Averill S. Thayer

Oral History Interview
Averill S. Thayer
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Fairbanks, Alaska
Interviewed by Jim King

Jim: This is May 21, 2000, and I'm in the home of Ave Thayer in Fairbanks. Ave and I went to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service in the spring of 1951. I think we both started out as stream guards although we didn't meet in 1951. It was not until you got to McGrath that we met. We would like to hear about your stream guard experience and how it went from there. You really had a varied career as I recall.

Ave: I did a lot of different things. I was present when a lot of different things took place. The overview of the Fish and Wildlife Service that I saw at that time and until today is that initially what we were doing was fairly basic. There were lots of wildlife, including fish, and relatively few people.

The Fish and Wildlife Service was basically doing law enforcement and research and surveys. Throughout the years the emphasis has changed to where the Fish and Wildlife Service was dealing more with habitat preservation and then problems with endangered species came up. There were new problems cropping up with the increase of human population.

Until today, the Fish and Wildlife Service is spending quite a bit of time on rehabilitating distressed populations. Nationwide at least, rehabilitation of distressed land and toxins and fuel spills and other such things is taking place. From one aspect it looked like it was actually going down hill. It started out pretty good and now we are in a repair and return mode. It is certainly not the fault of the Fish and Wildlife Service, however. It is the fault of the enormous increase in human population.

Getting back to the stream guard. I was out on Kalgin Island working for Holgar Larsen. I went out there in the spring. I had heard of the stream, of course, but I really didn't know anything about salmon. I don't think at that time that I had even seen a live salmon. There was a big pile of regulations and I was reading about the skeins of year and all the technical words that I can't even think of now. Trying to make heads or tails out of the regulations wasn't easy. I was supposed to be working with the setnets around the shore of Kalgin Island. I had a 16-foot boat with an outboard motor and a big army surplus tent. It was practically bullet proof; it was also light proof! It was pretty gloomy inside.

I traveled in the skiff around the Island and checked on the opening times and closing times, the type and size of the web and other things that the fishermen were using. I don't know how effective I was. I was out there a lot. I burned a lot of gas. Tom Wardleigh would come down with the Goose with a big load of gas. He would always comment on how much gas I was using. So from that basis, I guess I was doing the right thing, being present in the area a lot.

Jim: You were talking about the training program.

Ave: Well, there wasn't any training, actually. If there had been even one day to go over those regulations it would have really helped. There was a fish trap on the east side of the Island. There was one thing that took place on the Island that would give Ginny Hyatt a heart attack. It was on Packer Creek. There were lots of beaver dams. I went into Packer Creek and found all the salmon trapped right down by the tide water. They couldn't get past the beaver dams. There were about 10 of those dams there.

I sent in to town for dynamite and caps and fuses. Pretty soon Tom came in the Goose and here was all the dynamite, caps and fuses that I had asked for. There was never a question about my qualifications for using dynamite. I used a quarter of a stick at a time and blew a little hole in each dam. To try and tear them up manually, I wouldn't have

been able to stay ahead of them. The beavers on the upper end would be patching them up while I was working the lower end.

I suspect that in this day and age if someone asked about using dynamite, there would be a significant amount of paperwork involved. They would probably hire a professional blaster.

In thinking of things that the Fish and Wildlife Service did during the time that I worked for them, from then until now, they had a lot of activity. Law enforcement and research were the two primary things in one form or another. Those were means to a main goal and the main goal was stewardship. The research projects had to do with deciding what action should be taken to preserve wild lands and wildlife for the public benefit. Nothing else really mattered as long as stewardship took place. I think sometimes we got off track a little on research. For the most part, I think most of the work was for applied research.

Jim: Back to Kalgin Island, did you have any run-ends with the fishermen when you were scrutinizing them? Did you get involved in any cases or violations?

Ave: There were a few violations but I don't think there were more than 5 or 6 over the whole summer.

Where my camp was, there was a little cabin a few hundred yards away. There was a fellow named Tex Cobb that lived in that cabin. He was, by my judgement then, a really old guy. As it turned out, he was only about 6 years older than I am now! He had been a prospector and miner. He was quite a character and he had lots to say. He would come over to my tent and talk to me by the hour while I was trying to get some rest. He was very helpful to me in explaining the fish net business and regulations, maybe to his advantage, but at least I appreciated his knowledge of how to use this stuff. He was critical of the Fish and Wildlife Service but all of the other fishermen were too.

I never did have a serious run in with any of them. Everything was always kind of "matter of fact." The regulations said "this," you did "that," – therefore according to the regulations you did the wrong thing and you are in trouble. There was not a lot of talk about constitutional rights or the 2nd Amendment or whatever it happened to be.

On one occasion I was talking to a fisherman on the beach and the tide was going out. He seemed awful fidgety. He didn't want to talk very much. That was not like him. We stood on the beach and we talked a little more. He kept digging his toe in the sand. It was clear he wanted me to leave. I didn't know why but I thought staying was what I should do. About that time I saw a float in the water and soon another one. He had a diver net in the bay on the bottom. The outgoing tide was exposing the diver net. At first he looked out there and he said, "say, look, somebody's net got loose and hung up out there." We got that straightened out pretty quick.

