The Oral History of Ellen "Nell" Prior Baldacchino

October 19, 2017

Interview conducted by Libby Herland
Shepherdstown, WV

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Ellen "Nell" Prior Baldacchino
Date of Interview: October 19, 2017
Location of Interview: National Conservation Training Center, Shepherdstown, WV
Interviewer: Libby Herland

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 43 years (1969-2012)

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Summer Recreation Specialist at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia; Recreation Specialist at Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, Georgia; Public Use Specialist in the Refuge Manager series at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Maryland; Departmental Management Development Program (Washington, DC); Wildlife Biologist in the Annapolis (MD) Field Office for Ecological Services; Division of Refuges in Headquarters; and Biologist (Public Use) and Visitor Services Supervisor at Patuxent Research Refuge, Maryland.

Most Important Projects: Worked in public use programs at Chincoteague, Okefenokee, and Blackwater NWRs. While in the Washington, DC, Office, she worked on the Service Education Program; drafted the Trapping policy, was involved in the Steel Shot Program, Horse and Burrow Management, Population Management, Duck Stamp Program, and Publication Program. At Patuxent Research Refuge she was involved with teacher education, habitat camps for inner-city kids, birding for the blind, workshops for deaf teachers, the hunting program, and oversight of the National Wildlife Visitor Center.

Colleagues and Mentors: Dr. Henry Mosby and Dr. Bob Giles (college professors), J.C. Appel, Gene Cypert, Bill Julian, Willie Parker, Denny Holland, Lynn Greenwalt, David Klinger, Bob Hines, Hal O'Conner, Bill Savannah, Matt Perry, John Stasko, Sue McMahon, Diana Ogilvie. Patty Nagel, Brad Knudsen, Chan Robbins, George Gee.

Brief Summary of Interview: Ms. Baldacchino talks about early life and growing up in Charleston, South Carolina, where she connected with nature through roaming the coastal marshes and fishing and crabbing with her cousins at nearby Isle of Palms. A big influence in her life would be going to the South Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission's Conservation Camp, spending many summers there as a student and a counselor. She graduated with her bachelor's in biology from the College of Charleston in South Carolina and obtained her master's in wildlife management from Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI). She discusses her career starting out as an intern (Recreation Specialist) at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and retiring from Patuxent Research Refuge. She shares some of her work-related experiences as well as some stories from her time with the Service. Ms. Baldacchino still volunteers when she can at Patuxent Research Refuge.

LIBBY: Hi, this is Libby Herland, I'm the Region 5 retiree representative on the Fish and Wildlife Service Heritage Committee. And it's Thursday, October 19, 2017. I'm at the National Conservation Training Center with Nell Baldacchino, who retired from the Fish and Wildlife Service from Patuxent National Wildlife Refuge. Well, it's probably Patuxent National–

NELL: Patuxent Research Refuge.

LIBBY: Research Refuge, right, Patuxent National Research Refuge. So anyway, Nell is going to tell us about her long and illustrious career in the Fish and Wildlife Service, and it's a real pleasure to have you here, Nell, and thank you for agreeing to do this oral history with us.

NELL: This is an honor for me as well.

LIBBY: So why don't we start with a little information about you. Tell us a little bit about you and where you were born, when you were born, where, your early influences, how you got into the conservation field to begin with.

