Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Leroy Sowl
Date of Interview: October 9, 1999
Location of Interview: Shepherdstown, WV
Interviewer: Mark Madison

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: roughly 23years.

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Refuge Manager of the Lower Souris National Wildlife Refuge.

Most Important Projects: Worked on the Trans-Atlantic Pipe Line

Colleagues and Mentors: John Halaka, Robert "Sea Otter" Jones.

Most Important Issues: The Trans-Alaskan Pipe Line, problems in legislature.

Brief Summary of Interview: He talks about how, knowing the right people, he immediately found a job in the Fish and Wildlife Services. He then continues to describe the various positions he has held, and the multiple locations he had been to. Further detail is given towards the various projects and important events he was involved with, including the Trans-Alaskan Pipe line and the Exxon Valdiz oil spill. Finally, he goes into detail about the difficulties he faced and the people who made his job more difficult, usually coming from the government or less-than-helpful laws.

Interview with Leroy Sowl
By Mark Madison
10-9-99

Leroy Sowl:
...the impact it had. The Aleuts on Attu Island that were made slaves from Japan is one of the incidents that people there now probably don't remember. It's no longer a Fish and Wildlife concern, but the <unclear> Islands used to be a national wildlife refuge. The Americans took the Aleuts, the natives on there are Aleuts that the Russians had moved on to the <unclear> to hunt seals. They were taken, uprooted from their homes and taken down to southeastern Alaska and they were put internment camps just like the Japanese Americans were. They weren't thought to be disloyal or anything. It's just, we're protecting them from the Japanese, and a lot of the Eskimos, more Eskimos than Aleuts were what were called Eskimo Scouts during World War II, and they serve all over, and a lot of those people live on national wildlife refuges, or did at one time. Some of them are native landsmen. That history needs to be recognized. Salmon industry is still a strong industry up there, but people now probably don't remember the stream guards.

Madison:
What were those?

Leroy Sowl:
They were largely college students getting degrees in conservation, at least the ones I knew, that were taken up there and armed with rifles and they were put there to protect the salmon streams from poachers. Now that history's kind of gone from the Fish and Wildlife Service because the people that were involved were taken out of the Fish and Wildlife Service and put in the National Marine and Fishery Service. That's another place you need to go for Fish and Wildlife Service history, if you haven't already done it, National Marine and Fishery Service, particularly in Alaska, and the River Basins, as it was called, Ecological Services now, in Alaska was part of the National Marine and Fishery Service until they went into <unclear>, and then they came back the Fish and Wildlife Service. Some day we need to reunite with National Marine and Fishery Service.

Madison:
Some future time. What about your own career? How did you end up in Fish and Wildlife and Alaska, for that matter?

Leroy Sowl:
How did I end up in the Fish and Wildlife Service? I went to the University of Minnesota and studied wildlife management. There was, in the wildlife department, there was an animal damage control specialist, his last name was Peterson, I think, that had an office in there, and he was kind of an adjunct professor I was told today, but I didn't know that, because I never had any free classes, but anyway, he was evaluating people there, the students there, and he came to me one day and says, "Come on with me", and he took me over to the Regional Office and he introduced me to everybody from the Regional Director on down, and he had me interviewed and within days after I graduated, he said, "Let's go", and he took me over there, and I had a job before I left the office.

Madison:
It doesn't happen that way anymore.

Leroy Sowl:
No, it doesn't. But see, the Fish and Wildlife Service was expanding then, and they obviously had people out like, and I can't remember his first name, like him, with their eye open for potential material. The same thing happened to me in the Marine Corp. I never made it into the Officer ranks because by the time I was old enough, I knew what happened to second lieutenants in a war, and I didn't want any part of it. They were cannon target, and that's why they were, you know, when I came in, they put me in aviation and they put me in ordinance, and the reason was my test scores and things like that, and I didn't know it at the time, but I found out later, when they said, come on, we need you to lead troops, they had taken my test scores and everything and had designated me to be a future officer in the war. I wasn't old enough. They didn't realize that. Well the Fish and Wildlife Service, in those days, were composed of veterans. They operated the same way, obviously, and you know,

I didn't go looking for the job, I was recruited, and I would assume that that was a <unclear>. I became a Refuge Manager.

Madison:
Which refuge?

Leroy Sowl:
Then it was Lower Souris National Wildlife Refuge, and that's what I still call it.

Madison:
What's the new name of it?

Leroy Sowl:
Pardon.

Madison:
What's the new name of...

