

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Bob Stratton

Date of Interview: April 13, 2015

Location of Interview: National Conservation Training Center,
Shepherdstown, WV

Interviewer: Mark Madison

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 33 years

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: National Elk Refuge, Wyoming; Quivira Refuge, Kansas; Fish Springs, Utah; Alamosa and Monte Vista Refuges, Colorado; Salt Plains Refuge, Oklahoma; Union Slough, Iowa; at the Washita and Optima Refuges, Oklahoma; Sequoyah Refuge, Oklahoma; Laguna Atascosa, Texas; Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska; Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge, Illinois.

Colleagues: Fred Bolwahn, Harold Miller, Pete Bryant, Marc Nelson, Lyle Stemmerman

Brief Summary of Interview: Mr. Stratton begins by discussing where he went to college, how he got started with the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the different refuges where he worked. He shares several stories, one concerning monarch butterflies and the Program, Planning, Budget and Evaluation or PPBE. He also talks about how things have changed concerning grade increases, difference between when he was a refuge manager and refuge managers today, and even training. He really enjoyed working for the Service and says he “wouldn’t have changed it.”

Mark: Today is April 13 and I'm Mark Madison doing an oral history with Robert "Bob" Stratton. And first thing, Bob, is can you spell your name?

Bob: You bet, Stratton is STRATTON.

Mark: Okay. And usually, Bob, the first question we have is about your education.

Bob: I graduated from Colorado State University, bachelor's degree in wildlife management, 1965. Actually midterm; I spent a few too many hours hunting and fishing and had to catch some courses that I should have taken earlier, but it was an enjoyable experience. At that time in the field of wildlife conservation there were two schools of thought really: Colorado State and Utah State; not to diminish the other good schools around the country, but those were the two that really kind of turned out the graduates. So I looked in the catalogs and said, that's the place, drove up there and saw the mountains and I said, oh, this is the place.

Mark: Where are you from originally, Bob?

Bob: Northern Illinois. And in my career it was interesting to see the number of graduates from the mid-west; Illinois, Iowa, kind of interesting that those areas supplied a lot of the early graduates, but when you think, Leopold was from Iowa, Burlington. I've had the privilege of visiting with Ira Grabrielson at a refuge that he in fact established. He came back for a visit, and I'm sure he looked at me as this young pup as not going to be able to do much, but it was fun talking to him.

Mark: What refuge was that?

Bob: Union Slough, northern Iowa.

Mark: Alright. Well, let's backtrack a bit though.

Bob: Okay, sure.

Mark: You graduate, what was your job post-graduation?

Bob: Actually need to back up even further. I was privileged to begin under a program that's no longer in place and probably will never be put into effect again, the old Student Trainee Program. And in 1960, I can remember seeing a posting on the bulletin board at the Forestry and Wildlife building at Colorado State. And it said, "Mr. George Barkley from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be here to provide background on the Fish and Wildlife Service for promising careers." I signed up on a big list and I thought at that time, you either need to be the first interview, or you'll need to be the last. So I signed up last, 3:00 in the afternoon on a Friday. Had a meeting that night of two, three hundred students and to my surprise Dr. Gilbert stood up and said, "Is Bob Stratton in the audience?" He said, "Mr. Barkley would like to meet with you tonight. You're the only one listed for Friday and he wants to get an early start going home." So I walked up, met Mr. Barkley, he said, "Send Larry Means a letter up at the National Elk Refuge and tell him I told him to hire you." "Okay." So I sent a letter to Refuge Manager Means, a couple months later he replied and he said, "We're going to start the irrigation season in May on National Elk Refuge, if you accept the job, send me a note."

And I thought, Wow!, sent a note and that was the start of my career. I woke up every morning looking out at the Tetons and I thought it just doesn't get any better than this. From there we worked a series of refuges; went from there to Quivira Refuge in the state of Kansas, and then Fish Springs in Utah, the desert of Utah. Came back from there and went to Monte Vista and the Alamosa Refuge, in fact, I was the, I guess I had the distinction of posting the very first refuge boundary sign on the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge back in '66. And had some real disgruntled land owners watching me do that at the time; it was one of those condemnation things and it didn't make people real happy. From there Monte Vista, Salt Plains Refuge in Oklahoma, then up to Union Slough in Iowa, back to Oklahoma at the Washita and Optima Refuges, across the state to the Boston Mountains in Sequoyah Refuge. From there we went to, a real cultural shock, Laguna Atascosa on the coast of Texas; spent four years there basking in the sun in the 70 degree winters and decided wanted to try Alaska, so we went to Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge on the island, spent oh a year and a half or so there, decided that \$25 pizzas and flying everywhere was a little much. Moved to Mark Twain on the Mississippi and had the three states, Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri under our management operation; retired from there in December, no, January of 1995 with 33 years of service. I had an interview with a newspaper writer at Quincy, our headquarters, and I believe today as I did then, that I was so fortunate in having a job, if you want to call it that, that I never ever really had problems waking up in the morning. I was just one of those things that you kind of, you know,

a high school kid living a dream and it never ended.