NELL: Okay. I was born in Charleston, South Carolina. My dad was head of the history department at the Citadel Military College. He was originally from New England, then went to Amherst, Brown, Harvard; those schools. My mom was from Charleston, got her degree at Duke, but I was raised on the Citadel campus, and our campus housing bordered on the Ashley River marshes, so I roamed around the wetlands and the marshes and my cousins lived nearby. I was an only child, but they had a house at Isle of Palms, one of the nearby beach areas on the marshes with a dock, and I grew up with my cousins fishing and crabbing. And that got me interested in the out of doors, and we would just spend our summers roaming around in the pluff mud and exploring nature and having a good time together. And then as I got older I was part of a little museum group that they had at the Charleston Museum, again introducing young people to nature, things like that. And then the real thing that had a huge influence on me, and I loved dearly, my aunt got me a scholarship to the South Carolina Conservation Camp run by the South Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. And I was about thirteen years old, and I absolutely fell in love with it. Actually, my dad died when I was ten, I should throw that in there. He did introduce me to the outdoors some and taught me to shoot with this little .22 rifle and things like that; never went hunting though. But the camp was a huge influence; they brought in resource professionals, foresters, soil specialists, wildlife managers; we did hands-on stuff. The foresters let us drill into trees and count the rings, and we did a control burn, and we used capture nets and shot capture guns at make believe animals and got really hands on. And it was just a wonderful experience, and I was invited back for a second year; it was a weeklong camp. And I went a second year, was thrilled to go back as a second year, and then they invited me to come back as a counselor and they were going to pay me. And I said, "No, no, I'm so excited to come back, give the money to some other student, to give somebody else a chance to come." And I didn't know it at the time, but later I got the Youth Conservation Award from the National Wildlife Federation. I was clueless about what this was about, how much it

meant at the time, but I never even thought about it, it was just an impulsive reaction of a kid who had a good time and was thrilled to be there and participate. And it introduced me to photography too a little bit, but it was just a wonderful experience; I'd been to other camps a little bit, but I was very shy and this really brought me out, and I just loved it. And I guess I went back nine years in total, going back every summer.

LIBBY: Now, where in South Carolina?

NELL: It was in Cheraw.

LIBBY: Where is that?

NELL: Where is Cheraw, not exactly the middle of the state but in the sandhill part of the state.

LIBBY: And what year were you born?

NELL: 1945.

LIBBY: Okay.

NELL: I was thirteen when I started the camp.

LIBBY: Right.

NELL: So this was through my high school years.

LIBBY: Did you have many friends who shared your interest and passion in the outdoors?

NELL: Not really, just my cousins. We'd spend the summers at the beach fishing and crabbing and doing those kinds of fun things. So, then I got my–I was interested in nature, you know that sparked my interests. And got my bachelor's in biology at the College of Charleston, a very small community college; my mom had been there, my grandfather, whom I never knew, had been there and was on the board. But it's a much bigger school now, but it had a good solid environmental background. And then after that I went to VPI, Virginia Polytechnic for my master's. I started out in biology and switched over to the wildlife management, so I got my master's in wildlife management.

LIBBY: So, what year did you graduate?

NELL: Let's see, '69 for my master's, and Matt Perry was in my class. I got to meet Matt at the same time. So, we go way back.

LIBBY: That's interesting.

NELL: Of course, I was the only girl in the class.

LIBBY: I was going to ask that.

NELL: And I'd come in–

LIBBY: Really, the only girl in your classes?

NELL: Not in all the classes, but in the wildlife management program. They had a study room, so to speak, and I'd go in and everybody (speaks low). But it was great, and I got used to it. At first, I felt kind of intimidated and out of place, but then I got to be one of the guys, and it was great, and the same thing with my career. So, my major professor that I worked on rabies. They set me up for research doing rabies. And I did trapping, learned how to use steel traps and trapped a lot of mammals, and then worked at the Abingdon Health Lab where I could do fluorescent antibody assessment for brain tissue. And of course, I had to dispense of my animals in the traps, so I bought a little .22 Ruger automatic, and I dispatched all my animals. I roamed the mountains of western Virginia near Abingdon and collected as many kinds of animals as I could, trapping them, going into bat caves, and working with the state trappers who gave me their - they were trapping for rabies at that time. They gave me their carcasses too. And one time I cut myself dissecting late at night in the lab by myself, scared me to death. "Suppose this animal has rabies." So, they gave me the shots, in the abdomen, which was disgusting, but anyway.

LIBBY: Did you end up writing a thesis?

NELL: Yeah, I did a thesis; that was for my master's work.

