“Fire on the Swamp”

Roy Moore
April 17, 1985

Roy Moore is describing the different fires that occurred on Okefenokee National Wildlife during his tenure there staring in 1951. He describes how the refuge was when he first started and the plans to start doing controlled burns, which they started in January of 1952. However, starting in the summer of 1954, fires were breaking out in various locations around the refuge and in this ‘narrative’ Mr. Moore is talking about and reviewing slides of those fires.

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Moore, Roy
Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge and the implementation of fire breaks and controlled burning
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Roy Moore:
..... I came to work for the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge in 1951; I'd been there two or three times before that; one time I remember when two of the refuge men had been ambushed and killed and taken down, an investigation was being made by the FBI, and another time we had a man down here trapping bears and removing them from the refuge some (unclear) when they were some causing some trouble with some of the cattlemen. I really didn't know much about the swamp. Mr. John Hopkins was the first Refugee Manager and was living with us. I met him before and became better acquainted with him; we would get together every once and a while and he would tell me about his experiences in the swamp. I learned quite a bit about the background from him. I soon found that there was quite a bit of work to be done, and one of them involved the timberland on the hill; we called it the hill because it was high enough to be above water. There was pine timberland lying all around the swamp, because there is a definite relationship between the pine timberland around the swamp and the swamp itself in regards to fire situation. The timber around the swamp and the ground had a heavy layer of rough; that is pine straw, dead grass, palmettos, and (unclear) saps. It was such a heavy layer, that it was a definite fire hazard. In fact, there was enough of it on the ground that potentially in a fire situation it would support a ground fire (unclear). Within the boundary of the refuge and outside the edge of the swamp in other words, between the swamp and the boundary refuge in several places around the swamp, there was land owned by the government, by the refuge. There was some 9,000 to 10,000 acres of such land, and it was heavily layered with that rough just as the other land was. Now, the control burning was not a timber management practice at that time. The timber owners, the big timber owners like (unclear) and so on, they had firefighting equipment. They used it to put out fires when they occurred. But, as I said before, controlled burning as a management practice had not come along at that time. But, I decided to undertake a controlled burning program, and in December of 1951, we began making a system of fire breaks, producing controlled burning. We ran parallel lines a quarter of a mile apart to be used to prevent fires from out of controlled burning, and burning was done in the winter months of December, January, and February when the trees were dormant so that the fire would not hurt them. We began burning in January of 1952, and each year after that during those winter months, we continued advancing the controlled burned areas on more and more of those timber tracks along the refuge. That first year we burned on Soldier Camp Island and Cowhouse Island. The next year we burned on additional areas. Well, so much for controlled burning.

Reviewing the slides: The fires in the 1954 and 1955 period began in the middle of the summer of 1954; there were a number of separate fires, and what I am going to do now is to point out the locations of those fires and just a little bit about how they advanced into the interior of the swamp, and later on, we will have some pictures to show of some of those things.

On December 6, 1954, there was the Billies Island fire. It started here, burned up through the middle of the island, and then out to the edge of the area, burned that, and then it was

put out by rain. So, it didn't amount to a great deal in so far as the whole refuge was concerned.

Then there was the Black Jack Island fire, it began on August 7, 1954, down here on Black Jack Island. The first smoke was observed there on August 7th, and on August 19th the fire was continuing to burn. On September 9th it had spread southward on a five mile front, and on September 10th it came out over the hill and down here. It burned through Mims Island and came out down here and quite a number of fire fighting units were along here and had constructed fire breaks and back fire down there so it did not get out along the hill, and was put out by rain on September 11th.

Then there was the Rowells Island fire; it started out there just about a mile north of Rowells Island on October 6, 1954. On November 28th it had burned about 25 acres, and it was burning out from it from a circle. On January the 5th it had burned about 175,000 acres. On March 9th it came out on the hill, burned through Rowells Island and came out on the hill. In the meantime, the fire was being held by the fire control units of the various agencies that were participating in the suppression of the fire. It came out on the hill and it continued to burn in through the swamp like that, later on it was held for a considerable time on these two islands; Middle Island and Macks Island. Eventually, it came on through here, and it advanced northward up in through here and joined into fires that burned up along in here. By March 14th, it had advanced over almost to Minnies Lake along in here.

