



The Oral History of Mary Klee

April 11, 2019

Interview conducted by Bill Wilen

Washington D.C. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service HQ)

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Mary Klee

Date of Interview: April 11, 2019

Location of Interview: Washington D.C. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service HQ)

Interviewer: Bill Wilen

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 31 years

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: National Wetlands Inventory (NWI) (St. Petersburg); Smithsonian's Natural History Museum in the Herbarium working on a bryophyte list for National Wetlands Inventory; Headquarters (Ballston) as secretary for the Branch of Special Projects and then biologist for Ecological Services and later Endangered Species. Retired January 2017.

Most Important Projects: Reprinting Cowardin et al. wetland classification documents. Co-authoring an NWI paper to be published and presented at an International Wetlands Conference. Creating wetland bryophyte lists. [Headquarters biologist for delisting and post-listing monitoring of bald eagle and American peregrine falcon – not mentioned in this NWI-focused interview.]

Colleagues and Mentors: Buck Reed, Bill Wilen

Brief Summary of Interview: Mary Klee talks about her early education in college where she wanted to be a veterinarian and then decided to change her major to biology. From there she moved to St. Petersburg, Florida where she applied to a job at the National Wetlands Inventory as a biological technician. She then worked in the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum in their Herbarium creating a list of Wetland Bryophytes in conjunction with the National Wetlands Inventory. She moved to the Headquarters of Ecological Services in Ballston, first as a secretary and then later into a biologist position. She continued to work closely with Bill Wilen where she co-authored a NWI paper and then presented it. She was a valuable asset to the NWI program.

Interview

Bill Wilen: “This is Bill Wilen, and we’re going to capture Mary Klee’s oral history.”

Mary Klee: “Thanks Bill. So, I was born in Dayton, Ohio, and I really didn’t grow up in any one place because my father was in the Navy and we moved every 2 years. But I always enjoyed being out in nature and just, it was like a peaceful calming place and fun to explore and see new things. That’s kind of been throughout my whole life.

I went to Ohio State University, my freshman year, and I decided that I was going to be a veterinarian and then once I got into it and the expense and how hard it is to get vet school, and I decided I was not going to be a veterinarian. So, then I went to James Madison University out in Harrisonburg, Virginia and got my BS in biology, and again, thinking I could do something with a biology degree and with nature and like that.

After I graduated from college, I couldn’t find a job right away and my parents had just moved from Northern Virginia to Florida and I’m like, hmm I think I’ll go to Florida and live with the parents for a little bit and look for a job. So, I was working part time in St. Pete, Florida and job hunting every day at the job center, downtown St. Pete. And I came across this little card posted on the bulletin board with a job offer to work for the National Wetland Inventory, as a biological technician. I said great. So, I applied and low and behold I got in, and it was right there in St. Pete and I really was happy to have a job, but I was also very happy to be able to work with great people and interesting people and learn new things. And so I was working on the Wetland Plant List, that was my job, and so working for Buck Reed, along with 3 or 4 other biotechs and we spent our days with our noses in books, Flora of this and that, and looking up taxonomy and taking notes on those standard coding forms where you wrote down everything about the plant and it was kind of like virtual biology, you’re out in the field, in a book and reading, and it was a very interesting time. I will say as a supervisor, Buck Reed was fun to work with but he was a bit of a character, and I remember in the mornings we were all like hard at work, writing stuff down in our coding sheets and he comes strolling into the office, because he biked into work in his bike shorts and he’s all dripping with sweat and then he looks over at what we’re doing and he hasn’t had a shower and we’re all like go, get away, and he loved to kind of tease us a little bit. And he would always come and show us proudly the latest treasure that he found on the road on his ride into work. One time he was so happy, he found a complete socket set, it was great.