LIBBY: Do you still have copies of that?

NELL: Oh somewhere, yeah.

LIBBY: The archives would love to have a copy of your thesis for their–

NELL: Well it wasn't very meaningful, but it gave me good experience. It gave me field experience, which of course I never had, and exposure to all kinds of things. So, it was nice, and I met new people in new areas, in a new environment. And later on, when I worked in the Washington office for a spell, I worked on the trapping policy, which I at least had some experience with trapping and that kind of thing, so that kind of paved – greased the skids, so to speak.

LIBBY: Were your professors anybody who was known in the conservation world?

NELL: Oh, I don't know, I think they probably were. Dr. Henry Mosby I think was famous in his own right. And Dr. Bob Giles was my major professor, and I still keep up with him a little bit. And he steered me towards the Fish and Wildlife Service. He knew

J.C. Appel at Chincoteague. And after I graduated from grad school, I went out to look at it in the spring time during spring break when the snow geese were there, and I was just absolutely overwhelmed. So, I started a summer internship position at Chincoteague, the summer of '69. And it was wonderful! Of course, it's on the beach. And that was one thing about J.C., he made the point that an environment, a refuge like Chincoteague, was so special in that you could - people came - not because they cared anything about wildlife, but most people came for the beach. And they had extra time on their hands, so then they could come to the refuge programs and learn about the refuge and wildlife and wildlife management. So, you had this wonderful opportunity to reach out to an audience, which would not normally be visiting a wildlife refuge. And that has stayed with me, and I've often quoted him, so to speak, in making that comment that the beach was the "hook," and then once you got them there, you could expose people to other things.

LIBBY: You think he was an early person in the Fish and Wildlife Service to recognize that connection?

NELL: Oh, yes, yes, he was known for his innovative, I think, ideas and what not. And public use was something that he was one of the front runners in the public use arena. And he also had a significant influence in that this was at a time–this was the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife back then, and it was a time when the managers wore suits and ties, you know, they dressed. And he emphasized to me, and I think everybody else that worked there, the importance of appearance. And even wearing a hat and how, when you're approaching the public and even if you're telling them they're doing something wrong, they will respect you more if you're dressed for the part. If you are professional looking, and that has always stayed with me, and it's actually something that I have seen sort of go downhill with the Service over the years. I used to be glad that they had class A uniforms for going to meetings and special events and programs, and they don't anymore. And I used to—even in my later years with the Service, if I went to give a talk to a Chamber of Commerce or have a meeting with somebody in the community, which a lot of refuge managers and visitor services staff have to do all the time—you want to look professional. And everybody else is wearing business attire and you go into a meeting looking like a bum—not exactly like a bum, you wear your uniform—but it's not quite the same. I see our sister agency the Park Service looking much more professional, and I love the Service and I love being casually dressed, it's more comfortable, and if you're out in the field, that's fine. But I do think there's a place for the man in a tie at least, if not a jacket, and I think appearance does make a difference. That's just something that's stuck with me over the years from J.C., and from a different time when people did dress more.

LIBBY: I know it's definitely a lot more casual now. So, what were your responsibilities? That was a summer position?

NELL: That was just a summer internship. I did tours, and actually they had no uniforms for women back then.

LIBBY: Oh, really?

NELL: So, they sent me some cloth. I don't sew, so I had somebody make me a skirt; you know, it was skirts back then, slacks for some things but mostly skirts.

LIBBY: So, you wore a skirt?

NELL: I wore a skirt and a white shirt, and I sewed my patch on there with the rocker that said, "Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife."

LIBBY: And what did you wear on your feet?

NELL: What did I wear on my feet? I guess pumps, some sort of pumps.

LIBBY: But you were working on a beach.

NELL: Some of the time, yes; and then of course we had pony penning, and I got to ride one of the ponies and schmooze with people. So, I definitely wore slacks then, and just a white shirt, so I tried to blend in.