Then there was the Mule Tail Fire; it started on November 27th between Moniac and St. George, about 2 miles above the highway, above the road here, and advanced northward along Trail Ridge. On the following day, the 28th, it was secured on the hill but had gotten into the swamp in this area here, and it continued to burn into the swamp toward Soldier Camp Island, and I don't know just how many units but there was several units of fire fighting equipment, tractors and plows and bulldozers and such, and a number of men working in here, holding the line to keep it from coming down out on the hill. There wasn't any way to get in here and make a line in the swamp up in here. On December 2nd, the fire had burned across here and was coming out on Soldier Camp Island. We had fire breaks along there and, of course, we had controlled burning on the island about three years earlier, and we weren't worried about hurting anything on the island, but we didn't want it to cross the island and get more into the swamp over here. It could have crossed the island because in those three years there had been enough new litter on the ground, and the fire would have run on the ground, although it would not have been a ground fire. On December 5th then, see the fire had started on November 27th, by December 5th, the wind shifted and came strong out of the south, and it came up through here, it came up on Trail Ridge and also in the swamp, and a regular fire storm came up through here, and as soon as that happened I picked up some of our men, some of the refuge men, I left two of them on Soldier Camp to guard down there, and I picked up a couple more than we had down there, raced around here to Chesser Island, went down to the lower end of the island to see what the situation was. We could hear the fire roaring, it seemed to be less than a half a mile south of the island when we got there. Any controlled burning or anything of that kind, or any back fire would have been utterly useless. So, I left Tom Chesser, who was one of the men with me, at his home there near the north end of the island. He had a home there, a small farm. (unclear), the other man, I took him to his home out here, then I came around to Camp Cornelia, where the buildings and the equipment were, and another one of the men who was with me (unclear), and we got the hoses out and watered down the buildings around the entire compound there. We got that pretty well done by the time the fire came through. When

it did come through, it was, as I said before, it was a real fire storm. The fire just came rolling over the tops of the pine trees and below there. Those big oak trees there, the limbs simply whipped the ground, and I thought it was going to tear them off. We sheltered behind one of the buildings there when the fire came through it had shot straight across the compound and kept on going without any hesitation at all. As soon as we could get out from behind the building there, where the fire had passed, where we were sheltered behind the building, why we got out and got the hoses down and put out a few fires that had been started on two or three of the buildings. As soon as we had that done, we got in the car and went down to the boat landing down there where we had a boat house and had our boats down there in the concession area in a lone shack there, and some boats and motors. We all got down to the boat house, and the boats had burned and the little building that the concession major had outboard motors in, about a half a dozen of them, it was on fire. I got them out just before the thing caved in. But everything else now, there was one house that Tommy Roddenberry was living in, it didn't burn, but his chickens all burned in the coops. The fire continued on up through there. Incidentally, the fire coming through the swamp here came up about through the middle of Chesser Prairie. The east part of Chesser Prairie burned, the west part didn't. It came right up on through there and along Trail Ridge, and it was rained out that night somewhere up in this vicinity.

