The Oral History of Ben Harrison

May 7, 2018

Interview conducted by John Cornely

Chinook Winds Resort in Lincoln City, Oregon

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Ben Harrison

Date of Interview: May 7, 2018

Location of Interview: Chinook Winds Resort in Lincoln City, Oregon

Interviewer: John Cornely

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 31 years in the Region 1 Regional Office in Portland, Oregon.

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Assistant Regional Wetland Coordinator (1983-1989), Ascertainment Biologist (1989-1994), Regional NEPA Coordinator (1994-2001), Branch Chief-Land Protection Planning (2001-2005), Branch Chief-Refuge Planning (2005-2008), Division Chief-Policy and Compliance (2008-2011), Deputy Regional Chief-National Wildlife Refuge System (2011-2014).

Most Important Projects: Establishing new National Wildlife Refuges (Franz Lake NWR, Siletz Bay NWR, Nestucca Bay NWR, Tualatin River NWR, Wapato Lake NWR); completion of Headwaters Incidental Take Permit EIS; Trinity River Restoration EIS; completion of Comprehensive Conservation Plans; compliance and coordination of Columbian White-tailed Deer translocation project.

Colleagues and Mentors: Dennis Peters, Ron Weaver, Peggy Kohl, Chuck Houghten, Robin West, Kevin Foerster

Brief Summary of Interview: Overview of positions held during 31 years in the Portland Regional Office and observations regarding colleagues, mentors and memorial wildlife conservation projects during his career.

THE INTERVIEW

JOHN CORNELY: This is John Cornely with the US Fish and Wildlife Service Heritage Committee. It's the 7th of May 2018. We're at the Chinook Winds Resort in Lincoln City, Oregon on the Oregon coast. Today I'm with Ben Harrison in the continuation of our oral history project.

With that, Ben, I'll just let you start with your birthday and take off.

BEN HARRISON: Okay. Well, I was born on May 13th, 1952, in New Haven, Connecticut. I'm part of the baby boomer crowd. My father was a World War II veteran, went to college on the GI Bill and met my mother there in school and started having babies. Had a couple sisters along with myself.

We lived in Cheshire, Connecticut. I grew up there, which was rural at that time, in the early mid '50s. I enjoyed having a fair amount of property. I remember my father turned a low swampy area into a pond. We played in ponds, were able to fish and just be outdoors a lot.

When I was about ten years old, my parents divorced. My father worked in banking and finance. My mother was a housewife as so many were in that era. We moved to suburbs of North Haven for a couple of years after the divorce.

My mother remarried. My stepfather, who was an attorney, worked for the state of New York. He was a deputy assistant attorney general with the state of New York. He mainly worked in environmental cases. He turned out to be a rather big influence on me as I went through my high school years.

I ended up going to high school, actually, it was one of the college preparatory schools that were so common in New England called Westminster School. My father was adamant that that was the only proper way to get an education rather than public school. So, I was sent to a boarding school.

JOHN: Where was it located?

BEN: It was in Simsbury, Connecticut. It was in the northcentral part of the state. I went there from '65 to '71, graduated in '71.

My mother and her new husband lived in Kent, Connecticut, which is located on the border of New York State. He would work in New York during the week. He had sort of a hobby farm and that's where we lived. We had lots of animals. We ended up with some charity cases from the New York Zoo sometimes. We had goats and we had a horse, an ox, and he even brought a yak one time excessed from the zoo and some llamas.

We had a fair amount of property out there, 300 acres or so. I was still able to wander and did a lot of outdoor work, a lot of farm maintenance. We used to bring in hay for the animals and still had the opportunity to hunt and fish on our property. It was a classic case you find with a lot of Fish and Wildlife Service people. I thought it was pretty neat, the environmental protection stuff that my stepfather was doing. He was always telling me stories about that.

I was also kind of invigorated in that era, the public service, John Kennedy, what can you do for a country and so forth. Being interested in environmental stuff, environmental and protection, I decided when I went to college, I wanted to try and get that kind of a background. I was thinking in terms of maybe I would be able to work for a state agency, perhaps some conservation organization. I was really thinking about something like the Department of Environmental Quality or something with the state of Connecticut.

I went to the University of Connecticut from '72 to '76. I got a bachelor's in Natural Resource Management. That was in the college of agriculture at that time. We were out there with the farm boys who were learning how to do animal husbandry and so forth.

I just remember something that's always stuck with me. The first day of a wildlife management course, we were all young and enthusiastic. We wanted to learn how to age them and sex them and all that stuff you're going to do, being a wildlifer. And written on the blackboard, he had written "fish and wildlife management is people management".

We didn't know what that was about. He explained this to us. I thought, yeah, yeah, fine, fine if we want to learn about...I only thought about that about halfway through my career, I think, or so when I starting having to deal with the public and policy and all that kind of stuff. And when I became a manager, myself, I realized just how true that was. That was rather prophetic guidance I realized.

JOHN: Most of us didn't want it to be true. That's not what we were interested in to begin with, but you can't be successful…

BEN: Not at all.

I got my bachelor's degree and was seeing a girl. We ended up moving down to North Carolina because she had gotten a job in Salisbury, North Carolina working at a small college. She was in physical education. I wasn't able to find work at all and I got pretty frustrated. The relationship didn't last. We both left North Carolina and returned to Connecticut.

I decided I thought I'd go to graduate school after returning from North Carolina because I didn't seem to be getting very far with my bachelor's degree. Contacted one of my old UConn professors whose brother-in-law was at the University of Rhode Island. I was able to get a graduate assistantship at the University of Rhode Island. I was getting my master's degree in what was called Plant and Soil Science. It was in the forestry department. They didn't have an accredited forestry degree program. They did have what was named plant and soil science. I was heading towards the forestry end of things.