So, it was an interesting time and I did that for 3 years, and then I got married and moved up to Northern Virginia and NWI was kind enough to extend me another year as a biotech and worked out an awesome deal where I was in the Smithsonian’s Natural History Museum working on the Wetland Bryophyte List, it was a special project. And at the time NWI had a – I mean the Service had a field office there at the Natural History Museum so they kind of sponsored me. I had a desk in the Herbarium and I spent all my days in the botany library, so instead of having 2 or 3 shelves of botany books, I had a whole library at my disposal. It was awesome. Learning about wetland bryophytes and doing the same coding and things like that and a funny story; so, when I was done with the coding sheets, you know I’d put in them in a big box and ship them off

to Iris Kendall for coding and putting into the database. So, we would ship boxes back and forth, and apparently a dermestid beetle or two got in one of the boxes, because there was an outbreak of dermestid beetles right around my desk and they had gotten into the Herbarium. The folks at the Smithsonian just couldn't understand it because they had never seen that species of dermestid beetle in the Herbarium because it was not native, they couldn't figure out how it got there. I had to raise my hand and say sorry, but they still let me stay.

On my off hours, I got to go behind the scenes with the Natural History Museum and look at all the collections. I loved the Entomology collection, bird collection, and I got lost for 2 hours one time behind the scenes because it was all where everything, all the collections are, and I knew I was – kind of where I was, by what collection I was looking at and it was awesome. I got to see their dermestid room where they strip the meat off the bones before they mount the skeletons, so it was an awesome time and I really am grateful to have had that experience.

So, for a biotech, you work for a year and then you can renew it every year, but up to 4 years, so I was on my 4th year and it couldn't be renewed. I was still living in Northern Virginia and Bill Wilen worked out this amazing deal for me where instead of being at the Smithsonian, I'd be at Headquarters at Ecological Services in Ballston. I was, let's see, I think I came in as a secretary, a GS 5, step one, or something like that, but I was so excited because I was now a permanent employee and I could have health insurance. So that was good to be a secretary and I was doing people's travel and answering phones and stuff like that. It was an interesting time because I come to Headquarters and I'm wet behind the ears and I don't really know yet what's going on and I'd be introduced to people, and they would know me, and they would say, "Oh yeah, I know you, I've heard all about you." And I didn't know what was going on. I'm like okay! Come to find out years later there was big rumor floating around that I moved to Headquarters for – I won't go into it but it was totally untrue, and people love to gossip so I came up to headquarters and I was already infamous. So, I guess it's good to have your name recognized right? When you go in meetings and stuff?

So then after being secretary and doing all that kind of fun stuff, I got to work for Bill, and I was into a biologist slot, and I was very grateful for that because that got me out of the admin tract and into the biology tract where I really wanted to be. I was, I was kind of like Bill's girl Friday and whatever he needed me to do I did, right? I learned an awful lot, learned an awful lot, for example – now you can look back on it, it's funny but at the time it wasn't funny. We went to reprint Cowardin et. al., the bible of wetland classification for plants, and GPO lost the negatives. So, okay what do you do? Well, we'll just rewrite it. And so that was another fun project that Bill gave me to rewrite it, get it reprinted, and I got to work with the Regional Wetland Coordinators to do updated photos and captions and it was a whole fun process. Finally got it to galley proofs and when those first few reprints came off, I wanted to frame it because it was such an arduous task. I was like 'Lose the negatives? HA! We'll show you.' That was a lot of fun.

I worked with Buck to write up a paper to get it published in a national bryophyte journal that talked about wetland bryophytes and what they were, and we had done a whole appendices and the whole 9 yards. Unfortunately, by that time I was no longer working for NWI. I was working for the Endangered Species Program and I regret to this day that I did not take the time, nights or

weekends, to finish that paper and get it published because everybody put a lot of work into that and I know the Region 7 folks were especially annoyed at me and Buck for not finishing that because it would have been a really good thing for them to have an official wetland bryophyte list there up in Alaska.

