Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: John Fort
Date of Interview: March 17, 2010
Location of Interview: Crawfordville, Florida
Interviewer: Jennifer Hinckley

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 10-11 years

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Forest Service: Forestry Tech in Libby, Montana; Forestry Tech at Grand Canyon, Arizona; Long Leaf Pine Research out of Auburn, Alabama; Silvicultrist out of De Soto Ranger District, De Soto National Forest; BLM Alaska, Ran an engine in Alaska. FWS: St. Mark's in Crawfordville, Florida; First Director for the Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center, Tallahassee, Florida.

Most Important Projects: Prescribed Fire Training Center

Colleagues and Mentors: William Boyer, John White, Jim Durrwachter, Perry (Name), Hunter Westrand, Frank Cole, Pete Kubiak, Joe White, Doug Scott, Cal Gale

Most Important Issues: Restoring ecosystems to a healthy state.

Brief Summary of Interview: Starts off talking about his career with other agencies, the work he did for them, people he worked with, why he became interested in fire, why he decided to go back to college, and going to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service. He also shares stories of experiences he had throughout his career with all the agencies. John still works with fire part of the year, and works in a local hospital the other part in respiratory care.

JH: So the first thing we need is your name, and like a birthplace and a birthdate.

JF: My full name?

JH: Whatever name you want to give me, I'll then know who you are

JF: John Gordon Fort, Jr., born 6/28/50 in Atlanta, Georgia.

JH: And do you want to spell your name.

JF: F O R T.

JH: To begin with, John, what's your education?

JF: I have a Bachelor of Science in Forest Management from Mississippi State University. And I have an Associate of Science in Respiratory, Cardiopulmonary Science from Tallahassee Community College.

JH: And what years were you employed with the federal government?

JF: I started with the fed in 1972 in Libby, Montana and retired in19-, no I retired in 2001; January of 2001. And I made, this is pretty cool, I made the decision to retire in Libby, Montana on the same railroad tracks I fought my first fire on in 1972. Pretty cool, huh?

JH: Yeah. What years were you employed by the Service?

JF: From 1990 until 2001, January 2001

JH: And who else have you worked for?

JF: U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

JH: So you started, what was your first job with the Forest Service, or was it the Forest Service; first job?

JF: I was a GS 4 Forestry Technician doing standard application and habitat typing in Libby, Montana in the Cabinet Mountains.

JH: And your next job after that, did you like that one?

JF: It was a kick in the ass. I knew every understory species in western Montana after that season. I could tell you stories about that place; we stayed in bunk houses too. I could tell you stories about those bunk houses, the toilets would freeze in the wintertime and somebody had to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and bust the ice on the toilets so you could go out there and light the oil heater so everybody else could come out there and take a shower an hour later. Left there and went to Grand Canyon, Arizona for two years and then to Alaska.

JH: And that was all with the Forest Service?

JF: No I worked for BLM in Alaska.

JH: And what was your job in the Grand Canyon?

JF: Forestry Technician, fire. I was a fire lookout in 1973; I raised a dog up there in that lookout tower. And then we fought fire in fall and did prescribe burning on both sides of the Grand Canyon, both rims. And then in '74, worked on the hand tools crew living in

a cabin that was built in 1890; we were twelve miles from the nearest road. If we wanted take a bath we had to take a bath in a trick tank, or we took a bath in a wash tub once a week. And left there and went to Santa Barbara, California and worked an engine and then came back and did silviculture work on the North Rim, and that was '74. And in '75 I ran an engine out of Fairbanks, Alaska for BLM.

JH: That had to be fun.

JF: Hell yeah.

JH: So where did you go from there, from Alaska.

JF: Went to college; August of '75, sitting there on 2 Street in Fairbanks, me and this little jumper. It was about 3 o'clock in the morning and that jumper was 35 years old and he was like 10 miles of bad road. And we were both just drunker than robins. And I looked across that table and I decided, "That's going to be me in ten years." And I went back to college. I'd picked up a degree in two years, starving to death and then went to work for the Forest Service in research doing Long Leaf Pine research for Bill Boyer in Auburn, Alabama. And that was the Croker and Boyer team who established the Shelterwood system for Long Leaf Pine; I did research for him for fourteen months.

JH: That's cool. So from there?

JF: After that I went to work for John White. And I don't if people know John White but he was the best long leaf pine sivilculturist the U.S. Forest Service had in the lower coastal plain. And we were doing research plots in Wiggins, Mississippi. And White came up to me and said, "We're behind on our prescriptions on this Ranger District. You got a degree don't you?" I said, "Yeah I got a degree in Forest Management from the state." He said, "Won't you come to work for me." He was from Boston, that sucker was wired. And I said, "Well that's up to my boss Bill Boyer." And he Bill were good friends, the next thing I knew I'd been transferred got a professional job over there, I was a technician for Bill, and I worked for John White as a silviculturist prescription forester writing long leaf pine management prescriptions on the old De Soto Ranger District; Black Creek Ranger District under De Soto. And then left there and hopscotched around the U.S. Forest Service until I ended up here in Crawfordville.