Now the Cane Creek and Suwannee Creek Fires started on March 7, 1955. They are up in here, Cane Creek and Suwannee Creek, and they burned into the swamp here and advanced into the swamp and joined up with Rowells Island Fire, as I mentioned before, continued on up in here and eventually joined up with the Black Hammock Fire, Black Hammock in this area here (I'll tell you about it next). With these fires then, they were advancing through the swamp in here. The Black Hammock Fire started on March 7th and about a mile out, here is the corner of the refuge right here, and it was started about a mile off in here. This map is 1-inch to a mile, and it advanced up along in here in the swamp, came around here. On March 12th it was advancing through the state forest, on March 14th it had burned over most of the area visible from US 1 south of Waycross and Swamp Park Road, which comes right down here. It burned all around over in here by that time. East of the Swamp Park Road it had advanced down through the timber, to the refuge boundary line right here. It burned down through to the refuge boundary line and stopped abruptly at the refuge boundary line where we had controlled burn. The timber on the land above that, above the refuge boundary line, was completely killed, and there wasn't a tree burned on the refuge where the controlled burning had been done because there wasn't enough fuel there to support a ground fire. By March 21st, the northwestern part of the swamp had all burned; the fire was flanking westward toward Maul Hammock; all in here, coming in here, advancing westward toward Maul Hammock there. From then on the fires continued to burn, and in some places it burned over one time and killed the timbers and it killed the brush in brushy areas where it burned over, it killed the brush and small trees. A month or two later the branch of the fire would sweep back over and burn it again. By that time, with all of that material on the ground that was dead and dry, by that time it would burn really hot.

Now, I flew over the fire quite often to check on the progress and to find out where the fire was and so on, and after the fire had been put out in the latter part of June by rains in 1955, I checked over it and I estimated that about 285,000 acres had burned during those various fires that had joined together and had burned over most of the swamp. It's the area up here around Sapling Prairie which didn't burn. I mentioned the fire fighting equipment and so on, and I think that most of the forest fighting equipment in the whole state of Georgia was down here working on these fires.

That is a scene on Grand Prairie, and that is on the boat run between Minnies Lake and Billies Lake; we called it a boat run, it actually is a branch of the Suwannee River. That was taken before the fire. These several pictures that I am showing now are scenic, showing conditions in places in and around the swamp before the fire in '54 and '55. That shows the pine timber and some of the rough on the ground, some of it was much denser than that, but you can see the condition. I am sure all of you have been out in the country and seen pine forests.

That was at Camp Cornelia, none of the buildings that are there now were there at that time. Just to point out this right here, that was our Interpretive Center, you might want to call it that, the ancestor possibly of the one that is there now that probably you have visited, but that was it then. We did cater to the public, try to give them whatever information we could about the swamp, but we had to make most of it ourselves. That is a closer view of the Interpretive Center.

That, of course, is the illustration of the origin of the swamp, I am sure you're all familiar with it; the post line along here, Trail Ridge, and Okefenokee Swamp, and here is Florida. I don't know whether this particular illustration has come to your attention or not, but in order to show what I wanted to show here, I made these lines here 5 miles apart, these represent 5 mile, and these represent 50 feet. In other words, here is sea level here, there is 50, 100, 150, 200, and here is Trail Ridge, and here is the swamp here. Spanish Creek eroded this area out here, here is the level of the town of Folkston, and then it falls off to about 20-25 feet above sea level, all the way down to where it goes, and into the ocean. But you can see here that the swamp is more or less on a bench some 50 feet, well from here to here, 50-60 feet higher than the ground in the town of Folkston.

That is the couple of the refuge men on patrol in the swamp; Marty Cone is in the front and Jewett Hall in the back. They were both experienced swamp men, had lived in the area all of their life, had hunted alligators in younger days before the refuge was established, and they were our mainstay in apprehending alligator poachers. There are some of the gator hides that we found one day when I happened to be along with them on some of their work in the swamp. You will notice there that they take the skins from the belly of the alligator and leave the back part; they don't use that, it was not marketable.

That is another scene where showing how the refuge boundary line was marked. The boundary around the Okefenokee, around the refuge, had not been posted at the time I came there, and that was one of the jobs that we did while I worked there was to post the refuge boundary, and we carried on some research.

