

Interview with Judy Schmidt
September 3, 2014
Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge
Interviewer: Libby Herland

LIBBY: Hi, this is Libby Herland, I'm a member of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Heritage Committee; I'm the Northeast Representative for the Fish and Wildlife Service. It's September 3rd, 2014, and I'm talking today with Judy Schmidt, who is a member of the Friends of the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. We're here today to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act, which was signed into law today by President Lyndon Johnson. And we're at Great Swamp because Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge was the first wilderness within the Department of Interior. I'm conducting interviews with three people today to talk about the wilderness, particularly at Great Swamp. And Judy Schmidt is a member of our Friends Group, as I mentioned before, and she's been involved with the Great Swamp for many, many years. So I have some questions and we're just going to try to get a sense from Judy about what the wilderness area was like when it was designated. So, hi Judy.

JUDY: Hi.

LIBBY: Thanks for agreeing to be part of the oral history project about the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge Wilderness. Can you tell me what your current relationship is with the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge?

JUDY: I am a member of the Friends of Great Swamp, and a volunteer.

LIBBY: And how long have you been involved with the Great Swamp?

JUDY: I've been involved with the Great Swamp since the early '70's; I was one of the first volunteers.

LIBBY: Was that your first awareness about the refuge or did you grow up around here?

JUDY: No.

LIBBY: So tell me a little bit about how you first became aware of the Great Swamp Refuge before you became involved.

JUDY: I first became aware of the refuge when my husband and I purchased our house on White Bridge Road. The day after we moved in we got the newspaper and on the front page it said that there was going to be a jetport and we were right in the middle of a runway.

LIBBY: Oh my goodness.

JUDY: So from there, as Helen Fenske was doing the fight, I did what I could, but I was in the process of raising three children. So I could only do what I could do; wrote some letters. And then after that the residents got together and they started a thing called the Great Swamp Residents Advisory Committee. And we were just people mostly that lived on White Bridge Road and we realized how important funding was to buy more land for the refuge. So we formed a Great Swamp Residents Committee Group; we wrote many letters. We, almost every year, got at least a million dollars for land acquisition money.

LIBBY: So White Bridge Road is in what township?

JUDY: It's in Long Hill Township.

LIBBY: Long Hill Township. And what was the year, well, when you bought your house?

JUDY: When I bought my house was when they said it was going to be a jetport and it was almost immediately then you heard about let's make it into a refuge.

LIBBY: And what year was that?

JUDY: Can't remember.

LIBBY: Okay, you tell me later if you remember it.

JUDY: Okay.

LIBBY: So can you describe what you remember about your earliest impressions of the swamp itself, you know, this whole area before it was a national—

JUDY: Before it was a refuge?

LIBBY: Yes.

JUDY: And even as the refuge was starting to grow, it was just a really unique area. I grew up in Westfield, I worked in Summit, and those were more urban. And then you moved out here and you were real country, okay. On Sunday mornings you'd see Archie and Emma Stiles go up the street in their horse-drawn carriage or sled in the wintertime. Just about everybody had a garden, just about everybody hunted, just about everybody in this area spent a lot of time outside.

LIBBY: And I want to say for the record that this area is only about 26 miles from downtown New York, from Times Square.

JUDY: It was just a different place; I mean White Bridge Road now is a very heavily traveled road. My kids used to get excited, "There's a car coming!"

LIBBY: Yeah, very different.

JUDY: Very different.

LIBBY: So if this area hadn't been protected, well, it would have been an airport.

JUDY: It would have been an airport. And if somehow that didn't happen, it would have definitely been condominiums and homes.

LIBBY: Correct, yeah, that's what I think. So my understanding is that there were a lot of buildings and even as Secretary Jewell said today, that there were utilities in what's now the wilderness, and there were buildings. What do you remember about that, what is now the wilderness area, what it looked like before it was designated wilderness?

JUDY: Okay, I wrote an article, which I will give you, and it's about daffodils and lilacs, because I used to use the main trail that goes through the wilderness as a way to go from here to another town.

LIBBY: Was that a road?