JH: In Crawfordville, beautiful St. Marks.

JF: I was happy working for the U.S. Forest Service.

JH: So you got here to Crawfordville, Florida in…?

JF: '85, 1985 I came here and I was the FMO, Fire Management Officer and the Timber Sales Forester on the Wakulla Ranger District for Apalachicola National Forest. At that time there was not one Ranger District as it is now, it was two. We had the one over here and then you had the other one across the river over in Bristol. And the Apalachicola was 700,000 acres of Leaf Pine and Slash, it was the biggest, continuest block of Long Leaf Pine left in the lower coastal plain. It was really a

kick and old Bill Boyer had taught me well.

(Break in Tape)

JH: So Apalachicola.

JF: Yeah on the National Forest. Boyer had plots here, Croker and Boyer had plots they established in the '60's and '70's to facilitate their regeneration studies for shelterwood and for management studies on volume and yield tables for long leaf pine. And some of them were on the Apalachicola, so I'd been here before and really liked it. And I really liked it here because these people were, they did the first work with the heli-torch in the southeast. They came up to Holly Springs, Mississippi where I was working and taught us how to do it, and then I in turn, me and John Taylor from the town Bigbee taught the entire state of Mississippi how to use the heli-torch. So when I came here, it wasn't like I was new because I knew the people and I knew the country here in Crawfordville; we loved it here, still do. And it was a kick working here, I can remember days when we burned four or five thousand acres a day. And we'd put that heli-torch out there, and then subsequently went to the Plastic Sphere Dispenser Machine we were one of the first ranger districts to use the PSD. And we flew the socks off that huge helicopter back then; fought a lot of wildfire; this place does burn. And then from there went to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at St. Marks, which is contiguous to the Wakulla Ranger District; it was just, I was working the same ecosystem, just another federal agency and that was in 1990.
JH: So you were the FMO?

JF: Yes I was the FMO and the forester at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge from '90 until '97, and I loved that place, that was a hoot; what a great place to work. And in '97 we started up the Prescribed Fire Training Center, the National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center in Tallahassee. We started that up and I retired in 2001 from that position.

JH: What position were you at PFTC?

JF: I was the Director. I was the first Director there of PFTC.

JH: And what was the mission of PFTC?

JF: Well just what Durrwachter said, (laughing). What was the mission of PFTC? It was to promote prescribed fire. For years, and they're still doing it, they're still giving lip service to prescribed fire. And it was our goal, there were three or four of us who got it started, to put the rubber on the road. To let these people know, this is how you can do it, you don't have to be afraid of this. Come on down here, we'll show you that this is not rocket science. We'll put you with practitioners who have done this for years, for decades some of them. And you can listen to what they have to say and watch what they do and actually mimic what they're doing when they put a torch in your hand. This is an experience based program and we're going to give you the confidence to go forth and manage fire ecosystems as they're supposed to be managed, to manage the public lands as they're intended to be managed. How's that?

JH: That's good.

JF: That's pretty cool.

JH: That is. So you're the first Director of PFTC and then you finally retire?

JF: Yeah I did.

JH: And went back to school.

JF: I went back to school and I graduated with an AS Degree in Respiratory Care, Cardiopulmonary. And in the summer months I still work wildfires, and in the winter months when there's a crying need for respiratory practitioners, in the flu season and the asthma season, I work in a local hospital. I usually work three or four shifts a week in a local hospital; it's about five months doing that and I work about six months, five or six months working fire. And I spend a couple of months around the beach fishing.

JH: So what do you do on fire now that you're retired?

JF: I'm still red-carded in aviation, air ops, air support, and helibase management, and working on the initial attack tag dispatch.

JH: Why did you want to work for the Service? No we should back up and ask you the question, why did you get into fire 'cause you're a Mississippi boy. And you end up in Libby, Montana to start. Why'd you get into fire?

JF: It's exciting. When you're young and you're stupid and you're virile, and you're bullet proof, and you're ten feet tall; it was pretty cool. And you can strut and wear pretty boots and make overtime that was pretty neat too. Didn't make any overtime when I was working timber but I knew you could make overtime in fire. So that was good too, and this was back in the '70's now. There was some overtime to be made; we put out every fire back then. It was the adrenaline rush, you know a young person wanting the adrenaline rush, that's what it was.

JH: And why did you shift from working on the Apalachicola to St. Marks? You went from the Forest Service to the Fish and Wildlife Service, there's a mission difference.

