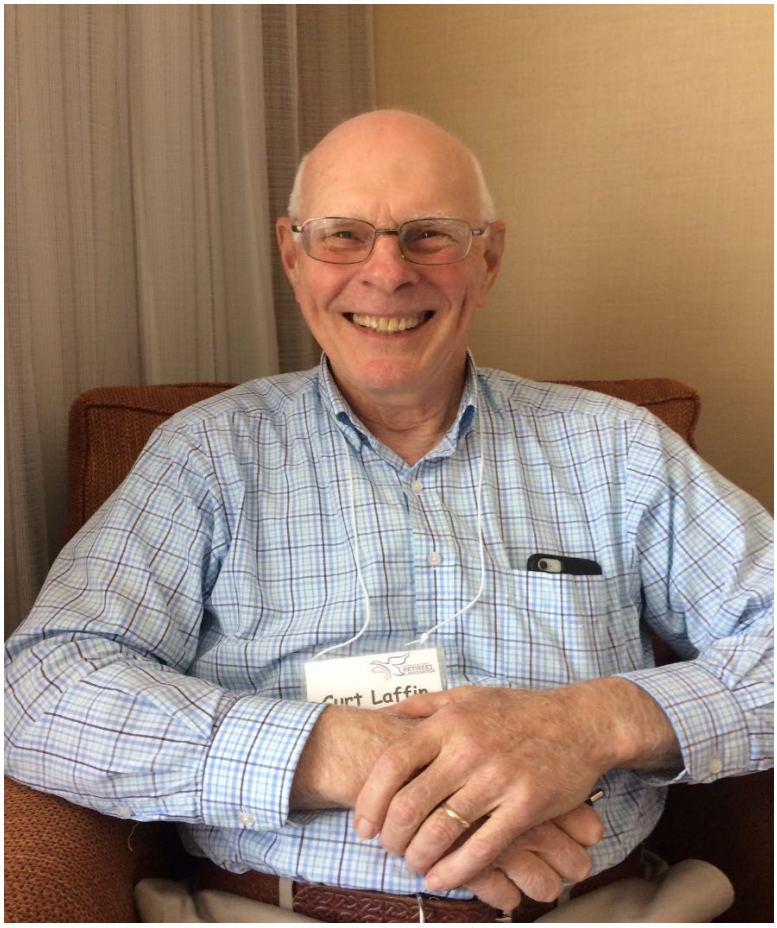
The Oral History of Curt Laffin

November 11, 2019

Interview conducted by Libby Herland at the Doubletree Inn, Annapolis, MD



Oral History Cover Sheet

Approximate years worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: 23 years, plus 4 years in the U.S. Navy

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: permits biologist, Vero Beach, Florida (River Basin Program) and Charleston, South Carolina (Ecological Services); biologist, Office of Biological Services, northeast Regional Office (Boston, Newton Corner MA); planner, Division of Refuges, northeast Regional Office (Newton Corner, Hadley MA)

Most Important Projects: implementation of the Rivers and Harbor Act permits in Florida and South Carolina, head of the Maine Coastal study, and development of master plans and other documents for refuges in the northeast United States.

Colleagues and Mentors: Nat Reed, Marvin Moriarty, Jim Oland, Mike Bartlett, Karen Mayne, Joe Carroll, Jack Gallagher, Lynn Childers, Harvey Geitner, Ralph Andrews, Paul Nickerson, Suzanne Mayer, Norm Olson, Ralph Pisapia, Don Young, Joe Ireland, Axel Larson, Roger Tornstrom, Bob Miller, Tom McAndrews, Jim Jones, Spence Conley, Mary Parkin, Anne Hecht, Dave Harris, Larry Shanks

Brief Summary of Interview: Curt was raised in Massachusetts, served in the U.S. Navy, went to college at the University of Maine on the G.I. bill, and worked seasonally at Acadia National Park. His first permanent position was with the Fish and Wildlife Service in Vero Beach, FL. He worked in the Division of River Basins Studies as a biologist reviewing dredge and fill permits under the authority of the Rivers and Harbors Act. After losing a court case, the Army Corps of Engineers had to consider the impacts of dredging on fish and wildlife when they were issuing permits. Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nat Reed authorized the hiring of 120 biologists across the country to conduct these reviews, and Curt was one of the biologists hired off a Civil Service list to do this work. After working in Vero Beach for a few years, Curt transferred to Charleston, SC, opening the first Ecological Services (ES) office in that state. Returning to his New England roots, Curt worked for the Office of Biological Services, overseeing an ecological characterization of the Maine coast. After that was completed, he was selected by Assistant Refuge Director Suzanne Mayer to oversee the Technical Services program for Refuges and Wildlife in the northeast Regional Office (legacy Region 5). In this position, Curt conducted annual surveys and provided technical support to refuges in the northeast. His interest in planning led him to pulling together the first planning team for refuges in Region 5, and for the rest of his career, Curt oversaw the development of refuge station management plans. Curt is one of only three people to work in three regional offices all within one region, as Region 5 moved its headquarters from downtown Boston to Newton Corner and then finally to Hadley, MA, where it is still located.

The Interview

LIBBY: Hi, my name is Libby Herland. I'm the retired Region 5 representative on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Heritage Committee. It is Monday, November 11, 2019. Today I am conducting an oral history interview with Curt Laffin. This interview is being conducted at the Doubletree Inn in Annapolis, Maryland as part of the Fish and Wildlife Service retirees' reunion. It's a real pleasure to interview you, Curt. I did have the pleasure of working with you during my career …

CURT: Yes, we did.