Mark: That's great. Now what was the first refuge you were manager of?

Bob: Union Slough; Union Slough in Iowa, 1968, June of '68 we moved up there. I was an assistant manager trainee under Pete Bryant, a great old time manager at Monte Vista, and then went to Salt Plains as the primary assistant with Fred Bolwhann, another fine gentleman. And that's where we became acquainted with and good friends with Harold Miller, the longtime clerk of the typewriter fame that we just represented to you. [Mark laughing] And then from there to Union Slough and I was manager for rest of my career.

Mark: How did managing a refuge change over three decades, or working in a refuge since you...?

Bob: You know, and it certainly has, Mark.

Mark: You had a long career.

Bob: Probably, and I can still remember the day that we received the call that we were going to have these training sessions. And if I mention the acronym PPBE, do you, okay.

Mark: No.

Bob: PPBE stands for, and some of the old time guys if they ever hear this recording; Program, Planning, Budget, and Evaluation. And that was put in place by, we referred to them as the Schmidt brothers in Washington, D.C., and they were kind of nameless, faceless people that we never saw. They sent

these memos out, said, “We’re going to bring the National Wildlife Refuge System into the 21st century. We’re going to start managing by this process, PPBE.” Part of that, an important part of it, was the designation of RBU, so we called them “Bennys”, Refuge Benefit Units. Each operation, each wildlife species, each anything on a refuge was assigned a Benefit Unit; one duck for one day was one RBU.

Mark: I have heard about these.

Bob: Okay. And it was, you know, it was the haves and have nots because a little old plains refuge like Washita in 1970, there’s no way we could compete with waterfowl use days for some of east coast or west coast. Well, we had to do something. Well, in the back of the book, monarch butterflies were worth 50,000 RBU’s and we had a host of those little colorful suckers slinging through there. You ever try to census monarch butterflies?

Mark: No, but I just heard this story...

Bob: You did, okay.

Mark: ...’cause we’ve just put millions of dollars into monarchs.

Bob: Okay.

Mark: And I told an old time refuge manager you might have known named Denny Holland...

Bob: Oh, I know Denny, sure.

Mark: ...about this. And he said, “I got to tell you a story sometime,” which he

hasn’t told me, “about the RBU’s for monarchs.” He was looking for them, I think, in South Carolina or something.

Bob: Well, we were looking for, in fact, you have to realize in the refuge managers were only as good or as successful as the crew, the staff. And we were so fortunate in those early days and today too, of having some fantastic people. Well, can you imagine here’s an old, hard core farmer, rancher that is now wearing the FWS patch (and you know I, am one of them now!). And a young pup manager coming out of the office and saying, “Well, Jack, I want to go out and count monarch butterflies because we’ve got to get our RBU count up.” And it was like “well, what are we going to do.” So they took a refuge vehicle and I said, “Just go back out in grazing unit 5, get a count, come back.” And he came back and he kind of laughed, he said, “Saw a lot of them!” So being a good refuge manager, we decided okay we’d extrapolate; I said, we ought to have at least 25,000 of those. Okay 25,000 times 50,000 RBU’s; man we shot to the top of the list, because it was budget-oriented. The more, supposedly, the more RBU’s, the more your budget could be.

Mark: Yes.

Bob: Well, when my whopping 67 million RBU’s for monarch butterflies hit the Schmidt brothers in Washington, I’m sure the laughter could have been heard across the hall and it was like, “Well, nice try.” [Laughing] They wiped it out so. That was the beginning of, you asked how it had changed.

Mark: Yeah.

Bob: That's kind of how it; we from pretty much seat of the pants, I mean, adapting and working with established wildlife management principles, but at the same time feet on the ground, tires on the trails, that type of thing to managing by computer and a lot more technologically-based.

Mark: When did that come in, PPBE?

Bob: 1970, '71 in that range; I was at Washita in western Oklahoma. And that's about the time, and you know the Service is great for having meetings and training sessions; that probably hasn't changed.