After quite a bit of the summer had gone by, I was moved over to the bay across from Homer, Jakolof Bay. I was there a few weeks.

There was not a patrol boat around there that summer but the following summer I wasn't on Kalgin Island but I was on a patrol boat. There was a boat operator and we were at Kalgin Island and Katchemak Bay and also around Port Dick and that country. Not a whole lot went on around there. Actually, I don't remember much about it.

Jim: That summer of 1951, they had a boat that was called the "*Fourteen*" and a guy named Ralph McGee ran the boat. James Collins had been a trainee and had finished his training that summer but then he drowned in the Kenai River. Do you remember that?

Ave: I remember hearing about that. I don't think I ever met him. The boat that I remember was the "*Steelhead*." It was a very noisy rattletrap type of a boat. The fishermen could hear it coming for miles. It really wasn't a very good boat for that

purpose. I think the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries had really not done the job in supplying the kind of boat that was needed. Maybe that was all they could afford.

Two winters after I was in Anchorage, I worked on the big game hunting law enforcement trap line. Then I went over to McGrath in 1954. Harry Pinkham and I were out together quite a bit. I think that was the winter that I got certified to fly the Fish and Wildlife Service airplanes.

I learned to fly before I went to work for the Fish and Wildlife. When I came back to Alaska the second time in the fall of 1950, I took a construction job at Farewell. The following spring I was in Anchorage waiting to get a job with the Fish and Wildlife Service. I went out to Merrill Field and got a private license. Tom Wardleigh certified me. That is what I had when I started flying with Harry Pinkham. Harry helped me quite a bit. We were out on trapline patrols. I would fly and he would coach me. As luck would have it, it was a wheel plane with big tires and it really bounced around . I had a horrible time with it.

Jim: You had been to Alaska earlier? Were you in the military?

Ave: No. I got out of the military in the spring of 1946 and I went to the University of Idaho that winter. In the spring of 1947, a friend of mine and I came up to Alaska. We came up on a freighter from Seattle. We worked on the freighter, long-shoring at each stop. It made all the ports all the way up. When we got to Valdez, we more or less jumped ship and took the bus and came on up to Fairbanks and worked construction in the summer of 1947.

I then went back to the University of Idaho and succeeded in crowding the four years into five years to get my degree. I worked for the Forest Service in Idaho and the Park Service Glacier National Park in the summers. That brought me back at the end of my fifth year

in 1950. This is when I came back to Anchorage, looking for a full time wildlife job of some kind.

My career was not very well planned, I'm afraid, but I think the experience in McGrath and the Lower Kuskokwim and the Lower Yukon was probably on the same level with my first two summers with commercial fisheries. It was something pretty new. I think the Fish and Wildlife Service did a lot of good work then.

During beaver sealing season, we sealed in excess of 10,000 skins and measured every single one of those skins and recorded where they were caught, etc. We recorded all the information on them that was possible. I worked on commercial fisheries on the Kuskokwim and the Lower Yukon below Anvik. There were some commercial fish wheels and netting on the Delta. I worked on that quite a bit.

Jim: You were with Lyman Reynoldson in McGrath?

Ave: Yes. He was very helpful also. He could really fly an airplane. He was a fine pilot. He showed me a lot of things about flying the old 170 that we had there. It was a ski plane. It was not very powerful as a floatplane. We used it in a lot of places, especially out on the delta.

Jim: Trapping was a pretty important economic element at that time wasn't it? There wasn't nearly the welfare money around that there is today. A lot of those people really needed that beaver money in the wintertime.

Ave: Those trappers worked pretty hard. They didn't use snow machines. The better trappers would not use a dog team. They said they just made too much noise and scared the fur away. I don't know whether it did or not but they were convinced. They also had the expense and problems of dealing with the dogs so they were just out trudging down the trail on a little toboggan, pulling their stuff on it. The line cabins had a roof that was

about six feet high at the peak and about four feet high at the wall. They were made out of little spruce poles, just about the size of a large doghouse. They would stay in those little cabins. They would have to thaw out the animals and skin them out at night. They were up doing the same thing again the next day. I was really impressed with the energy they put into the cleaning of the beaver. They would have to scrape all that fat off the hide, etc.

Jim: Those were interesting times. I don't think a beaver is worth any more money now than it was then.

Ave: No, I don't think it is. There were a lot of trappers in the upper reaches of the Holitna River and other places as well. A lot of those fellows were out there by airplane. They lined and poled the boat up the stream in the fall with all their stuff. In the spring, once the water was down and the ice was out, they came floating back down. They also risked their entire catch floating back down. It was about as close to a subsistence life style as you could get using metal traps and firearms, etc. Any closer you could get would be in the pre-European days.

Jim: Do you have any colorful stories from that period?

Ave: I don't think I have, actually. Lyman had some colorful stories. He was a bit colorful himself on occasions. I think it was he telling of staying in a cabin with a trapper. During the night, the trapper raised up in his sleeping bag and was shooting through the door with his 30-30, scaring off the people who were trying to break in and ended with a statement like "there, take that!" Lyman said he laid there the rest of the night with one eye open just in case.