JUDY: It was a road. And then after it became a refuge and the road got torn out, it just became a path and I noticed that there were daffodils growing or lilacs in the places where the homes used to be, so I wrote an article about it. From White

Bridge Road going towards Chatham, the first place on the left hand side was the Sander's Saw Mill, and the Sander family lived there. A lot of the buildings in this area have their lumber came from it, the grange in the center of Meyersville, which is an historic building, has wood from the Sander's Saw Mill; it was started in 1925 and it operated until 1967. When you go down the trail, the next daffodils were the White Farm and that's where, I don't know his real name but we called Pop Bear, and he lived there and he raised coon dogs. And across the street from him where there's now a wet area, a vernal type marsh, he used to have trap shooting every weekend. And so people would go down there and they'd do trap shooting. On the right hand side of that trail a little further down was the Werner Farm and they had a wind mill, so they could generate their own electricity. Charlie Waterford lived down there and he used to make weather vanes, he was very well-known for his weathervanes. It's a good thing I wrote this down.

LIBBY: This is fascinating.

JUDY: Because I would forget names. A little bit further down was the Trap Farm, there are large pine trees that are still planted in a row and the Trap Farm used to sell fruits and vegetables and it was just a huge farm; it was where if you didn't have it in your garden you'd go up there, if you didn't have apple trees, you'd go up there.

LIBBY: I was going to ask you about; but if you have more information about the homeowners and just want to continue with that.

JUDY: That's all; if you come out of the Orange Trail area and you're going towards Harding, the Haverlock Dairy Farm was on the right hand side, which is not wilderness

but they were the last farm in New Jersey to sell raw milk. But on the right side was the Hilbert Farm and then the Bracco Farm.

LIBBY: So did you know any of these home owners?

JUDY: I knew almost all of them.

LIBBY: And when the refuge was established, their land was purchased?

JUDY: Most of that land was eminent domain.

LIBBY: Oh, it was taken by eminent domain.

JUDY: In the beginning it was; first of all, the residents that lived here were a little upset because you'd wake up and you'd see some guy in a uniform walking around your property. But then you found out who he was, and then they started using eminent domain so that they could get enough land for the wilderness.

LIBBY: So did that create opposition to the wilderness?

JUDY: No, there was a little bit of friction as to, "Why are you walking on MY land?"

LIBBY: Because it was Fish and Wildlife Service people.

JUDY: Because it was Fish and Wildlife, but they didn't give you a heads up that they were coming. Okay, they would just show up and walk around and fortunately mine wasn't property that they wanted so I didn't have much dealing with them.

LIBBY: But when you have farms and places where people are doing things, they're trap shooting, that type of thing, I

could see where there could be a lot of opposition to it. So that's what I'm kind of interested in: was there so much support for not having the jetport that people didn't mind as much because they had already got to the point where they thought they were going to be moving anyway because of the jetport.

JUDY: Right, well, I don't think they really thought they were going to be moving because of the jetport. I think a lot of us hid our heads in the sand, that there's no way this is going to happen, they're not going to knock down these mountains to make it into an area where they can land jets. But we knew something was going to happen, and yes the support was more to keep the land the way it was. Now a lot of these people were older, so as you sat back and you really looked at it, well, it's better that I get what I can for my property and it stays the way it is and then I can move and I'm older and maybe I can't really take care of my farm as much as I used to.

LIBBY: I know a lot of farmers have felt, that have sold their property to the Fish and Wildlife Service for additions to National Wildlife Refuges, they have a strong connection to their land and the fact that it's going to be preserved forever is really rewarding to them, to be able to sell it. It's their retirement, for many of these people it's their retirement fund, and they're happy it's still going to be undeveloped and they can go by it and look at it.

JUDY: And that seemed to happen pretty quickly around here.

LIBBY: That's very interesting.

JUDY: People were very proud of the fact that this was kind of a unique area already before it became a wilderness and a refuge

because it was still old-fashioned. Where else could you go and see horse-drawn carriages.

LIBBY: Yeah. So my understanding is that there was a fight to stop the jetport, which ended up in the establishment of the refuge, but then there was a feeling that there needed to be additional protection.