LIBBY: … at least part of my time, and it's very nice to see you again. So, tell us, you began working for the Fish and Wildlife Service. What year?

CURT: It was 1971.

LIBBY: Okay. And you retired from the Fish and Wildlife Service in …?

CURT: in 2094.

LIBBY: Two thousand, two thousand??

CURT: 1994 (laughter).

LIBBY: Yeah, right! You retired from the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1994. Wow!

CURT: Yes.

LIBBY: So, you had a long career. Twenty-three years with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

CURT: I did.

LIBBY: All right. And were you in the ser[vice], in the military service?

CURT: Yes, I was.

LIBBY: All right.

CURT: I was in the Navy from 1960 to '64.

LIBBY: Okay. So, great. So, you had, kind of, basically like 27 years of federal, federal government service.

CURT: Yes.

LIBBY: So, I'm really, I know you a little bit and I've seen you a few times after retirement at reunions or whenever other people have retired at retiree parties, but I'm really looking forward to getting to know more about you personally, and your childhood, your education, your family, your career path, especially in the Fish and Wildlife Service, some of the highlights

of your work, your challenges and what you've been doing since you retired. So, why don't we start with your childhood and your early influences.

CURT: Yeah. I was born in Concord, Massachusetts, January 1941. I grew up in Acton, Massachusetts. It was a rural town at the time.

LIBBY: Right.

CURT: It's kind of expanded a bit like every place else around the country. I always enjoyed being outdoors like any country boy would. Fishing and hunting and - one interesting thing that I'm going to jump forward almost to today - my father once showed me a huge American chestnut tree in Harvard, Massachusetts. And he told me that it was the last living American chestnut tree that he was aware of. Today, my wife Carol and I are both very active in the American Chestnut Foundation. We are trying to restore the American chestnut tree into our eastern forests. So that one point, when my father introduced me to the tree, kind of got me on the path, and as I was…

LIBBY: How old were you at that time?

CURT: Five or six.

LIBBY: Yeah. And do you remember where in Harvard it was?

CURT: I think it was on Bare Hill, [it was] called Bare Hill.

LIBBY: Oh, yeah, sure. That's conservation land now.

CURT: And so, a lot happened between seeing that tree and today, and working trying to restore that tree. So, let's, let's go back to from then on.

LIBBY: So, you grew up in Acton and you went to school there.

CURT: Yes, I did.

LIBBY: Do you have brothers and sisters?

CURT: I had two brothers. They both passed away, but we all grew up right there in Acton. I went into the Navy in 1960. I went to Boston University for a year but had a little too much fun (laughter), so the Navy was the way to go. I really enjoyed the Navy. I was in an aircraft squadron on aircraft carriers and served in the Cuban blockade in 1963, cruised the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic quite a bit. And then, but the … I joined the Navy, I loved being at sea, but that wasn't my life's ambition. It went back to the natural resource. So, I went to the University of Maine.

LIBBY: Why did you know you wanted to do natural resources? Were you always outside when you were younger? Did you fish?

CURT: It was and still is in my blood. You just, you grow up in that environment and that's, that was where I wanted to go. One interesting aspect, if I was … I got out of the Navy on September 4, 1964. The Viet Nam era benefits started September 1, 1964. I got $220 a month to go to school, and that was enough to put me over the top, to let me go to the University of Maine. So, you talk about an investment in taxpayer money, I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for that simple little thing.

LIBBY: That's the GI Bill?

CURT: Yes. Yep, yep.

LIBBY: How about that?

CURT: So, while I was at the University of Maine, I was able to serve as a seasonal ranger at Acadia National Park. I did that for two full seasons, and I was starting my third. I was about to start my third season and we had - I lived in Brewer, Maine, which is about 60 miles inland from the national park and the Park Service had quarters for families, seasonals to live. So, we were going to move down – I had three children.

LIBBY: Oh, so you're married already by this time!

CURT: I am. I am, yes.

LIBBY: (laughter). Oh, you're quick!

CURT: I was married while I was in the Navy.

LIBBY: And you married, who did you marry?

CURT: Ellen Staples.

LIBBY: And she's someone you knew from?

CURT: High school.

LIBBY: High school.

CURT: We went to high school together. She passed away just 10 years ago, this year. So, I was about to start my third season. And I had very good connections within the Park Service. They were encouraging me to, to ultimately come to work for the National Park Service. So back in those days, you took a simple little Civil Service test it was called, and your name went on a list somewhere. So, I was kind of anticipating that eventually … I graduated in February of 1960 and then I was starting my third season and it looked like I was going to sort of just phase into the National Park Service. Well, we lived in a small apartment in Brewer, Maine. So, we had moved everything down, my kids and everything down to the, to the park, and it was about the middle of June, in 1960.

LIBBY: 1960? Is that correct?

CURT: No.

LIBBY: No, 'cause you were …

CURT: No, that was '70, '71. I'm sorry.

LIBBY: Yeah, 1971. That's all right.

CURT: I'll probably…

LIBBY: 'Cause like, wait a minute - I think you were going into the Navy in 1960. Right.

CURT: So, two young women were going to sublet our apartment while we went to Acadia for the summer. They were late to come get the key. They were supposed to be there at 10 o'clock. At about five or ten minutes after 10, the phone rang, and on the other end of the phone was Vernon Brown. He was the personnel chief in the Atlanta Regional Office.