I took just sort of on a lark as an elective a course about wetlands, wetland management or something about wetland ecology. The professor there was a gentleman by the name of Frank Golet, who was also one of the authors of the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife] Service's wetland classification system.

After I graduated in 1979, looking around for work again, I learned later on there was kind of a network of people looking to find Frank Golet students for various wetlands work. A company by the name of Martel Laboratories was looking to hire people who knew about wetlands and could do aerial

photointerpretation, things that I had studied in both my bachelor's and master's degree. Being a student of Frank Golet, they were anxious to hire me.

In 1979, I think it was September as I recall, I moved to Florida. This is all the while where I had earlier that spring just before graduating, I had proposed to a woman who was going to be my wife. I said oh, well, I've got to rush off and I don't want to rush into being married. I'll go down there, and I'll come back next summer, and we'll get married.

I started working for Martel Laboratories, a company with a contract with the Fish and Wildlife Service doing a lot of the aerial photointerpretation and the ground truthing for the National Wetlands Inventory program.

I came back up to Connecticut in 1980 and got married. We moved as young newlyweds down to Saint Petersburg, Florida where kind of the production headquarters of the Wetlands Inventory was. I worked for Martel Laboratories for three years and was able to travel to a variety of different places; we'd go wherever the wetland coordinators needed to go. I spent some time in Alaska, did some work in the southwest, and some in the southeast of course.

I (along with several other Martel employes) had a marvelous experience helping Lew Cowardin develop his standard plots, doing the mapping of his standard plots for his Mallard model and kind of got an introduction to research.

A fellow by the name of Jon Hall was the Fish and Wildlife Service person working at Martel Laboratories. He was in charge of National Wetlands Inventory quality control for the photo interpretation in St. Petersburg. I got to be friendly with him. He was kind enough to recommend me to a fellow named Dennis Peters who was National Wetlands Inventory coordinator in Portland, Oregon. Dennis was looking to hire an assistant. Dennis was pretty dogged in trying to hire someone and he hired me.

I recall at the time; it was the first term of the Reagan administration, there was hiring freeze on both regionally and nationally. Dennis made the case for a specialist, and I was fortunate enough, I had enough coursework I could qualify for a wildlife biologist position. Dennis advertised for a wildlife biologist, but he also wanted someone who had fairly extensive background in plants and soils, which I had from my master's degree. I guess my background allowed me to be hired as opposed to other wildlife biologists who were more focused on fisheries or traditional wildlife biology. You usually don't get too much plants and soils education in your traditional wildlife management degree. I also had the wetland background from Frank Golet.

I got hired and that was the start of my Fish and Wildlife Service career.

JOHN: Say the year again.

BEN: 1983 it was. I remember March 20th, 1983, was my in-service date.

I moved out ahead of my wife. She had to sell the house in Saint Petersburg, but finally joined me in the summer and started my career doing wetlands inventory. We quickly learned that I was a better technician than Dennis. Did a little bit better in terms of the technical stuff, that being aerial photointerpretation and ground truthing stuff.

Dennis by this time was a master of the administrative end to things. We agreed to kind of play to our strengths. I took on a majority of the photointerpretation, the mapping and the ground truthing. Of course, Dennis did a fair amount of that too, but he ran the program in the region. I was able to learn a little bit more about budgets and just the administrative side of running the program as his assistant. I kept on doing that till 1989.

In 1984, my first son was born, and I was still traveling a fair amount. It was a little bit stressful with a newborn youngster with Jean**.** She was also trying to go to graduate school. She worked for the Portland Art Museum at the time. She was taking graduate studies and Native American studies because she was a curatorial assistant at the Portland Art Museum for Native American Art.

As my second son was coming along, I decided I needed to do something different that would stay closer to home. I was also being recruited by a fellow by the name of Ron Weaver. He had to move to a different job. The early ‘80s is a time if you remember, we had regional offices and what did they call them state offices?

JOHN: Area offices.

BEN: Area offices, that’s right. They were closing down the area offices. A bunch of people were needing to be placed from area offices and so jobs are getting shuffled around. Ron ended up getting moved to the refuge program. It was called refuge planning, land acquisition planning or land protection planning.

Anyway, Ron was looking to hire some people. He knew me from the days when he was in ecological services. We were all in the same office up in Portland. He asked if I was interested in lateraling to a different job and he did that for me.

I left wetlands inventory and learned all about land acquisition planning. It was primarily an office job. I still got out in the field occasionally. We looked at projects and so forth but wasn't traveling anywhere near so much. It was good exposure. I got to learn about the refuge program, learned about land acquisition, learned a lot about planning, and had to do a lot more writing, especially environmental compliance documents. It was just a good career development.

JOHN**:** It was when we used…I was involved in helping evaluate some of this stuff. We used the land acquisition planning system to rate or to prioritize or something as I recall.

BEN: Yeah, LAPS (Land Acquisition Priority System), the old LAPS. I spent a lot of years on LAPS and never liked it. We were never happy with results, all the way till probably the mid-2000s, struggling with trying to develop what we thought was an equitable land acquisition prioritization system.

JOHN: Everybody agreed that there needed to be some way to prioritize, but I don't remember anybody that was totally happy with LAPS.

BEN: It had some merits, but there were a lot of facets…well, the capture, which were really important making those decisions. It was a struggle. I got involved in that. I worked in the land acquisition planning program for 5 years, from ‘89 to ‘94.

Ron Weaver actually took a different job, went back to Ecological Services probably 2 or 3 years into that.

A fellow by the name of Chuck Houghten came from California and became the planning chief.

JOHN: I know Chuck.

BEN: He promoted me into a GS-12 position. I was working my way up. Once again, Ron Weaver intervened. This was in 1994. He was looking for someone who could do NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) compliance. Of course I had a lot of experience with NEPA. This was the Clinton era and Bruce Babbitt was going to prove that the Endangered Species Act would work.