JUDY: Absolutely.

LIBBY: Which is kind of where the idea of the wilderness came about. Were you involved with any of that?

JUDY: No, it was still too much raising my children. It wasn't until I got into the '70's, then it was time to spend more time.

LIBBY: Right. And you've been here as a volunteer.

JUDY: And I've been here as a volunteer.

LIBBY: That's just amazing, really, to have that longevity as a volunteer is a real asset to the refuge.

JUDY: The truth of the matter is, I like to say this, I got my master's degree by being a volunteer, because you would go out with refuge staff and they taught you how to clean wood duck houses so you learned all about that. They did the deer tagging with them. So they would take me out and give me lots of lessons that, how am I going to get some other way.

LIBBY: So, I know it's just a wonderful opportunity and it's wonderful for us to have volunteers who are interested in learning all that. An extra pair of hands is almost always helpful, and sometimes we have some programs at some refuges that the whole program is run by volunteers because there's

not enough staff to do it. I wanted to ask you, how you think management of the wilderness area has helped shape this whole, the larger geographic area here? You know, either management of the wilderness area or just the refuge itself in terms of the fact that this, almost, eight thousand acres of land is here and is protected in this larger Basking Ridge, Chatham, Long Hill, Harding Township area.

JUDY: I don't know how to answer that question. I mean, I think it is the refuge speaks for itself. I worked at the Wildlife Observation Center and was just amazed at the people that come in here that had no idea that this is in New Jersey, that this is just a wonderful place. So I think the whole refuge system and the idea of the land being set aside for wildlife and people just being able to visit is very important.

LIBBY: Do a lot of people you talk with, are they local folks or do you get a lot of visitors from all around?

JUDY: We have people from all over the world. As a matter of fact, we one year put a map up of the world and made people put pins and so many were so far from the United States that I was like, okay, more Europeans are sticking the pin in then there are—

LIBBY: Well, if you are interested in wildlife or nature and you're from, say Europe, and you're flying into New York City, it'd make sense that you would try to get out here.

JUDY: That's true. And, of course, we've a more diverse population in this whole area now anyway and so I think that increases the amount of people.

LIBBY: Yeah. How do you think this refuge and the wilderness area in particular are going to be perceived in the future, do you have any thoughts about that; 50 years from now when someone's listening to this interview?

JUDY: I just hope that the future generations care enough about getting outside, not playing with their electronics, that they get introduced to it so that they can help continue to preserve it the way it is. It's amazing to see children that live fairly close, I'm not talking about inner city kids, that come here and have no idea that we had frogs or snakes or turtles, or that trees were so big, or that trees moved when the wind blows because they haven't paid attention. And so as long as the kids keep coming out, I think this refuge stands a good chance of continuing.

LIBBY: Right. You know it's hard to imagine 50 years ago how much development there would be around here, so what's going to happen in the next 50 years? And then we have climate change and all the other issues that you have to keep fighting and keep working to protect these areas. But the wilderness area designation does add a whole other layer of protection to this area, which is very important.

JUDY: The wilderness area is what makes me think the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge will continue to be here. If it wasn't for that, then to me, maybe it would stay part of it.

LIBBY: Right.

JUDY: But the wilderness is the most important part and as far as protection.

LIBBY: Is it one of your favorite parts of the refuge or do you--?

JUDY: My favorite parts of my refuge; I like all parts of the refuge. I don't have a favorite part. What I do have a favorite is, is working with people to introduce them to Great Swamp. So I would have to say my favorite place is the Wildlife Observation Center because that's where I get to introduce the public to what a place this is.

LIBBY: Right. Well, that's great. Well, is there anything else that you'd like to add that I didn't ask the right questions?

JUDY: No, I think we did good.

LIBBY: Alright, I think it's wonderful that you're the only person who's going to give me any information about the people that were here and how this area was used before it was designated as wilderness, and I think that's an important part of the history and I'm really appreciative of the fact that we have that glimpse into the past.

JUDY: Why, thank you.

LIBBY: Thanks, Judy.