LIBBY: Oh! For Fish and, U.S. Fish and Wildlife?

CURT: Fish and Wildlife Service. And he said, very right to the point, very quick, he says, "I'm going down the list. I have this list of civil service people who took the test. I'm going down the list, asking you a question. If I don't get an answer, I don't even, I just hang up and call the next person." He says, "I'm offering you a job in River Basins." Well, I have no idea what that means, the "River Basins". "In Decatur, Alabama; Raleigh, North Carolina; or Vero Beach, Florida. And you have to be there by the first of July, because of the fiscal year."

LIBBY: Right.

CURT: This was three kids up in Maine. Half our stuff's down one place, we're in another place. And I says, "Can you call me back in about 10 minutes?" (laughter). So, I talked to my wife, and I says, "This, here's the situation, so what are we going to do?" So, on the spur of the moment, we said, "All right, let's go to Vero Beach, Florida." So.

LIBBY: Permanent position?

CURT: Permanent position.

LIBBY: Did he say what GS level it was?

CURT: GS-5. $5,700 a year. (laughter). So, we had an old canoe. I quickly rented; I bought this beat up old canoe trailer. We put half our stuff in the back of the canoe. We packed up our kids. Well, I grew up in Acton so we – we had two weeks to get there – so we, I had to go back down to the park and get our stuff, you know, get organized. So off we went, we stopped at our home in Acton for two or three days, and we, we made it. We got to Vero Beach, Florida and started my career with the Service. That's how it all started.

LIBBY: My goodness.

CURT: That's part of the story. The other interesting part is why was Vernon Brown, and every other personnel manager in the country, calling these people and offering these jobs? Well, in 1970, there was a court decision – Zabel versus Tabb – was the name of the court case, and it had to do with a dredge and fill project in Boca Ciega Bay, Florida. The decision was that the Army Corps of Engineers, which issued permits for such work, was required for the first time to consider the impacts on fish and wildlife and natural resources when they reviewed whether or not they were going to issue these permits. So that was, that was big news, because prior to that, the Fish and Wildlife Service had very little say on which permits were issued or how they might be amended. So, there was what was then called the Division of River Basin Studies that worked in this area. We had an office in Florida – a River Basins office. So, Nat Reed happened to be the, one of the Assistant Interior Secretaries at that point, when all of a sudden, the Fish and Wildlife Service had a major role to play in permitting. So, Nat Reed's a very strong advocate, of course, for, for natural resources. He's the one who engineered the money to hire these 120 people at the spur of the moment.

LIBBY: Across the country.

CURT: Across the country. There were three of us who went to Vero, think three went to Vero Beach, and then of course, Marvin Moriarty, Karen Mayne, Mike Bartlett, Jim Oland who's here, he was one of them.

LIBBY: Oh!

CURT: So, we were off and running, and it was really exciting because, in the middle of June I'm up in Maine, getting ready to work at a national park, and a month later, I'm on Marco Island, Florida, hacking my way through mangroves with a machete, trying to find where the mean high water line is, 'cause that's where the Corps of Engineers jurisdiction went, so.

LIBBY: Wow. So, what was your, your degree in specifically? Natural… Wildlife?

CURT: Wildlife science.

LIBBY: Wildlife. And so, when you moved to Vero Beach, and now you're in this new program, did, was there somebody there? Who was your supervisor, do you remember?

CURT: Joe Carroll was my supervisor.

LIBBY: And what kind of training did you get?

CURT: Pretty much, jump in a car with a boat and somebody's going with you. We worked the whole state of Florida, Puerto Rico and the Virgin… not the whole [state], we worked the whole Florida peninsula, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. So, and the way, it was crazy the way we ran our office. There were 12 biologists in the office. You'd decide – okay, I'm going to go down to the Florida Keys for a few days, so you'd team up with somebody else in the office and you'd just watch the inbox, and permit applications would come in and so you'd get a stack of them for the Keys, then off you'd go, down to the Keys. Or if you wanted to go to the west coast of

Florida, or up to St. Augustine. The only place that was, was controlled was Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. There was one guy named Jack Gallagher. He decided who was going to go, but he spread it around, so we all got a chance to go to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

LIBBY: Did you have a government vehicle and?

CURT: Oh yeah. And boats and whatever. So, that was, that was interesting.

LIBBY: So, let me just ask you a couple of questions about that. You would have to go out in a boat sometimes to get to the place where the …

CURT: Oh yeah, you had to go ….

LIBBY: This was because they were going to be dredging? It was part of the Ports and Waterways Act?

CURT: Yeah, yeah. Rivers and Harbors Act.

LIBBY: Rivers and Harbors Act. Okay. So, they wanted to dredge, so you actually needed to get out to the site.

CURT: Yeah, you had to go look at the site, and determine if this was damaging to the wetland system or could they do it a different way or and then you'd provide comments to the Army Corps of Engineers and then they would decide on the permit.

LIBBY: So, you knew how to drive a vehicle that had a trailer on it.

CURT: Oh yeah.

LIBBY: And a boat, 'cause you had done that. Did everybody know how to do that, or did you have people?

CURT: Oh, you had to, you know. But it's nothing like it is today. I mean, you just …

LIBBY: You didn't have to take a week of boat operator training?

CURT: Right. So, that was exciting and that was fun and very rewarding. But then, I decided well it's time to move on to something else.

LIBBY: How long did you work in Vero Beach?

