

## **Oral History Cover Sheet**

**Name:** Harold Burgess  
**Date of Interview:** March 9, 1988  
**Interviewer:** Kevin Kilcullen

**Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service:** 1950-1980

**Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held:** GS-5 at Upper Mississippi River Refuge, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin; Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge, Iowa; Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge, Missouri; Lacreek National Wildlife Refuge, South Dakota; Kansas City Area Office

**Colleagues and Mentors:** Dick Trauger, J. Clark Salyer, Fran Gillette

**Most Important Issues:** Area offices, public use/access

**Brief Summary of Interview:** Mr. Burgess discusses how he came to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the various refuges/offices he worked. He discussed the controversy over the Area Office concept, the different types of refuges, land management, changes within the Service, having a master plan and sticking to it, and how he feels refuges were focusing more on the public and public use than on the biology.

**Keywords:** employee, history, biography, public use/access, wildlife refuges, work of the Service, military, migratory birds

**Kevin:** Start off first, give your name, your academic background, your career, a little bit, when you started with the Service and all. That would be a good starting point.

**Harold:** My name is Harold Burgess. I started with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1950. Prior to that, I had been a rubber tree planter in Liberia and had been in the Army three years in Korea and Japan. I had a bachelor's degree in forestry and a master's degree in wildlife from Michigan State College at the time of my entry.

**Kevin:** What kind of positions did you have? What about your career in the Service?

**Harold:** Yeah, I came to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service sort of accidentally. After coming back out of the Army in 1949/50, I took a semester at the University of Michigan, while for a job any place in the world actually, and noticed that there was an announcement of Civil Service Exams for refuge manager and game management positions in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I debated which of these that I should try for because the exams were taken at the same time and decided that even though the entry in the refuge system was a GS-5 and the law enforcement was GS-7, I would be able to spend more time in my home with the refuge system.

I actually entered the refuge system in 1950 and found that 75% of my work on the Upper Mississippi Refuge was law enforcement and that I would spend as much time away from home as if I were a law enforcement officer. I was on the Upper Mississippi for five years and then took a transfer to Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge in northern Iowa. There the management was quite different in that we were working at many different types of things that are a smaller scale than you would find on most conventional refuges. We had farmer permittees, we had grazing, we had many of the multiple use activities that you would find on a normal wildlife refuge. It was a great training opportunity for me to learn how to manage the larger refuges.

Fortunately, this was a time of change. When the stations were promoted and I was able to go along with the station and changed from a GS-7 to GS-11 in fairly short time and we were finally making survival wages.

I had transferred from Union Slough to Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge in northern Missouri in 1962, and was at Squaw Creek for 10 years. There I managed mostly wintering and migratory waterfowl. Most of our time was spent in preparing the refuge for feeding the migratory waterfowl during their north and south migrations.

I left Squaw Creek in 1972 for Lacreek National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota. Lacreek is an oasis between in the Badlands of South Dakota and the Sand Hills of Nebraska and was producing as many as 1,000 Canada geese and 10,000 ducklings a year, but the bonus there were the trumpeter swans. This was one of the baits that the Service used to get me to transfer to Lacreek.

I have always been fascinated by trumpeter swans, and there we had a restored flock that was producing as many as 10 young a year. Since that time, I have been involved with the Trumpeter Swan Society and have been involved with trumpeter restoration. In 1978, I transferred from Lacreek to the area office in Kansas City, mainly for health reasons. I was getting older, my arthritis was catching up with me and I was finding it very difficult to work through the winter in South Dakota. I transferred southeast, to Kansas City, and spent the next two years until my retirement there.

**Kevin:** If you could think back to the period when you were in the refuge system. What were the two events or milestones that had the most influence on the direction of the system that were the most important?

**Harold:** I think our greatest opportunity came about between the Ford and the Carter administration when we were asked to analyze everything that we were doing and see what we should be doing in our refuges and how much money we would need to fund the program that we thought was adequate for meeting the potential of the refuges we were on. After the refuge manager had made their first cut, their first thinking on this, we were told we were way short of what we should be asking for and to go back and to develop more things, which we did. We were supposed to accomplish this over a ten year period.