LIBBY: But you had to make your own uniform?

NELL: Or have it made. Yes, because there was nothing else.

LIBBY: That's amazing, 1969, no uniforms for women.

NELL: No, no uniforms for women. And yeah, I guess, in a way—I hadn't thought about it at the time—well, they were looking for token females. They were looking to recruit women into the Service at that time. So I was fortunate. I kind of resented the fact that I was given opportunities because I was a woman, but I wanted to have opportunities because of the merits of what I could do. It was nice to get the opportunities anyway.

LIBBY: So, you have an internship, you have a master's degree?

NELL: Yes, in wildlife management.

LIBBY: You're coming out, in wildlife management, you're doing an internship as a visitor services person for a few months.

NELL: Right, and then they were trying to keep me on. In the meantime, I had signed up with Audubon, but before I–

LIBBY: National Audubon?

NELL: National Audubon had a naturalist training program, a three- month training program. And it ran in the fall of '69. Their Greenwich Center is where I went. And it was great–
LIBBY: In Connecticut?

NELL: Greenwich, Connecticut, and it was teaching you how to interpret and deal with the public and deal with kids and do education programs, so that was good; I enjoyed that. And then after that they were able to hire me full time down at Okefenokee.

LIBBY: Permanent?

NELL: Permanently.

LIBBY: Okay, and how did that happen?

NELL: Well I guess I applied. You know, they told me to apply, I mean, I was introduced to the people in the Service at Chincoteague, and of course they were looking for women at that time, so they encouraged me to apply.

LIBBY: Someone stayed in touch with you?

NELL: Yes, Larry Givens, I think from Region 4 Regional Office, was I guess my initial contact. But anyway, I landed at "Okie" in January 1970.

LIBBY: And your position was?

NELL: Oh dear, what was my position? I guess I was a Recreation Aide or something at that point; later that changed. And I did tours there, and developed slide shows, and got the kids in the community involved with programs and coming out and exploring this and doing that on the refuge. And it was a great experience, and I got to tag along with the biologist, who was getting ready to retire, but he knew his plants.
LIBBY: Who was that?

NELL: Gene Cypert, I think CYPERT, I'm not sure, but he really knew the plant life. And I would go around with him and take pictures of plants, and he would tell me what they were, and that was good for me, got me out in the field. And they were doing lots of neat things. They'd just built a three quarter of a mile boardwalk out into the swamp, and I would go out in the swamp on my days off in the boat and just explore. One day, I had my camera, I was by myself in a Jon boat going down the canal. And I saw a raccoon on the shore and I said, "oh," grabbed my camera, jumped off the boat, and had the anchor with me, but the other end of the anchor rope was not attached to the boat. So here I am standing on the shore, holding an anchor, holding my camera, and the boat is going out, and here I am in the middle of the swamp by myself. And, of course, no cell phones back then.

LIBBY: What'd you do?

NELL: What did I do? I put everything down, looked around for any alligators that might be guarding their young, didn't see any, dove in, and chased the boat down, climbed in, and came back and retrieved my stuff (laughing).

LIBBY: You're intrepid.

NELL: But it was a little unnerving. Another time I was pulling the boat along the shore and looked down and there was a cottonmouth right under my hand - water moccasin. Anyway, we had a variety of snake stories and things like that, but it was a great experience, and I did attend a photography class while I was there, and it helped me a lot because I've enjoyed photography through my career.

LIBBY: So you were at Okie for–?

NELL: For just a year.

LIBBY: Oh, just for one year?

NELL: Just a year.

LIBBY: And you're not married at this point, right?

NELL: No, no.

LIBBY: You haven't met your husband yet?