JF: Because I like the way Fish managed their ecosystems. They didn't pay lip service to managing ecosystems, grant it the focus was on wildlife, but critical to that wildlife was maintenance of the indigenous ecosystem. And these were all fire related to ecosystems. I love fire, I came to love prescribed fire much more than wild fire. I don't want to get into that 'cause that's whole can of worms, but for many reasons prescribed fire just much more challenging, much more fascinating, much more satisfying; you learn much more than you do on wildfire. On wildfire you just put a line around it, clip your overtime and go home. Prescribed fire, you're managing that fire, you consider the variables, you're pushing that fire, you're getting it to do what you want it to do. And Fish and Wildlife Service was on the cutting edge of that and I never regretted that, that was a kick in the ass; that was a lot of fun. That was a lot of fun; that was a lot of fun and Joe White was refuge manager at that time; he was a forester, he was open with habitat management and we did some great things at St. Marks. We did some wonderful things restoring habitats there that had been

neglected for many years. No reflection on past foresters or FMO's in the Fish and Wildlife, absolutely none. But the political climate was such that I stepped into at a time when I was allowed to do really neat things.

JH: These 20 questions come from talking to like Frank Cole and people like that. So the next question that they have is what Presidents, Secretaries of Interior, and Fish and Wildlife Directors did you serve under?

JF: I don't know.

JH: Yeah, I didn't think you did. So how did any changes in the administrations affect your work?

JF: Political administrations?

JH: Yes political administration. You know there's the waves of politics that roll through what we do down at the field level. How did they affect your work from when you started in the '70's to when you retired?

JF: I was never a refuge manager or a Forest Service District Ranger; I was never a line officer. Politics influenced line officers more than staff. I was the staff for the refuge manager; I was the staff for that District Ranger. So I don't think politics really influenced me that much at all. I worked with some superb line officers, absolutely magnificent line officers, some of the best; they're all old school. And they expected you to work hard and accomplish the mission of the agency. That was pretty cut and dry, and in return they took care of the politics. They fought the funding battles, they took the political heat and they allowed us as staff to operate. So did the political wins influence me personally? No, not really, they influenced my line officers more than they did me. And PFTC, that was rather unique, yeah that was subject to politics at that time. It was just a new initiative and such a new program it took a little while for politics to catch up. It took a little while for politics to figure out that we were on their radar. So it was center directors after me who had to fool with politics, I was pretty well allowed to grow the program and get it established and running.

JH: That was a good opportunity. What events influenced you most in your career?

JF: Drunken smoke jumper in 1975. Yeah that drunk smoke jumper he did a lot; I never forgot him. That railroad track in Libby, Montana, who'd thought that would influence me like it did. Influenced my career?

JH: Yeah your career. So how about the gentlemen, the researchers that you worked under? That a significant…

JF: Oh Boyer did! Yeah there's no doubt Bill Boyer did. Bill Boyer's magnificent. This was a guy who was in the Merchant Marines in World War II and sailed the north Atlantic, saw ships torpedoed and never knew if his ship was going to go down. And this guy came back from World War II and got a PhD in ecology, one of the toughest programs in science that you can get into. And he got a PhD in ecology and went forward, subsequent to that, and recognized an ecosystem in decline. The Long Leaf Pine had been abused, it was rapidly disappearing, and he and Tom

Croker figured out a method to regenerate Long Leaf Pine ecological, silvicultural, and did it successfully. To this day their research still holds water. Bill, he introduced me to Long Leaf Pine and I've loved it ever since; that was a fascinating ecosystem. And I spent, I don't know how many years, studying that and working in it, it was a kick in the butt there; that was a lot of fun working for Bill. Other things that influenced it, aerial ignition, when we were at able to implement aerial ignition in the southeast and put aerial ignition into a truly fire related ecosystem and accomplish goals that people had never imagined and do it safely and economically, and be able to be on the cutting edge of that; that was a lot of fun, that was pretty good. And I really liked doing PFTC that was a combination of many, many years of experience and dreaming and to work in a team environment with the other players who got PFTC going. And then once you did that and once you cracked that open to work with the other true Prescribed Fire Managers in the United States, who were just waiting for somebody to do something, and then they flocked to that focal point; it was really, really rewarding, that was pretty good.

JH: I don't know what you mean by the true Prescribe Fire Managers and flocking to a focal point.

JF: Oh there's a lot of folks hiding in the woodwork who always believed in prescribed fire, always wondered why in the heck we were putting out all these wildfires. Always wondered why we couldn't ignite more acres and restore the ecosystem that had been abandoned for generations, and then put them in the health they deserved, but kept running into a brick wall in Washington. The 7 o'clock rule, where all fires had to be out by 7 am the next morning, kept running into that, and kept running into that, and kept running into that and it was hard to light a fire in the western U.S.; that culture was never abandoned in the southeast because prescribed fire, man ignited fire was carried forth from the '30's on forward. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was established in 193-, help me out.

JH: The Fish and Wildlife Service was established in 1903.

JF: 1903, but the lands here in the south…

JH: Oh 1931 was St. Marks.