Jim: About the last time that I saw Lyman, there were a bunch of us had lunch together and somebody asked Lyman if he was behaving himself and he said, "yes, and it is getting easier all the time."

Ave: Lyman was o.k. He was sort of a blustery guy but actually he didn't like confrontation. If there was any way to ease around it, he would do it. There was one case where a trader who had a bad reputation and the people who traded with him came down the tributary rivers to the main stem of the Kuskokwim. This trader was also a postmaster. He kept telling us that he would send orders to Sears and Roebuck and the stuff would never come but something just exactly like it would show up on his shelf and he would charge folks for about the same price. So they would buy it. I didn't put much stock in that but Lyman paid attention and talked to some of them. This went on for a little while. Finally, one day we went into the store and Lyman just laid it out to the trader that he knew what he was doing and he had to stop right then or he was going to file charges with the postal department and everybody else. That was the end of it. I always admired Lyman for that. There could have been a heck of a flap over that because Lyman really had no proof.

Jim: There are instances like that that really gave the Fish and Wildlife a pretty good reputation in the bush community's back then.

Ave: I agree. For the most part game law enforcement was sort of a matter-of-fact. If a guy was standing there with a dead whatever and he wasn't supposed to have it, you laid it out that the rules say "thus and so" and the guy would say, "yes, you are right." We didn't get into courts very much. I do suspect once in a while that the wrong guy went to court. They would pick out somebody that could more conveniently go to court and they would send him instead. At least they agreed on that.

Some of the regulations were initially a bit of a shock to them. At one time we had to put a stop to the fish wheels on Sunday. I don't know if that rule was already on the books and we just had never done anything or whether it was a new rule. We went down the river to enforce it. There were several fish wheels still going. We stopped and put a stick in them and told the owners what happened. There was a little stir about that but later on,

just a matter of a few weeks later, the reports that we got were the idea of taking Sundays off was not so bad. It gave them a chance to catch their breath and drink some extra coffee and rest for a day. I think they were telling us the truth.

Jim: I got the feeling, to a certain degree, the Service and the agents acted as referees in a difficult occupation and it helped to have some rules. If everybody else was fishing they didn't want to take a day off but if everybody was taking a day off that was a nice break.

Ave: I think that was the essence of it. No one wanted to stop if all others kept fishing.

It certainly eliminated a lot of conflict over the trapping areas. When they sealed the beavers, the man of the family would have all the super blankets. If he had a son about 14, then he had the next size beavers and on down the line. The wife's beavers were all little tiny ones. We knew they were shuffling beaver skins around like a deck of cards but statistically for management of the beaver, it didn't matter.

Jim: That beaver thing was really interesting. I think the older guys remembered when the beavers were pretty much gone in a lot of the Interior back in the days when they used to shoot them in the summer. They were glad to see some rules and they could see the beaver responding and coming back.

Ave: There were comments about that. I had no knowledge of what had gone on before but there were comments. The trend overall was, of course, more and more people dividing up the animals. Sometimes there were more animals and sometimes there was just the same number of animals to divide up amongst the people.

After a while it was recreational trappers and hunters who were taking a bigger and bigger percentage of the animals. Those kinds of changes were a little hard to take. To tell

those who go dragging their boat upstream for days in the fall to get the beavers and then to realize that his take of beavers and moose must be restricted because of recreational take of them was not a good situation. It was inevitable worldwide.

Jim: The competition with the airplane hunters was a big sore point that was just really developing in that period of time.

Ave: Yes, the airplane competition was just getting started. Now you have people from Ketchikan driving up, towing a riverboat, driving over to the Yukon River, going a long ways down the Yukon and up the Koyukuk to go moose hunting. I think that is just incredible! This is what's happening. You can see how the people on the Koyukuk feel about guys from Cordova and Ketchikan coming that far to take one of "their" moose. There is something kind of wrong with that, I think. People from the Koyukuk certainly don't go storming down to Cordova to catch salmon. I find it incredible that people go to that extent. People go out of Fairbanks by riverboat out on the Nowitna River. That's a long haul too. They go every year.

Jim: Well, the floatplanes were the biggest thorn in the side of the boat hunters, I think. A lot of the floatplane drivers were from Fairbanks, but more from Anchorage showed up in places like the Koyukuk River and started cleaning house.

Ave: That is true. When the Fairbanks hunters first started going over to the Bethel area, they all came back with giant trophy moose. That lasted two years. The second year especially, lots of trophies came out of there. I really think, in spite of what hunter organizations say, that hunting is gradually going to be a smaller and smaller part of our activities. Hunting is basically falling from favor in the bigger segment of the population. I don't know if that is good or bad.

Jim: Young people aren't taking it up very fast.

Ave: No they are not and it is a good thing. If they did, you wouldn't have much in the way of a season.

Jim: I see that around Juneau where the duck hunters come right by my house. Thirty years ago it was all high school kids. Now it tends to be older fellows with all sorts of camouflaged equipment, decoys, and dogs. It is a real performance but there aren't as many of them. They do get ducks.