During the mid- '90s, into the late '90s, the new glamour program became incidental take permits under the Endangered Species Act for private entities. We spent a lot of time working with permit applicants to develop HCPs (Habitat Conservation Plans). I worked on NEPA compliance for these habitat conservation plans that private entities, timber companies, counties and anything non-federal if they wanted to get an incidental take permit.

My time as a NEPA coordinator just started out as NEPA compliance for habitat conservation plans especially for forest ones. I was kind of proud because I kind of built the job into something much bigger. I became the regional NEPA coordinator of the whole region and just dealt with NEPA compliance for all of the Fish and Wildlife Service programs. I liked that because it sort of became a position that was value added. People really, really liked the assistance I gave. I tried to make dealing with NEPA easy for them.

I also got involved with teaching at NCTC. We developed training programs. I worked with Don Peterson and Ron Singer, who were the NEPA coordinators at headquarters and did a lot of training and I enjoyed that.

Sort of to jump way ahead, at the very tail end of my career, I ended up being the person who wrote the NEPA manual for the National Wildlife Refuge System program.

We were getting sued left and right in the refuge program for poor NEPA compliance. I remember Jim Kurth said, we need to have something, a simple manual people can use. We've got to stop getting sued.

There was a team put together. Time and effort kind of drew people away. We finally wanted to close the door on it, and I said, I'll do it, I'll finish it up. I think even after I retired, I was working on the last pieces of it to make sure that it got done and it did. That was another piece of work, I thought was pretty neat.

Back to 1994, I started doing the NEPA compliance and I worked on that stuff till 2001. Worked with an awful lot of the endangered species folks. I learned a quite a bit about the Endangered Species Act and habitat conservation plans.

Gosh, I got to go to three signing ceremonies with Bruce Babbitt. There's just a story I remember: One of the very first ones was timber company, Plum Creek. He showed up. This is one of the big ones we had here.

We were all introducing ourselves to Bruce Babbitt. This was just about the time my wife who had been working in visitor services, she had redesigned the Fish and Wildlife Service exhibits in the Interior Museum. In Bruce Babbitt's introduction, I said, by the way, my wife is just working on the redesign of the Fish and Wildlife Service exhibits in the Interior Museum. Have you seen it? He said, no, no, but I will, I'm intrigued by that. I thought, okay, yeah, yeah, he's just saying that. (*Laughter).*

It was probably 8 years later, it was at the end of the Clinton administration, we do another big signing ceremony. We had done a big project in Northern California. Oh gosh, I forgot… what was the name of the river. It was a huge Bureau of Reclamation project that they had to start releasing more water. The Trinity River, the Trinity River project. This is a big deal for the tribe, the Hoopa' and so forth. Finally, they were going to release more water down Trinity River to restore fisheries.

Bruce Babbitt came out for that signing ceremony. We did the meet and greeted again, and I said, oh, by the way, did you ever get to see the Interior Museum? I remember I mentioned to you a number of years ago. He says as a matter of fact, I did, and he started telling me all about it and how much he liked it.

Wow, this guy is amazing, what a memory. He remembered pretty minute details of the exhibit. He thought it was wonderful. I was able to go back and tell my wife about how much Bruce Babbitt enjoyed it. She was feeling great about that.

My former supervisor back around 2000-2001, Chuck Houghten said he was looking for a branch chief for land protection planning, it was known then. He wondered if I was interested and I said, yeah, I would do that. He hired me into that. I got my first management job GS-13, first line manager.

I remember I had an all-female staff, and I thought, okay, what am I going to do about this. I don't want to do the wrong thing. I asked a lady from the Sacramento solicitor's office, Lynn Peterson. I said Lynn, I'm going to have an all-female staff, what do I need to do to keep them happy? She said, praise and chocolate, you'll be fine. I took that to heart.

I always had a gigantic bucket of chocolate in my office and the ladies would come in and I could tell if they were having a good day because they'd take 1 or 2 pieces of chocolate if it was a good day and if they were having a bad day, they'd come in and take a fistful of chocolate.

I kind of muddled along in that job, did some land acquisition planning, but land acquisition started drying up. Pretty soon, that was not a popular program.

In Region 1, that's about the time we started a split. They split California and Nevada from the Hawaiian Islands, Oregon, Washington and Idaho. California and Nevada became region 8. The decision was that they originally expected a bunch of people to want to move from Portland down to Sacramento and were shocked to learn that nobody wanted to leave Portland to go to Sacramento. It became a money thing. Region 8 claimed Region 1 owed a certain amount of money, which equals so many full-time equivalents.

Refuge management in Region 1 decided, well, we're not going to take money out of the field, we're going to take it out of the regional office. If I recall correctly, it was 10 positions they had to shed in the regional office. We did that. We ended up collapsing a number of program branches in response to having fewer RO staff.

At the time we used to have a branch chief for land acquisition planning and a branch chief for comprehensive conservation planning, CCPs. The person who was branch chief for comprehensive conservation plans ended up going to be the visitor service chief. I ended up becoming the branch chief for both of those planning functions. That allowed me to learn a whole bunch about the comprehensive planning conservation program in addition to land acquisition planning, which was pretty slow then.

A new refuge chief would be gung-ho and let's expand the system. Then the lack of O&M (Operation and Maintenance) money headaches would continue. Oh, we don't have O&M to run what we have. I don't want to add more land, I don't want to grow the system anymore. Let's not do this. That happened every time we had a new chief. I was working on that kind of stuff.

Then we had a retirement, and we had an opening for the division chief. This is where I think it might have been 2006 or 7, when I finally got a division chief position. I got my GS-14 and supervised several programs. I supervised the archaeology program, was the lead for policy and compliance, was supervisor for fire for a time and supervised the refuge biology programs. I had a pretty decent number of staff and a fair amount of responsibility. I did that for several years.