Leroy Sowl:
J. Clark Salyer, and I did my trainee time there. I was given responsibility for what were called easement refuges. They were wetlands under easement. This was before the wetland program, in the Turtle Mountains of North Dakota, and I just met a young lady who had been managing those wetlands for the State of North Dakota, she's moved to Iowa, and she wasn't even aware of the history, but she had seen an occasional sign, so I don't know what happened to them in the Fish and Wildlife concept, but probably the easement ran out. I was given that responsibility, and then I was moved down, told I was going to the Upper Mississippi National Fish and Wildlife Refuge.

Madison:
Now when was this? Roughly what years?

Leroy Sowl:

Let's see. I was out in North Dakota '59 and early '60. I moved to the Upper Mississippi in '60. I was the District Refuge Manager at Pole 9 at Lansing, Iowa. The structure of the refuge has changed now. I was there four and a half years, and then I was, in those days they didn't ask if you wanted to go somewhere, they told you, and they sent me out to the far northwest corner of North Dakota to be manager of what was called the Crosby Wetland District, that had, at that time, four counties. By the time they left there, it was down to three. Then a call came out, they needed biologists to go to Alaska and work in the Aleutian Islands and monitor the Atomic Energy Commission. I don't usually volunteer, but I volunteered for that because I had been trying to go to Alaska in my college years as a stream guard, and I had tried and tried and tried, and they didn't even bother to acknowledge my interest. I suppose it was because they had so many people they didn't need to bother. Anyway, I got to Alaska, and I worked on Amchitka Island for three years. Actually, at the time I went up there, Dave Spencer, and you probably already interviewed him...

Madison:
Yeah, we have.

Leroy Sowl:
...was the Associate Supervisor of refuges in Region I. He was the Associate Supervisor for Alaska because Alaska was under Region I technically at that time. They didn't give us much support, and he was the first member, his secretary was the second, and I would have been a third member to come on to the staff in Alaska, and I was followed very quickly by John Hakala, who'd been there before as the Kenai Moose Range Manager. He got the job because he was notoriously tough on the oil companies and <unclear>. They knew they needed hard heads out there in the Aleutians to fight with the Atomic Energy Commission. John was the hard head, and I tried to be the, you know, good guy, bad buy. I tried to be the good guy. I was a little hard, too. But I did that for three years, and then they decided they needed to build an oil pipeline through Alaska. So here I had this monitoring experience, and I was away from my family every other month for the entire month, and the kids were young. Ethel had to take care of them on her own. She didn't drive, and so she was stuck with those kids for a month, and then I came home, and I had so much comp

time built up that I spent two weeks at a time not working, and we traveled all over Alaska. Then I said, here's this chance for me to come in, be with my family, buy a house, and really settle down. So I took it. Well, I had more of a family life, but I was gone a lot because that pipeline needed watching, and I got so many people, what happened was that my group turned into a data gathering group, gathering data on wildlife on the pipeline. That was the time the Environmental Impact Statements first came out, and we wrote the first large Environmental Impact Statement, and Washington just came down all over it, because they said, you cannot talk about rape, pillage, and plunder. We didn't do that, but we made it really tough. So they put together an interior pipeline EIS statement, bit if we hadn't started out, they wouldn't have done it, and so we worked then with USGS and the Bureau of Land Management on this statement. The Bureau of Land Management got, we'd been very stubborn and everybody told us we didn't need monitors for that pipeline, the engineers would take care of it. Well I'd been on Amchitka, and I knew about engineers. Some of the stuff they did out there was just atrocious. To go back to that, there was one time one of their drilling rigs was sitting in a wetland area, and they started pushing the topsoil around the tundra, and I said, "You idiots can't do this." "Why not?" "Because, I said, "that soil's going to turn liquid and it's going to go swoosh, right down the mountainside." "Are you an engineer?" "No, I'm not an engineer, I'm a biologist." "Well, you don't know what you're talking about." I went in town, I came back, and the whole mountainside was down the drainage, and the Corps of Engineers was providing the engineers, and their soils engineers came out and he said, "Why did you idiots do this?" "Well, we didn't know this was going to happen. Leroy was telling us it was going to happen, but he's not an engineer, what did he know," and that guy said, "You damn idiots, if you didn't believe him, you should have called me." So I had that kind of reputation, so they moved me on to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, and...

Madison:
When did you start working with...

Leroy Sowl:
That was, let's see, '67, that was 1970. '67 I went to Alaska. In 1970 I switched over to the pipeline. There were three of us, GS-13's. The other two guys didn't

want to be supervisors. One of them was Chuck Evans, who you probably have already interviewed.