NELL: I hadn't met my husband then. Then I had an opportunity, I don't quite remember how it came about, but I transferred to Blackwater, and I was in the refuge manager series then. I think they were, again, looking for their people that were in that career path, although I wasn't interested in being a manager. Anyway, I got my U-Haul and drove up to Blackwater and another great experience, different kind of refuge. I used to tag along with the muskrat trappers and do a lot of public programs there. I can remember one time I had a group of kids on a bus doing a tour, and I saw a snake on the side of the road. So, I jumped off the bus and I grabbed the snake. And the snake was sort of, it was just a black snake, but it was blind, I think, in one eye. And I just sort of picked it up without paying much attention, not holding it properly behind the neck, and it turned around and bit me while all these kids are standing in front of me; I had gone back on the bus. And of course, I couldn't react too much, so I used it as an opportunity to say, "This is not how you're supposed to handle a snake. You're supposed to hold them right behind the neck, so they can't turn around like this." And the kids would scream, and the more the kids screamed, the more the snake bit my finger (laughing).

LIBBY: It kept biting you?

NELL: It kept biting me, just on the finger. It was not horrendous, but I had to try to keep my cool all this time. Ever since then I was a little more careful in how I handled snakes. But anyway, that was just one of my fun experiences at Blackwater, and I guess that's where I met my husband too. I got very involved in the community, everywhere I went, and we had worked with the art center and had a wildlife photography contest. And my husband-to-be was an editor of a local newspaper, so he came out to cover this event, and that's how we met.

LIBBY: Oh, that's cool.

NELL: Anyway, let me see if there was anything else at Blackwater.

LIBBY: Who was the manager when you were there?

NELL: Bill Julian, and he was a wonderful guy. And I got to know his family, his kids and his wife, and became good friends with them.

LIBBY: Was there anybody at that refuge that you felt was kind of like a mentor to you, because you were still relatively young. And again, how many women were on the staff?

NELL: That's another thing, when I went to Blackwater, as I said, I was in the refuge manager series, and automatically with that came law enforcement authority. And back at that time, there was no law enforcement training. You went you out, and they took me to somewhere and I shot a pistol at a tin can, and I was certified. And since I was at the visitor center by myself a lot, they wanted me to keep a firearm there in case of an emergency or something. So that was fine, but that was pretty much the extent of it.

LIBBY: I'd heard of that.

NELL: Yeah. And the only real law enforcement I did, I worked with famous people like Willie Parker, who was the agent over in that area. And he had me go in and buy a mounted bird from a shop nearby, which of course was illegal to sell, but that was the only extent of my law enforcement work. But I loved to hear the tales and of course in that part of the country law enforcement was not looked upon very favorably. The feds were sort of the evil people, you know, down in the marshes of Dorchester County.

LIBBY: How long did you have your commission?

NELL: I never even heard of it as a commission. I guess while I was there, in that position–

LIBBY: Did you have a badge and credentials?

NELL: I don't think so. I don't remember. I don't remember having a badge and credentials. It was just sort of–
LIBBY: But you had a gun.

NELL: I had a gun, yes (chuckling). And at one time, Denny Holland commented that I guess he thought I was one of the first professional women in the Service. And I said, "Oh, no, no, this is ridiculous. I mean you've got Rachel Carson, you've got Lucille Stickel, you've got all these famous, very qualified women." And he said, "Well maybe it was in the refuge," I don't know exactly what he said, but it was probably in the region and in the refuge manager series, it was something like that, but it was one of these early on things.

LIBBY: How long did you stay at Blackwater?

NELL: I think it was two and a half years, give or take. Then, oh then they wanted me to go into the Refuge Manager Development Program in Washington, which was about a nine-month training thing. And I said, "But I don't want to be a refuge manager, I like being in the field, and I like dealing with people." But again, they were trying to get women into an upward mobility-type thing. So I said, "As long as you understand that. I don't want to do this on false pretense, but if you want me to do it, fine." So I did that, and it was a good experience. I worked on things like the Service Education Program, and I did shadow assignments with Lynn Greenwalt, whom I admire tremendously, he's such a professional, always so thoughtful. He never said things randomly, he always thought about what he was going to say and such a professional person. So that was a nine-month program, and after that I went to– we had moved, and well during that year I got married. Joe followed me from Cambridge (Blackwater) to D.C. and got a job in the D.C. area. And we bought a house in Bowie, well, eventually bought a house in Bowie, and I got a job with the Annapolis Field Office. So he worked in D.C. and I worked in Annapolis, and we were sort of half way in between.