Then we had a retirement, and we had a new chief, a fellow by name of Robin West, come along and said he would like to have a deputy. Would you be willing to transition into that? I did that from about probably 2010 or so till 2014. I was the deputy regional chief. We didn't fill the division chief position I vacated, so I did that as well as being the deputy Regional Chief.

From what I understand, people were real happy with me in that position. I enjoyed it. It probably was the most enjoyable in some respects. I was able to get things done for people. I had command of the budget and just had a lot of responsibilities. The way Robin and I split up duties, whoever fielded a call that came in first, we would work on that. I would a lot of times work on something the chief would normally do and vice versa.

Got a lot accomplished. We had an emergency situation with the Colombian white-tailed deer. Under emergency situation, we were able to start getting deer transferred to another refuge. Something that probably would have taken years if it hadn't been an emergency. We recognized the silver lining of the emergency situation, in a couple of years, we were able to get a species that was listed as endangered downlisted to threatened. Something we've been working on since the early '70s.

JOHN: A long time, yep.

BEN: We'd build the deer population up and something would happen, usually a flood. We really got to get these deer moved around someplace different. There were plenty of deer, but they weren't in a secure habitat. Once we moved deer to secure habitat there were some real successes.

Had 5 or 6 different jobs depending on how you wanted to count them. It turned out to be a remarkably rewarding career. I worked in Ecological Services. I worked in Refuges [and Wildlife] quite a bit. My 31 years in the regional office, either as NEPA coordinator or working cross programs touched just about all the programs except for maybe law enforcement. I was able to supervise about every program in refuges and just found it be an exceptionally rewarding career.

I was just astounded by the dedication and the quality of the people. Even in training programs, I would be training and meet people from other agencies in much the same way. The general public likes to rag on you, government employees just sitting around drinking coffee with their feet up. It was so false. I never saw such a dedicated group of people.

JOHN: It's very frustrating. My feeling has always been, well if you watch things over time…The vast majority of Fish and Wildlife Service people, no matter what program they are, are hardworking, put in extra hours and very passionate and dedicated about what they do. That's one of the main things, I think that makes it a great agency to work for. People, if you do anything, you have to say, hey, you need to slow down a little bit.

I had a person working for me that I would just off the top of my head say, boy, it'd be nice if we knew something more about this. Like a week later there would be a report on my desk and I never asked him to do anything. I was just doing that.

Plus, I think it reduces the number of conflicts and personnel issues and stuff that some other agencies have to deal with.

BEN: There was another thing that was the dramatic change in responsibilities. We had female employees increase in numbers over time. I mean, when I first started, people would make sort of snarky comments about women in the agency, especially in the refuge system. I mean, there were even days when there weren't women's uniforms, they had to wear men's components. It just doesn't look right. To see women throughout, even in the Hook & Bullet Club, we had these managers and regional chiefs, females and that was great.

I don't know how we ever cracked the diversity nut. We were always trying to do something. I don't know if it's just something cultural. Just well, a lot of folks of color just didn't seem to get interested in wildlife conservation work.

JOHN: In Region 6, I was on the diversity committee. We found an outstanding trainer to contract with to put on workshops. I think we accomplished a lot that way. A lot of times you accomplish a lot and then you leave and then you look back and things have kind of fallen back into a hole or something. It is difficult. I did a lot of recruiting of co-op students and then SCEP turned into the student conservation/career experience program.

I had students when I was here at Western Oregon Refuges and the program had a bad rap. They said, well, they just accept people because they're female or minority and they're not the best students and all this kind of stuff. I got a real good one. I didn't really…it wasn't like at that time I was able to recruit the person myself. In region 6, I started recruiting. I found out we just weren't putting any time and effort into finding people. We didn't have much money, so we could only afford 2 or 3 at a time.

When I would go recruiting, I had connections with professors at certain universities and stuff. Of course, these programs weren't designed as diversity programs. I said, I only want top notch students. We're short on females, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Native Americans and so on. I knew there had to be good ones out there and there were. We were very successful once, but…2 or 3 of us had to put a lot of extra time over and above our regular job.

At the same time, compared to region 1, when I was here, we had biologists on almost every refuge. When I got to region 6, that was not the case. We had 2 refuge biologists in the whole big region. I used this program also to train refuge biologists and mostly get good undergraduates and get a master's degree on a refuge project at a problem that we thought was a priority problem.

At least for quite a few years, we were successful at getting good new people, increasing the diversity and increasing the average educational capabilities of people. I recruited some managers too. You have to work at it. It just doesn't happen.

BEN: No, I know we have people working on it. Send a white guy down to talk to Howard University. I don't know how well it's going to go over and it didn't. We struggled in the region…scratching our heads.

JOHN: I found out because we couldn't afford very many either. I recruited Grambling and different places like that. You don't have to do that. You can go to Oregon State, you can go to the University of Oregon. I found a publication that listed the percentage of minorities at schools like Colorado South, State schools all over the country.

I have no problem with going to those historic black colleges. There are places with high percentage of Hispanic enrollment and so on. You don't have to do that because you're looking for 1 or 2 a year.

You could go to Colorado State or Texas Tech or wherever. You need professors that know exactly what you're looking for is. Oh, yeah, I've got just the person. It took a lot of work, but I'm really proud of it. I've been retired for over 10 years and people in region 6 mostly now don't have any idea who I am. My kids are out there doing good things. One of them is a chief of refuges in region 6 and they're scattered all over.

BEN: Let's see, that is…

JOHN: Will Meeks.

BEN: Will Meeks. Okay. Still there. Okay.

JOHN: Anyway, I'm not supposed to be talking on your oral history.