JF: Yeah, '31, they were still prescribed burning in 1931 here in the lower coastal plain, and never lost that edge, and never lost any of the ecosystems that they managed today. Whereas in the western United States, the 7 o'clock rule, they abandoned the fire ecosystems out there. It's amazing when you look at the historical photographs, what they've lost out there. And there was a lot of people in the western U.S. who recognize that but really were just looking for someplace where they could get the word out. And you know this PFTC all of a sudden was the focal point and that was pretty neat. People like Paul Gleason, Paul Gleason came down here more than one year and he would take his students out and he'd be an advisor and he's be a teacher to these students, to the teams that went out; Gleason was great. God he knew his stuff! And he was a real advocate for prescribed fire, heck of a fireman, but a real advocate for prescribed fire. Frank Cole, Cole he

preached prescribed fire from here to Boise and Washington D.C. for his whole career and all of a sudden he's able to come in and reach these young people and get them on board and give them the confidence they need. A lot of the early participants were folks who believed in prescribed fire but didn't know there were other people out there who felt like they did. And it was like an epitome for them when they left here, when they left the PFTC. Phil Street, Brian McManus, both had roots in Florida, and saw the value in prescribed fire and carried it forwardly nationally. There's a lot, I forgot how many people, I have to look at the list of all the folks who came through here in the first three or four years we were going. It was just exciting, it was really neat. Forest Service sent some really good people through here. The U.S. Forest Service had some folks from Boise and the Washington office who were advocates of prescribed fire. They also has people who were opposed 100% to prescribed fire and did everything they could to cut the legs out from under us, but by in large the support the was there. And it's evident because PFTC is still vibrant, still in operation. I'll shut up.

JH: You can say whatever you want. I'm good. So what would the high point of your career have been then, 1975 with talking to a drunken smoke jumper? (Laughing)

JF: That was a catalyst, you know. There was more than one drunken evening in my career. But that was the catalyst that propelled a career that the entire career was a high point. There were many days when I, I couldn't believe they were paying me to do what I was doing. I can remember days sitting on a mountain top in Idaho, or Washington state, Oregon, California, and thinking they're paying me to be here watching the sun set. I can remember evenings in a fire camp in Big Sur California watching the sun set in the Pacific and thinking, they're paying me to be here. And there were days where I bust out of the brush here in Florida, here at St. Marks; and there's places in St. Marks refuge where I'd bust out of that brush and all of a sudden you see the Gulf of Mexico and the sun just sparkling like diamonds over the Gulf out there, and I'm thinking damn they're paying me to be here. So was there any one high point? No. My whole career was a highpoint. Very satisfying and yeah I was very fortunate; a lot fun.

JH: Good. Were there any low points?

JF: Yeah, politics. Sure the line officer would absorb a lot of that, but there were many times when the staff, there was a lot stuff that you saw….

(Break in tape).

JH: I think that we were at, we were talking about low points. Low points in your career.

JF: So yeah the politics.

JH: Politics, you were talking about line officers.

JF: Line officers absorb most of the politics but it had a ripple effect. And we knew as scientists, and natural resource managers, what needed to be done to the public lands to maintain them for the good of the public; we knew that. But there were political whims that dictated otherwise, those

were some pretty low points. And they tended to build on each other, you hit a low point one year and you could blow it off, you hit a low point the next year you blow it off. Five years later you hit another political whim and you'd blow it off. But after so many years of it, that's why people retire because you get tired of the silliness of things, the ego's that tend to interject into public lands management. And make no mistake we are in public land management. If there were low points, that was it. And then they cumulative and they compound on each other until every public lands manager reaches a point to where, "Yes I'm going to retire." Anybody who's dedicated to the public lands and who loves the public lands reaches a point to where "I can't do this silliness anymore" and moves on.

JH: So did Pete Kubiak work for you on the Apalachicola?

JF: Yeah Pete was a forestry technician; sharp, real good guy, real sharp. Yeah, I supervised Pete on the Wakulla District, he was a forestry technician over here and one of the best burners we had on the district at the time. And to his credit, he was mobile and being mobile he was able to advance and better himself and get to the point where he's at now. Yeah I admire Pete for taking the bull by the horns and making something out of himself and doing good things for the public lands.

JH: And Bob Eaton?
JF: I didn't know Bob that well. Bob followed me at St. Marks, he got the position after I did and that was at the time I was working at the Prescribed Fire Training Center and Bob had his hands full at St. Marks Refuge being FMO down there. And our paths would cross occasionally but I always liked what he was doing, but he's a good hand; Bob's a good hand.

JH: What was a major impediment to your job?

JF: As FMO with Fish?

JH: Sure.

JF: A major impediment, I didn't have any.

JH: That's not true (laughing).