LIBBY: So you go to Washington to be part of this Refuge Management Development Program, but then you end up working for the Annapolis Field Office?

NELL: For Ecological Services.

LIBBY: Which is not refuges.

NELL: Which is not refuges.

LIBBY: So how did that come about?

NELL: And actually, I'm trying think if the Manager Development Program was just refuges, I don't think it was; it was an Interior Department Program. It was for all, we had multi-agency people there, it was not just Service.

LIBBY: So it was a precursor to some kind of upper level management?

NELL: Yes, we had management training sessions and different assignments with different people and that kind of thing. And it'd give you exposure to different agencies

and what they were doing. Then, since I wanted to be - I was sort of located in that area - I was able to get a job in the Annapolis Field Office.

LIBBY: Did you do this because Joe had moved with you, and he had a position, now his position is starting to help determine where you might go?

NELL: Yes, right, we both sort of landed in that area.

LIBBY: Annapolis Field Office.

NELL: Ecological Services.

LIBBY: And do you remember what year that was?

NELL: Oh, dear me, probably around '73. Yes, we got married in '73, and the training program was started in probably summer of '72 and went through spring of '73 or something like that. And people like - there are a lot of people here this week at the retirees group that were part of that - in that office. So it's been like going home week, Jim McKevitt and other people like that. A lot of time out in the field, and it was an adjustment for me to go from Refuges to Ecological Services. Of course, I didn't even know that much about Ecological Services at the time, but I learned a lot. And it was like – I felt like with Refuges I was the good guy with the white hat, and when I went to Ecological Services I was the bad fed with the black hat on, trying to keep people from developing their property. And I learned over time different people handle it different ways, and I always thought at the time you need a lot of PR with this part of the agency. I had one of my most terrifying experiences when I was with that office (chuckling). We would do a lot of our work all over, we'd go to Delaware, we'd go to the Eastern Shore, and down all over Maryland and into Virginia commenting on federal permits, Corps of Engineers permits and things like that. So we were out in the field a lot and often did sampling in different habitats to be able to justify positions against certain developments and what not. And it was late one day in the wintertime, and the wind was blowing, and most of the staff that I was with lived on the Eastern Shore. So, I was the last one back in the government car, and we had a canoe with us, and the guys tied the canoe on top of the government car. They tied it at a bit of an angle rather than straight on. I was coming up the Bay Bridge and a wind hit me, and the canoe flipped right as I was starting up the Bay Bridge coming from the Eastern Shore back to Annapolis. And I was scared to death. It was still tied to the front and back and it was like I was driving along, with this canoe driving along next to me, and I was just envisioning if the rope breaks, maybe it will throw me over the side or maybe it will hit another car; something terrible could happen. And I've never prayed so hard to God in my entire life, I don't think, just getting across the bridge and the high winds. I didn't want to stop. I'd just heard of somebody that stopped and got killed because you just don't stop on the bridge. We made it to the other side, and I flipped the canoe back on top and straightened it out and breathed a huge sigh of relief, but it was kind of scary.

LIBBY: You and boats!

NELL: Yes, yes.

LIBBY: The second incident with a boat.

NELL: That's true, that's true, I hadn't thought about that. So I guess, I'm trying to think how long I was in the Annapolis Office, maybe that about two and a half years, maybe Blackwater wasn't quite so... Anyway, about that time we had our first child and I was still working full-time for about a year, and it got pretty overwhelming. Often, I'd be out in the field until ten or eleven at night getting back from Virginia or somewhere, and I felt like I had to cut down a little bit. So, I went part-time, ended up three days a week, and about the same time, I think, I really wanted to get back into refuges, and I explored opportunities. I think they were looking for somebody in the Washington Office, and they were willing to take me on part-time. So, I transferred to the Washington Office in the Division of Refuges, and initially I was in Population Management. I was doing things like being involved in the Steel Shot Program, Horse and Burrow Management, trapping. And I drafted the Trapping Policy for the Service at that time. And it was good experience, and it was nice to be able to work part-time. And then more kids started coming along (chuckling). We eventually had four. But I was really interested in getting back into Public Use.