CURT: Three years.

LIBBY: Three years. So, you were there basically from 1971 to 1974 or so.

CURT: Actually '73.

LIBBY: Okay.

CURT: So, I was, I became aware that the Service did not have an Ecological Services office in South Carolina. The Vero Beach office covered the coast of Georgia and the whole Florida

peninsula, but there was a lot of activity going on – dredging, development activity - going on, on the coast of South Carolina. There was a gentleman named Bruce Stebbins who was at the Raleigh Field Office. And there was so much activity in South Carolina that the Regional Office decided that they wanted to open an office, an Ecological – well by then it was called Ecological Services.

LIBBY: No more River Basins office. Yeah.

CURT: Right. They wanted to open an office in Charleston. So, they were going to send Bruce Stebbins to open the office. Strom Thurmond, that name ring a bell?

LIBBY: Yes.

CURT: South Carolina.

LIBBY: Senator.

CURT: Strom Thurmond let the Regional Office know that it was not a good idea to send Bruce Stebbins to Charleston, 'cause he was very controversial, very, very aggressive biologist, and his, his reputation sort of proceeded him. So, so the folks in South Carolina sort of, they didn't think they wanted Bruce Stebbins. So, John Green was the – oh, I can't remember what the, he's, what's the A- Assistant Regional Director now, but he was in charge of the, all the Ecological Services offices in Region 4. So, I called John Green, and I said, "Well, John, if you're not going to send Bruce to Charleston, why don't you just send me, and let me open the office?" So, I did, and that was really, really a wonderful place to live and work. Those wetlands are just well the most active ecological systems in the world. The reason is that they have seven or eight feet of tide in Charleston and Savannah. If you look at the east coast of the United States, you've got Cape Hatteras, and then there's Jacksonville, and there's this big arc between them.

LIBBY: Right.

CURT: When that ocean starts to move in, it just pushes so much water up into those lowlands, those, those, those tidal wetlands go on forever, and they're just very, very productive.

LIBBY: Is that why they call it the "Low Country?"

CURT: Versus the High Country? Yeah, yeah, that would make - the high country was the mountains, and the low country. So, I was very fortunate to come into the, the – oh, open the office, and the location had already been set up. Fort Johnson is now the South Carolina Marine Resources Center. Fort Johnson is one of the forts from where the shots that were fired at Fort Sumter were fired from.

LIBBY: Okay.

CURT: From Fort Johnson. Around the turn of the century, the early 1900's, it was turned into a quarantine station, so it kind of was, just wasn't taken care of as a historic site, but. But

anyway, the State of South Carolina took it over and built their marine resources center, and my office was in a 200-year old plantation house that was sitting right there on Fort Johnson. So that was really nice.

LIBBY: It was just you? A one-person staff?

CURT: It was me to start with and then two other people came on to work with me. But, so I, what I - and then, the State people were just wonderful to work with. We just clicked. It just worked out well. And there happened to be a man who lived in Beaufort, South Carolina. His name was Steve Shein, S-H-E-I-N. He had a little clothing store, but he also had an airplane, and he was really concerned about what was happening along the coast. So, he would take me and one of the state guys, Rob Dunlap who I worked with a lot. He'd take us flying up and down the coast so we could see what was going on. And, when I first got there, and we would fly up and down the coast with Steve, you, we could literally navigate from one drag line to the next. There was that much …

LIBBY: Wow.

CURT: … work going on out in those wetlands. And then, fortunately we had a very cooperative U.S. Attorney. Hightower. Ron Hightower. He was the U.S. Attorney. So, he – trying to make a long story short – by the time I left Charleston, three years later, you could not find a drag line on the coast of South Carolina. It was not permitted.

LIBBY: Can you tell us a little bit, just explain what a drag line is.

CURT: It's a, it's, it's a machine with a long arm on it that digs, digs ditches. So that's what they were doing. They were digging up the wetlands to create waterfront developments.

LIBBY: Okay.

CURT: Cutting canals, and.

LIBBY: Oh, canals. Right.

CURT: So.

LIBBY: It wasn't for mosquito control (laughter).

CURT: No, not mosquito control. It was for you know, just real estate development.

LIBBY: Wow. Did you have any famous battles or anything when you were doing that work, 'cause you're, now you're…

CURT: Actually, no. There was, well, I had one situation that could have been dangerous, but it turned out to be rather amusing. We're flying one day. Here again, you couldn't possibly do today in any agency the way we used to operate down there. You just wouldn't be allowed to do it. It's like the boat thing, it just. But we were flying along one day, and we saw a drag boat on this little island, or something was going on. I can't remember the specifics. It just didn't

look right. So, the next time we were out in the boat, we thought, "Let's check that spot out." So, there was nobody around, so we pulled up to the side of the little dock there, walked up and looking around, and all of a sudden, we hear this noise, and we turned around and there's this guy standing there with a shotgun, wondering what the hell we were they doing out there (microphone noise). So, that could have been a little tense but we finally, we had a little trouble communicating. I'm from New England and he was certainly from South Carolina, and we finally got everything settled down and explained the situation. Fortunately, there was no real problem going on down there.

LIBBY: Well, actually, I was going to ask you if being a Yankee was a, how that affected your interactions with people that you had to work with, especially when you are doing enforcement, or.

CURT: Yeah. No, no, it never, it never really …

LIBBY: Your personality, your just "nice guy" personality. (laughter). Did you hire people when you were in South Carolina?