Ave: I think the NRA is partly responsible for that because the NRA makes an awful flap about gun ownership, etc., that maybe they don't know anything about guns. They pose in magazines with a high quality hunting rifle or a shotgun, lobbying about automatic pistols and machine guns, and assault rifles. People are starting to associate hunting with that when the NRA has nothing to do with hunting whatsoever. Their objective is entirely different.

The real need is more and more of wild areas, bird watching, places to get away from town, and wilderness areas. If that means putting a stop to hunting, then hunting, I think, will lose out. It just doesn't have the votes. Places like the Arctic Refuge, which incidentally, was pretty lucky it got established in about 1960 because it would be kind of tough to establish it now. There probably shouldn't be any big game hunting in the refuge. I have heard people say that and it really surprised me.

A lot of the biologists who have come out of wildlife schools in the last 25 years, come out of wildlife school really keen on maximum sustained yield of kill. All they can think about is dead bodies and gallons of blood. After about 15-20 years, they step back and realize that there is more to this – more to animals than running out and blasting them. They also realize a maximum sustained yield is not sustainable. It is such a narrow concept that it can't account for all the positives and negatives of killing those animals. Some of the people who have said that there should be no big game hunting in the Arctic

Refuge are the Fish and Game Department biologists who would gladly go up there 20 years prior and kill everything. I think that's the trend.

Jim: Let's put this in sequence. You started out as an enforcement agent and then you were sent to Kenai as an enforcement agent in the refuge division? How did that work out?

Ave: I was in enforcement in Cook Inlet and at McGrath also. I came back to Anchorage for about a year and then when I went down to Kenai, I was still in enforcement. Jim Branson was the supervisor but he was in Anchorage. John Windler came to Seward and he became the supervisor. My title was switched to refuge law enforcement officer in the refuge division. I switched divisions there. After that I became assistant refuge manager; then refuge manager of the Arctic NWR starting in 1970.

When I left the Refuge in 1981, my title was wildlife biologist but I was working on wilderness and wild rivers. When I would send memo's down to Anchorage I would put my title as "Wilderness Planner." I kept sending them down with that title and pretty soon I noticed on official documents and stuff that my title was refuge planner. I don't know whether somebody just misinterpreted or whether they just officially shifted me over. I was a bona fide planner. I always liked that title. It sounded like you really knew what you were doing. When I finally retired, I retired as a "Planner" – somebody that really knows all about planning!

Jim: When you went to work on the refuge, it was when the oil guys were first coming. You weren't involved so much with beaver and moose as with the oilmen and the cat skinners?

Ave: Initially, I went to the refuge in 1958. I was still doing law enforcement for a couple of years. When I became refuge law enforcement officer, I was then involved

with the oil field. I would go out there where they were building roads and pads and other activities to see if they were following the regulations.

One thing that really helped there was I had worked construction quite a bit during the summer from school. I knew about caterpillars and backhoes and dirt and things that could go wrong. I don't think they fooled me too many times. Sometimes I could point out something they were doing that would cause them problems. The oil companies seemed to have very little company continuity or history so the guy I said it to would be gone and here a new guy would be there and I would have to say it to him too. There was a chronic education need. I think that was the basic thrust of what we were doing besides oversight.

Jim: As I recall, it was in the Eisenhower Administration that the refuges were opened for oil exploration for the first time and that almost immediately, and perhaps the first refuge where an oil find was made, was the Kenai. So you, John Hakala and Dave Spencer were developing ways to deal with the oil exploration and production on a wildlife refuge. It was kind of a new thing. You were writing the book on how to proceed.

Ave: I don't think I was aware of that at the time. I was just seeing it in terms of our own problems there. It may well have been.

Jim: Albert Day, in the second printing of his waterfowl book, wrote a chapter about a used car salesman from Oregon that opened up the refuges for oil development and Day was just furious about that. I think that was about the same time that they came sailing into the Moose Range and found something.

Ave: The problem remains the same when the oil industry went to the Prudhoe Bay region. They made the same old mistakes they made on the Kenai, or would have made if they hadn't been stopped. They just didn't seem to have a continuity of information in

the industry. A very bad example of that was in about 1968, in the early days of the oil field. I was up there in the spring after the ice had gone out of all the ponds. They had been using those frozen lakes for runways and campsites.

When they left, they took their buildings but left everything else, including hundreds and hundreds of 50-gallon drums. In some cases, they had driven caterpillar tractors over the drums and tried to squash them so they would sink but all they had done was rupture them so they leaked. Some of the lakes down at the windward end would be filled with floating oil drums, some half sunk.

Around the kitchen building and mess hall site, all the garbage has just been dumped on the ice. On lakes where there was still ice, you could see where their toilet was; all the contents therein just went out on the ice in a big frozen pile and it would still be there in the spring! It was an outrage as far as I was concerned, considering the industry as a whole had been working on the Kenai for some time.

I took a whole lot of pictures of all that and even rented a helicopter and landed on a lot of those places and sent it all down to Spencer. I'm not sure what all happened but Dave sent all this to Washington to a fellow named Scoop Jackson. I think all that information was sent to him. He arranged to have a stop put to it.

