

INTERVIEW WITH RENFORD TALBERT WILLIAMS  
BY MARK MADISON and GEORGE GENTRY  
TENSUS RIVER NWR, MAY 20, 2003

[The following is a recorded telephone conversation]

MR. MADISON: I wonder if it would be possible to talk to you a little bit about Ben Lilly and your career while we've got you on the phone?

MR. WILLIAMS: Oh, you bet.

MR. MADISON: And maybe we could tape it for an oral history; do a preliminary one now and then, if one of us comes down there, we could do a proper one in person. Does that sound all right?

MR. WILLIAMS: All right, if that's what y'all want.

MR. MADISON: Well, the first thing I need to do is to ask you to spell your name so I can get it right in the form.

MR. WILLIAMS: All right, Renford; R-E-N-F-O-R-D, Talbert; T-A-L-B-E-R-T, Williams; W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S.

MR. MADISON: Okay, and the only other thing I need from you is if it's okay for us to tape this conversation?

MR. WILLIAMS: You bet! As long as it's for the benefit of the Refuge and helping us get more land or something, you bet!

MR. MADISON: We'll be happy to use it in any way that will help the Refuge and help the Service.

MR. WILLIAMS: That's what I need.

MR. MADISON: Well, let's go back; I'd love to hear some more about your relationship with Ben Lilly.

MR. WILLIAMS: Well, he had a daughter here that was Superintendent of Education, and a visiting teacher for whenever we had a sick teacher in one of these little one-room schoolhouses like we had all over the country. She taught school here for right close to forty years, if I can remember right. For some reason in the fourth grade she took me for her pet. Man, I'm going to tell you, she was a great, wonderful woman. And her husband was a Postmaster here at Tallulah for thirty or forty years. They lived here for their lifetime in Tallulah after she got out of college at LSU. Mr. Lilly had published a book. It came out in 1950, I believe it was; the first edition, and is still coming out in print from a College over there in Texas, Austin I believe it is. They are still doing copies of it. They do so many hundred copies of Ben Lilly

legend. A few years ago it went into just a new frenzy about Ben Lilly. Of course I had been having a few copies of this and that and the other about it. The thing kind of caught me, you know the President Roosevelt came and made his bear hunt here in 1907. What I know now, and after I got up to where I could read a little bit and read and think and study, you know, a great man like that coming here, and visiting. So that helped me stay on Ben Lilly's trail hard and heavy.

MR. MADISON: Yeah, that was a famous visit by Roosevelt.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is that right?

MR. MADISON: Yep, we've read about it out here.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is that right?

MR. MADISON: Yep.

MR. GENTRY: Didn't Ben Lilly have a camp that's not too far from you guys? Is it still standing tall?

MR. WILLIAMS: No, it's just an old chimney and it's on the ground. That old camp of his is across the river about a mile north of Refuge HQ here. I probably two or three hundred of those square nails that I picked up around his old campsite. I've got, I can't remember, I haven't pulled that slip out for showing in several years, parts of one whole whetstone and parts of two more. He was a big knife maker as well as a bear and cat hunter. He made lots of knives. And these big old rocks, he wore them thin in the middle, until a couple of them broke. I got maybe a half of one and both halves of another and another whole one that's nearly ready to break. I found an old bullet mold at that camp. I don't know what he'd be doing with an old bullet mold.

MR. MADISON: Was he making his own bullets, you reckon?

MR. WILLIAMS: Possibly, very possibly. I've always picked up old iron around these old pre-Civil War home areas. I toted it from the time I was twelve years old. I brought that stuff home with me. I wound up with so much of it that about three years ago I give a good friend of mine a whole pickup truck load of it. Now, I wished I hadn't because I was hoping that one day maybe the Refuge would get a museum and put it all in it.

MR. MADISON: That would be great.