CURT: I did. I did. In fact, one person I, well, no that's not true. No, I had three other biologists that worked. There was a guy named Childers – Lynn Childers. He was, I'm not sure where he is now. I know he left, when he left Charleston he went to Olympia, Washington. He was working up there. Harvey Geitner was another one. Well, that was about it.

LIBBY: Now I know that Roger Banks at some point became the field supervisor there. Was he there when you were there?

CURT: No, he replaced me.

LIBBY: He replaced you. Okay.

CURT: So, the reason I left Charleston. It was, as nice a place it was, and everything was great, I was so familiar with the territory and everything about it, that I could just sit at my desk and get a permit application. I'd been to the spot. I knew exactly what we were going to say. So, I said, "Well, maybe it's time to move on to something else."

LIBBY: Well, how did your family like living in South Carolina?

CURT: They liked it, they liked it.

LIBBY: How old were your kids?

CURT: Gee whiz.

LIBBY: I'm sorry! I'm making you do some math. (laughter).

CURT: Yeah, they were like between …

LIBBY: Elementary school?

CURT: Five and nine, yeah, around there, yep, yep. And my wife actually had a Girl Scout troop. My oldest daughter was old enough to be a Girl Scout, and the kids were half black and half white, and they had the best time. After that, my kids could never understand, "What's, what's this racial thing all about?" They just didn't get it. They just had such a good time. So, let's see, that was '73, '74. It was, there was a lot of concern going on about oil spills. All over the country. I went to a meeting in New Orleans about oil spills, and I met Ralph Andrews at that meeting. And had a nice chat with Ralph 'cause he knew I was from New England, and he was working up in the Regional Office in Region 5. A few months after that, he called me and said he was, he was working in this program called "Biological Services" and that they were about to start this major study on the Maine coast. Biological Services was doing these ecological characterizations. They did them all over the country. So, one was the Maine coast, and would I be interested in overseeing that project? So, Maine coast, that's a no brainer. So, so I went up and oversaw that project.

LIBBY: What year was that?

CURT: '76.

LIBBY: 1976.

CURT: The bicentennial year.

LIBBY: Oh, yeah. A lot of things happened in 1976, didn't they?

CURT: Yes. So that project took about three years. And because the Biological Services program was just an amazing thing that almost happened. There was a - Allan Hirsch was a visionary to say the least. He was working in Washington. I'm not sure where he actually came from if that's the best way to say it, but he had a vision of creating a whole new agency named the Ecological Survey, that would be tantamount to the Geological Survey only it would be ecological information. So, he put together these various teams. There was a coastal ecosystems team that would put together information on coastal matters. There was a mining [team] that would deal with strip mining and all kinds of mining. There was a rivers program. Power plants. And then he'd establish these teams, and each team had a regional component. He was literally using the Fish and Wildlife Service as the vehicle through which he would build this whole agency. Mid-level management in the Fish and Wildlife Service sort of didn't like them, 'cause he was taking money and people away from the various programs. So that whole thing kind of floundered a little bit. And that's when we were working together in Region 5. And, as you recall, the Ecological Services/Biological Services offices were on one side of the building and Refuges was right next door.

LIBBY: Now, is this in, now you, on the way up here, you were telling me that you had worked in three regional offices, but they were all in – and we're going to say Region 5, but we are going to call it "legacy Region 5" for the people who might be reading the transcript in the future, which was the northeast part of the country.

CURT: When Ralph Andrews called me, the Regional Office was located right in downtown Boston.

LIBBY: Right.

CURT: It was, but it was about to move out to Newton Corner [Massachusetts]. So, when Ralph offered me the job to go up there, if I did not know that the Regional Office was going to move out of downtown Boston, I probably would not have taken the job.

LIBBY: Okay.

CURT: So, just because of the hassle of getting in and out of Boston.

LIBBY: Even in the '70's, it was a hassle getting in and out of Boston.

CURT: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. So, I worked in the old downtown office for two weeks, then the office moved out to Hadley.

LIBBY: No, Newton Corner.

CURT: I mean Newton Corner. And then, we were in Newton Corner for I think 17 years.

LIBBY: Right.

CURT: Then we went to Hadley.

LIBBY: Right.

CURT: There were, I think there were three people – myself, Paul Nickerson, and there was one other man – who, the three of us worked in three regional offices without leaving the region! (laughter). So, so the Biological Services thing was not sure where that was going, and I was always interested in Refuges, so Suzanne Mayer was the ARD [Assistant Regional Director] for Refuges at the time, and she needed somebody to oversee what we called like technical services – planning, graphics production, things like that were needed for refuges. So, I shifted over there, and I went out and did a few refuge annual surveys. It was, it was going along fine, and I was kind of interested in planning because I noticed that the refuges, I had maybe some ideas of my own, so maybe you should be doing things a little different, but you don't say that to a refuge manager, of course (laughter).

LIBBY: Say that to Ed, say that to Ed Moses and he'll give you an earful (laughter).