On that same survey I saw wolves and bears and every single one I saw was in a garbage pile out on the tundra. If there is a point to this tirade is that the Fish and Wildlife Service can't sit back or slack off on anything. The same old problem will keep coming up repeatedly unless steps are taken to prevent it in the first place.

Jim: Is that the time you found where one accommodating cat skinner had carved the company initials in the tundra?

Ave: Yes, that was Geophysical Services, Inc. – a big GSI across the tundra – huge letters. I got some pictures of that. I think that made it very plain the attitude prevailing there. They were not in a refuge so they could do anything they wanted.

Jim: That got to be quite a famous event.

While you were on the Kenai, you were working with John Hakala. What was it like working with him? Do you want to talk about your experiences with him?

Ave: I think the feature I remember about him more than any other is that we were discussing some problem there and the solution to the problem looked like some sort of short term fix. It really didn't address the problem; it was just sort of a bandage thing. He would always notice that and point it out that this wasn't a solution and more would have to be done because there would be a whole bunch more problems. He would say that about the time everybody was getting up to leave. Everybody would have to sit down again and really address what the problem was. John didn't have time for the "emperor's new closed-type solution."

Jim: I remember Art Skinner, he was the gun dealer in Juneau and was well known all over Alaska. He would talk about how he had grown up in the oil fields of Oklahoma and saying that "the Kenai oil field is the cleanest oil field that there has ever been." I thought that was a real compliment to the three of you there that made that happen. I know it wasn't an easy thing.

Ave: The sad fact is that it may have been the cleanest but it was still a big mess on a wildlife refuge or any natural area, for that matter! It wasn't as bad as it could have been. I guess that would be another way to say it.

Jim: I remember you telling at a meeting that "if you see an oil man drop a cigarette butt on the refuge, you should point that out and make the little things look big because that would make the big things look bigger."

Ave: That is true.

I might make a few comments about airplanes. We had an Aronica Chief with a 65-hp engine. After I went over to McGrath and Bethel and had a communal dinner at the roadhouse, one constructor worker asked me if I had an Aronica. I told him, "yes, we have a nice Aronica Chief." He said, "that used to be my plane – they caught me with a cow moose and confiscated my plane." At the moment I couldn't think of anything to say but he was pretty cheery about it. That was a substantial loss for him.

When I first went to McGrath, a Pacer is what we had over there. Lyman had had an accident with the 170. I was really impressed with the way Lyman could fly that ski equipped Pacer. He would land on those winding streams back in the forests. There were no straight stretches at all. He would get that Pacer up on one ski then up on another going around the corners, into the air. The wing span was only about 29 feet so you could tilt it up pretty high.

When I got down to Kenai, I had a Pacer pretty much for my own use. It took me a long time to learn to fly that thing well so I could fly it and not crack up and I could land on bush strips and beaches.

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Jim: That was a neat airplane. That was my first airplane that I flew very much with the Fish and Wildlife Service. It had its limitations but it was certainly well built and it had a minimum of mechanical failings.

Ave: That is true. I think the Aircraft Division made an excellent choice in choosing the Pacer considering the amount of money they had and the availability of types of airplanes to choose from. I liked it a lot. There were certainly better floatplanes but where I liked it the most was when I was at Kenai and could use it a lot. It had a wide landing gear, wider than the Cubs, which gave the brake a little more leverage over the fuselage and more brake leverage over the tail wheel and the short wing span. You usually don't see short wingspans but landing on those salt-water beaches in Lower Cook Inlet, it always tilted. The tail of the airplane tends to go down hill. I had good brakes. The above leverages that I mentioned kept that plane from climbing up the beach and getting into the drift logs. It also had a little bit shorter wings and a little bit more room.

I finally learned how to fly it properly and got it slowed down properly in the approach. You couldn't just come sailing in like you do with a Cub and level out. You would have to slow it down some distance out and bring it in with some power. It would land short and with the big tires on it, it lifted the nose up a little higher. I carried my emergency gear clear in the back end of the baggage compartment, tied down. I had taken the rear seat out. It was a very practical airplane.

I landed it on a lot of Super Cub strips and you had to know how much space it needed to take off because many strips, you had to go all the way to the end of it before you lifted off. There was no chance to abort if things didn't look good but it worked out very well, indeed.

My other favorite airplane was the DeHavilan Beaver. It had many of the same characteristics in terms of getting in and out of places. It did have a long wing and you had to be careful about that. The DeHavilan Beaver would go just about any place if there was room for the wing span.

I ended up in Fairbanks because there was an opening for a game management agent. I transferred back to the law enforcement division and moved up to Fairbanks in 1968. The biggest law enforcement problem that I saw was the oil activity on the North Slope. It was certainly the greatest potential for violation. It was against the law to shoot ducks with a gun that held more than three shells but it was also against the law to kill ducks with oil by draining their ponds! I spent a lot of my time in the Prudhoe Bay region and also over on the refuge.

The oil companies were doing surficial geology in the refuge and they had camps in there. When I first went into their camps there was clearly a lot of room for improvement in the way those camps were managed with their garbage disposal and other wastes and other junk. There was plenty of law enforcement to be done north of the Brooks Range. In the fall I was out chasing the duck hunters around and for the most part they eluded me.