Mark: No.

Bob: And I can remember...

Mark: Hence this place.

Bob: By the way, are there people here today training?

Mark: Yeah, yeah, we'll have a couple groups...

Bob: Okay, good. Well anyway, that was probably the biggest change when we went to PPBE. And then the next was the computerization, however, and I don't know how many managers would agree with me on this, but the real change, politically, management oriented-wise, came, and I don't know whether you were in Minneapolis at the same time. But it came about when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service made the regional directors SES's, Senior Executive Service. A lot of perks, unlimited annual leave and having a lot of benefits, but it removed them from the protective umbrella of Civil Service. I

was around when a regional director received a phone call saying, "Clear out your desk, you're no longer the regional director." Prior to that the directors, the regional directors were there for years and years and years, and really developed a staff and a management philosophy. When that came about, I'm sure there were benefits to changing over, and a lot of people did that. But the establishment of the regional directors as a Senior Executive Service Branch, or SES'ers really changed the complexion of the Service.

Mark: Now Bob, even by our agency standards, you moved a lot. Why was that, I mean people did move, but I'd say on average people that worked in the same period as you, maybe six stations but I heard even more than that in your...

Bob: We had 13 stations; a couple of them were complexes. But the philosophy back then, Mark, and I guess it's understandable that they no longer can afford, budget-wise, to do that. A lot of the refuges, most of them were rural, of course, and they had housing; old farm houses, old ranch houses. In some places, Monte Vista for instance, they built complexes; Fish Springs, there was nothing for a 150 miles so they built complexes out there. That, I guess, by having refuge housing it enabled young managers to move, to gain an experience base without being burdened by selling this house, trying to find a rental home, that type of thing. And it provided, I think, a flexibility for the management staff in the regional office. But the philosophy then, and I can still remember the regional supervisor, Marc Nelson, fine gentleman; since passed. His philosophy was, "I want to expose

my young managers to as many different refuge management programs. You may start out on a wintering area, but I want you to go to a transition area, nesting area experience is next one, and the only way you can do that is to move.” There was also an unwritten rule that you did not get a grade increase, in place; you could not go from a 5 to a 7, you transferred. You could not go from a 7 to a 9 in place, you transferred. And it was unheard of to go 5, 7, 9, 11 and up to the, what we referred to then as the GS-a millions, in one place; you could not do that. I retired as a very high step 13, but it took 33 years to get there and a lot of moving. I was fortunate I have to put in an plug for my wife, who’s standing over there. You could not have done something like that without a family that was totally behind you, and I’m sure you’ve heard that and seen that from a lot of folks.

Mark: I’ve heard that from everybody, it’s a team effort.

Bob: It really is. And actually, one thing that the, I think, the managers today, and I don’t say this in a disrespectful way, but it’s kind of an 8 to 5 job now. It’s good and it’s bad; there are a lot of pluses and minuses. But when you lived on the refuge 24 hours a day, you became so intimately involved and familiar with the goings on, and I’m not sure that same feeling is there today because at 5:00 you lock the door and you drive 50 miles to your home. Whereas we might have walked 50 feet to our home and then got a call, “Number 2 crossing is washed out, we need...” you know that type of thing. So there was, I think, a big change when the refuge housing was kind of pushed to the side. Good, bad, I don’t know.

Mark: What was the housing like; somebody that stayed in 13 of them.

Bob: We started our married career in a 16 foot travel trailer with sling bunk beds; we soon modified that, but that was in the desert of Utah. I followed, I missed working for the great director, Lynn Greenwalt. Lynn was the original manager at Fish Springs, and he left just shortly before I arrived with Lyle Stemmerman as the manager, and Lyle just passed away here a couple of months ago, was not able to visit with him much. We went from the desert of Utah, trailer, to a home in Colorado where as we irrigated the front lawn in the spring, it washed the balls of snakes that had been hibernating under the house into the yard and my wife didn’t think that was at all necessary. And I advised her that they were also considered wildlife and could not be dispatched. And we ran a trap line in several of the houses, catching mice and I don’t know how many we caught that first summer in Colorado but we’d be there at night, half asleep and, “SNAP, SNAP.” And it was all right if they were killed outright but when you just wounded them the trap would kind of bounce around the house. We had, we had lots of “fun” experiences; she put up with a lot.

Mark: Still is from what I understand.

Bob: She still is.