LIBBY: How long did you stay in Washington?

NELL: Oh, about ten years.

LIBBY: And part-time the whole time?

NELL: Part-time the whole time.

LIBBY: That was actually pretty much, I think that was a fairly unusual accommodation to have somebody only working half-time.

NELL: It may have been, I don't know. I didn't have to fight for it, and I've always felt very fortunate because I was able to have my family and spend time with them and still have my career. It was like two different lives, and it gave me a great diversity and balance in my life, I guess I should say. And I really appreciated being able to do that. And it worked out - and at one time - and well I got back into Public Use while I was still in the Washington Office. They were having a Public Use workshop out in Arizona, I really wanted to go, but they wouldn't send me because that was not what I was doing.

LIBBY: Right.

NELL: So, I paid my way, they let me go. We drove out there with a two-year old child and another one on the way. We drove out to Arizona on practically no notice at all. Joe was very supportive, and we had just, I think, bought a new car so we could manage that. And so I was able to sort of get my finger back into Public Use and later switched what I

was doing in the Washington Office to deal with more public use stuff: the Duck Stamp Program and some of the volunteers and answering questions from the field related to Public Use. And also publications— I got involved with the Publication Program, reprinting the refuge list and coordinating with the field and things like that. And I got involved with the printing. Bill Savannah in the printing office gave me a good education. And I met people like Steve Hillebrand and David Klinger in Public Affairs and worked with the Slide Program. I remember one time, not slides, but they were cleaning out the refuge offices and they assigned some new person to clear things out. And I found they were throwing out Bob Hines sketches and artwork and all kinds of things. I said, "Oh my gosh, you can't throw these things out!"

LIBBY: So, it was good that you were there!

NELL: Yeah, so I salvaged all this stuff.

LIBBY: Did you have any particularly good supervisors during this time, or people–?

NELL: Well, Denny Holland, of course.

LIBBY: Oh, he was your supervisor?

NELL: For part of the time there, yeah.

LIBBY: While you were in Washington.

NELL: While I was in Washington, yeah. Denny was wonderful. And I was able to do some public programs and things like that if they needed people to talk about the Service or work with a local school or whatever, but not a huge amount of that. And then I heard that they were starting to do things related to the public at Patuxent. And while I was still at Blackwater I had visited Patuxent and been on a tour. And at the time I thought, oh my gosh, what a facility, this place has got wetlands, it's a refuge, it's a research center, they're doing this incredible research, what an opportunity to tell the public about the Fish and Wildlife Service and the things we do and the environmental issues and what not. And I'd been thinking of that, and periodically I think I applied several times, but at that time Patuxent was very research-orientated: "keep the people out, let us do our work." You know this was not at all something that Patuxent was interested in. But then when Hal O'Conner got there - and I had met Hal at steel shot meetings and other things because he was in the Washington Office - and he went out there as Center Director and of course he's the one that got the Visitor Center started, he was very politically connected, he was in the Senior Executive Service, and a mover and shaker. Great with getting partnerships going, getting involved in the community, getting the Chamber of Commerce involved, getting the Congressional people involved, and helping raise money to get the Visitor Center started. So, I was able to finally get a job at Patuxent, again I started part-time and gradually as time went on, I built back up to full-time.

LIBBY: Do you remember approximately the year that you went out there?