When President Carter came into office they said that anything that the Ford Administration could do in ten years, we should do in four. So, they squeezed it all up

into four, and unfortunately we go way away from our goals of producing resources and got involved in building roads, building other things. We had a great opportunity there and in a lot of ways we did benefit by it, but we got, I think, our objectives were very mixed before we got through. There is something to say about this, in that when we had very little money, refugee managers were able to use their own ingenuity and to accomplish great things. Once they got fully funded, they could no longer do that because they got a lot more attention from the higher offices and had a lot more reporting to do. We got caught up into systems that really prevented us from doing the great things we could have done if we had more time to do them, and probably less money.

That is one of the turnabouts. A lot of the refugee people were not pleased with the area office concept because we were used to going direct to the regional office with our problems and having them come direct to us. In the early days of the area office we found that we were having to go to the area office, the region office, and to Washington to get anything done. A lot of things were not done that could have been done because of the difficulty of getting through all of the different systems.

I think again, however, when they dismantled the area office it was another chaos time, in that we suddenly had to find a lot of places for people of rank. Many of those people were put in the field where they didn't necessarily fit. Many people were forced to go places they didn't really want to go. This was a very difficult time, as well, for the traditional field workers.

**Kevin:** When were the area offices created?

**Harold:** That would be about 1972, 1973 or 1974.

**Kevin:** There area offices were disbanded when?

**Harold:** They were disbanded in the last administration, about 8 years ago. There were some difficult times, not only for the refugees, but for other people in the field. Reorganizations are pretty difficult for field people to take.

**Kevin:** From the period that you came on to work with the Service and the refuge system in the 1950's--I don't know how much you've kept up lately, I imagine you probably have--what are the major differences? What do you perceive the big differences to be in that 30 to 40 year period?

**Harold:** I think that you have a lot more people in the Service that are system oriented rather than resource oriented. They go by the book; they've written the book. A lot of times the resources come last in their thinking. There are many more people now that are interested in how every decision is going to affect them as individuals than there were in the early days. In the early days, most of us thought how these decisions are going to affect wildlife.

It think that one of the thing that is happening in many areas is that it was become necessary to give a lot more attentions to the public, to the public use of the refuge, and because of that the priorities have been given to this rather than to the biological resources of the refuge. We are, in many places, better staffed to accumulate information on public use than we are for information on wildlife use.

The questions that are asked by Congress, perhaps, and by public are more apt to be on public use than they are on wildlife resources. To answer these questions, we've staffed in that direction. We are now a long ways from knowing what's going on biologically on our refuges. I would say that we are today, much further away of knowing what's on our refuges than we were in the 1960's.

**Kevin:** When you were manger and you were hiring people, what kind of qualities or traits did you look for in new employees as you hired them? Where did you get most of the employees from that you hired?

**Harold:** Well, in the original days I only hired summer help. I considered that if I was going to hire labor, for instance, I might as well be hiring a college student that was going to come into the field rather than some other laborer off the street. I was maybe one of the early ones to hire what we call student labor. Although we had the work cut out for

them to do like fencing and other maintenance work, we saw that they had a fairly rounded experienced in refuge management during their time.

In fact, some of the students that I have had actually took part in research that developed into papers that were published in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*. One of these people, Dave Trauger, happened to be the Director of Patuxent Wildlife Research Station. There were a number of refuges that did this and I think they were doing a great service for themselves as well as for the Fish and Wildlife Service when they hired that way.

I have had very little experience in actually hiring people for assistant positions or higher rank positions because that's done by personnel. At least the choices and the criteria for those people are set up so that they screen them down to about three before you make a choice, so you don't have a chance to look at the whole field.

I think this is a mistake. I think that the project leadership should be able to see the whole field and have more choices than those final ones that are selected because the criteria that are set up for those seem to have very little relationship with the job that we are hiring people to do. There was a move in the Service, particularly 15 to 20 years ago, that everybody we hired were to be a potential regional director, and the training was all set in that direction. Well, we know that everybody can't be a regional director, nor could every regional director do the job out in the field that you want done. I think our personnel and career people went overboard in that direction.

The thing is that even if we have people trained to be regional directors and they've come up through the ranks, there is always the political element that will dictate that some other people are going to hold some of those jobs rather than our people.

One of the things that the Service has done is open the doors to women. I think I was probably one of the first managers to have a woman clerk. I thought then and I think now that they do a better job of clerical type of things and most of them can do just as good a job in the field as the men. For years, we hired male clerks that were really don't very efficient clerks but mainly they could get out and band ducks and do other things well. We've sort of gone the correct direction now. WE don't insist that our clerical help be able to do the field work.

