

ORAL HISTORY
of
Norm Johnson
Animal Damage Control Program (Retired)

Interviewed by
Dorothe Norton
On March 22, 2005

Oral History Program
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Conservation Training Center
Shepherdstown, West Virginia

Oral History: **NORM JOHNSON** [Also in the room, Norm's wife Barbara.]
Position: Animal Damage Control Program
Location: At his home, Webster, Wisconsin
Interviewer: Dorothe Norton
Interview Date: 04/22/2005

DN: It is April 22, 2005 and this interview will be with Norm Johnson and Dorothe Norton. So, we will begin by asking you, Norm, where and when you were born?

NJ: I was born May 18, 1930 near Lemington, Wisconsin. It is south of Couderay, which is like 50 miles east of where we are right now. We're in Webster, just off of highway 70. My dad's name was Roy Johnson, and my mother was Thora Johnson. My father was a farmer and my mother was a housewife. I had two brothers and one sister.

My grandmother had 15 children. Vick LaValasavick, who is a retired agent now in Duluth, was the oldest of 15. At a very young age, my father died and we moved to St. Croix Falls, which is where I grew up. I was very active in the Boy Scouts, and my other hobbies were hunting and fishing.

Before I graduated high school, I worked part time in a filling station and worked for five years in a bakery, which was all through high school and one year after high school. I graduated from St. Croix Falls in 1948. I did not go to college. I worked one year with the bakery and then I worked two years in a meat cutting shop, and then I was drafted during the Korean War. I was in the Army Airborne. I went in 1951. I served for two years and out in May of 1953. I had basic training in Fort Riley, Kansas, and the rest of the time I was at Fort Benning, Georgia. I was in the airborne artillery, and we just trained as paratroopers. We didn't leave the country.

I went to college under the GI Bill. The first two years I was at the University of Wisconsin - River Falls and then I transferred to the University of Minnesota until we couldn't afford that anymore. We were married at the time. I transferred back to River Falls and graduated there in 1958. I had a biology major and a chemistry minor. After I graduated from college, I worked one fall with the Wisconsin State Department of Conservation, as they were called at that time, as a Game Warden for a 3-month assignment. After I completed that, I was hired by the Fish and Wildlife Service. When I was at the University of Minnesota, I worked one summer for the Fish and Wildlife Service with Animal Damage Control. It was just a summer assignment. So when I went off looking for employment, I went back to Fish and Wildlife Service.

DN: Okay. Well, before we leave your personal information, I want to know when, and where, and how you met your wife.

NJ: Well, I met her when she was six years old. She lived across the alley from us. We knew each other for a long time. We got married in 1954 at the Little Brown Church in Iowa. We have four children, two boys and two girls. The oldest son is a chemical engineer and he lives in Maryland and the younger son does carpenter work, and he lives in this area. The next one down is our daughter who lives in Phoenix and is a teacher, and the youngest daughter lives in San Diego and she's a biochemist. We only have two grandchildren and they are in Phoenix.

DN: So you started with the Fish and Wildlife.

NJ: I started with the Fish and Wildlife in February of 1959. I was a trainee in what was called P&RC, or Predator and Rodent Control, at that time and my first assignment was Bismarck, North Dakota. Yes, that's my first real job. From Bismarck I was transferred to Huron, South Dakota as an Assistant District Agent. I was there for not quite two years, and then transferred to North Platte, Nebraska for the same type of a job, a supervisory position with Predator and Rodent Control. And from there I transferred to St. Paul and worked in Minnesota and Wisconsin as a State Supervisor in Animal Damage Control. Then I transferred to Denver, Colorado as a state supervisor for the Animal Damage Control Program there. That was a pretty good-sized program. We had about 50 employees at that time. And from there I transferred to Washington. I was with the Animal Damage Control Program there also. And I was in DC until 1979. It would be from 1971 until '79. Then, I transferred to Albuquerque. I was a Regional Supervisor for Region 2 and then in 1985 the program was transferred out of the Fish and Wildlife Service and I moved to Denver again. I retired out of Denver, Colorado in 1987.

DN: Did your career affect the family at all, with all those moves?

NJ: Well, you know, it has its plusses and its minuses. Now they got a really strong background in meeting people in the country, but it was also difficult for them to move frequently as we did.

DN: So, did you ever do anything for recreation in the field with people that you worked with, or were you always just kind of a lonesome guy out there by yourself?

NJ: People in the PRC Program were usually pretty close, and we would have, you know, organizational meetings and generally there was some recreation involved in those, and when I was in DC, I did quite a bit of hunting and fishing with the folks from the regional office.

DN: That's good. Okay. So what kind of training did you receive for your jobs, like when you first started?