MR. WILLIAMS: I've got just lots of stuff from these old house sites. A lot of your old house sites is fast disappearing. Here on the Refuge, we don't own the spot, but we've got one of these old big gin [cotton] chimneys. In fact, it's one of the biggest chimneys ever made for a cotton gin. It's surrounded by refuge, but a fellow bought it for a camp lot. I wish there was some way we

could preserve that old chimney. Right near that old chimney, he had a brick house with seven rooms. Today you can still see the brick about knee high around every room. Every window and door, you can see where it was. It's on private property yet, but it's just a one-acre block. I believe we could probably buy that if we'd pursue it a little bit. Because the man that stayed on it years ago, he'd died and here it all is rusting. Then there's an old big brick house that Mr. Presley was working on; it was three stories high, and high enough off of the ground where you could drive team of horses with a wagon, or buggies under it; in case of bad weather you wouldn't get wet getting into this house. He near about had it finished when the war come along. I got a few old records from that, but it's been a lot of digging there over the years; hunting all of that silver and gold money he had, and a big bale that he buried to keep the soldiers from finding it. [Sounds like] His brother in law stabbed him over yonder at the crossing; he was fixing to head out to Texas. Back in '56 his great great grandson came over here and I spent a day and half, or nearly two days and he told me a lot about it that I didn't know about. He said that Mr. Presley is buried near that old gin chimney. His wife, she continued on the plantation there for just a few years and couldn't make it. She finally sold it. But we've got numerous old house sites all up and down this river. At one time I could have told you most of the people that lived there but I'm kind of getting to advanced age, you know. That old mind it not as bright as it used to be.

MR. MADISON: It doesn't sound that way to us, at this end of the phone.

MR. WILLIAMS: It's just an old retired State Game Warden here. I retired in 1980 with State Wildlife. I've got a lot of help [tape skips] about all kind of wildlife activities. The time I went to work with the State there was only five parishes that had any deer in it; Madison and Kennesaw was the two that was the heaviest. So we've gotten a re-stocking program in the 50's. It ended up in about '63 or '64. Today, we've got deer all over the State from that. Wild turkeys; our turkey flocks was huge. Here is this big, virgin timber area. Whenever they got to sawing, why, there wasn't much virgin timber left here. They got it cut out. Chicago Mill went to selling it. They bought, I believe, and I may be wrong on some of this, but they bought that Singer Sewing Machine Company in '26, I think. They put the land on sale and they cut it. They clear-cut it. For so much acreage, if you buy a section or more it was \$17.00 an acre. You could pick a section wherever you wanted it. So boy, they sold lots of land. Here lately they went back to trying to buy a lot of it back that hadn't been cleared. And a lot of people have sold land back them. In '65, well, it started in '64; they put it on sale again. The State of Louisiana could have bought this land for about \$28.00 an acre but they would have had to have bought everything in every state they had a corporation in. At that time, it entire thing sold for about 36 or 37 million dollars. That included saw mills, woods, lumber and everything on hand. For miles down, they just went all to pieces. It had done got to where lumber was cheap; there wasn't no money in it. That's when the [Sounds like] Prescott family, they bought this in '65. They took all cash, all debts and maybe it was somewhere around a million and a

half dollars in debt that they had. They had something like thirteen million in the bank in Chicago. They got all of that, so they really sold the land. Of course Mr. Prescott; J. Prescott, he died in 196 I believe or 197. I was with the first group whenever he came down here to check on the land, and thinking about possibly buying some of it. He made a statement to the crowd, he said, that he didn't know just what he had down here, but he knew it was a lot of land but he'd never been on it. He didn't want any of the local employees to know that he had been here. They went to selling and we finally got the government to move. Jimmy Carter, he voted to buy all of the land that they had. Reagan came in and he said that we were selling government land, we're not buying. So we got a young man to help get us all to a coalition board over there at Shreveport, Louisiana. He was Skipper Dickson. Him and his Daddy had contributed to Reagan's campaign. After we gotten everything kind of moving, they got in their airplane and went to Washington to meet with Reagan. When they come back they said they got a commitment for fifty thousand acres. Today, we're getting close to seventy thousand. Chicago Mills got lots more land surrounding us and joining us that's up for sale right now. We've got no money to buy it with. Even at today's high prices it'd still be a bargain. We need to try to get some of these woods back.

MR. MADISON: Oh yeah! Hey Mr. Williams, how did you end up working at the Refuge?

MR. WILLIAMS: After I retired, they got after me to go to work with Fish and Wildlife Service.

MR. MADISON: When would this have been. Was it 1980, did you say?