I feel like I accomplished quite a bit on the North Slope. I didn't haul anybody in before the judge but they changed the way they were doing things. That in the end is the objective anyway. It doesn't give me much satisfaction to see somebody rotting in jail. The big meaning is stewardship of the land and wildlife. That is how that came about.

Finally, the government provided for a refuge manager and that was in about 1969. I applied for that and my recent experience up there helped me on my application. I went into detail on that and I was lucky enough to become the refuge manager. I held that position for about 12 years. At the end of those 12 years, the Alaska Lands Act had been passed and I had been involved with it quite a bit. I made trips to Washington, D.C. with armloads of maps; I drew lines on maps in Washington.

I had decided that there were plenty of guys at that point who could deal with the new problems of the refuge better than I could. There were plenty of new problems coming up with different attitudes in government so I switched over to a wilderness and wild rivers

position. I stayed in that as a planner for another year and in October of 1982, I retired. I think it was the optimum time.

Jim: I remember there were supportive articles in the *Audubon* Magazine about things that you were able to do to slow down the oil company destruction up there. You had a lot of good support nationally, as I recall.

Ave: Yes, I did. Audubon, the Wilderness Society, and Sierra Club were all behind the Fish and Wildlife Service. They were basically a threat to the oil companies. The oil companies knew the conservation people were looking and representatives from those organizations would come to Fairbanks. I would take them up into the refuge with me. I did that a lot; spent a lot of money on hauling conservation people around. Some of the biologists thought I should be spending the money on wildlife surveys. The return on the dollars for hauling people around was much bigger in terms of stewardship than doing the wildlife surveys.

Over the years, I think I have gained the dubious title of being one opposed to wildlife surveys but I really wasn't. At that time, I could fly across the North Slope in October and I could say definitely that there were 50,000 snow geese that were feeding and nesting until they headed South. This was a not time to be rattling around in helicopters doing surficial geology. We stopped them from doing that at that time. Whether it was 48,000 snow geese or 52,000 snow geese, it really didn't matter.

Jim: Now they are worried that there are too many snow geese.

Ave: That's not my fault! Applied research has its place. I am certainly not going to disagree with that. Going up to the North Slope and doing a long extensive study on the chromosomal variations in Red Poles does not serve, probably, the stewardship for which the Fish and Wildlife Service is charged with.

Jim: You had that interesting trip with Mardy Murie and it was so exciting that she wrote a new chapter for her book.

Ave: That was not really the very best thing. She and Cecilia Hunter were in the Beaver when we were going around looking at various things. I was pointing out some of the problems of having the oil industry next door to the refuge as well as having them operate in the refuge. Unfortunately, the engine went out all of a sudden and we turned back out of the canyon that we were in and landed uphill on the tundra. It bounced along and came to a halt right side up with a couple of the float struts broken but otherwise, intact. It was tilted to the right so the right wing was on the tundra but not to the extent that it would damage it. I told the passengers that I preferred that it was tilted that way because I always favored the left wing. I'm not sure they knew what I meant there. That could have been a very bad situation but actually I was in very good hands.

Mardy and Celia set up tents, cooked up tea and generally took very good care of me. I was in the airplane trying to contact someone via the radio. I could hear Cold Bay very well but I couldn't reach them. Finally, the search and rescue Hercules, came over. We had the emergency locator beacons on and they spotted us. A helicopter from Prudhoe Bay came and took us out of there.

Jim: That was after Smitty retired and the Aircraft Division had gone a different direction, is that right?

Ave: Yes, that is true. I had been kind of curious about what was wrong with the engine. I had never inquired about it. It clearly was a basket case, lots of clanking and banging in various parts. Oil was coming out of the cylinders. I had no power at all.

Jim: You mentioned getting through on the radio. Do you want to elaborate on the radio equipment that we had back in those days?

Ave: I was pretty aware of the radio system that we had when I first went to work and especially when I was at McGrath. When I went into the Navy during WWII, I had decided that I would be a gunner because I had grown up shooting shotguns and rifles. I really thought I was a pretty good shot. I shot a lot of ducks, pheasants, etc. The Navy told me that I was going to be an electronic technician. This was a big mistake on their part because I was drafted basically right out of high school. I was a poor student and a bad candidate for that.

I did work really hard and got through their school and when I showed up at McGrath, the transmitter we had was huge. It was as big as two chests of drawers. It was a Navy transmitter. I knew every wire in that transmitter. I was pretty fired up about that. In listening to the radio net, Dillingham, Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Anchorage, Cold Bay, down in Southeast, were all on this net. You could make contact just about any time you wanted to. We used a low frequency, 5907-1/2 kHz – you could always get somebody.

I don't know what the difference was, but when I was sitting up there west of Peter's Lake, trying to raise Cold Bay, it was in a period of time when I could really feel our communication ability was greatly reduced! One reason for that was the reflective layer that makes good skips was in the wrong position and had been for about five years. The communication conditions were overall, regardless of the kind of radio you had, poorer than they had been 15 years earlier. I think the emphasis on putting FM radios in airplanes had de-emphasized those middle frequencies, 5907, etc. I think there was a loss in equipment ability too.