BEN: I just kind of got through my career. I know it was quick. Lots of stories and…

JOHN: Yep. Well, we've got plenty of time if you have some other stories you remember. Some of our earlier discussion today, if there are some things you wanted to elaborate on that would be fine too.

BEN: I sort of remember they used to say the best job I ever had was the first one, which paid the least. That's not quite true. Wetlands Inventory was wonderful because it was just science. You feel like you were doing science as I said before. Or I was doing soils. It's not politically controversial most of the time. That was just kind of a neat thing to do. Oh, this is what I went to school for. That's great and that's fine. I think I just became a more effective conservationist by getting different experience in the land acquisition…

JOHN: Yes. I'd like you to comment a little bit more on that. It seems to me that that is extremely valuable to get that diversity of experience and kind of gives you a different perspective. I think that's probably what made you effective when you became a division chief and all of these other things…made you more effective.

BEN: Well, the land acquisition program was really a great learning tool to see there's a lot of other perspectives out there on the way people think the world ought to be, especially with landowners.

It was difficult in land acquisition because a lot of people's experience with government is you have to do something. It's the draft or the highway construction. People are coming in and you don't have a choice. It was a tough sell to say, well, we would like to buy your property, but only if you're willing to sell it. Folks were kind of like, what are you going to do to me. The first impression they would have is the government guy comes by; you're going to do something harmful to me. It would be very difficult to convince them otherwise.

I remember we had lots of refuge projects where we were the anti-Christ. We were just going to ruin the county. We finally get the refuge established and 10, 15, 20 years later, the refuge was the greatest asset in the neighborhood.

One story I remember, we were trying to establish a refuge that's called Nestucca Bay National Wildlife Refuge. Roy Lowe, he noticed there was an area south of Pacific City, Oregon, where the Semidi Island Aleutian Canada Geese would overwinter. I guess they're Aleutian Cacklers now.

JOHN: Yes, they are now.

BEN: Okay. They would come there. That property was for sale.

JOHN: Before Roy was there, I was trying to keep track of those birds. They'd fly out to Haystack Rock and graze out there. We had some Duskies that did the same thing.

BEN: We went down and started the planning process and got a pretty cold reception. Mainly it was the dairy farmers didn't want to have anybody sitting around looking at them dumping cow manure into the water. Even though they claimed it was something else, that was really what the issue was. They didn't want us there. We were able to manage and get the project started.

We purchased the headland there. A place called Cannery Hill. Over time, we purchased the entire headland. It's opened up for public use. We've got viewing platforms and hiking trails there. It's a real asset. It's part of the Scenic Byways program.

At the time we were working on the planning, which was sometime in the early '90s. There was a newly elected county commissioner, Tim Josey**.** He just thought establishing the refuge would be the worst thing in the world. He did everything he could to stop that and was bitterly disappointed he couldn't.

He came to our public opening of the refuge some years later. One of our celebrations of the headlands. I think this is even after I was retired, I think it was maybe 2015-2016. He came and he announced to everybody, he said, well, I was wrong, I was wrong. I tried to stop this thing. I thought it was terrible, but now I'm a full supporter. This is a great asset to the county. I'm glad it's here.

After Tim Josey gave his talk, Roy came over to me. He says, I guess we can stop our boycott of Tillamook products now, Tillamook ice cream. (*Laughter).*

JOHN: Right. Right. Roy told the same story too.

BEN: We were so shocked.

JOHN: I remember because both of us worked for Palmer Sekora. Even though I was kind of the chief biologist. Palmer had a seabird background, and he wanted to supervise Roy. He didn't want Roy under me, which was fine, because I believe in teams rather than hierarchy anyway. Palmer said, well, there's no support for any more land acquisition. Coastal refuges are never going to expand anymore. We're not ever going to get any more land in the Willamette Valley. Now, look what's happened since then. He got involved before he retired. He was right in there saying, yeah, write that up and stuff like that.

The last refuge that we had acquired I think before I left the complex was Bandon Marsh. We thought that…just a little marsh. Look what happened in the estuary now.

We hoped that Palmer was wrong, but he had good reason to say what he did. When I found out what was going on over there, I said this is incredible and so great.

Not just the county commissioner, but you've got a lot of public support of all this stuff that's been done.

BEN: Oh, it's been remarkable.

JOHN: Well Palmer was very supportive of biological programs and biologists on refuges. There was always this rift between managers and the biologists. We overcame quite a bit of that through the years. We didn't have a regional refuge biologist until about 1982 or 3. We just didn't have any such a thing. We got one.

Then I acted more like an area biologist. I was assigned to this refuge. I was surveying Ridgefield and a whole bunch of areas. We started getting all the biologists together doing annual biological workshops. We had never met each other.

At Malheur, when the cranes start splitting up, they're going to the Klamath Basin. I said it would be nice if we knew the biologists down there and we'd get on the phone and say, hey, here they come. This is kind of a diversity story, although I think we were all white males at the time or mostly.

We got together the first time in a meeting, and we found out we had a deer biologist of Columbian white-tailed deer. I had a predator…

BEN: That would be…Dr., I forgot his name.

JOHN: I can see him.

BEN: Al Clark.

JOHN: From Binghamton, New York.

BEN: Al Clark, PhD. Al spent his whole career trying to save those deer.

JOHN: Very kind of quiet guy.

BEN: If he said something though, you ought to listen.

JOHN: He was sharp.

I finished my PhD while I was at Malheur, worked every night and weekend for the first year and a half, while I was out there, while spending daytime time in the field in northern Arizona in Flagstaff. I studied coyote ecology in Joshua Tree National Monument at the time, now Park.

Anyway, so I had a predator background. I couldn't figure out why they hired me for a waterfowl migratory bird refuge, but they had serious predation problems. Plus, I had a fire ecology background, and they wanted to do prescribed burning. I got that started before we had any professional fire people.