CURT: That's a good example, that's a good example. So, I don't know where I was, I was at a meeting, something, somewhere, and I saw a quote from a gentleman from the Missouri Department of Conservation. And the quote was that "We have some very talented people who know how to do things right. The question is, are they doing the right things?" And that really hit me. "Wow, how more logical could you get?" Well, that's when I really got interested in planning. So, then I, for the rest of my career, I was kind of involved in refuge planning. I remember Pat Weaver out at the DeSoto refuge with Norm Olson, when he was doing one of

those for that refuge. So, I put together a team of four or five, well maybe three to five people and we would actually go out to a refuge and just stay there for about a week and facilitate discussions with the whole refuge staff. We weren't trying to tell the refuges what to do. We were trying to help the refuges tell themselves, well should we be doing this, or we should be doing that, how does it fit with regional and national objectives? They weren't master plans. We called them station management plans, so it, we didn't get involved in EIS's [environmental impact statements] and public involvement and all that. It was just to help the staff figure out what's best, what they should be doing.

LIBBY: So, do you – so I have a couple questions. Do you remember what year it was when you started working in the technical services kind of part of Refuges?

CURT: Oh, let's see. The office moved out to Hadley in '93. That was, that was …

LIBBY: Not '93. It must have been – oh Hadley, oh Hadley, yes.

CURT: It was probably the mid to late '80's. '86.

LIBBY: Because I came to work in the Regional Office in 1988 and you were there so I'm just trying to get a sense of your, that your… Had you been on refuges before, because you had been in another kind of part of the Fish and Wildlife Service, more Ecological Services and so. How familiar were you with national wildlife refuges and what they did?

CURT: Oh, when we were travelling around, if I got near a refuge, I'd certainly stop and check it out and talk to the people, so.

LIBBY: But when you were, when you working, you were, did you know refuge staff when you were doing your field work or working in ES? Was there interaction between ES and the positions and the stations where you were and…

CURT: Oh, you mean professionally.

LIBBY: Yeah, professionally with local refuges.

CURT: No, no, not much of that.

LIBBY: So, you had a personal interest in them. Right, and…

CURT: Well, if they, it didn't happen very often, but if the refuge was going to do something that required a permit, then we'd get involved, but that didn't happen very often.

LIBBY: Well, lots of time they didn't ask for a permit (laughter).

CURT: So that's kind of how I, I wound down. When the office moved from Newton Corner to Hadley, I didn't, didn't move my family. My wife had some health issues, and she came out with me for a while, but it just, it wasn't working. So, I was sort of commuting weekends. Yeah, that was an interesting thing. I had a, I shared a house with Ralph Pisapia and Don Young.

LIBBY: Oh, yeah.

CURT: That was kind of interesting. I got a…

LIBBY: Well, we should say that the Regional Office in Newton Corner – they were having trouble attracting a lot of candidates for positions. They had good people working in the Regional Office, but they wanted to have more applicants for the positions. A lot of people – Newton Corner is really close to Boston, and the traffic is bad. And there was a whole group of people that lived in New Hampshire.

CURT: There sure were. I was one of them.

LIBBY: And you were one of them.

CURT: So, carpooling was a major event.

LIBBY: So, you grew up in Acton, but when you were offered this position in Boston, you ended up moving to New Hampshire.

CURT: Yes.

LIBBY: All right. So, you always commuted from New Hampshire to the Regional Office?

CURT: Yes. Seventeen years I commuted.

LIBBY: You were in a van pool, or a carpool?

CURT: I was not in the van pool. That was a unique animal. That was the Nashua side of the Merrimack River. There was the van pool and a couple of, there must have been 11 or 12 carpools. On the other side of the river we had, we could all fit in one car. But then, there were other carpools that came from different parts of New Hampshire. It was, it was a real culture and it kind of, it certainly influenced the Regional Office because the meeting ends at 3:30 (laughter) because the carpools are leaving (laughter).

LIBBY: Yeah! So, who were you in a carpool with?

CURT: Paul Nickerson. Joe Ireland. Roger Tornstrom. Axel Larson.

LIBBY: Oh yeah.

CURT: I must be leaving somebody out. That was, that was the core.

LIBBY: And most of those people didn't move to Hadley. Axel did.

CURT: There still there. A lot of them are still there. We still get together regularly. The Millers, and Tom McAndrews.

LIBBY: That's really great.

CURT: So that's… Oh, I don't tell many people this, but I guess I'm going to tell everybody now. And Pat [talking to Pat Martinkovic Pascuzzi, who was observing the interview], you certainly knew Don Young. We all had tremendous respect for him. When Ralph Pisapia and Don and I were sharing this house, Don and I were upstairs in like a loft and we each had a twin bed, side by side. Don Young was a marine. Every morning, his bed was made just as tight as it could be. Everything was in its place. Spit and polish. Don Young. Well, if Don Young was travelling, I didn't worry about that stuff. So, Don Young was travelling this day, and he wasn't supposed to be back for another two or three days. I went into the, into work, I'm walking down the hall, and here comes Don Young. I says, "Oh, hi, you came back early!" "Oh, yeah, I came back early, everything was…" What do you think I did at lunch time?

LIBBY: He made your bed?

CURT: I went home and made my bed.

LIBBY: Oh, you went home and made your bed (laughter).

CURT: I could not let Don Young see that.

LIBBY: Was he the ARD for Refuges at that time?

CURT: Yes, yes, he was.

LIBBY: Oh, so he's your roommate. Ultimately, he's also your boss. (laughter).

CURT: Yeah, yeah, yeah. He was …

LIBBY: Oh, that must have been, that must have been strange. So, you're living during the week and again, the Regional Office moved from Newton Corner to Hadley in the 1991-1992 time period, maybe '93. You said '93, I moved out to Amherst in '91, I thought it was. Well anyway, in anticipation of the move. I ended up commuting doing the reverse commute back to Newton Corner.