JF: The only impairment to my job was ignorance, I can't stand stupid people. I've told Jennifer this, I've told my daughter this, I can't stand ignorant people. And when you've got ignorant people standing in the way of science based intelligent ecosystem management, they are impediments and they either need to be fired or demoted or moved on. And there are some people in Fish and Wildlife Service in the field who need to be moved or ignored. We learn how to work around them, but that's not the right way to run an operation. Yeah what was the impediments? Stupid people. And in my entire career, I can think of maybe—two people that I had to work with day in and day out who were really stupid and we had to figure out a way to work around. And working around them we did benefit those ecosystems, we left them in better shape than we found them. On wildfires, that's a completely different aspect of it, there were impediments on wildfires, but those people are dangerous and we just blew right by them. When you work on a

wildfire and you run into a stupid person, they're dangerous and the infrastructure is in place to eliminate that impediment and to proceed in a safe and direct manner. And more than one time we did have wildfires across the United States, we eliminated that impediment. Day to day, systematic, you just work around it and get the job done; takes a little bit more effort and it challenges you, but those were the only real impediments I ever had.

JH: So when you got to St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, you said that the rotation for the fire regime was rather high.

JF: Yeah, yeah it was. Old Joe White, God Bless him. He came in there and he said, some of this refuge is on a 12 year rotation hadn't been burned in 12 years. I mean we had fire ecosystems where fire has been neglected, fire has not been initiated in 12 years for one reason or another; I'm not finding fault. And Joe said, "I want this refuge managed. I want it ecological sound. I want the habitat managed as it should be. I want the indigenous populations in place and intact as they should per the mandate of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service." And that was my marching orders from Joe White, God bless him, and that was it. And by gosh we got it done. Doug Scott and I just laid with it, we had good staff, we had good people to get the job done that didn't mind working. We grabbed every opportunity we could, and I think I was here for 7 seven years. And after 7 years, I want to say, the oldest rough on that refuge might have been four years. It took multiple entries to reduce some of those heavy rough stands, those 12 year old fuel loads. And we did it in a fashion to where we preserved the over story. But yeah that was good.

JH: So you came to St. Marks after the time period where there was, especially in the sandhills, a fire line put in every ten chains and then a back burn done between each fire line.

JF: Yes.

JH: So you started burning by units?

JF: Yes. We ignored the old practices. I'm not saying they were bad practices, they were the practices that were inherent to the times. Times change, approaches change, some are more sound than others. Our approach to prescribed fire in 1990, which was much more valid than prior approaches to it. We did a more intelligent job of burning; we treated landscapes rather than partitions, by fire lines. We used any type of fire that was necessary to get the job done. We relied heavily on aerial ignition, and in return we found out how resilient the ecosystems are in the lower coastal plain. And perpetuated the species that are here now. And in turn, the habitat for Fish and Wildlife Service.

JH: What was your most dangerous or frightening experience?

JF: Getting married. I don't know.

JH: Is she from Mississippi?

JF: Oh yeah, she was raised; her daddy raised Long Leaf Pine in south Mississippi. We got along pretty good; me and her daddy got along real good. Marrying her just terrified me, she still scares me to death (laughing). You can tell her I said that!

JH: I've got it on video. (Laughing). What was your most humorous experience?

JF: (Laughing) Anytime I was able to screw Durrwachter.

JH: You want to give an example of…. (laughing).

JF: Oh there were several, or Perry (Name). Here's a good one on him. Perry shows up on a farm on Blue Ridge Parkway and he's down working the hill in his Division down there. And he comes up on top, well Durrwachter had shown up late. And Jim, he forgot his hard hat. Perry comes up to get a drink of water and he puts his hard hat down on the truck. Have you heard this story?

JH: No I haven't heard this one.

JF: And so Perry walks off to drink his water and left his hard hat on the truck. Jim picks up the hard hat and goes down the line 'cause he's looking for an assignment. He's a bored Division supervision and he just got there; Perry can't go back out on the line now 'cause he doesn't have his hard hat. So Jim spent the rest of the shift out there managing that Division and Perry was fuming, he was absolutely livid, and he knew that I put Jim up to it and he knew I was responsible for it. I was running the airshow at the time, but I got blame for it and that's okay. So he shows up at the helibase subsequent to that and we had flight for him so he could look at his division, helicopter flight. And he comes walking across the helibase, and he's got his hard hat under his arm and he's just grinning pointing at his hard hat as he goes to get on the helicopter and fly off. And I wave at him and Perry waves at me and just grins and points at his hard hat and he flies off and he goes to see his Division. Well he left his truck unlocked, and he put his baseball cap in the truck. We were operating out of a cow pasture at the time, Perry left his truck unlocked and left his baseball cap in the truck. Well we filled his baseball cap up with old cow pies, old cow flop. He comes back from his flight and he comes strutting across that helibase just grinning, just pointing at his hard hat 'cause he knew we didn't mess with it 'cause he had his hard hat with him the whole time. And he smiles and he gets in his truck, the whole helibase is watching this, and he gets in his truck and he smiles and he puts the key in the ignition, drops his hard hat beside him, reaches over and picks up his baseball cap and doesn't look in it, and puts it on his head. And this cow flop flies all over his head and coats the inside of that truck. And if you could just imagine an entire helibase on their knees laughing and Perry is so damn mad he can't stand it. I mean, you ever see anybody lay rubber in a cow pasture, that was Perry (Name). Oh it was great, it was some of the greatest days of my life being on that Incident Management Team with those two; we had so much fun. I mean Perry got me back, and Jim got me back many times; I can tell more stories about it too, but we had a blast. Those three years, that's where I learned how effective an incident management team could be when you have excellent, superb people working cooperatively. When it works it is magic, and when it doesn't work it sucks.