Jim Hainline was down at Klamath Basin. He did his master's on shorebirds.

Steve Thompson was my assistant at Malheur. He was very interested in raptors. As we went around our group, we had all kinds of people that we could call up. They either had contacts, or they knew answers to some questions that we had if our background was a little different. It was wonderful.

Before that, we never got invited to project leaders' meetings. We didn't know each other. Then we started getting together every year. Ulrick Wilson up at Sequim is where he was stationed out of Dungeness. Ulrick was a seabird guy. We have all these seabirds on the coast and before Roy, we had nobody over here.

One other quick story. This is about Roy. When we hired Roy, Frank Dunkle was the…

BEN: Uncle Dunkle.

JOHN: Uncle Dunkle. Frank didn't give a shit about seabirds or shorebirds or anything else. We had to advertise this as a waterfowl biologist. (*Laughter).*

Before we go to Tualatin River, I want you to talk about that. That is a wonderful...

See a lot of these places that I used to fly and count birds are now part of the refuge system. They were places that I had to count because they were important areas. I never imagined they'd become part of the system.

Palmer, I think was bipolar, maybe still. Apparently, he's back in Corvallis again. He was good to me, but he also pissed you off. Like I say he supported biology. The reason I got over here is he didn't get along with the biologists he had. He basically wanted to transfer him somewhere else. I was at Malheur. My wife didn't like it over there.

BEN: Who was the biologist then?

JOHN: John Annear. He went to Umatilla.

JOHN: He was an old-fashioned naturalist. Palmer was looking for somebody that had a little bit more of a research background. He wanted to do some birding and stuff.

I have two quick stories.

One, Palmer was the only one that lived on the refuge at Finley. We would do this Christmas bird count. Dan Boone was the assistant manager. Dan and I would take groups of Audubon volunteers to do the Christmas bird count. We would sneak around so we didn't disturb the geese and all this kind of stuff.

Well, some of those geese are always getting up and wandering around. Palmer's at home. We're done with the Christmas bird count and we're back at the shop area at Finley. There's about 5,000 Taverners Canada geese raising hell and flying around. He comes over and chews my ass in front of all these volunteers about kicking up all those birds. I said, Palmer, we did not do that. I said, I guarantee you that we did not kick those birds up.

Well, he wanted to know where Dan was. I said, well, I don't know where Dan is, but I doubt that he did it either. We were very careful. You can ask these folks if you like. I was just…I kept my cool, but I was steaming.

Then he said, well, okay. He went back to the house. Then I met Dan over at the office and I said, I'm going to kill the son of a bitch which is very unlike me. Dan had a temper that you rarely saw, but he had a whale of one when he really…We reversed roles because this time he was calming me down. He says, it's not going to do a damn bit of good and all this…

Fortunately, with Palmer, you could come in and say good morning and you could read him in 30 seconds whether it's time to go out and get in the truck or sit down and have a great conversation.

The other thing that happened was we used to have a put and take pheasant hunt on Finley, which was ridiculous. Every year we'd go have a coordination meeting with the state up at the E.E. Wilson Area. We went up there. Dan was there and I was there, Palmer was there, and the state guys were there. We had our annual meeting and that was a Friday afternoon. Monday morning Palmer was going to pick me up. We had a meeting in Portland.

He pulls up in a government pickup. He picks me up and starts in on me about how I really made him look bad at that meeting on Friday. I'm sitting there and I said to myself, what in the hell is he talking about. He goes on for…we're sitting in my driveway. He goes on for about 10 minutes and I said, what did I say, Palmer?

He couldn't remember.

He'd been stewing about it the whole weekend and he couldn't even remember what it was I said. *(Laughter).*

BEN: But it was bad.

JOHN: But it was really bad. I said, well, I don't know what it was, Palmer, but I said, you know that I would never intentionally say anything to make you look bad.

Then…okay. We had a perfectly good two days. That was just typical, it happened over and over again with somebody.

All right let's talk about Tualatin.

BEN: Well, this is a fascinating story. The land acquisition story I need to tell you about how Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge came to be. There's the story that you hear and then there's the real story, which is a little bit more complicated.

JOHN: I need to do an interview with Ralph at some point too.

BEN: Ralph knows about this. His recollection might be slightly different.

JOHN: I know how that works. You interview enough people about the same incident and the truth is in there somewhere.

BEN: This is the God's honest truth right here.

Marv Plenert, I don't know if you know him.

JOHN: I know Marv.

BEN: Marv was instrumental on this one. He has some pretty interesting recollections about this.

Oddly enough, Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge got its start back in the early 1980's with the Kesterson Reservoir. You may remember that…

JOHN: Because my good friend Fred Paveglio was down there.

BEN: Oh yeah.

Anyway, one of the adjacent landowners at Kesterson is named Jim Claus. His land got contaminated with selenium from the Kesterson Reservoir. He battled the Bureau of Reclamation for the longest damn time and Reclamation is like no, no, no. Finally, they paid him off. They bought him out. Jim goes, it's a pretty sweet deal, the feds will pay you big bucks for your land.

Fast forward to early 1990s. Jim Claus has moved up to Sherwood, Oregon. He's contacting Marv Plenert because Marv was the regional director for the longest time. Claus is always calling him about Kesterson and so forth, so he was always pestering. Claus was like, oh, you ought to get a refuge project up here in the Sherwood area…because I want to buy land in your project area and have you buy me, come on. Well, there wasn't much of anything Marv didn't want to buy. He was one of these guys who said, don't worry about the O&M, that will follow, which had been true for the most part.

JOHN: Plus, if you don't buy it now, it may be ruined or not available.

BEN: Marv was one of those guys who believe in management by walking around. Marv would go right to the staffer and tell you what he wanted. He came to me and then you'd have to report up. Oh, I had a visit by Marv**,** and this is what he wants. It drove all the managers crazy. He came to me and said we need to get an urban refuge out here.