NJ: Well I started out in North Dakota as a trainee and kind of transferred around and worked with the field people. It did involve, you know, learning to use all of the equipment that was involved in the program and at that time, we did everything from controlling coyotes to rodents and, even at that time, we were doing rat control in cities and bird control. I worked with the regional, or with research and doing field tests of bird control techniques.

You worked as many hours as it took to get the job done. And sometimes that was, well it took most of the week. An eight-hour day was something that you hardly ever saw. Yeah. As a supervisor, I would have a group of field people that did the field work, my responsibility to keep them trained and negotiate the cooperative programs with the states, counties, and many of the states' Game Departments.

We did a lot of field testing of techniques and equipment that research was involved in developing like the M-44 device, which was a piece of equipment used to control coyotes. And we trained with some new trapping techniques using foot snares for bears and wetting agents to control blackbird populations, and snaring devices to control birds at airports.

Well, some of this equipment was actually developed between research and the PRC field people. Yes, the M-44 device was a service-developed piece of equipment. The pocket gopher burrow builder was developed by the Fish and Wildlife Service Research and PRC. The development of aerial operations for controlling coyotes was pretty well developed by the PRC field people.

DN: Do the states do PRC-type work too?

NJ: No. Not in the states that we had cooperative programs. See, the PRC programs in all of the operational states was through cooperative programs. Through, generally we would have a master agreement with one of the state agencies, like the State Department of Agriculture. An agreement with their Game Department, and then the other partners in the cooperation or the cooperative program would be the counties, and then the Livestock Associations. So it's a very involved program.

DN: So did you work with the animals then, yourself? I mean there were your troops, of course, but did they get them out of the traps...of course if they were trapped ones you were getting rid of, you wouldn't care...What if you ever trapped something that was protected or something. Did that ever happen?

NJ: Oh, you know, we were responsible for seeing to it that everything was done according to regulations, and if animals that were protected were captured, they would be released. We did a lot of work, also, with eagles because trying to develop a method of reducing eagle depredations on livestock without capturing the eagles. Well there are techniques for trapping eagles, but they were under the Migratory Bird Protection Act, and we spent a lot of time developing techniques so they could be captured. We used snaring devices, mainly, to move them without hurting the eagles.

DN: Okay. Let's see....How do you feel that the service was perceived by people outside of the agents. Like, do you think we received good support locally, regionally?

NJ: Well, you know, Animal Damage Control was a controversial program. All of the work the Fish and Wildlife Service did was controversial also, but PRC was very controversial and there were the folks that didn't believe in management and then, of course, you have the other side of the picture; the folks that were being damaged, and so we had strong support locally.

DN: That's good. Why would it go to the Department of Agriculture? Do you know? I mean, how did they...

NJ: Well, actually, the activities we were involved in, much of it anyway, involved the Department of Agriculture and involved the State Departments of Agriculture. So, we were closely related with their activities and the politics at the time dictated that the program be moved.

I was involved with field testing of many of the control methods and developing methods for controlling black birds and corn depredation, for instance, and as I mentioned before, the aerial operations. Well, just about everything we did was an issue with somebody and so, as I said, it is just controversial.

There were techniques, methods developed over time, to involve more of the local people in decisions and developing state committees that would help coordinate programs within the states, bringing in people that were involved on both sides of the issue, and then developing policy from those; that kind of cooperation.

DN: What do you think was the most pressing issue you had to deal with during your career?

NJ: Well, I suppose. I was involved in the transition of the program to Agriculture. That was kind of a long, difficult transition. We had a transition team made up of, I believe it was eight people. We worked through this process of moving all of the program responsibilities and developing and coordination that we had to have with Fish and Wildlife Service after the program was moved to Agriculture. It was kind of a long, detailed project.

DN: Has your perspective or opinion on that issue changed with time?