MR. WILLIAMS: Actually, it was January 24, 1981. I said, "Alright, I'll just do that." And I didn't much want to even think about another job. I was a Club Warden on a big Club here even though we knew it was going to be cleared up in the next three, four of five years. So I went ahead and took the job. After a week and a half, I tried to quit, they wouldn't let me. Do you know Ray Acock at Jackson?

MR. MADISON: No, I don't.

MR. WILLIAMS: He's been with Fish and Wildlife all of his life, since college days. He's the one that pushed me. And the Refuge Supervisor in Atlanta, Steve Prigg, he wanted me. So here I am today, I'm looking at 73 for my next birthday. And I was born here on the Tensas. I was raised on it. I've gone away from it for five years. Two of that was in the Service during the draft during the Korean deal. I was the first man drafted from this Parish for the Army. A few years later, we lost the Tensas in '65; after '65 on. They had a hot spot down in the central part of Louisiana, they had bought a bunch of land, the State Wildlife had. And they had built some nice homes on it, and offices and shop, and all that. So Dr. Glasgow, he was a Professor at LSU, he had got into the position of being Director of the State Wildlife. We was heading down

to the mouth of the Mississippi River and he come out on the bow of a boat where I was sitting watching everything. It was in November. He told me he was glad that I was out there by myself because he wanted to talk to me about something. I couldn't imagine what I'd done for him to talk to me. But he told me what he wanted, and I said, "Lord God, I don't care nothing about going down there." He said, "We want you to come along and take a look at it." He kept talking and asked me if I wanted more money, and I said, "Not much more than I'm making now." He covered all of that, so I went down there for three years. I had the devil getting away from down there but trouble soon stopped and they haven't had any more trouble that I know of since. It's just keeping the local people fired up about stuff. So that's how I spent three of the five years I left Texas. I was born in an old log house on what they called the old Lynn-Davis place.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Talbert, in your work with the State and with the Fish and Wildlife Service, did you ever work with Dave Hall?

MR. WILLIAMS: Yep, Yep.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: What sort of cases did you work on with him?

MR. WILLIAMS: I never did work that much with Dave, but I did some. Yeah, I knew Dave. There was old Sidney Woodson, Terry White, there was a fellow named Barnes, I can't remember his first name. He helped us on a lot of State cases. And we'd help him on federal cases. It was Dick Barnes. I don't know of y'all are familiar with him. He's been dead quite a few years. He left here and went to Tennessee and died not too long after that. Is Hall the Game Warden that wrote a book?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Yeah, they wrote a book about him called, Game Wars.

MR. WILLIAMS: Game Wars, yeah, I've got a copy of it. I was trying to refresh my [memory]. I was trying to remember if he worked on the White Perch case down in Concordia Parish.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Right!

MR. WILLIAMS: I wasn't on them cases. See, I done retired when this all--I had been retired two, three or four years when that come about. I've got some picture of nets that we laid on Larto Lake the first time in '62, I believe it was. February of '62. I used to make a lot of, or a good many dove cases and duck cases up here. I enjoyed the little, the pay is better over here than the DA over there would pay. I'd pick up a little Christmas money along.

JEROME: Talbert was revered up here like Dave Hall, they just didn't write a book about him. A lot of people still have a lot of respect for Talbert. When he see him now, they remember him in his Game Warden days, and they still call him "Wildlife Agent Williams" because he commanded their respect and the cases that he made. People still remember that today.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I know that the Larto Lake White Perch, that was a really big, hot item in Game Wars. There was a lot of graft and a lot of problems with the local Sheriffs and Judges and District Attorneys and everything. They were all on the take and they were all making a lot of money from those White Perch. Millions of pounds of White Perch were being taken from Larto Lake.

MR. WILLIAMS: You're right, and I'm going to tell you something else; the Assistant Chief of Law Enforcement, he had brothers living down there in that business.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Were they the Books [family]?

MR. WILLIAMS: Julius Books.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Books, yeah, uhuh.

MR. WILLIAMS: I know him well. [unintelligible].

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Dave Hall is a really good friend of mine and heíd told me a lot of stories about that sort of thing. They are very fascinating, and the book is really good too.