What was also going on, this was back in the days of director Mollie Beatty**.** We were getting beat up pretty bad about endangered species. This was after the Republican revolution and the Endangered Species Act was no good. Mollie was trying to save the Act as well as trying to keep the Service relevant.

She had done a number of things, one of which was she had sort of issued this one pager about we ought to have more urban refuges/advocating for urban refuges. Get refuges close to the people as opposed to this mantra that in the past, way out in the middle of nowhere where nobody can go out there and disturb the wildlife…we need to bring wildlife conservation closer to where people live.

JOHN: Nobody had any idea there was even a refuge there you can visit.

BEN: Right.

Urban refuge, yeah Marv was all over that. That's a good idea. We need to be doing more of that. I want you to put together an urban refuge. Well, refuge management didn't want any part of that. They assigned me to look at Tualatin River, the whole Tualatin River watershed and see what you can find.

Also, at the far end there was Wapato Lake, which I looked at with Palmer Sekora. It is now a refuge.

JOHN: That was one of our survey areas.

BEN: But the farmers at Wapato Lake at that time told us to drop dead and go away. It was interesting in several years later; they came by begging us to buy their land. That was a different time. Yeah, they couldn't farm it. That was about 2005 or something, they told us to drop dead but by 2010 or so, the Wapato farmers were happy someone would buy their property.

There was Jackson Bottom, which was always being used. There was this area near Sherwood, which was mainly dairy farms and a bunch of Tualatin River floodplain, which looked pretty promising, particularly because there had a lot of riparian still on the landscape. It's one of the most intact stands of riparian habitat left along the Tualatin.

That looked like a promising area for an urban refuge. It was just outside of the urban growth boundary. Happy coincidence was that the City of Sherwood was trying to do something to keep from being overrun by the expansion of the City of Tualatin. We came by and told them about this idea of establishing a refuge there. They embraced it. This is just wonderful to have the feds buy us a big park and separate us and give us identities. We love it. We're all over the area.

Meanwhile, Jim Claus was calling Marv about the refuge. Marv pretty much told him, if you can get the political backing, we'll do it but don't want a lot of opposition there. Jim was off talking to the city people and that was all fine.

JOHN: Had he bought property in that area?

BEN: No, he was waiting to see what the project area was going to be. That's another interesting...We're out doing our public review. The farmers in the area were kind of skeptical about you're going to do something to me kind of thing. Another piece of serendipity. We went to meet the farmers. A family had been there since practically the turn of the century, the Cereghino's. Gerda Cereghino was still alive, and she was the matriarch of all the farmers.

We had the meeting. Unbeknownst to us, Gerda's son Dave came in because she was quite elderly. She was going to be a spokesperson. Dave Cereghino had had an interaction with the Fish and Wildlife Service on lands he owned in Idaho. He was trying to develop a small FERC (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission] project. This was like 10-15 years ago, earlier than this time. He worked with the fella; his name was Roy Hebert. He was with our Boise Ecological Services office. He's working with FERC and he's working with Dave Cereghino. Dave Cereghino really didn't like the FERC guys. He felt they were really jerking him around. He was really impressed with Roy Hebert. He felt like Roy was really trying to help him.

JOHN: It was a positive…

BEN: It was a very positive experience with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

In comes Dave Cereghino. We didn't know him from Adam. We only learned about this from Dave after the meeting. We got up there and we sort of presented what we were trying to do. Some of the farmers are kind of like, I'm not sure about this.

Dave Cereghino stood up and said, hey guys, I worked with the Fish and Wildlife Service back in Idaho years ago and you can trust them. They're not going to screw you. If they tell you, it's right and this is what their program is, don't worry about it. They're not going to do anything bad to you. You can count on these guys to be truthful. Any opposition to the refuge project from the local farmers completely evaporated.

The city was on board, the farmers were on board. Not even the Farm Bureau, which typically got all over us about land acquisition, they didn't make a peep because farmers said, no, we're fine with this. Don't be bothering us. The local residents were all happy to have a big greenspace in town. It was just this massive love-in.

Jim Claus saw one of the early project area maps. He didn't get anything clandestinely. He was part of the public process, looked at some draft ideas/configurations. He looked at one of the alternatives and he found a piece of property that was vacant. He decided that's what he was going to buy. It was in an area that was kind of like low priority I thought. I finally came up with a configuration I thought was much better, which left that piece of property off.

Claus would call Marv again and again about the refuge project boundary. Marv would tell us, you've got to keep Jim's piece in. We got our approved refuge boundary established ahead of Jim's low priority piece.

He cleaned it up and he paid hardly anything for it. Of course, I think he tripled its value just in the appraisal.

I don't know if you remember Jim Houck. He was the manager at the Western Oregon Refuge complex. Claus starts calling Jim Houck. He's like ragging, ragging, ragging on him. Jim Houck said Claus's property is the last piece of property I'm ever going to buy. After about two months of Jim Claus calling him every day, he's like buy out the guy, get him off of me.

JOHN: The last time I saw Jim was actually…I just stopped in at Tualatin River. They had the visitor center finished, and I hadn't seen that. I just stopped in. He was in some kind of a meeting in there. He came out and said hello. What he wanted to talk to me about is he was under some pressure coming to name a piece of the refuge in it after Dave Marshall.

BEN: Oh, I remember hearing about that.

JOHN: He was asking me what I thought about it. I'm not big on that, but I said, well, I would not rename. Like I wouldn't take Tualatin River and say the Dave Marshall refuge, the Dave Marshall Tualatin River Refuge. I said…at that time, maybe Wapato was not quite established.

I said the only way I would ever agree to something like that, is if it was a brand-new piece that didn't have a reasonable name already.

