

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Robert “Bob” W. Burwell

Date of Interview: March 11, 1988

Location of Interview: McAllen, Texas (?)

Interviewer: Kevin Kilcullen

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 1944-1971

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: River Basin Studies, Albuquerque, New Mexico; River Basin Studies, Billings, Montana; Missouri River Basin Studies covering Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, North and South Dakota; Regional Director for Region 3, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Most Important Projects: Wetlands Acquisition Program

Colleagues and Mentors: Albert Day, Rudolf Dieffenbach, John Gottschalk, Dan Janzen

Most Important Issues: protecting wetlands

Brief Summary of Interview: Mr. Burwell starts out discussing previous employment before joining the Fish and Wildlife Service. He discusses the various River Basin Studies offices he worked out of before becoming the Regional Director in Region 3 (Minneapolis office), where he would remain for 17 years before retiring. He talks briefly about the Wetlands Acquisition Program, and challenges that they faced from land owners, other agencies, and political figures in trying to protect wetlands.

Keywords: employee, history, biography, work of the service, wetlands, River Basins, management, Regional Director

Kevin: ...and give some information on background and your career in the Service.

Bob: Well, Kevin, my background is forestry at the University of Michigan and 1937 is when I graduated. Jobs were hard to come by at that particular time and I was fortunate to find a job with Aro Exploration company in Tulsa, OK, who had a contract to make aerial maps of the State of Missouri and the state of Minnesota. It was for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration.

The war came about and the aerial mapping was something that brought all of us into it. When the war came along, the U.S. Corps of Engineers offered me a job because I had some knowledge on aerial mapping. The Tulsa District Office of the Corps of Engineers took me in. Later on my job with the Corps was liaison with the Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas Game and Fish Departments.

I was active in the planning and construction of reservoirs in the Tulsa District which covered Arkansas, most of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. It was at that point then that I worked with the state game departments and the Fish and Wildlife Service Soil Conservation Service, and local interests.

After the war began to end, that's when the Fish and Wildlife Service developed its River Basin Studies Program. My background contained bits of luck—being in the right place at the right time. My dean at the University of Michigan and some of my other profs were the ones that trained me in such a way that I was able to take advantage of opportunities.

Kevin: Were you still working with the Corps when you were offered a job with River Basins?

Bob: Yes.

Kevin: The job offer came from where? Washington? The regional office there?

Bob: The director at that time was Albert Day. His assistant in directing River Basin Studies in Washington was Rudolf Dieffenbach. These two men made the decision.

Kevin: you mentioned that you had moved to Albuquerque in 1944?

Bob: Yes, and we remained in Albuquerque for 6 years. Then was moved to Billings, MT basin studies operation there and the man that was in charge of it, Mr. John Gottschalk, was transferred to Washington for higher duties. I was moved to the Missouri River Basin Studies, at that time. It covered Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, North and South Dakota—it was a large operation.

Some months later the Fish and Wildlife Regional Director in Minneapolis and the upper Midwest was transferred to Washington to be the director of the Service. His name was Dan Janzen—a fine man. And a brilliant man. When he was made the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, I was named to the Regional Directors position in Minneapolis to replace Dan Janzen over from Billings Montana for that particular region. That's where I finally retired.

Kevin: So you became region director for Region 3? That's what it was called at the time?

Bob: Yes, that is right.

Kevin: Could I ask you a question about the River Basin Studies? What happened with those initial studies that were done? Is that something that the reports were given to the Secretary of the Interior for him to make a decision, or what was the result of all the studies? [While in the Washington area, this matter would come from Mr. James O. Stevenson]

Bob: I really don't know how to answer it. There was some opposition to River Basin Studies on the part of some of the states. There were political problems also, and strong local interests.

For example, North Dakota, which was and is concerned with the river basin operations because of the drainage of wetlands in that state. Too, we had to contend with land owners of all kinds, as well as the Bureau of Reclamations who didn't want us messing around with plans that they had in mind. There were governors and state senators and representatives who had to operate on what their constituents wanted. It was touch and go in a lot of difficulties in trying to protect wetlands in North Dakota and South Dakota, particularly those two, and to some extent Minnesota. It would tax anybody to try to solve those problems.

Little by little, the pendulum began to swing over in favor of doing some good for water loving birds and animals. You've seen it happen here in your lifetime, seeing it go from not being able to protect the wetlands to protecting its values. That's what has happened over the years and much of that is due to the River basin Studies efforts.

Too, many of the refuges are the result of studies and efforts made by River Basin Studies to save difficult situations.

Kevin: You were regional director in Region 3 then and when did you retire from that position?

Bob: It was 1971.

Kevin: So you were regional director for 17 years?

Bob: Yes, 1954 to 1971.

Kevin: If you could name one issue or one event that happened during your career with the Fish and Wildlife Service that was the most influential issue, in your opinion, that really affected the direction and the future of the Service, what would that be?

Bob: Mr. Gottschalk or Jim Stevenson would be your best info. on that question.

Kevin: You mentioned previously that the role of the CCC and the people that came out of that and came to work for the Fish and Wildlife Services, could you tell me a little more about that? How important was that was?