- NJ: Well as far as whether the program should have been transferred or not? I believe that what they call Wildlife Services now works with the states and with the Fish and Wildlife Service has been a pretty effective program. I think that it was successful.
- My first supervisor was W. O. Nelson. In North Dakota it was William Hickling and Roy Henderson. Hickling and Henderson worked together. Henderson was the assistant. From there, to Mark Wooster in South Dakota and also Don Donahoo. In Nebraska, they were still my supervisors and then when I transferred to St. Paul again, Ky Falkner was my supervisor. In Denver it was George Rost. George was working out of Albuquerque at the time. And from Denver to Washington DC, under Jack Berryman. Then when I transferred back to Albuquerque, Gordon Hansen was the Assistant Regional Director for Wildlife and Refuges. Then when we moved to Denver under the Department of Agriculture, Jim Lee was my supervisor. *[Rogers]* C. B. Morton was the Secretary of Interior when I was in Washington and the Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks was Nathaniel P. Reed.
- I worked with a lot of people from the state agencies that were excellent people, and I really can't come up with a name.
- DN: Did any of them ever ask you about possibly transferring in to Fish and Wildlife in the state?
- NJ: Yeah. And in many cases we did hire people from the states...recommended to the program.
- When I went to DC in 1971, Nathaniel Reed was the Assistant Secretary, and he had, at that time, a plan...it was in the works...to eliminate the PRC Program within 6 weeks. But after working there for, I think, over eight years, we were still a program. And Nat Reed was not with the Department of Interior any more. There were some difficult times with the administration during that period because they had some different goals.
- DN: Do you remember who the Regional Directors were when you were with us?
- NJ: Okay, ...boy you're gonna ask me that...I was trying to think of the Regional Director in Minneapolis at the time, and I... In 1960, Bob Burwell.
- DN: How about Region 2 in Norman? *[Oklahoma]*
- NJ: Well, it was W. O. Nelson as State Supervisor and he became the Regional Director in Region 2 and he wasn't the RD when I was there ...I should remember him, I worked with him a lot and it's just the name that escapes me right now. Uh...I can't come up with a name.
- DN: Okay, that's fine. Oh this doesn't take very long. Now we are going to do perspective, like what was the high point of your career; if there was one major high point, or else, what you felt was any high point.
- NJ: For myself personally? Being involved in the, as a very active member of the transition team, moving the program from Fish and Wildlife Service to Agriculture was a real challenge, very interesting. The success of doing that was very satisfying to me. It was just because of the enormous challenge that was involved there. I had some assignments while I was in DC that were very interesting and challenging too. Like everybody else, you get involved in the congressional hearings and see and participate in some very interesting things.
- DN: I bet. How about a low point? Did you have any low point in your career?

NJ: Well, yeah, as a matter of fact. When I transferred to Huron, South Dakota, there was a little difference of opinion between Mark Wooster, who was the District Agent at that time, and W. O. Nelson about whether this Johnson boy should be employed or not. The promotions weren't coming like I needed them to. I went and applied with the Food and Drug Administration and was hired, and once that inquiry came back to the Fish and Wildlife Service, well, things straightened out for me.

DN: Okay...okay. Did you ever have a dangerous or frightening experience when you were working?

NJ: Well, dangerous? We did a lot of aerial operations, and to me they weren't frightening necessarily, but you're always about that close to it being very dangerous and thanks to the training of our pilots and...

DN: Okay. What was your most humorous experience?

NJ: Well, I would think, if you could call it humorous, the first cooperative meeting I went to involving a 3-county cooperative program in Nebraska. It was held in the Sheraton County Court House, right in the court part of the building and the meeting got just a little bit carried away, and it ended up in a fist fight between ranchers and hound men, and me standing back and watching it. They broke it up before it was really settled.

DN: Okay. What do you like to tell others about your career, about Fish and Wildlife Service, or aren't you ever asked?

NJ: Well I think I tell them it's one of the best jobs in the world. It was interesting and challenging, and I got to work with people all over the whole United States, you know. Great people. Farmers and ranchers. Fisherman and Service people; folks in Research.

DN: Did a lot of people ever get confused and think you worked for the State DNR?

NJ: All the time. That or the Forest Service. Well, we were always in a kind of flux, you know, changing. The programs changed, the responsibilities changed. Animal Damage Control went, was broadened to do wildlife services where we helped state agencies with wildlife management programs other than animal damage control. So, yes, the program the Service developed was all the time I was working with them, I think.

DN: That's right. Where do you see the service heading in the next decade?

NJ: I've been retired 18 years. My perspective of that is not as good as it could be, I guess. You know, there's always going to be a need for wildlife management and there will always be a need for somebody to resolve issues between people and wildlife. As I see it, that's something that's going to be or require a need that's always going to be there.

DN: Okay. And do you get information now about Fish and Wildlife Service every quarter or every...?

NJ: I get the Refuge Update.

DN: The Refuge only, huh? I meant to give you the memo about the meeting for all the Fish & Wildlife retirees group meeting in September in Portland, Oregon.

NJ: I got that notice.

DN: Okay. Do you have e-mail? No, it's not in this directory. And the reason that I want to know this is because Jerry Grover, the one who sends out all this information, if he has an e-mail, he sends to everybody regarding a death of any of the former employees, that type of thing, so if you'll give me that, I can turn the recorder off, and I will send that in too, so you'll be sure to be on the list.

NJ: Okay.

DN: And he's the one that will be also sending out information about the next retiree reunion in Albuquerque.

NJ: I see.

DN: So, okay? Well it was a pleasure to meet you, and to meet you, Barb, and I'm just very happy to get to know you, and if you would come to September meeting, you'd enjoy it, I know. Okay, thank you so much.

NJ: You're welcome.

Additional editing and review provided by:

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