Name a visitor center or something. That is much more palatable. My office was on William L. Finley National Wildlife Refuge. It started out as Muddy Creek…

BEN: Right. I remember that I remember seeing the old land acquisition project files.

JOHN: Finley had so much to do with Malheur and Klamath Basin established. He was the director of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for a while. Of course, it was already done by the time I got there. In general, and now they've done at Columbian whitetail deer and at Tinicum they haven't changed the name. They've just added a name to it. Julia Butler Hansen Columbian Whitetail Deer Refuge I'm not sure I like that either.

BEN: I've got a couple more quick stories at Tualatin River.

One of the neat things about community spirit of this refuge is…so we finally get the planning done. Okay, let's start getting money to buy this stuff. Where's the money coming from. That's a separate story.

We were explaining to people, we said, well, it's much easier to get money for a refuge that is already established rather than for a brand-new refuge. It's going to be tough to get some money, but maybe we convince Senator Hatfield or something like that.

Well, there were two landowners within the area. They had some property, and they decided to donate a portion of their land. It was Tom Stibolt and Lisa Brenner, a married couple. They decided to donate 12 acres to get the refuge established. Finally get a piece on the ground there, which in theory would make it a little bit easier to expand on that. They did that. That was amazing. How often does that happen?

But in terms of getting the money part, another kind of I found humorous story.

Apparently, Jim Claus was good friends with the actor Robert Wagner. He convinced Robert Wagner to come up and do some promotional stuff. We had one deal in voiceovers and Jim's idea was that Robert Wagner video was going to go to congressional members, and they would be so awed by Robert Wagner doing this video and promoting the refuge that they would just be throwing money at it. We would have the whole thing bought in 2 or 3 years.

We actually got to go meet. We had one of the local landowners had dinner. Robert Wagner came. We had lunch with Robert Wagner. We were showing him around. It was almost comical, like Robert Wagner.

Apparently, Claus had been working with Robert Wagner as Claus tells the story. For years, they were going to make a movie of some sort, the Jim Claus story about his experiences with the Kesterson issue. I haven't seen it done yet, so maybe they never got it together. That was apparently the connection between Jim Claus and Robert Wagner**.** Amazing stuff you come across.

Anyway, that's about all I had to say about Tualatin River. That was my last refuge project I did, at least as a staff person who did the public use and all the planning and all that stuff. That's a nice way to go out of the program.

JOHN: Okay. Well, why don't you finish up by just saying a little bit about…you've still been doing some kind of conservation related stuff since you retired, so why don't you just mention that?

BEN: Okay. Well. Well, yeah.

For an example, last year/last summer. Jean, my wife and I, we got a call from the refuge manager at Midway. I'd been helping before I retired with NEPA compliance on a seawall he was trying to build, and he's a little frustrated because he wasn't getting a whole lot of help from the regional office. He asked me if I'd review some documents for him. I said, yeah, I'll do that for you, Bob. He said, can you and Jean come out here for a month and help me with the 75th commemoration Battle of Midway? Yeah, we'll do that. Sure. We're retired.

We went out there. My wife spent a lot of years…She was the chief of visitor services, done a lot of graphics. She also worked for external affairs for a while, so had a lot of experience. She went out there and just sort of gratis, prepared all kinds of logistical planning, prepared the brochure, did a lot of planning for the upcoming visitation by the veterans and all the other dignitaries gathering there.

I went out there and helped Bob with the seawall document. He is saying, I've been trying to get this done for a month and you come here in two days, and you've got it straightened out. This is great. (*Laughter).*

Even while I was, helped him and the staff frame up there. They're doing a mouse eradication project. We talked through. Okay; this is what the documentation needs to look like. This is how you need to approach it. This is how you get to an EA. You don't have to do any EIS and that kind of stuff.

Jackie Farrier is the project leader out at Willapa Bay. A couple of years ago she asked Jean if she'd design some interpretive panels for us. So, she did. That's done. They're going to be manufactured and installed this summer.

I get a call occasionally, something about I can't get ahold of anybody at the regional office. I need to know something. Can you help me out with this? I'll do that. I still get calls from people sometimes to help out.

Actually, I was just asked if I'd take a look at the mouse eradication EA to see if I saw anything, anything jumped out at me that might be problematic, that kind of stuff. We still dabble a little bit in Fish and Wildlife. As I said, we volunteered at Midway. We still do some stuff. It's still kind of fun, not a whole lot there.

JOHN: Right. Well, I really appreciate the time you've taken both in our group discussion that we had earlier and doing this oral history interview. I've enjoyed it. As you can tell, I think it's a really important project to preserve these experiences of our people.

BEN: It is. I think about how many field stations, institutional memory would be lost, people go, and nothing be documented. I think this is fantastic.

JOHN: That's a real serious problem.

BEN: Collecting this history. There's just so many stories and so many remarkable things.

JOHN: A lot of it…I mean, it's bad enough that reports and files get thrown away, but so much good experience and knowledge is not in filing cabinets in an area. It's in people's heads and their memories.

BEN: If you can get Marv Plenert to tell some stories, wow. Yeah, he's got some.

JOHN: I think he's done one. He's just been kind of friendly. He's a good guy. He and I both grew up in Kansas.

BEN: My family is like Marv's. You always knew he spoke from the heart. He'd get in trouble with the spotted owl and stuff in that. He was right on. You may not agree with some of the sentiments. I mean, he wasn't being sly.

JOHN: Most of the time you can agree with him, but sometimes his methodology was a little harsh.

BEN: Yeah. I guess it worked for him in his career. He's a good man. I see him every once in a while. Anyway, I appreciate the opportunity to leave a little history.

JOHN: Glad to be able to facilitate that.

End of Interview

Key words: aerial photography, diversity, endangered species, habitat conservation, maps, mapping, planning, plants, realty, training, wetlands, wildlife refuges