JH: So what team were you on?

JF: I was on Type I teams in the southeast, primarily the Red Team from 19—oh goodness, '83, 1983, '84 through '98. I had to get off in '98 because I was too busy with PFTC; working aviation on the Red Team. I detailed on other teams too. Yeah that was a humorous story. And Perry would lie right now and tell you it never happened.

JH: Did you witness any new Service inventions or innovations?

JF: Oh yeah, all the time. I mean the folks on the ground were always coming up with new and better ways to get stuff done. You know you let a man make mistakes and they're going to perform. If you allow, at least they're doing something, if you allow a person to make a mistake at least they're doing something. And they would acknowledge, "Hey man this is okay. Don't do this again, but try another tactic and see if you can do it." What were some of the innovations, shucks I can remember we used a three wheeler; we had three wheelers before we got four wheelers. We figured out that well gosh you can light off of these ATV's, these all-terrain vehicles, you can go through the woods and you can light off of them; it wasn't the safest thing to do, hang on with one hand and hang a drip torch with the other. It really wasn't the safest thing to be doing. So they came up with a way to where you could have a rat tail dragging along behind you and they figured out a way that if you hit brush, rat tail would break loose and stop the flow of fuel, it was a wonderful idea; it was a great idea, very efficient, very safe. That was just one example; different ways to use equipment, always trying for a mechanical advantage. And you let the technicians who get the work done in the field innovate and use their experience to get the job done correctly, they will do wonderful, imaginative things for you every time. Any agency I worked for I found that true. Was there, gosh darn, I don't know. The heli-torch was good, we perfected the PSD, Kubiak did really good things with the PSD he did great things, figured out ways to manipulate and use it to our advantage. Engines, believe it or not Hunter Westrand was the fire management officer on a national forest in Florida in about 1987 or '88, and Hunter and I brought the first type four engine into the southeastern U.S. We saw the need, identified it on the Wakulla District, Hunter acknowledged it but we didn't have any way of getting one over here. I worked with the engine folks out of Missoula, Montana who had a prototype, a model 52 prototype that they were working with. And I told them what we wanted to use it for here in the southeastern U.S., they modified it and told me what it would mount on and what we needed to do. Hunter got some funding, I never asked how he did it but he got it, and Hunter said, he said, "John I can't get it down here." I said, "Well Hunter it's in Missoula." He said, "Well I can get you some money but I can't get it down here." Come to found out in Spokane, Washington they [National Guard] were having a mass training session and everybody from the United States, including the southeastern U.S. was in Spokane for a mass training session, you can see...

[End tape 1, start tape 2]

JH: …training going on in Spokane.

JF: Yeah that model 52. I forget that guy's name who was in charge of that

program out of Missoula; God he was a great guy. Worked with us six ways from Sunday to make it happen, 'cause he wanted to see us try Type 6's, it was Type 6's. Did I say 4's?

JH: Yeah.

JF: It's 6's, it was Type 6's. He wanted us to try type 6's here in the southeast. He worked with us a lot. And I called him back and I said, you know the C130's were going to be down there from North Carolina. The National Guard C130's were doing their mass training up in Spokane. He says, "Yeah." I said, "Why don't you deliver that Model 52 bed up to Spokane and we're get it on a C130 and I'll go up to North Carolina and pick it up. He thought I was crazy. He said, "Do what!" And I said, "Yeah," said, "I've already talked to the guys and they've got a C130 up there that's got room." And so he did by gosh, he dropped it off at the Spokane Airport where they were doing their training. And the Air Force, God bless them, put it on a C130 and delivered it. And the Air Force delivered that sucker, I mean the Model 52 folks out of Missoula delivered that thing up to Spokane, which wasn't that far from Missoula, and they flew it back down to North Carolina. And Hunter had got us the money for a Dodge 1 ton flatbed, and we drove it up to North Carolina, bolted that bed onto it, bought it back down here to Wakulla Range District and that was the first type 6 in Region 8, and now I don't know how many they've got. How many you've got?

JH: Two.

JF: Two.

JH: Yeah two at Lower Suwannee and I think you've got four Type 6s over on the Applachicola.

JF: They're all over. The Forest Service got them, BLM got them; they're everywhere. But that's how the first one got here.

JH: Cool.

JF: Old Hunter got the money for it.