That is a fire outfit that the refuge had, we had one unit of fire fighting equipment, the tractor and the Mathis plow. We were heading off in there to do some fire break work, to do some control burning. There he is stringing the fire; you can see the size of the fire break that that plow makes, and he is lighting the fire on the upwind side, as you can see the smoke moving across there, and lighting the fire here, and it would burn slowly through there, until it reaches the next break a quarter of a mile away. Fires, as I mentioned, are done in the winter months when the pine trees are dormant, and also, select times to burn when there is the right amount of moisture and a suitable wind so that the fire would burn slowly upwind, and remove the rough that is on the ground. There you can see the fire advancing upwind, taking all of that rough off the ground.

Here you can see how the ground had been cleared; here is a small Longleaf Pine, and the lower branches are scorched as the fire went through but the upper ones were not, and the tree was not hurt. A fire needs to be run through the forest usually every three or four years in order to maintain suitable fire protection conditions and also to maintain a better wildlife habitat. That was one of the reasons, not only fire control but wildlife habitat was one of the reasons that we were interested in burning the pinelands within the refuge.

That was a scene on Seagrove Lake in early summer of 1954 when the swamp began to go dry. A few days later there was no water all there in Seagrove Lake.

That was a tree at the upper end of Big Water; I took the picture to show those Cyprus knees. But, during a fire that particular tree and quite a number of more in that area were killed, the fire burned the roots of those trees and they would fall. In other words, those trees where the peat and swamp was deep they were rooted just in that peat, and when the fire would burn the peat it would burn the roots too and the tree would fall over. There was not a great deal of that in this 1954-'55 fire, but in some places there were some trees that were lost that way.

That is looking down on the Suwannee River sharply and up in the swamp a short distance from where it comes out on the Prairie near the pocket, and that is one of those little islands that I spoke of up there in that green area. This would be Middle Island and Max Island here. As you can see, there is no water in the swamp; you could walk with dry shoes all the way from Fargo to Billy's Lake without getting your feet wet. Still, water did continue in Billy's Lake and Minnies Lake and Big Water, a small amount of water.

That's looking down on Chase Prairie, and you can see one gator hole there. Those gator holes are important in times such as that because wildlife could get water there. You can see that is part of the prairie there, but there are clumps of bushes and a few trees coming along in patches.

That is looking down on Minnies Lake, which is right along in here. You can see run is dry below in this lake.

This area coming in here, this point coming in here is where the Everett Cypress Company took out the Cypress in that area during the first quarter of this century while they were conducting their logging operations and, as you can see, it has grown back up in scrub but the Cypress is gone.

This is looking down on Dinner Pond; you can see the perimeter there is completely dry, but there is water in the lake and a little bit in some of these gator trails.

This is looking down on another part of the swamp, showing the dry condition, some more of the same.

That is between Minnie's Lake and Big Water; you can see the boats around there are completely dry.

That's further along this part of Floyds Island Prairie here, and this is above Minnie's Lake. This little spot, you can see it right there, that is a canoe that had been left there. We had that there, we would come up there with an outboard motor boat and get in that canoe and pole across the prairie here, and find places where we could catch fish, caught

some nice bass out in there. You can't do it now, you couldn't pull a boat out there now at all; it's grown up so much since that time.

Now, here is a particular place that I want to draw along just a little bit; this is the Suwannee Canal, one branch of the Suwannee Canal. The other branch goes off this way towards Billy's Lake. Here above the smoke engine, here is what they called the corn box. The Everetts, when they were operating there, used to bait ducks and they happened to have a great big box, a bin there, that they put corn in to bait the ducks for hunting, so they called those areas the corn box. Here is a trail that leads out to Floyd, across Shakes Prairie to Floyd's Island. But, you notice right here, the prairie comes out and stops abruptly at the edge of the timber, and the same thing is true in many places around and over the swamp, where the prairie comes up next to the swamp, and then you've got timber. Quite obviously, the fire that caused the prairie to form a few centuries ago, I don't know how many, burned up to here and something stopped it, maybe a change in the wind direction, maybe rain. But it shows to me, and quite obviously, that these trees were there at the time the prairie was formed, otherwise, they wouldn't have started growing right there all of the sudden and not have grown here. There must have been trees there, possibly small ones, I don't know how big, but those trees, some of them, are probably 700 or 800 years old, and the fire stopped right there. So these trees, quite obviously, were there, much younger, I'm sure, at the time the prairie was formed, and I think the same is true in a number of places. I think it would be interesting if some of the researchers could find out when that happened, whether prairies were formed at different times in different parts of the swamp, or whether they all formed at the same time. For instance, the Sapling Prairie in the northern part of the swamp has a different appearance than the swamps down in the other part. Maybe they formed at a different time, maybe it wasn't. But, I think it would be interesting if we could find out, and I hope the researchers will work on it if they're not doing it now, I wouldn't be surprised if they are.