Bob: I didn't have anything to do with the CCC, but when CCC started to close up, we had a number of those operations in the upper Midwest—North Dakota and Minnesota, for example. The CCC men were looking for jobs and we took many of them. Training there a necessity, many of them were married, of course, and needed a job. Many of them joined the Fish and Wildlife Service. Some of those people from the CCC had college training. For example, civil engineers, biologists, teachers, forestry, etc. They contributed quite a bit to the staff working for refuges.

Not many of them were in River Basin Studies because that really wasn't their interest. It was something different for them. But the CCC boys came in. They knew how do a man's work and appreciated to have it; they could do a lot of things. They were good people. If they were fortunate enough to get a job, they were going to stick with it....CCC boys were good ones.

I imagine you grew up through some of the times I'm talking about.

Kevin: I've heard quite a bit about them. In fact, many of our lands and refuges still have the buildings that were built during that time period. They are still around.

Did you do quite a bit of aerial mapping work for the River Basin thing? I mean, like mapping river basins out?

Bob: The aerial thing I mentioned earlier was a part of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. I remember what Minnesota looked like. You looked down and there wouldn't be anything but cattails, and dry lakes, everything was dry; dust and dry.

Aerial mapping that we did had been turned over to the federal agencies with various interests. Our maps were sent there and improved and made available to different agencies of government; Agriculture, Mines, Minerals, etc.

Kevin: So you didn't actually do that work for Basin Studies, you did that work before that?

Bob: Yes, that mapping was done before River Basins. It was related to the drought and agriculture. By the time we got River Basins going, then we could go to Washington where they make the maps and get those and we could operate from then on.

Kevin: Maybe you could talk a little bit about the wetland acquisitions program when you were in Minneapolis as the regional director. How did that come about and what was the purpose of the program?

Bob: When Mr. Dan Janzen was put in charge of the Midwest region for Fish and Wildlife Service, he was a remarkable man, a brilliant man. He was a forestry graduate from the University of Oregon; I don't know how he got started with the Service. He probably filed for a federal exam, I'm sure he would have made a good one.

I think Dan was the first person in a high position that became concerned about the draining of the wetlands in the region that he directed for Fish and Wildlife Service, particularly in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Those were the main state where draining was going on. Dan worked hard to alert wildlife organizations that we were acquainted with, and he worked like the dickens to get their support. He traveled quite a bit getting people to understand the value of wetlands. He studied that problem like nobody else could do. He had a good background and education in farming and agriculture and public affairs. When he was moved to Washington to become the Director of the Service, he had much more influence with federal and state and local interest. He gave us a real base to work on.

Mr. John Gottschalk is one of the men you have on your list and you will probably want to talk to him; you'll like John. He was named Director of the Service on the sudden death of Mr. Janzen. The problem was largely political. Mr. Gottschalk understood the wetlands problems thoroughly. The farmers and ranchers would go to their congressmen and senators; the governors. They just didn't cotton to the idea that

wetlands had important values. One reason that it was that way was because refuges had come in ahead of this drainage and they had dealt with some of the refuge people, and they didn't get their way with some of those refuges so they were against the Fish and Wildlife Service right off the bat. Mr. Janzen had to go to the House or the Senate to explain things to people. He did a good job of selling but it was still difficult.

We had a few anti wetlands governors, and we had some very interested governors to deal with. Even the best of them, you could see it was bothering them because it was going to hurt some of their constituents, farmers in that area. Little by little understanding got better and better, and landowners began to take steps to protect their wetlands.

One of the things that hurt us, Kevin, and bothered the governors too were the actions taken by agricultural interests, both state and federal and local. Quite logically these interests felt it was their duty to stand up with their constituents, the ranchers and the farmers.

Kevin: When this was initially started with Janzen, were there special requests made to Congress for special appropriations to purchase these lands or acquire them? Is that how it came about?

Bob: Director Janzen would usually find people to talk to.

Kevin: The state conservation agency or organization, were they generally backing what you were trying to do? Or were they opposed to it and siding on the part of the farming, agricultural interests and the state game agencies?

Bob: They were generally against us. The SCS and the ASCS, they didn't stand up even though some of them had people who really knew better. For example, the SCS hired quite a few biologists, wildlife biologists, over the years. That made some interesting things; when a Michigan wildlife man was sitting right across the table from an Oklahoma SCS man when you knew he knew better than that.

It was a funny time, looking back on it. I wouldn't have changed it for anything.

Kevin: Thinking back when you started working for the Fish and Wildlife Service compared how the Fish and Wildlife Service is set up today, what is the big difference that you see? What is the biggest change, the biggest difference?

Bob: Well, Kevin, it's been 10 years since I retired and I haven't been close to the operation.

Kevin: Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't already covered?

Bob: I don't think so, Kevin. My mind is so jammed anymore that it is difficult for me. I have major memory loss and inability to concentrate, hence my suggestion that you might wish to chat with John Gottschalk and/or Jim Stevenson for better info.

Short Biographical Sketch

Place and date of birth: Winsted, Connecticut on September 8, 1915

High School education: Graduate Tulsa, Oklahoma High School

College Education: Oklahoma State University 1934 & 1935

Curriculum: Pre-forestry subjects

College education: University of Michigan

Curriculum: School of Forestry & Conservation 1936-37

Graduation: 1937

Marriage: January 20th, 1940 to Alda Eleanor Nlibeck, University graduate 1938

Children: Nancy, born 1941; John, born 1944, and youngest Robert Jr., born 1950