JH: Hunter Westrand, haven't had him come up in any of the conservations yet. What were some of the changes that you've observed.

JF: I just, I don't know. Changes part, public lands management; change is going to occur.

JH: We talked about the changing, said we're doing 10 chain burning, back burning, to doing whole unit burning using the right techniques for the area.

JF: Yeah. I started prescribed burning about 1981, and we got away from back fire and everything at night. And trying daytime burning, seasonal burning, landscape burning, and then we got the aerial ignition where we were able to manage bigger blocks; that was the biggest change. Everybody was scared to death of ping pong machine [PSD] and it took a while for them to understand there was nothing different between laying a line with a drip torch and laying a line with a helicopter and a ping pong machine. The basics are the same, you're just able to accomplish more in the shorter period of time. You're able to grab the small windows that you have, many times a two hour window where

the smoke desperation is ideal, you may only have two or three hours in a day, but given aerial ignition you could jump right on there and accomplish the landscape burn that you needed to do. That was one of the innovations that were really good. Yeah it had a very good innovation, and doing it intelligent 'cause you give the helicopter the ping pong machine to any (unintelligible). We're pretty good down here in Florida, the lower coastal plain compared to Louisiana and across to North Carolina, the lower coastal plain; we're pretty dag gum good with aerial ignition. And you take that same tool and you put it in the hands of somebody, maybe Colorado or Wyoming in a lodge pole pine ecosystem, and they're screw it up pretty quick. You need to be able to, you need to be flexible and you need to except change for what it is, but do it intelligently. Does that make sense?

JH: Yes, to me it does, but in 20 years I won't. So we're talking specifically about the Fish and Wildlife Service. The Fish and Wildlife Service established a formal fire program on St. Marks somewhere when you started. Frank Zontek was the forester but you were the first FMO.

JF: Yeah Frank had burned before I did.

JH: Okay he was considered the Forester.

JF: He was considered the Forester but Frank also did the burning.

JH: Okay.

JF: Just a matter of understanding and Franked had burned in step with the protocols of his time.

JH: And so some of the changes that you saw at St. Marks, were the changes in the fire techniques, establishment of the units….

JF: Yes.

JH: ….and using aerial ignition; you talked about all that stuff.

JF: Seasonal burn.

JH: Seasonal burn.

JF: Seasonal (or season) burn; that was major. That was a big shift. There was quite a bit of resistance to seasonal burn, it's pretty well acknowledged now as the way to go especially here in Florida; state lands and federal lands, seasonal burn. Trying to mimic nature and by mimicking nature, you are ensuring the success of that indigenous species of that ecosystem; flora and fauna. That was a big thing down there at St. Marks that we were able play with. And that's what I really like about Fish and Wildlife Service at the time. Forest Service was doing some stuff, Joe Ferguson was doing good things out of Bristol, Florida with seasonal burn. He was doing it on a landscape basis, whereas on the refuge we were burning; we were given a latitude to burn smaller blocks; Forest Service, their funding was based on a per acre funding. To be really successful, you had to burn three to five thousand acres to get it done. The Fish and Wildlife Service gave you the latitude to burn 80 acres or 500 acres, or 1,000 acres or 20 acres, just break the blocks up and treat the blocks. And by so doing, we're able to experiment with different months, different conditions, different firing patterns, different types

of ignition because of the latitude Fish gave us to ensure habitat. And that's key to it all for Fish and Wildlife Service, is that mandate to manage habitat; that was pretty good. I really liked that, I still like it and I wish Forest Service would adopt it and instead of a (unintelligible) view of funding (unintelligible). So looking at burning as a funding mechanism, where Fish is more focused on habitat management.

JH: So you were one of the first four FMO's in Region 4 for Fish and Wildlife Service; Tony Wilder, Jim Durrwachter, you, and whomever was at Merritt. Is that correct?

JF: Yeah Ray.

JH: Ray Farrenetti was great.
JF: Well Ray was the first one. See Ray came down there, he came down there from Alaska after Cole, I think he came after Frank Cole.

JH: Frank Cole went up to Idaho, Boise, right?

JF: No I think he went to Washington.

JH: Washington, okay.

JF: I think after Merritt he went to Washington and then he went to Boise. And Ray came down following Frank, I want to say it was late '70's, early '80's. And so Ray was really a pioneer, I mean he came from Alaska, which was a big burning; I mean the burn program up there is phenomenal. It was something working up there; it was a kick up there. He came and kind of introduced big time fire at Merritt and then me, and Jim, and Tony came on down from the Forest Service.

JH: Do you want to tell me about your first fire management officer's meeting in a hotel?

JF: I don't remember. What did Durrwachter say about it? Where was it?

JH: There were four of you and there was a hotel room and ya'll sat around on a bed.

JF: I don't remember. Jim's a little bit more focused than I am, and I'd probably, no I don't remember. (Laughing).

