him across the field and we wondered whatever became of him.

MM: Yeah.

AN: So, that, you know, those count... Some of the things I remember about that.

MM: Did you end your career in the central flyways or did you...?

AN: No. I had always been interested in this harvest survey. You know, I don't know if you're familiar with what we call the Wing Bees.

MM: Yes.

AN: Okay. And, I had worked with Sam Carney and I was allowed to go to all of the flyways to work on wings with him, and I really enjoyed working with Sam and he was getting ready to retire, so I came back to Patuxent. I still flew... came back and flew as an observer up in the Arctic with Carl Ferguson, but I took over not the chief of the harvest surveys, but the national Wing Bee coordinator, so I was running the Wing Bees across the country. And, that was a very interesting time for me because it was a time when they started to computerize all of the stuff that we'd done by hand. I mean, we used to get done with the analysis of the wings and we would separate envelopes by state, by county, by age, by sex.

MM: What were you looking for?

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AN: Well, we were looking for a distribution of the kill. We found out a long time ago that hunters couldn't identify ducks that well. So, we had one survey to determine how many hunters we had, then the other survey, by them sending in a wing, we could tell what the speciation was of the national harvest. And then, also from that, we could look at the age ratios from those wings. We could tell the age and the sex, with about a 95% accuracy, from the wings. So that was pretty interesting.

MM: Yeah.

AN: And, Sam had spent a lot of time with me. I don't know if you ever knew him, or...

MM: No.

AN: But he set up all of the original Wing Bee procedural type things and through his study and working with the Smithsonian found a lot of different characteristics that people weren't aware of, as far as determining age and sex from feather analysis and he was kind of the Grand Master at that. So I really, really enjoyed that, and then after a while I had a chance to come back to my roots, southern Illinois, and I took that opportunity and went back there for ten years...no, not ten years, eight years. I got into a program where I was doing a lot of field work. Private land work with farmers and people I wanted to work with, and restoration of wetlands and the restoration of bottom land habitat. Planting of trees and that and working on a joint venture earlier with Ducks Unlimited, the Nature Conservancy, and the Fish and Wildlife Service. At one time, the Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge was the premier joint venture area in the region. So that's where I finished out my career, but the whole time I was doing that I still had opportunities to go on the special assignments. For example the breeding and production surveys, the Wing Bees, and... They also allowed me to go out to Johnson Island one time for three weeks under the auspices of the Smithsonian; working with ocean birds to discern feather development patterns. And I really enjoyed that, so...

MM: Wing Bee. How are you spelling that?

AN: Wing Bee. It's a takeoff from the term quilting bee; the old ladies would get together and they would all work on the quilt. They called that a quilting bee. So all of the biologists get together and work on wings. So I call it the Wing Bee.

MM: This is to help the transcriptionist.

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AN: Yeah. Okay. Yeah. It's a fairly practical program. We have annually looked at close to 100,000 wings, in all four flyways. So you get a good idea as to what the kill is and the age ratios, and this all goes back into understanding populations and setting regulations and, you know, the stuff that you do in Canada, the breeding pair and production surveys are one aspect of this system, this big picture, but there's other things that enter into it; the banding information and the harvest information.

MM: Yeah. That's fascinating.

AN: So, a very important component of that.

MM: What were some highlights of your career, things that stick with you?

AN: Well, I had a fairly level career, I don't...

MM: That's wild.

AN: No escape from mediocrity in my background. I just think my exposure to a lot of folks. I mean the Glovers and the (undecipherable) and Art Brazda. I'm just fascinated with these folks that I have worked with; some of the people, like Jack Green, were my heroes. And, that made the highlights of what I enjoyed and I look back on and the fact that I survived all of this with no major problems, no accidents. And, that's kind of a highlight.

MM: Yeah. That it is a highlight, isn't it? (Undecipherable) your career.

AN: Yeah. Oh yeah. Hey, it was a wonderful career. I would tell my dad what I would do for a living and I'd tell him, "We used to take vacation and do that." "And they're paying you." He couldn't believe it. I mean, there's... there's work to it.

MM: Sure.

AN: I mean, it's just like any job, I mean, you have things to do, there's paperwork and I don't care what you're doing, you've got administrative duties that you have to attend to and the biggest change in that whole flyway type thing has been the computerization, the accuracy of the results, and the fact that if you're not tied up doing a lot of number correcting, I mean the computer is doing that, you had more time to think and report about habitat, and I think that has been a big, big advantage.

MM: Were they using only computers when you (undecipherable, two people talking).

AN: No, when I started, absolutely not. We had a tape recorder that was used. And, we'd come back, we'd record everything from the flying surveys. We took data from both the pilot and co-pilot. In addition to all of this, we had to fly the plane and navigate, we had to count the birds and remember what the ground crews were doing. The right-hand observer counted ducks and water, so when you got back to the motel room that night, you had to transcribe all of this, put it on a data form, through special notation, and then you had to summarize all that, okay? So you did all of that and at that time, then there was another form that you used for the summarization for each one of the segments that went into the computer, you know, and you'd check... put the numbers in there and when you got back all of the stuff, it had to be audited and, you know, quality control was such that even though you'd gone over it several times, they'd still find errors.

MM: Right.

AN: You know, on the data. And then it was computerized and then after it was corrected, you'd get a copy back and you came back. There was always a great urgency to get this stuff done because of the regulation process. There were so many days after they published regulations to...

MM: Right.

AN: For public comment and that kind of thing. So we were always kind of under the gun. So, it's usually a May and July type of thing with those types of surveys. Coming back...

MM: So the computers really helped?

AN: Oh my goodness, yes. Well, it just didn't make mistakes in addition. You would not think that that would be difficult to do, but when you're dealing with page after page after page of numbers and the different types of notation, it was quite easy to overlook something. It really was. And you'd feel like an idiot if, you know, we kinda used to take bets on who could get something through the auditor back at Patuxent, you know. And say, "Why, she can't find any errors in this," you know, and then there'd be six or seven errors that she'd find in there. So that was one aspect of the quality control, and the other thing, of course, was the ground crew type of information, you know. We had comparisons of aerial versus ground, and they kinda give you a conversion ratio of the numbers, so the pilot was also responsible in the Dakotas, or in the U.S., for the ground crew. In Canada, the ground crews were mostly Canadian folks. So, they had their own supervision and we would get new people every year from refugees and what-have-you to work on the ground crew and they would visually go out and check every wetland in this 18-mile segment, you know, and then we'd look at it and see what the comparisons were and that sort of thing, so it was pretty interesting.

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MM: Anything else you want to add?

AN: No. I just think it has been enjoyable. I wonder why I am so lucky to have (undecipherable) all of these things, like something catastrophic is going to happen here.

MM: Maybe a good attitude leads to a good career.

AN: Huh?

MM: Maybe a good attitude leads to a good career.

AN: I would think so. I think so.