MR. WILLIAMS: Oh yeah. One of our State men got shot down there. He lived down there. Somewhere about, I don't know, the late '50s or early '60s down on Larto Lake; he went down there by his self. I tell you what, on that raid we pulled, and I've got pictures of me and another two State Agents; Red Hillfinger and Vance Head. Larry and I were in a boat. We got to pulling up nets near the shore where he had them hid, every one of them illegal and lot of them were full of White Perch and Bass. They were leaving the authority of the boats and leaving the lake pretty bad there. We were still running a lot of nets and we didn't have no radio and walkie-talkies in them days, like we got now. We left two boats up there in that south end of that lake. We were busy pulling up nets. The last two or three nets I pulled up. I done left fishing off, 'cause weíd done been told to get out from down there. We got through and everybody wanted some of them White Perch. Shoot, I kinda wanted some of 'em myself.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Well they say that the White Perch from anywhere else just aren't as good as they are from Larto Lake.

MR. WILLIAMS: That's always good, fresh water. Before all of this land clearing come into being. That's what that was. Today, I bet the fish don't taste too good, and I ain't been fishing there in years, they were good. But telling you about that; after we was getting loaded up, we had all the nets loaded up; an old boy come down on the bank in front of his house where we was loading. He said, 'Yall ain't taking my nets off?' I said, 'Yes, I'm afraid we are. They've got to go to [unintelligible]'. He said, 'Yall don't have to do that, now! I'll have them back in the morning!' I'll tell you what; a bunch of

us had to go back the next morning, we had to go back and take those nets back! Not only what us two boats had picked up, but what everybody had picked up, which all of them had nets in there. They had pushed them off on the bank and they'd straight them out to sell. Whenever they got ready to go; let me back up a minute; the Chief of Enforcement was Jimmy Gillespie, he was trying not to let the Assistant Chief know it. He went to talk to the Sheriff and the DA. He told them not to take a lot of men in there, because somebody was going to get killed. But then he said whenever they have trouble, to let them settle their own trouble, and they did. Then we went ahead and raided anyhow. Right after that deal, that's where I moved to down there. Gosh dern, I can't even think of the name of it now, but it's Dewey Wills Management Area now. That's where I went to live, in that hotspot.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Yeah, those were dangerous times weren't they?

MR. WILLIAMS: You bet. I married a girl from [there], Faye was raised over there in that mess there in 1960. Whenever I told her that night that I had come back from Baton Rouge to pick up a pickup truck, I told her, 'Well, I got to get up and be at [unintelligible] at two o'clock. We've got to still make a fish raid.' She said, 'Where are you going?' I told her I didn't know, for sure. She said, 'You take your high powered rifle, some of them people'll kill you down there if you ain't careful.' I says, 'I ain't gonna need no rifle', but I did have a sidearm. I enjoyed that. Did yall, by the way, see the documentary on Ö. I can't think of the name of it.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE in LA: I can't think of the name of it Talbert. But yeah, we did a documentary of establishing the Tensas here. We'll be happy to send you guys a copy. But it's kind of featuring Talbert and Hartwood right here at Tensas.

MR. MADISON: We'd love to get that Jerome that would be super! Jerome, what I'm thinking is that we need to come down with a camera and film Talbert and maybe follow him around to a couple of these sites he's talking about.

JEROME: You bet.

MR. MADISON: And look over some of these documents if he is amenable. And maybe; do you guys know George Gentry?

JEROME: Yeah, we've met with him. I've been here about three years, and he was trying to put together a videotape of Tensas with some old slides and stuff we had. But that didn't work out. Yeah, I know of Mr. Gentry.

MR. MADISON: Talbert, he's our chief of video up here. He makes all of our films and that. He's retiring this summer in like June. He wants to do oral histories with us after this, just as a volunteer. I was thinking that maybe Jeanne or I could come down and hook up with George and do some good filming of

some of these places with Talbert talking. You've got too many good stories and images and locations to do it justice on a tape, basically on a speakerphone.

MR. WILLIAMS: Right.

MR. MADISON: You've just got to promise us that you're not going to retire for another year!

MR. WILLIAMS: Well, I tried and Jerome said, "Don't do it, we need you here, hear?"

MR. MADISON: But I think that will be our long term plan if that makes sense for you guys?