Madison:
They have in Region 7.

Leroy Sowl:
He was an Environmental Services, whatever, River Basins pilot biologist. So I became the project leader, which meant I was stuck with the paperwork, but I also had a good deal of influence in that job, and I don't know if I should tell this or not, because it could get people in trouble, but after the pipeline was built, one of the oil companies that was involved decided they were going to sue me personally, because at one time after we had these stipulations done, and Bureau of Land Management, Geological Survey, Fish and Wildlife Service, and some other people had developed these environmental stipulations, and a lot of them had to do with caribou. Well, the political pressure came on, and these other agencies all backed off, their bosses backed off. Well, in my case, being known as a fighter, Gordon Watson, who was the Area Director at the time, just disappeared when they wanted a representative back in Washington, and I had to go back, and what they were trying to do was take away stipulations that the oil companies didn't like, and eventually I just told the Deputy Director, and my names are gone now, but I told him, I said, "I am not going to give anymore." "Oh, okay," and they quit. In other words, they would have taken away the whole book of stipulations if I hadn't have defended them. But in those days, it was a little different than now. As long as they had a reputable, professional, career person there telling them no, they could only go so far. Nowadays, they just override them. Well after the pipeline was built, this oil company decided that I'd been full of hot air because nothing had happened to the caribou. You know, I was wrong, and it had cost their company millions and millions of dollars, and they were going to sue me personally. Well, what they forget about is Alaska's a small society, and I found out after the fact, because one of the people that worked for the law firm and one of the people that was in the Fish and Wildlife Service casually told me one day, "Did you know that you were in deep dog doo?" What had happened was, they called one day and the Regional Director, Keith Shriner, was gone, and the company representative called and didn't want to talk to

me, but the Regional Director's secretary said, "Well, Keith is not going to be in for quite awhile. If you want to act now, you've got to talk to Leroy." Well, he didn't really want to talk to Leroy, but he did, and what he asked me was for the names of all the confident caribou biologists that I could think of in the United States and Canada to give them an opinion on the matter, and what it was, they were trying to get these people to say that Leroy overreacted. They all, to a man, apparently said the other way, if it hadn't been for Leroy, you'd be in trouble, because the caribou would be in deep trouble. So they dropped their lawsuit. I don't know the details on this because I just got a back channel, but that's the kind of game that was played up there at that time, and I would bet that it's still going on. If you look at the history of the place since I got out of there, there have been several regional directors that have been removed. One of them's right here, and you can talk to him. I don't know why, Putz, I don't know why he was removed, but he evidently said no at the wrong time, and they got rid of him.

Madison:
What did you do after the pipeline?

Leroy Sowl:
After the pipeline, well now, there's two stages to the pipeline. I was there during the planning and the environmental stipulations and everything. It got so hot there for me that Gordon Watson arranged for me to go to Washington DC, and I was assigned to the Office of Biological Services, which is gone now. It doesn't exist anymore, and what was my first job down there? Oh, the first year I was down there, I worked on what was then called the Trans-Alaska Gas Pipeline, and they've never built that pipeline. But how many years ago was that? That was like '74 or '75. Just one of the components of that Trans-Alaska Gas Pipeline was one called Northern Border, and that came under this whole umbrella. It's just been this past summer that Northern Border has been building pipeline through where I live now. It's taken them all this years to do it. But I was sent down to do that, and when that kind of drained off, they needed a coordinator for Outer Continental Shelf, and most of the people wouldn't touch that with a ten foot pole, because they knew it was going to be political.

Madison:
Oh, yeah.