I really wanted to reach Cold Bay because I knew people were curious about where we were. I wanted to ring them up and let them know what was happening. That was my only chance that I ever had that I could say "May Day" to somebody and I didn't get to do it. I always wanted to say that!

Jim: It had its limitations, but that radio net that they put together through the sub-port in Juneau and the Aircraft Division in Anchorage, had a lot of us on the air at times when we needed it.

Ave: It was extremely effective when I first had that Pacer. The radio in it was a portable one, called the "silver box." It ran on those old red and white stripe dry cells like we had back on the farm. The wires were hooked up to a trailing antennae. To run the radio, I had to turn around in the seat and fiddle with the dials, but I could talk to anybody that I wanted. Not only that, I could unstrap it from the seat and I could take it out on the ground. We had one over at McGrath. I went some place off through the woods and we ran the antennae up the fish pole and we talked to Juneau on this dry cell battery radio.

I doubt very much to this day if they have the equivalent. I give a high degree of credit to Clarence Rhode because he knew which radios to get. I don't know how he knew that but he had worked it out and had them shipped up. Mostly they were Navy radios. Theron Smith knew all about radios too. That wasn't really surprising though, because Theron seemed to know all about everything, especially airplanes. He kept those radios humming. Loren DeChant was working on some. He came to McGrath and we worked with him on solving the antennae problem. He certainly knew what he was doing.

Jim: Do you remember Hans _____?

Ave: I didn't have much contact with Hans _____ but I talked to him some but from what Loren and others had said the guy was a genius at that sort of thing.

Jim: They had those big military radios in the cars, boats, and airplanes. We really had the best communications of any outfit in Alaska.

Ave: That is true because when Clarence Rhode's plane was lost up in the Brooks Range, the military came in to help search. They ended up relying on the Fish and

Wildlife Service communication net to oversee that search. The military planes could tune in on our frequency. That was the official band for that search.

Jim: They even moved the search headquarters to the office there on Airport Road.

Ave: It had other aspects too. There was an incident that Lyman told me about. He was in the office at night and a couple of guys were chatting on the radio and one guy was giving the other guy a recipe for making home brew - the ingredients and how long, what temperature to use, etc. After they signed off, another voice came on and it said, "now, what was that temperature?" Pretty soon another voice came on asked, "now, how many pounds of sugar was that?" Apparently, a lot of people were tuned in on the same channel!

Jim: The project that I remember most working with you, Ave, was the summer we spent in Fort Yukon catching ducks. Do you have any memories on that?

Ave: Yes, I have a lot of memories. We really banded a lot of ducks. I have no idea what the total was but I am sure that as duck banding operations go nationwide, I doubt very much if there was ever one that banded more ducks and more variety than we did. Where else could you go and find that many ducks? I think about that whenever I happen to be in that area. That was an exciting summer. We would fly out to those work sites each morning and fly out to our lake, fairly high so we could see it. Every day, we would fly out a little lower learning our course. One day we took off and the ceiling was about 100 feet. We were navigating by clumps of grass and old birch stumps and we would go right to that lake.

Jim: I remember one time, we caught a bunch of grebes. We banded them and we would release them at the edge of the lake. They would have to take a few steps to get down to the water. We were discussing this performance one morning and you said, "well, those grebes are not much for track!"

Ave: I remember one grebe that was struggling along about 3-4 feet away and it turned around and came back and took a big whack at one of the guy's boot with its bill. It then turned around again and headed down toward the water again. I guess it didn't like being banded.

Jim: I got a little bit of scolding about banding all those grebes from the banding office. They thought that was just a waste of their metal bands. My feeling was that we had harassed these things and caught them so we ought to get some good out of them if there is any good to be gotten.

Here last winter, I got a call from a girl at the Frazier University in British Columbia, who is doing her doctoral thesis on grebes. She had looked up all the banding for grebes and most of them came from a couple of little spots in Alaska. She wanted to know what I could tell her about those places. Everything is numbered now when it comes from the banding office. She really didn't know how to convert that to a banding site. I got a map and marked our banding sites on it and described the project a little. I haven't heard from her this winter.

Ave: There's bound to have been some returns. I know that some duck hunters will shoot grebes and quite often they will leave them. I am confident that some bands eventually were sent in. A similar thing happened to me. Just at the top of the hill here, I was taking the dog to the vet. The vet's wife, on seeing my name on the card, said, "oh, you are the one that made all those bird observations."

She was employed by Brina Kessel. Brina was writing a new bird book for Alaska. I don't know what records she had but I do remember that we had some cards about six inches long and four inches wide that we used to fill out for bird observations. I concluded that that is probably what she was looking at. She was going through all those

cards, sorting them, and getting the information into a computer. I recall filling out those cards over a period of 4-5 years. My sole claim to fame, I guess.

Jim: It is interesting how those things that you don't think much about come back later and it turns out they were useful efforts.

Ave: I guess that is the point of it, you never know what is going to be useful. There certainly is a case for not only applied research but also academic research.