JEROME: Oh yeah, I think that's the way to do it. And Talbert is a local icon here and I think in many ways could be a national icon because the stories are definitely true. We also have Mr. Dewitt Arnold who works here who is the oldest employee in the Fish and Wildlife Service. Talbert and "Mr. DD" have comparable stories because they have lived here all their lives. It's fascinating to hear these stories.

MR. MADISON: I think we need to get George there and catch both of them. Jeanne or myself, or both of us will come down and we'll do an oral history where we have it on film because I think like you mentioned earlier Jerome, this might be something we want to use for a future visitor center film, or to teach people about this particular refuge and it's fascinating history, or, of internal uses like when we do a refuge video; to have featured some of our older employees.

JEROME: You bet. And I know, I guess you guys have got some stuff already on Ben Lilly there. We actually have a bridge named in his honor on the south end of the refuge. Ben Lilly was a big person in this part of the world.

MR. MADISON: Yeah, he's one of our Conservation Heroes out here.

JEROME: Exactly! There's some controversial stories, I know Talbert can tell you all about them when you get here, but some people liked Ben Lilly and some people just thought he had done run off his wife and his kids and he was a "noaccount". But that just makes him all the more interesting.

MR. MADISON: Yeah, the important thing is that he's an important historical figure.

MR. WILLIAMS: He was with the old rat and Rodent Patrol for the government for years. It was twice. He jumped two or three years at a time. He didn't like the way the government did things; they'd take too long to get something done.

MR. MADISON: Well, that's all changed today!



MR. WILLIAMS: Talking about that film; a station out of Pittsburgh sent a crew down here to film some of us. Of course, I'm on it with about twelve minutes. The name of it was "Conserving America's Wetlands".

MR. MADISON: Oh neat. I would love to see that film.

MR. WILLIAMS: They've got me on it. And you know how my voice sounds; it's a bad situation!

MR. MADISON: I can understand every word you're saying!

JEROME: That's right; we love that accent!

MR. MADISON: That's right. And I'm from as far away from you guys as possible. I am from Wisconsin originally.

JEROME: Is that in the United States?

MR. MADISON: Just barely! [All laughing and enjoying the jokes.] But why don't we do that? Why don't I try and coordinate at this end, and see. Is there any particular time Jerome, that would be really worthwhile coming? You know, when something special is happening on the refuge?

MR. WILLIAMS: Hunting and fishing days.

JEROME: Yeah, we have hunting and fishing day, which is on the fourth Saturday in September. It's kind of like a little festival we have. There's a couple thousand people that will be out here on the Visitor Center grounds. Back in March we're moving; Louisiana Black Bear, as you know, is a threatened species so you may be able to get some footage of that if you want to come at that time of year.

MR. MADISON: God, that would be great, to get to footage of that!

JEROME: Yeah, and like this morning I came to the refuge and I saw nine turkeys, seven deer and four bear in the road this morning. So right now, is a good time if you want to just get out early in the morning you could probably capture some wildlife, you know, out there just doing their own thing. The worst time for us is probably from the middle of October or the first of November to the end of February because it's hunting season. We're just kind of wrapped up with that whole deal because we actually have the largest white tailed deer hunting program in the nation. So that's the worst time. But any other time, I think, would be fine.

MR. MADISON: Although I hate to put it off that long, I would love to come in March, because if we could get some footage of the Louisiana Black Bear too, that would be so invaluable to us.

JEROME: Yes, and Talbert, and I don't think he mentioned that he was in on some bear relocation stuff, it was from Minnesota wasn't it Talbert?

MR. WILLIAMS: Yeah, I made six trips to Minnesota trapping bear and bringing them back down here. That was after we lost the Chicago Mill land. I knew the Supervisor on the Madison portion of it then and after we lost it the State just went to using it, any and everywhere.

JEROME: We've got pictures of Talbert releasing some of those bears. It's a threatened species here, but at one point we had pretty much lost all of our bears in the State, or were just about there. The Minnesota bear was closely related genetically as anything, and they moved them down here and I think they all pretty much left, didn't they Talbert?

MR. WILLIAMS: I think every one of them left!

JEROME: But he was a big part of getting the bear back in this country. But what I'll do is go make you guys a copy of that tape that he's talking about, right now, and it's going to give you some ideas. Then you just pick and choose what time of year you want to come and we'll be waiting on you.