CURT: Several people were doing that.

LIBBY: Right, because we wanted to get housing before, while it was still available (laughter). And, but a number of people ended up renting houses in the Hadley area and you had a lot of strange bedfellows. (laughter).

CURT: You sure did.

LIBBY: For, you know, how long did you do that? A couple of years, maybe longer?

CURT: A year and a half.

LIBBY: A year and a half.

CURT: Yeah. I had, well after that, I did bring my wife out. We did that, I did that for maybe six months and then, I did get an apartment up in Sunderland. It was a beautiful little spot. It was

a farmer who had been there for generations, and he had converted his barn into some apartments. So, Jim Jones – remember Jim Jones?

LIBBY: Uh-huh.

CURT: Jim Jones. He was …

LIBBY: Jimmy Jones?

CURT: He was at the same place.

LIBBY: Was he Fisheries?

CURT: And Spence Conley lived nearby.

LIBBY: Yeah. Wow.

CURT: So that's the …

LIBBY: And then, were you, so you were working on kind of like management plans. And I know … who did you work with? Anne Hecht? Mary Parkin? Were they working with you on your team then?

CURT: Yeah, they were. They were more in, well they, once the Service got into what they call "comprehensive conservation" …

LIBBY: Well, they were doing master plans.

CURT: Yeah, those were master plans. Yeah, those were much more detailed. That's about the time that I was phasing out.

LIBBY: Wow. Oh, so you never had to work on a comprehensive conservation plan.

CURT: Not really. I did, I actually did a little bit of work after I retired. I worked with Norm Olson and Ward Feurt on the Rachel Carson. Did a little bit of work on that one.

LIBBY: Yeah. You know that one is still not done. Rachel Carson master plan - I don't - comprehensive plan. I don't think it was ever finished. So (laughter) they can take a long, and it's not the only one I know of. So, tell us, tell us – do you have any other stories you want to share about, like some other refuges that you worked on, or some of the, maybe some of the issues that you helped refuges?

CURT: I've got a funny, I've got a funny little story that happened way back in Vero Beach. Dave Harris –(unintelligible) that name probably doesn't do much to you, but in the world of Ecological Services, Dave Harris was a – he worked for the State in Vero Beach. Did the same type of work we did. His boss was Larry Shanks.

LIBBY: Oh, I rem[ember], yeah, we know Larry.

CURT: Larry Shanks lived right across the street from me. Once this whole Ecological Services thing got rolling, back to the Nat Reed situation and all this influx of people, Nat Reed moved Larry Shanks – he hired him into the Fish and Wildlife Service and came up and opened the Annapolis ES Office. Marvin Moriarty, Karen Mayne, and Dave Harris came with them. So anyway, so. When Dave was working for the State and I was in Vero Beach, one day, Dave called me and he said that all the local law enforcement people were off at a conference somewhere, and he had just gotten a call from the Sheriff's Office, and the Sheriff's Office had gotten a call from this woman in the next town who had an alligator in her back yard. So, the Sheriff went up to see what he could do, but right after he got there, he got an emergency call. So, he called the State office and said, "Can you do something about this?" Well, Dave didn't have anybody else in the office, so he called me, and he says, "I might need some help. We've got, something's going on with an alligator." So, Dave is from Arkansas, I'm from New Hampshire. So, we get in the car, we go up, we find this house. We go in the back yard. The Sheriff had lassoed this seven-foot alligator and tied him to a tree (laughter). So, the alligator is there, his mouth is wide open, he's hissing at us. He says, "What the heck are we going to do? What do we know about alligators?" So, we, it was Dave's car, so we looked in the car to see what he had. It was a station wagon. He had a couple pieces of PVC pipe and some duct tape and some rope. So, we figured out that – we knew that if you – it doesn't take much to keep an alligator's mouth closed. You can just hold it with your hand. But once they're open, you don't want to get near it coming down. So, we were able to take, get a piece of duct tape, put it on the end of a piece of PVC pipe, and wrap it around the alligator's nose, so he couldn't open his mouth. But here he was, lassoed to the tree. So, we very gingerly got some lines around both of his feet, so he couldn't run anywhere. (unintelligible) We were actually able to pick him up and put him in the back of the car and then took him to over to a stream and let him go. But that was …

LIBBY: But then you had to un, you had to …

PAT: In the trunk? In the trunk, I hope.

CURT: Well, it was a station wagon, so we put him in the back of the car.

LIBBY: But then you had to unwrap all the duct tape.

CURT: Oh, we had to unwrap him, and you could see him, he was getting a little, "Oh, I'm getting free here." Then we got him all loose, and he wouldn't go anywhere. He just stayed there and hissed at us and looked at us. We had to actually prod him to go back into the water. But that was a funny thing. That's another one of those "could have been dangerous" but it turned out to be kind of funny.

LIBBY: Right. Ever have any other, ever have any near accidents with a boat or anything like that? Ever get stuck somewhere?

CURT: I was out in Charleston Harbor once with Rob Dunlap and we were cruising right along, and the steering mechanism on the outboard motor came loose. So, the boat started fishtailing and myself and another guy just got thrown right out the boat, but Rob was able to get the throttle and cut her back in time. But that was …

LIBBY: Were you wearing PFD's or is that before there was a requirement that you had to wear PFD's (laughter)?

CURT: No, that was before. We had them, but we weren't wearing them. Yeah.