Now, here is a scene taken a couple of years later after the fires were gone at that same location. You see how the prairie goes right out through the swamp. I will go back to that first one to show you. That picture was taken right along here, and there you can see it right there. That is looking down on the Mule Tail Fire. Incidentally, I forgot to tell you how the Mule Tail Fire got its name. Some workmen were gathering turpentine and gathering gum, they had a mule hitched to a sled with a barrel on it, and their story was that it was cold and they built a fire to get warm, to warm their hands, and the mule switched his tail, which was soaked with gum, and he switched it into the fire, and he let out through the timbers and lit the fire. That was their story. So, ever since it has been known as the Mule Tail Fire. You can see out here where they burned out the fire, the flank right here burned out. It did the same thing up on Trail Ridge, on the north end of the fire on Trail Ridge. The fire went into the swamp here, it headed across toward Soldier Camp Island like I mentioned awhile ago. It continued to burn there for five or six days, I forgot exactly what. The wind changed, it came out of the south and went north on high.

That is the fire advancing through the swamp; sometimes you couldn't get a picture like that. If the wind happened to be blowing in the direction the fire's going, you couldn't see the front edge of the fire. But there you could look down on the swamp and see it.

That's another scene, the fire line across the swamp. At one time, when I was making an inspection, I estimated that the fire lines meandering across the swamp was on a line approximately 40 miles.

Here's another one, you see the timber has been scorched where the fire has gone over, the fire was still advancing, but not advancing fast because it's advancing against the wind.

That's looking down on Number One Island towards the southeastern part of the swamp. There was some big virgin pine timber on the island. It was a small island, but it had never been logged, and there was some virgin pine on there. When I took a look at it, it looked like it was killed, and I lead a contract to have the timber removed, but I went over a couple of months later before the man who had the contract got around to taking the timber off, and looked at it again and the trees were greening up and looked like they would live, and I cancelled the contract. I thought at least we could have one place there where there would be some virgin pine. As far as I know, it's still there, I haven't flown over it for quite a number of years now, but I think it's still there.

Here is some more fire line across the swamp. One night, when we were holding the line at the edge of the swamp, incidentally, it custom them there, and I guess the only practical thing to do when there is a fire in the swamp, the control efforts are to try to keep the fire from coming out the swamp, to keep it from coming out or it would burn through the pine timber and through the farms and so on. So, one night we were holding the line at the edge of the swamp in the vicinity of Strange Island up northeast of Fargo, and I set a camera on a stump and pointed towards the swamp, and that's what I got.

That is a scene looking out on Chesser Prairie from Suwannee Canal where the boat run took off, or near where the boat run, took off going down toward Monkey Lake and Buzzard Roost. The fire is not visible but you can see the smoke just beyond that timber in the horizon there.

There is another scene; here is where the boat run came down through there, down through Chesser Prairie.

That's looking down on a portion of the swamp where the fire has gone by, and that's smoldering condition throughout the entire swamp. There were no extensive peat burning in the swamp this time, but there were small peat burns here and there in many places, but nothing like a condition that would create another prairie.