Leroy Sowl:
I was a GS-14 at the time, and I was given responsibility for that. I did that until about 19-, boy, 1976, I think, or was that, no, I'd have to work it out on paper, but I did that for awhile, and then the Office of Minerals Management was formed, and they, more or less, took over the whole Outer Continental Shelf thing, and we predicted something. It took a lot longer to happen than we said, and that was that Valdez oil disaster. We told them it was going to happen. In fact, the Merchant Marine Academy did a mock-up on it, and they thought it would happen within six months. It took several years for it to happen, but it did happen, and they're still having trouble with that. Well, I went on from there, I guess, and about that time, Gordy Watson needed a Deputy Regional Director duty. That was called an area then. They didn't acknowledge it as a region, but it shortly became one, because I went back there as Gordon's Deputy, and then I guess I shouldn't mention names of Assistant Secretary, but he got cross ways, and the Assistant Secretary who was nominally a friend, not a foe, I was in the Washington Office and Lynn Greenwald was Director then. He called me in, he said, "Leroy, old friend, I need your help." I said, "Okay, I'm your man." He said, "I have to remove Gordon Watson from that job," and he said, "I want you to take over for as long as it takes." Well, it took a year. I was in there a year. That was long enough to get more exposure to the Alaska delegation, get in deeper <unclear>. Then Keith Shriner came up, oh, in the meantime, in that year while I was the Acting, it's different than a normal Acting in that Lynn gave me an appointment as an Acting for as long as it took. They couldn't give me Area Director status for some reason, but they gave me Acting Area Director status and put it on paper. So I really was the Area Director for that year, and during that time, I was responsible for staffing what became the Regional Office, hiring personnel officer, hiring contracting, and everything, and then Keith Shriner came up as Regional Director, because when Lynn checked around on me, people like the Audubon Society, who I'd been involved with for several years, said, "No, you know, his history shows he's sympathetic to oil, he's involved with pipelines and things, we don't want him." The oil companies said, "He's an environmentalist, we don't want him," and the State said, "We don't want him." Because you can't be the head of the

Fish and Wildlife Service in a state like Alaska. Well, it's even worse now, as you know, and after this week, it's going to be even more hot up there. Just before I left Alaska, I ran into an Alaskan employee, John <unclear> who was head of the Marine Mammals for the State of Alaska. I'd been over to the man's house for parties and friendly. He wouldn't even talk to me. He wouldn't shake my hand, and you know, what have I done? But it was something the Fish and Wildlife Service had done or, who knows. John and I professionally started getting along because nobody had ever been able to capture and move sea otters alive, and when I was on Amchitka Island, the Seattle Tacoma Zoo, Sea-Tac Zoo wanted a sea otter exhibit. So they have a group of, or did at that time, Boeing employees that go out and do these things in the name of Boeing, and they sent a group to Alaska to capture and move sea otters. Since I was on the island, I got tapped to capture the sea otters, and I can't claim much credit for it, but they actually moved those sea otters to Seattle and they lived. It's the first time in history that captured sea otters had ever lived. Well, what it was, all it was was we decided that we could take sea water along, keep those sea otters cool on the airplane. It took about three hours to go from Amchitka to Anchorage, and it's almost the same distance as going to Seattle, so it was another three hours down to Seattle, and those sea otters got there alive. One of them was named Leroy after me, and he was put in the Sea- Tac Zoo. He may have been the only one that survived, and the Alaska biologist said, "Wow, we didn't know you could do this." Well the sad story is that Leroy expired fairly shortly, and nobody knew why. They do now. You can't put sea otters in fresh water. They have to be in salt water. They can only be in salt water aquariums, or at least that time. They may have found some way around it, but for some reason it didn't work. So I was a good guy to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game then because they started coming out there to Amchitka and hauling sea otters away by the plane load to re-establish sea otters elsewhere in southeast Alaska and then down in the northwest United States. As I say, that all evaporated there, and I was no longer a friend by the time I left. Now I got digressing here, and I forgot where I was. I guess...

Madison:
You were saying how hard it is to be Fish and Wildlife in Alaska. Basically it was a no win situation.

Leroy Sowl:
Yeah, that's basically it.

Madison:
Why is it like that there though?

Leroy Sowl:
It's basically that way by the Native Claims Settlement Act. Fish and Wildlife Service had federal mandates and subsistence and some things like that which the citizens of Alaska, that are non-native, violently detest. Their politicians detest them and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game detest them. Now there are some personal relations that are fairly strong between the biologists on both sides, but there's a tremendous amount of animosity, and I haven't got the details yet, my daughter who is a biologist up there now, was telling me that, the last time I talked to her, which was two or three weeks ago, that there was this legislation coming up, deadline coming up, and if Alaska Game and Fish didn't back down, they were going to lose even more control over subsistence. Well, they didn't back down, so they got this going on. My daughter is a <unclear> biologist, because that's a function she fulfills, but she's never been able to get a permanent job with the Fish and Wildlife Service, in spite of being a woman. She didn't go through the right hoops. She went to the University of Alaska, like a male would do, got a degree, like a male would do, and applied for a job, like a male would have done at one time. She didn't go through any special program. So as far as personnel's concerned, they treat her like a male. She can't get a job.

Madison:
When did you leave Alaska?