Jim: It is gratifying to see the amount of support the refuge still has in the face of all this massive oil industry lobbying, etc.

Ave: It's impressive here in Fairbanks. People are very persistent in their support for the refuge. I don't know what is behind Senator Murkowski. When the price of oil goes up he wants to go into the refuge but when the price of oil goes down, he wants to go into the refuge or if it stays the same, he still wants to go into the refuge. There's a lot of talk about not importing so much oil but as far as I am concerned, we ought to use the Iraqi oil. That is good oil. We should use theirs instead of ours. Let them run out first.

Jim: Somebody handed me a copy of an editorial from the *News Miner* that was written in 1958. It is the *News Miner* supporting protection for the wildlife refuge.

Ave: They did support the refuge at that time. I don't think what they print really matters one way or the other. So did quite a few groups in Fairbanks support the refuge. Most of them still support protection of the refuge. It is a fairly small voice that is speaking for opening it.

Jim: Seems like there is plenty of oil to the west to keep them going up there for quite a while. I don't know why they are so intent about going into the refuge.

Ave: It doesn't really make sense. It is not logical to export oil. I'm not joking, I think we ought to burn the Iraqi oil.

Jim: That's what a good conservation concept would dictate.

Ave: That and the industry's inability to really refrain from repeating the same old mistakes. If that part of the refuge is open to oil, they are going to have mistakes. They brag about how they operate so cleanly and I have to ask why didn't they do that 20 years ago. I guess it is cheaper not to.

Jim: But actually, not all that much cheaper. When you consider the price of the oil they get and the amount, what little they have spent on cleaning up their act is minimal. The oil company, ABR, that I have been working for was credited with - they were worried about the caribou getting in the feeder lines on the pipeline. They did some studies and spent some money and their recommendation finally was to raise the pipes up so the caribou could go under them. The oil administrators objected immediately but they found that in fact it was cheaper for them to do that because their welders could then put their pickup under the pipe. The welders liked it much better and could work better and x-ray their wells better. Now they are raising all their pipes and everybody is happier.

Ave: A number of oil people have told me at different times that industry is very tradition bound. They make technological progress and they really like to brag but basically they are tradition bound and slow to make changes for whatever reason.

Jim: I had an interesting time doing some tapes with Dave Spencer. I hadn't realized how much time he had spent with people like Aldo Leopold and Olaus Murie and the Craighead brothers before he came to Alaska. I got to thinking that it must have been Spencer that brought the whole concept of wilderness into the Fish and Wildlife Service. It got us all to thinking about wilderness.

Ave: I think it was. When the Wilderness Act was passed, I was at Kenai and the initial information came out on it. I can recall the Regional Office (in Portland) was consoling with Dave Spencer a lot about what the Wilderness Act meant and what should be done. I really think he was their main source of information and guidance on it.

Jim: That was the sort of thing you never heard from Dave in idle conversations with him. Last winter he was kind of enjoying talking about his association with Leopold and the Murie's.

Ave: I keep coming back to this business of being branded as a person that was opposed to wildlife investigations which as everyone knows, I was not. I did make one investigation. I went out to St. Lawrence Island in 1958 working with the walrus hunters. Bud Fay was there at the same time. He was the leader of that expedition and I gave him the information on the forms that he had designed and requested. I really enjoyed that assignment. I went out in the skin boats amongst the ice flows. We would pull up to an ice flow and get out on it. Some of the hunters would crawl up on the peak of pushed up ice where they could sit up there with binoculars and scan for walrus. I have thought a lot about that.

When I was refuge manager we would send out crews to be out on the refuge doing biological investigations. I envied those guys being out in the camps, counting ducks, doing their thing and here I was in Fairbanks, trying to write memos. I would fly up occasionally to check on them but I felt left out. I had done a lot of surveys but mainly aerial surveys of sheep, goats, moose, and bears. I made aerial surveys of beavers, beaver dams and a lot of different things but it is not the same as being out in camp someplace.

Jim: My impression is that you had a really interesting and varied career. You started as a stream guard, went through the game warden phase and other kinds of wildlife investigations we used to get assigned. Then you wound up as the first refuge manager in the Arctic which there was no precedence for that.

Ave: Yes, that is true. One thing that impressed me as refuge manager, you could take direct action on the refuge. You could tell somebody that "you can't do that." They wouldn't do it or else they knew they would be prosecuted. It sounded sort of dictatorial but it was effective and it had to be that way. When I would make those tours in Washington, sometimes something would come up having to do with Alaska and they would ask me to draft a response. I would draft a response, then someone would have to initial it, then another person would have to initial it, etc. It would take all week for it to make the rounds for everyone to initial it. It would be something that I would handle by telephone here in Fairbanks. I could just tell the person on the other end of the line that "you gotta do thus and so."

Jim: Well, Ave, this has been fun. I must break away now or I'll miss my flight home.

Ave: I can't think of much more to say at this time, anyway.

Jim: You can have all this back and you can fill in the gaps.

Ave: Thank you very much. I know people will appreciate this on down the line and I appreciate it because it is a fun thing to do.

--end of side 2, tape 1—

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