That's looking down on a portion of the swamp down in, I believe, was Gannet Prairie. You can see the fire has burned hotter in some places and cooler in other places. You can see a few bits of smoke still smoldering there; the fire had gone through a couple of days before that picture was taken.

That is Billys Lake, looking north across Billy’s Lake. You can see this entire area has been burned over. This area in here, a second fire came back a month or two after the first one, I don't remember exactly how long, say around a month after the first fire burned through here, another fire from some other part came around here and burned through here. You can see how hot it burned in that material there that had been killed by the first fire.

There is a tractor that we lost; two of the men were fighting a fire and a strong gust of wind swept a crown fire out of a thicket, there was a thicket over there, and a gust of wind swept the fire out of that, and the crown fire came over them and they ran about 150 yards and got in a jeep and high-tailed it out of there, and got out of the path of the fire.

The tractor was lost and the tires were burned off of the Mathis plow, but we put new tires on it and it continued in operation.

That is in the swamp just above Soldier Camp Island. The peat there was only about 3 to 4 feet thick over the mineral soil, and it was dry all the way down, and the fire burned down all the way down to the mineral soil. In other words, it burned all of the peat. In other places where it did burn in the peat, it only burned down to the water table, to where the peat was wet, down anywhere from 3 to 5 or 6 feet.

That is another scene in the same general area, showing where the peat had burned off down to the mineral soil. Those trees, of course, were all killed. That area, since then, has grown up in scrub brush of various kinds.

That shows conditions where it has burned around some of the roots.

That is the Suwannee Canal after the fire. You can see the condition there where trees and so on have fallen in.

Here is something that was quite interesting to me: The boat run from the canal, leaving the canal, and going down toward Monkey Lake. When the fire was there, even when the drought was on, the boat run, of course, was completely dry, and during that time a heavy sod of weeds and grass and such grew in the bottom of the boat run. Not very deep, but it grew in the bottom of the boat run. Then, later on, when the swamp filled up with water again, in the latter part of '55, that ribbon of sod broke loose from the bottom and floated up to the top of water, and there you can see that ribbon there floating on water that was in the boat run. Later on it drifted over to one side and left the boat run clear. Unfortunately, that ribbon is still visible there. Now, that is not the present boat run that goes down and leaves the canal and goes down toward Monkey Lake; this boat run is the old one and was a few hundred yards further on out, and it's not generally used now.

This is a map showing the location of a sill that was proposed and was filled for the purpose of holding water back in the swamp during periods of droughts such as we had at that time. Here you can see joined into the pocket just inside a short distance from the refuge boundary, just beyond (unclear) place, across both branches of the Suwannee here and tied into Pine Island for a distance of about four miles. Billy’s Lake is here and it goes down through here like that. That sill was put in there for the purpose of holding water back. Now, my thinking in that was if they were going to have a sill there for that purpose, then it should have been built down here in order to protect this area as well because this would hold water back in here but not hold it in here. But the engineers out-argued me, and they built it where they wanted it. Here is a diagram showing what I'm talking about; here is the pocket (I wish I had that turned up right side up) and here is the sill tied in across these two islands, Macks Island and Middle Island, and going out to Pine Island, that's the sill, where it was built. My proposal was to build the sill across here, less than half a mile right across it here, and tie it in over here. This was to protect all of this area here, holding in some water in case of a drought. But they said no, that water would flow around here and take care of the situation anyhow. But what has actually happened is this area on this side over here has dried up and pine timber has grown here, and it is no longer a swamp. In other words, back in here, this is no longer a swamp in here. My proposal was across there, but (unclear).

After the fires were out, I spent a few months salvaging the burned timber, getting contract to saw mill and timber operators for the tracts that had been burned. Incidentally, we didn't lose any timber on areas that had controlled burn. But there were other areas where we had not controlled burn because there was a lot of small trees on there that would have been killed, or so close in to the edge of the swamp at the time of the controlled burn that we couldn't control burn. So, we had some burned timber, but not on the areas that had been controlled burn. I sold about $100,000 worth of burned and damaged timber. When that was done, I was able to get back to some research.