Leroy Sowl:
I left there for the last time in 1983.

Madison:
So you were there during the Alaska Lands Act.

Leroy Sowl:
Yeah.

Madison:
How did that change things? I ask because Jimmy Carter was recently down here reminiscing about it.

Leroy Sowl:
It had just been reciting and changing for the worse, relations between Fish and Game and the Fish and Wildlife Service. I don't know what I can say. The normal, non-native Alaskan, from what I said before, a lot of those aren't really Alaskans, they came up there to get rich quick during the big oil days. They're still there because they still get no taxes, like this year's going to be $1800 a person kick back, and they just recently voted not to give up any part of that because it was theirs. Well, the fact of the matter is that Alaska's schools are in big trouble. That includes the University of Alaska. I brought my daughter up for a reason, but I don't remember. Oh, one of the things that was interesting, when I was Deputy Regional Director, the Congressman was our biggest problem. Stevens didn't want to get his hand dirty, I think, with people that wouldn't cooperate. But his wife is an Alaskan native. He maintains a house at, I think, it's not Arctic Village, one of the villages on the Yukon River, and he goes up there periodically to maintain his residency, and he was up there one time, and several, three at least, of the refuge managers that had cabins on the refuges were summoned there. You know, if I had known about it, I'd have gone there. That's why I didn't know about it, because I'd have gone and told the Congressman to go fly a kite. I done it so often, you know, it was a big deal. But he didn't even look at them. You know, he looked around and saw they were there standing in a row, and you know, if you need to, I can give you the names so you can go check with them. This just isn't my story. They were, at that time, trying to get rid of all the illegal in holdings on the refuges, and that was Kenai, Kodiak, and Yukon Flats. Well, most of those were hunters cabins or guide cabins they used to take their clients to, and he wouldn't let them do it, and nobody fought him. I didn't know about it until I was down here after I'd been moved out of the Washington office for fighting with the Republicans from Alaska, and one of the guys who was involved said, "Do you remember the time when..." I said, "I didn't know

about that." He said, "I know you didn't." He said, "They wouldn't let you in on it." But anyway, shortly after my daughter started working for the Yukon Flats, the natives came in and said, "We don't want these hunters going out here and hunting in these areas around the village." You know, they didn't care about the Alaskans who were hunting there, but it was the parties. So the refuge got together a burning party, and they went out and burned these cabins to satisfy the natives. My daughter was one of them. So in spite of the Congressman, Sowl got the last word.

Madison:
You took it in your own hands.

Leroy Sowl:
She wasn't in charge, because she's not that high, but she was one of them that helped set those cabins on fire, and there were no repercussions, because I would imagine that the native leaders had gone in and told the Congressman how the cow ate the cabbage before the Fish and Wildlife Service went out there.

Madison:
Leroy, we have to let you go.

Leroy Sowl:
Okay.

Madison:
Because we have to go to Charles <unclear>.

Leroy Sowl:
I don't think you were there. Was the war history in the Aleutians?

Madison:
Yeah.

Leroy Sowl:
John Hakala, if he's still alive.

Madison:
How do you spell his last name?

Leroy Sowl:
He's Finnish, H-a-k-a-l-a, I think. He lives or lived on the Kenai Refuge. He, at one time, was the refuge manager of the Kenai. He was a B-25 pilot during World War II, but he was stationed on Amchitka.

Madison:
His name has come up from somebody else, too.

Leroy Sowl:
I don't know, as I say, I don't know if he's alive, but then Robert "Sea Otter" Jones, you may hear him referred to...

Madison:
Robert "Sea Otter" Jones, Debbie Corbin has been doing some stuff on him.

Leroy Sowl:
Good, but there are people like that, you've got to get information from on that refuge in the World War II.

Madison:
Yeah, I'd love to.

Leroy Sowl:
They came to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service because they loved that area, and both of them were officers. Bob Jones was a second lieutenant or something like that, and he was in charge of a early warning station on the west end of Amchitka Island. He's a maverick from the word go, and another one you've got to talk to is Palmer <unclear>.

Madison:

Palmer <unclear>.

Leroy Sowl:

The last I knew he was a refuge manager in, I’m holding you up...

Key Words

aircraft

biologists (USFWS)

buildings, facilities, and structures

chemical spills

Directors (USFWS)

education

history

international affairs

island

legislation

man-made disasters

marine mammals

military

motor vehicles

mountains

Native American

oil spill

places (human made)

ships

structures

supervision

training

transportation

vehicles

wetlands

wildlife refuges