[Laughing]

Mark: What was, to just go back one last time, what was your first job like at Elk Refuge, besides being drop dead gorgeous? I know the vista well.

Bob: Unbelievable. It was a summer irrigation job. At that time the Elk Refuge had alfalfa fields and, you know, tame grass fields that we would irrigate and it was critical because the snow melt lasted such a short period of time and we needed to make use of the irrigation water as quickly and as efficiently as possible. So they had three of us (Les Beaty, Gary Lunt, and myself) that were summer irrigators, and then as we worked into the program, I think they used that, and the manager was kind of, "We'll see how these boys do. And if they show any promise, we'll get them out of the hip boots and let them really see what a refuge is about." And I was fortunate enough to end up doing a lot of the census work, high mountain lake trumpeter swan census work; just kind of a general orientation. The early managers, at least in my career, were, and I really benefited, they were interested in developing young managers and seeing that their career move forward, but they were also equally as ruthless. If they didn't think you were interested or could cut the work, you didn't last very long; the phone call, and it was like, "Well, thank you, we appreciated your service and hope you do well." You know that type of thing. But the National Elk Refuge was, for a young fellow, just outstanding. All biological work, and all in the field. And one of the things that my wife has reminded me of, as you move up in the career chain, you move farther away from the field. As an assistant manager at Salt Plains, you know, I was plowing fields, cannon netting geese, coordinating muzzle loader rifle hunts, waterfowl census. I did, later on in my career, just to kind of add spice to the life, I went ahead, and with the approval of a fine gentleman in Minneapolis, went

ahead and got my commercial and instrument pilot's license. And we had a Service plane, [number or November] 708 stationed at my headquarters there in Quincy, Illinois. So for the last, oh ten years or so, I served as a dual function pilot and refuge manager; got to see a lot of the country; it was a fun tour.

Mark: Tell us a little about the booklet you brought down here today.

Bob: We had, as I mentioned to you, when we drove in, this training facility is just fantastic. The first one at Arden Hills, Minnesota was a bit different! I think the goal was the same, how they reached it was certainly a little different.

Mark: Do you remember the year of that?

Bob: May, April/May 1966 probably in that range.

Bob's wife: Sounds about right.

Bob: The very first one was in 1965, and that was kind of the, we're going to see how this works. And they had a small staff and a smaller number; '66 was the first where they brought young managers in from all over the country. And very formal, you did not have a very relaxed atmosphere; Dr. Green, Dr. Bill Green was the director of the academy. Forest Carpenter, supervisor of Region 3 was kind of the main mover and shaker behind that, and there were several others from Washington, but very, very formal. You did not go to the classroom except in your Class A with a tie; those are those old gabardine wool, stand them in the corner and wait for you the next morning.

Mark: We have them in the closet here.

Bob: Well, I'm going to be buried in mine, [everyone laughing] that was the only thing they were good for!; you know people are going to say "My, doesn't he look nice in that." But it was very formal and very, very structured. Now the list that I gave you of the original instructors, most of those gentlemen sadly have passed away. But they were photographers, law enforcement agents, refuge managers, fisheries biologists first and then they were pressed into service because of their expertise in the field to come and tell us young folk how it was done. Most of that group went on, with very few exceptions, to have long term careers in the Service. And one of the first managers that I ever worked for; I had this idea that it would be real good to maybe be a biologist and move to Washington. And he took me aside and he said, "Bob, I want you to know that refuge managers always have a land base attached to their position. All you have in Washington is a desk, if you're lucky." And he said, "You make the choice." And I had several opportunities to move into the offices, but for our personal needs and enjoyment we stayed in the field and I haven't regretted a single moment of it; it's been great.

Mark: Is there anything else you want to add before we...?

Bob: No, other than, I would like to say that the staff that you have on refuges, and a lot of them are called by different titles now; the maintenance men, the,

you know, we've got a different term for it now. We had, when we would get ready to plant browse for the migrating geese, a real team effort and I think it was probably known by the regional office and suspected by the Washington office, but no one really said anything. Today an administrative assistant, you couldn't put them on a tractor because it just is not allowed. We would double and triple shift and the clerk would drive the tractor from four in the morning until noon, and then we'd have a maintenance man come in; it was a real team effort. And while I'm sure that takes place today in some form, I think we were a lot closer knit unit back then, than we are now simply because it's such a diverse system. It had to change. I don't look at that as a negative, but I'm really, really glad that I came up when I did. It was a good career.

Mark: Thank you, Bob.

Bob: ...wouldn't have changed it. Thank you very much.