Now, these next few pictures I put them in, they were taken after the fire and in more recent years, and I just put them in for scenic purposes, they had nothing to do with the fire except to show that the swamp is still the Okefenokee Swamp.

That is at the upper end of Minnie's Lake looking south. That is just below Minnie's Lake looking north, the lake a little further on. That's at Gannet Lake, the edge of Gannet Lake. That's in Chesser Prairie, it's in the fall, as you can see the color of the foliage on the Cypress trees. That's a picture of some plants. That's some Cypress trees in Big Water, the giant Cypress that undoubtedly stood there is not there now, but the knees are still there. That is in an area between Minnie's Lake and Big Water that I call The Cathedral, it's a beautiful place. Chesser Prairie, that was on a cloudy, dark day. That is Big Water, not on the main stem of the Big Water but a side branch that leads off to one side, not far from where the patrol cabin is located.

That's it.

Q/A:

Question: Were most of these fires set by lightning?
R. Moore: Yes.

Question: How many dry seasons were there before the fires started? Before the fires started, how many years had there been of lesser-than-average rainfall?
R. Moore: Well, somewhat less than 1953, in the summer in 1953. But nothing until 1954 that it really got serious, and incidentally, there had been three fires of such magnitude as that in the swamp, one in 1910, another in 1932. John Hopkins told me about that one and I believe he was the man that told me about the one in 1910, another one in 1954 and '55. That appeared to be a pattern of 22 year intervals, and I was looking for something in 1977, but it didn't happen.

Question: That was because of the sill, it didn't happen because of the sill?
R. Moore: No, the sill had nothing to do with it.

Question: What is the percentage of wildlife, does it seem like, was destroyed?
R. Moore: What percentage of the wildlife was destroyed? I really don't know for sure, but I didn't find any evidence of very much of anything except the fish, they were practically all destroyed. I ordered a million bass fingerlings to be put in the swamp when the water came back, and I got a good portion of it, I don't think they got out. We did restock it after the fire when the water came back.

Question: You did do a research project to try to recover those?
R. Moore: Yes!

Question: Mr. Moore, should a fire break out today, what is your opinion, should we make every effort to extinguish the fire or should we let it burn like over a period of...?
R. Moore: Well, if it was in the swamp.... the Rowells Island Fire was started by lightning about a mile into the swamp, and when the men walked in just a few days after they first saw the smoke in there, and they were not able to put out, it was down in the peat. They couldn't take any equipment in there, and they were not able to put the fire out, so they just had to let it burn. The Black Jack Island Fire and some of the others were started by lightning too, most of them were. There was one or two that were started by people, but most of them by lightning. Asked what to do about it, once the fire is in the swamp there isn't anything that you can do, at least nothing that anybody has ever discovered. (Unclear) back fires and so on, and take of that. Now controlled burning is almost a universal practice as timber management, and timber management in this number of areas, in South Georgia, why that has pretty largely solved the problem of serious fires. Incidentally, since we started that type of controlled burning backing from the fire breaks as you saw there, they have developed another method that they use in some places and that is to drop (unclear) from an airplane that can scatter over the area, and each (unclear) would start its own little fire, and each fire then, before it gets enough to go poking through the county, would run into fires where places that had been burned by another fire and they would all burn each other out, and that works. But, it is in practice now in some areas. Maybe sometimes they would get a bad fire that would get away from them sometimes. But that is being very largely used now by the big timber companies, because they could burn thousands of acres that way, whereas fire break burning is a pretty slow process. But in the swamp, you just can't do anything to put out a fire, and incidentally, (unclear) in the peat in the swamp you need to be a little bit careful because the fire will burn under the peat for considerable distances, from me to you or further without showing anything, a man could drop into something pretty hot!

Comment: Pogo burned three weeks ago using a helicopter; Pogo Island was burned three weeks ago using a helicopter; they do it on a regular basis now.