LIBBY: Is there anything else? We could, you know, I mean, we can talk a little bit more if you have time or?

CURT: No, I guess I …

LIBBY: Who were some of the people that you felt were, did you feel like you ever had a mentor in the Fish and Wildlife Service, or is there anybody that you feel like you kind of mentored?

CURT: Oh, boy. That's a … Well, you know, Ralph Andrews and Don Young, of course. He was just a pillar of leadership. He was, you learned a lot from just being around people like that. And well like, was it Mark [Musaus] this morning said that the dedication of the people - it's just such a treat to work with people who love doing what they're doing. You know, just so many people. It's hard to find a piece of dead wood in the ranks of the Fish and Wildlife Service. It's just really great.

LIBBY: Did you get to go to most of the refuges in Region 5 during your career?

CURT: Yeah, I think I got to, boy, I can't think of one I didn't go to. I think I, yeah.

LIBBY: Any favorite refuges amongst them?

CURT: Oh boy. Well, you know, if you live in New England, you've got so much diversity, so close. You've got the ocean, you've got the mountains, you've got lakes, you've got rivers, you got, and so it's, and then they're all unique. So, it's hard to compare apples and oranges.

LIBBY: Did you, did your kids understand what you did for a living and did they, were they interested in that?

CURT: They did, and it certainly affects them to this day. They're all very much into the outdoors.

LIBBY: Did you take them with you on any of your travels?

CURT: Oh yeah, oh for sure.

LIBBY: Oh, you did, that's great. 'Cause I don't think that happens too often anymore, people tak[ing] their kids with them when they go out to the field.

CURT: We used to, when I was in Vero Beach and then Charleston, it was very easy to go out and catch your own crabs or shrimp and fish and oysters and whatever. They'd be right there.

LIBBY: So, you retired in 1994. That is 25 years ago.

CURT: It is.

LIBBY: Wow. That's amazing.

CURT: I volunteered with New Hampshire Fish and Game for a while. I worked with a non-profit - the Nashua River – no, Merrimack River Watershed Council. Worked with them for a while, and then the last ten years, Carol and I have been very much involved with the American Chestnut Foundation.

LIBBY: And Carol is your second wife, after your wife passed away, you ended up remarrying.

CURT: Yes. Carol and I were neighbors for 35 years, and her husband passed away. It was like falling off a log (laughter), it just happened.

LIBBY: That's wonderful. That's nice. So just tell us a little bit what you are doing with the American Chestnut Foundation.

CURT: Oh, goodness. I don't have time. Let me see if I can tell you this very quickly. I should bring my, I do a PowerPoint presentation. I should bring it to one of these reunions. The American chestnut tree was the most important tree in the eastern United States up until about 1950's. In about 1904, the chestnut tree started dying at the New York Botanical Gardens. They realized that a pathogen had been imported with a Chinese tree, and within 50 years, it just wiped out 200 million acres of chestnut trees. It's, and the chestnut blight is here to stay. You can't get rid of it. So, the Chestnut Foundation, about 35 years ago, started genetically backcrossing between wild Americans and the Chinese tree, because you can still find wild American Chestnut trees, because the blight kills the root, but it doesn't kill the tree. The tree gets, lives for five or six years, and then the blight kills it. But occasionally, even today, some of those trees will live long enough to flower. So those, we call them "mother" trees. And we would seek those trees out and hand pollinate them and put them in orchards to go on to the next generation. We thought we were almost there. That after six generations, we had a tree that was almost pure American but had enough of the Chinese genes to resist the blight. Well, just in the last year and a half or so, our geneticist informed us that it's not working. That there are more genes than originally thought to be blight resistant. When the whole thing started, 35 years ago, we had 17 state chapters all across the east. The New York chapter never got into the backcross breeding program. They started working with the State University of New York in Syracuse to develop a blight-tolerant tree in the laboratory. A "GMO" [genetically modified organism] – bad word, sometimes. They found in wheat two genes that produced oxalic acid, I don't know, that oxidates. They produced a gene called oxidase. The way the blight works, it works in two stages, when the blight attacks a tree. The first thing it does it has oxalic acid that starts to break down the cells in the cambium layer. Once those cells are

broken down, then the real toxin in the blight comes in and kills the tree. This oxidase gene de-toxifies the oxalic acid, turns it into water and CO_2 so it can't do its thing. So, the tree still has the blight, but the blight's been de-activated. Can't do its thing. So right now, that whole tree is going through approval with the USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture], EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], and the FDA Food and Drug Administration. So, if that gets approved, that may be the silver bullet that actually brings the chestnut tree back. What we're doing now, we're still, like I say, if you really look, you can still find flowering trees, so we're trying to find every tree we can, capture its DNA, get them into orchards so when the transgenic tree gets approved, they'll be there for pollination. Because the transgenic tree is a clone.

LIBBY: Right.

CURT: Everyone has the same genetic makeup, and so you need that diversity.

LIBBY: You need to diversify that. Yeah. Well, so if anybody's reading this transcript, they can, if they find a chestnut tree out in the wild …

CURT: Go to acf.org.

LIBBY: Acf.org. Cool.

CURT: And you'll find a link to your state chapter.

LIBBY: All right.

CURT: All right.

LIBBY: Well, thank you so much, Curt. It's been a real pleasure.

CURT: Yeah.

LIBBY: Thank you. Really appreciate it, and good to see you again.

Key words: basins, boating, coastal environments, dredging, planning, trees, wetlands, wildlife refuges