I enjoyed working and getting to meet with the National Wetland Coordinators, they were always a voice on the phone or an email. I got to go to a couple of the Regional Coordinators meetings and those were fun and meeting those people in person, and they're a fun lively bunch. So, it was really good to meet them and I learned a lot from a lot of different people, just to show me the ropes and especially you Bill, how politics works and get it done, out the door, get it done, out the door. People were throwing obstacles in your way and you're like oh get serious, you're bobbing and weaving, you got things out the door despite the bureaucratic stuff.

Bill: "Yeah, I focused on 'get it off the floor and out the door.'."

Mary: "Right and you did. Oh dear, another fun memory that I have of working with Bill, for Bill, was he would give me things to type up and it would be like a piece of lined paper with cut outs from printed documents stapled or taped to the paper and then interspersed with his hand writing to have this stream of consciousness putting together this patchwork of thoughts and it was great. And I remember you – I'm typing away right outside your office and you're standing over my shoulder and watching what I'm typing and then you kind of get a new thought and like "Well no say this." So, we're kind of editing on the fly. And what came out was better. So, it was awesome.

I really enjoyed my time with NWI, I learned a lot from a lot of different people and it was – you worked hard and you played hard and it was fun, and to not take things too seriously. And again, the mission was the important thing, the overriding mission. No matter what the kind of the bombs and arrows are coming and the way, it's the mission and it was a great sense of comradery and team work to get a new map out the door, get a new map digitized, have the updated U.S. map, it shows how much has been mapped and digitized. I enjoyed really – I had a lot of great people to work with down in St. Pete and again all a bunch of fun people.

Holiday parties were epic and that's all I'm going to say.

My career did not affect my family a great deal compared to my father being in the military and moving every two years so I just kinda did my thing, and enjoyed it and was able to come and go as I pleased. Looking back on it, when I first started fresh out of college and then 31 years later when I retired, it was a nice transition. So, I'm grateful to Bill and all the NWI folks for showing a greenhorn how it's done because those skills kept me going and got me through 31 years at the Fish and Wildlife Service. And I know Bill and some of the other NWI folks are always good for a good laugh or a good joke and that helped keep things moving and keep things going. Again 31 years, they went by really fast, really fast.

As far as NWI goes, getting Cowardin reprinted, that was a major big deal. Also, Bill let me co-author a paper with him about the NWI and it was all about the NWI and the Classification System and how it works and the mapping and here am I, just a greenhorn out of college, and we co-wrote a paper. He let me be co-author and then he lets me present it at an [International]

National Wetland Conference and I'm like, holy crap this is serious. That was an awesome experience. Then our paper was published in the International Wetlands Journal, *Vegetatio* and I think even today we still get occasional requests for that reprint, even though its 20 years old, we still get requests for it and it still gets cited. I think -."

Bill: "It still gets cited quite often and then I'm always pleased to see that."

Mary: "So it's nice to see when you work on something like that that you look back and say yeah, I did an okay job, people are still interested in reading it! So, I'm very happy about that too. Yeah, I have a lot of humorous memories about working for NWI and working for Bill in particular, some of which I shared, and others which I will not share, but Bill knows what I'm talking about. It was a fun place to work and I really, really enjoyed it."

Some of the major issues I had to deal with were, again the bureaucracy of the headquarters office and the politics, and again being a young greenhorn coming to headquarters, I didn't understand why people did stuff or didn't do stuff and sometimes I would just say to myself, that's stupid, why, and Bill would say, "Just because that's the way it is and here's how we get around it or above it or below it" to keep on moving. And I always admired Bill your determination and doggedness and political savvy to get things done, you know a lot of people who knew a lot of things and that's the way to do it, that's the way to get things done. Thank you for showing me that. I don't know, that's kind of all I have to say for the moment, kind of my random stream of consciousness about my NWI experience, Bill do you have any questions you'd like to ask me?"

Bill: This ends the interview with Mary Klee.