**Kevin:** In the late 50's and, I guess, the early 60's there was a big push for wetlands acquisitions and easement. How did that affect the refuge system? What did that do?

**Harold:** Well, I was never tied up in a refuge that had an acquisition program nor an easement system tied to it. I was in South Dakota, but I was in western South Dakota and all that state's acquisition was done in the east. I do know that acquisition sometimes restrains your operations because you have to be much more careful that you don't offend your neighbor who might be one of the people that you are trying to buy land from, or you might say something that raises the price of land. You're under much more restraint, I think, in the areas where you are acquiring lands.

That's true down here no in the Rio Grande Valley where we are acquiring lands. The people that work in the Rio Grande Refuge are much more restrained in what they can say publicly and what they do publicly than the normal refuge people.

**Kevin:** When you worked for the Service, if you can think back, is there a particular quality out of all of them that you consider for someone to have in order to be a successful manager of a refuge.

**Harold:** Well, I think to be a successful wildlife refuge manager, you've got to like wildlife. You've got to know something about and understand land in the sense of ecology of land and the timing of seasons and so on and what happens at what time. Right now too many of our managers are attempting to manage by cookbook recipes rather than by the feel of the seasonal changes and what's going on in their lands. I don't think you manage lands successfully that way. You may be able to manage it to meet your requirements from the regional office, but you don't really meet the potential of the refuge when you do everything according to the plan set out before you. You've got to have enough flexibility that you can flex with the seasons. Some years you have lots of rain, some years you have drought. You've got to take advantage of the seasons to be a successful manager.

**Kevin:** Were involved with the acquisition and creation of any refuges during your tenure?

**Harold:** I never was the first manger on any refuge. I understand the first manager had a real tough job.

**Kevin:** I was just curious what your opinion was on the various obstacles and problems of creating a new refuge during the 50's and 60's.

**Harold:** At Lacreek we had some land that had just been acquired, about 2500 acres, and we did have some problems with it in the sense of teaching or educating the people that they couldn't do the things on that land that they had been doing before. I think this is multiplied many times when you get into a completely new refuge and a large size area.

**Kevin:** Are there any other issues or questions that you would like to talk about? Or are there any other issues that pop into mind? Feel free to talk about it.

**Harold:** I think one of our problems is one that we've hit on before. We have very few people in the refuge system that really understand land management in the sense of having an inherent feel for the land in that they were raised on the land and live on the refuge and know when it is critically important to do this or that.

I see it on most every refuge that we visit. According to their plan they are going to prescribe burn, and you know if you are using fire as a tool, you are after a certain objective and that usually is for raising green vegetation for geese to feed on, or creating a different type of vegetation for cover. If you do it at the proper time you accomplish this. If you do it a month later, you miss the boat and you might better not do it at all. And yet, many times you see this done.

The same with crops where, unfortunately, we have had to depend on so called cooperative farmers to farm a lot of our land on shaves. They seem to have a bad habit of getting their crops in on time and ours not. Again, you've got to have it in a certain time; you've got to take advantage of the weather, and this, so often, is a failure on our part.



We end up with these same people on our land, disking the ground black over winter, the soil blowing and nothing out there for wildlife on the lands that they farm.

Where we have a cooperative farming program we are talking about giving away 60 to 75% of the part that is farmed. I think it is a bad program, actually. I think we farm it ourselves, use less land, and do it well. I think we should be looking closer that we are picking up some people that are inherent land managers rather than somebody that has come off the concrete and wants to be a land manager. They can learn but they don't have the feeling for it -- not necessarily that rural people have it either because a lot of rural people don't know how to farm anymore. They don't do it. Their parents wouldn't allow them to get on their expensive equipment.

We have different types of refuges. Mainly we have the migratory waterfowl refuges, the unique refuges, such as the Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge, which is being acquired by Land and Water Conservation Funds. There are quite different objectives at Rio Grande Valley we are trying to preserve unique flora and fauna. I think there is a lot of misunderstanding about this. I think maybe there is even some envy and bitterness amongst the refuge people because they don't understand that the Land and Water Conservation Act refuges are not competing for the same money, in the sense of duck stamp money, et cetera.