Question: Where do the animals go and how do they avoid being burned as these fires progress over?
R. Moore: Well, from experience and observation I couldn't tell you; all I could do is guess. Generally, the fire would burn slow enough that they could get out of the way, but I have no doubt that some of them burned. As I said, I didn't find any evidence of it, and there aren't a great many animals in the swamp.

Comment: There is another factor that probably is involved here is the drought that persisted sometimes prior to the swamp; many of the animals left the swamp in search of water because the gator holes provide only such much water, and a very good idea that the number of animals which was in the swamp (unclear).
R. Moore: Tom Chesser did lose some cows, he had a little farm there on Chesser Island and his cows were down in the swamp grazing, and, of course, they didn't know to come out of the way, to get out of the way. So, they said he could hear them yelling down there.

Question: In your research, what was the biggest bass that you saw?
R. Moore: In the swamp, about seven pounds; I never did catch the big one!
Comment: That's big enough.

Question: What is the relationship to the drought and the rainfall this year to '53 say or '54? Was it worse in '53 than it is this year?
R. Moore: Well, not very much different between now and '53; in '54 and '55 it did get much worse.

Comment: In 1981, the water level in the swamp came down within about three or four inches to the 1954 drought period, it came very close to it in 1981. We had a persistent drought period in 1977, it was one year with the exception of 1981, and they were expecting a really big fire in '81. We had lots of newspaper reporters coming in, writing articles about fires in the swamps. It started in 1977 and peaked in 1981, and then when the rains came, all the reporters had to start writing about something else! It got to be very, very dry in 1981, and they thought the 1954-55 period had returned but it did not, some of the islands burned but not too much.

R. Moore: I have a little story that doesn't have much to do about the fire: Walt Kelly, the creator of Pogo, came down one day, one time, and went down to Jones Island and Billy's Lake, and there were some newspapers along, of course, to cover the story. I took Mr. Kelly along in my boat and a newspaper woman out into Billy's Lake and we went on up toward the upper end of the lake, and this lady was in the front end of the boat and Mr. Kelly was in the middle of the boat, and coming along somewhere near the Five Sisters hump of Cypress trees. There was something over there on the side of the lake that she wanted to see, and so I turned the boat over there. At the edge of the lake, the water was kind of low; I think that was in '53, but I'm not sure there, but the lake was kind of low, and a bank shoulder-high like that of peat, right at the edge of the lake. I ran the boat up about that far, and what happened, she hopped out on that! She went in about that deep, we fished her out, and then I had to fish her shoes out!

Just a year or two, I think it was, before Walt Kelly died, I saw something, and I can't remember where I saw it, but it was some comments that Mr. Kelly made about motor hopping back (unclear) because of the newspaper woman!

Question: Why doesn't the sill keep the water level constant?
R. Moore: Well, there is not enough water coming back from above, I guess, to keep it all the way up there. Sometimes there's a lot of water running over it and sometimes not very much. I don't know just how far back up in the swamp the effects of the sill can be ascertained, but....
Comment: As far as Billy's Lake.
R. Moore: That's my idea, is somewhere near Billy's Lake...the rest of the swamp.

Question: Well, would the maintenance of a constant water level in the swamp be good for the eco system of the swamp? I know that down in the Everglades this has been a problem; the swamp level hadn't fluctuated and the result was that the wood stork has suffered, and other forms of life have suffered..... **End of dictation.**

Key Words: Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge, 1952 controlled burning, John Hopkins, Walt Kelly, Soldier Camp Island, Cowhouse Island, Middle Island, Macks Island, Billy's Island, Black Jack Island, Mims Island, Rowells Island, Mule Tail Fire, Soldier Camp Island, Minnies Lake, Cane Creek Fire, Suwanee Creek Fire, Black Hammock Fire, Trail Ridge, Pine Island, Number One Island, Pogo Island, Gannet Lake, Chesser Prairie, Monkey Lake, Big Island