JH: Okay, don't worry about that. In your opinion, what events or people most shaped the Fish and Wildlife Fire Program?

JF: Frank Cole, Frank Cole God bless him. Frank didn't mind change, Frank funded change, Frank allowed mistakes; he wanted to see stuff happen. Frank was a God send to the Fish and Wildlife Service; he was wonderful. He had a master's in ecology, Frank was a Navy, I think he was a Navy veteran; I think he was a Navy Seal, don't quote me but I think he was a Navy Seal. And bless his heart, he was so smart and so aggressive and so accepting of change and new ideas. Where am I going with this?

JH: We were talking about people who most shaped, or events, that most shaped Fish and Wildlife fire management.

JF: Frank did, Frank did; Phil Street. Frank set the tone, I'm talking about the '70's and '80's. Phil Street followed Frank, Phil's another one who was a superb manager but a superb supervisor

and had a vision. Phil had a vision and that vision included Boise, Idaho and he made it to the top. And so he kept Cole's vision and improved and bettered it in some foundation, Phil did. And then Brian came in right after Phil and it continues to this day, this innovation, this openness that Frank established in Boise, is carried forward to this day through those people out there. Those are the people who really made difference in the fire program, nationally, in Fish and Wildlife Service. There's a lot of FMO's who have worked real hard and are very dedicated coast to coast. The Forest Service and the BLM had some very good FMO's, but as far as prescribed fire, to me, Fish and Wildlife Service is the premier agency. They were given the leadership out of Boise, they were allowed and they were funded to accomplish a mandate, to accomplish the mandate. And they did so, they made mistakes, they learned from them, they taught the young people, the young people carry it forward to this day. And it continues right now. And this tradition goes back, I want to say Cole kind of set the tone for prescribed fire. Cole kind of shifted it from the 7 o'clock rule, the 7 am rule, having all these fires out to just manage an ecosystem that's designed for fire. Those are the people who really made difference I think. And Cal Gale, I want to give Cal Gale some credit. Cal came in, he was the first really sound Regional FMO in Atlanta, and Cal was wonderful. He had some field experience, he understood politics, he understood funding and he did his darnest to get it to the people in the field to allow them to accomplish the mission of Fish and Wildlife Service.

JH: Okay. Well we're almost done. You're speedy. What else would you like to share about your experiences?

JF: I don't know. You know what was kind of neat, not many people know this; I don't even think Durrwachter know this. You can buy a brick at the Wildland Firefighter Memorial in Boise, Idaho. And there are, there are five bricks in my family in that Wildland Firefighters Memorial because there's one for me, because I spent entire career in fire, starting in '72. And I have a brother who was an Alaskan Smoke Jumper for 14 years, his brick is there. I have another brother who was a Midnight Son's Hotshot for five years, his brick is there. I have a daughter who was a Forest Service dispatcher in a coordination center for four years, her brick is there. And I have a son who worked in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness out of Moose Creek and his brick is there. And that's all from one family, and there's five bricks there in Boise. And I don't know if anybody else can say that, you take that in a bucket, you can get a cup of coffee at Starbucks, but I think it's pretty cool.

JH: Well that's good. So do you have anything else to say about any of the burning around the southeast, any more; do you have any photographs or documents you want to donate, share a copy?

JF: I've got a whole lot of photographs, but I'd have to plow through them. Ya'll tell me what you what and I'll get them to you; whole lot of them. I don't know why I did this but starting in about 1982, I started taking pictures of every fire I ever went on and I got it in albums out in the shop; there's a bunch of

photographs out there. There's a bunch of digital photographs out there. Never got rich, raised three wonderful children; a house and a new truck. I reckon I'm successful. Would I do it again? Yeah, I'd do it again; I learned so much. Met so many wonderful people, met some real assholes but that's okay. You can appreciate the good ones when you've been around the bad ones. When you've been around some sorry folks, some stupid people you can really appreciate the good ones. It's been good. And that Prescribe Fire Training Center, what a wonderful way to cap off an exciting career. Over the years I just developed this love for prescribe fire, for managing the public lands. And there are places where fire has no place on the public lands and there are places where it does. And to be able to manage the public lands, to me was a privilege. And I'd like think that there are still young graduates, you have to have an education, a foundation to work from. And there's still young graduates who view it as a privilege to work with public lands. And that was gift, I was glad that was given to me, that gift. And to be able to put prescribe fire on there and to learn how to do it, and to manipulate it and to achieve concrete objectives for the good of the American public, I'd do that again in a minute. Putting the wildfires out, yeah you've got to put them out, yeah you've got to save homes and everything else. I'm not going off on suppression, that's another bottle of wine, right there suppression is. But as far as prescribe fire goes, we still have a ways to go with it but it's really neat to be able to say that I practiced it and accomplished it.

JH: Are you done John?

JF: I am done.

JH: You sure?

JF: I am positive.

JH: It was a fun interview.

[Causal talk, end of interview]