Here is one of the hard things to keep in the minds of the refuge people, and certainly much harder to keep in the mind of the public that these completely different objectives and source of funds and different obligations to the public.

**Kevin:** You mentioned that in recent years, the way the land is managed has become much more rigid and worried more about objectives and the plans and stuff like that. How does that differ from the 50's when you came on board? You weren't tied to master plans as much?

**Harold:** No, we weren't. We had a kind of general objective of what we were attempting to do, and we had a lot of flexibility in obtaining that.

I was one of the first people to do master planning and to live with my master plan. In 1962-1963 we master planned Squaw Creek Refuge in northwest Missouri and I

was there for 10 years. I found that master plan gave me a lot of freedom of operating. I already had approval for the things that we were doing. If I stayed within that master, I didn't even have to ask anybody else if I could do this or that. So, that was great. We had a regional director at that time that you would tell you, "Now this is not engraved in stone and if you find that this doesn't fit then we can change it." But, of course you would go through the supervisors to get approval, but I found that master plan gave me a lot of freedom to operate on. Of course, since I was a part of developing it, you could understand that it would give me a lot freedom.

During those years we came up with some other objectives that we had to meet, I think fortunately. The Endangered Species Act and the public regard for all wildlife creatures had made it necessary that we broaden our approach to where we manage for all the living forms on earth. Many of the managers were doing this anyway, but it was real nice to have this accepted by the whole system rather than just doing it on your own.

**Kevin:** Did you have a chance to work with or met J. Clark Salyer III?

**Harold:** I met J. Clark Salyer several times even after he was blind, I knew him before as the Chief. But after he was blind, I was in Washington one time and rode up the elevator with him and spoke to him, knowing who he was. I was just visiting on annual leave and I hadn't been in the refuge office long before a message came around saying he wanted me to come to his office. At that time I was at Squaw Creek Refuge and he asked me about practically every tree on the refuge and all the things that you would think he would never even know about when he was full sighted. He had a terrific memory as well as being a terrific individual. He started the refuge system.

**Kevin:** Anything else?

**Harold:** I worked for Fran Gillette for about 10 years before he transferred out of Region 3. I think he did a lot of good things for the refuge. He certainly upgraded the system, where we were originally managed by WPA foreman and CCC foreman, people like that, and he brought it up to professional standard where the normal manager was a

graduate from wildlife school. He also salvaged those managers who by their own initiative, reading and so on had been able to do professional work. Mr. Gillette had been the refuge supervisor in Region 3 and he was the regional director in Atlanta. I understand he had a much harder time moving Region 4 than in Region 3. Then of course, he became chief of refuges in Washington. But, he had a lot to do with upgrading the standards of refuge managers and with them the refuges.

**Kevin:** You mean the professional standards?

**Harold:** Yes. One of his main objectives was to put this on a professional footing. I was kidding him recently about his dart board, where we accused him of naming his darts with refuge managers' names. One thing also about moving us around he figured he was not only training us but using the expertise that we had in different positions. Even though that's hard on families, it improves the system, and it is a system that is used by the U.S. Forest Service and others. They move their people around about once in five years, even if they're doing a good job. Sometimes if they're not, they'll move them faster.

**Kevin:** So, the manager rotation system came in effect while he was chief of refuges in Washington. That was mid 60's or so.

**Harold:** Yes, however, he had such a system that affected Region 3 long before that. He tried to move people who had been in place for 10 years or more. The system came out that they would all move, but of course, they didn't all move. There were ways. You appealed it, which I did at one time. I appealed for going to Squaw Creek, LA for a year because my daughter was a senior in high school, and I wanted to get her through school. I ended up going to Lacreek a year later. It was suggested very strongly that I do so. It was great. I got involved with the trumpeter swans and that had been a big thing for me. I've been president of the Trumpeter Swan Society twice since then. I'm a director on the board and real active in restoration and it's a magnificent bird to work with. I was a whole new challenge.

Besides, producing birds is always fun when you've been on a migratory refuge and just see them passing through. To get on one where you actually produce the young birds is fantastic.

I guess I've never been on a refuge I didn't like, and I've never been on one that I didn't hate to leave. And the amazing thing was, I like my service in the area office. I thought I would hate it in Kansas City but I knew I had to get out of the cold. My supervisors were such nice people to work with, just great people, that I couldn't dislike it.