NELL: '88, I started Patuxent in 1988. And my kids actually got involved out there, and sometimes they would volunteer with me. I can remember taking them down to A.P. Hill for the Scout Jamboree with an exhibit, and they would help and show people crane puppets and different research things that we were doing, work for YCC's and things like that. And then later as the kids got older, and we developed the hunting program, one of my sons helped the check station pulling deer jaws and doing that kind of stuff with me.

LIBBY: So, you got your whole family involved.

NELL: A little bit, some of them were less inclined (laughing) then others, but it was a good opportunity. And again, I was initially part-time and then increased as the kids got older. So, Patuxent was good, and of course it was like —when I first got there, it was a research center. It was a separate region in the Service at that time. It was Region 8 and not the Region 8 that we have today, but it was a separate branch of the Service. It was very loosely connected to the refuge system in Region 5, but all that changed when Bruce Babbitt came in as Secretary. Of course, he pulled research out of the Service.

LIBBY: I remember.

NELL: And formed the National Biological Service; it was the National Biological Survey initially and then it became the National Biological Service. So when the Visitor Center finally opened, I don't know if we knew who we belonged to. It was part of NBS. We created our own uniform: we had khaki slacks and blue blazers. It was a different agency. And then eventually research went to the USGS, and the refuge came back to the Fish and Wildlife Service. So, it was interesting times.

LIBBY: Yeah, Patuxent is really a very different refuge.

NELL: It's a very unique refuge, yes.

LIBBY: Because you've got all these buildings where the researchers are.

NELL: Right, it was initially all research, an entity all unto itself. But it was established as a research refuge; it's not Patuxent National Wildlife Refuge, it's Patuxent Research Refuge. It has a unique name, even. But it *is* a national wildlife refuge.

LIBBY: I misspoke at the beginning.

NELL: And part of the System, so it's protected under the legislation that protects refuges. Of course, initially, the center director was the head of the whole place, and then after the NBS fiasco, and now two different agencies. The Research Center has a director, and the refuge has a refuge manager, and they work together as partners, but it's still two separate agencies.

LIBBY: Right. So, at this facility, at this refuge, you have people wearing the Fish and Wildlife Service uniform and then you have other people who work for USGS.

NELL: Right. And there's also the Migratory Bird Management Office there, too, another division of the Service that's co-located there as well. So you had all these entities. Again, a wonderful opportunity to tell people about things that the Service does. We have this great package, this neat stuff. But it's complicated, and people really don't really care. They don't understand, they still think it's a park. The Service, I think, has a huge challenge to educate people about distinction. And that was one thing that we were able to do a lot of when the visitor center opened in 1994 - enhance with our programs. We were donated an electric tram at that time and could take tram tours through the habitats. You had a captive audience, you could take handicapped people, you could take elderly, you could take kids, but you had them captive on that tram and having a good time through the habitats. But you had an opportunity to tell them about the Service—what the Service is doing, what the Research Center is doing, what some of the issues are—and it was a fantastic opportunity to reach out to the public. Then of course we did events all the time, programs all the time, and participated in all. Being close to Washington, we had all the youth initiatives and were very big into environmental education. When the visitor center first opened, we sort of had an overall manager of the visitor center and then three lead staff people doing different things. We had one person that was mainly in charge of volunteers, some other person that was more involved in facilities and IT stuff, and then I was involved with the education programs - worked a lot with the school systems, tried to have teachers workshops and connect the mandatory or recommended curricula that the state was using with ways you could use Patuxent as an extension of the classroom to meet these objectives. And introduce Patuxent as a place to bring your classes. You know—bring your kids out here, expose them to the environment, expose them to these issues—and that was great. And of course even before the visitor center opened, [we received] the North Tract from Fort Meade, 8100 acres of land, and I was involved in all of that and working with the hunter programs, and education programs in the north area, and then, of course, the visitor center.

LIBBY: So, were you involved with the design of the visitor center?

NELL: No.

LIBBY: That was other people, who was–?

NELL: Other people were involved.

LIBBY: Whose baby was that?
NELL: Well, Hal O'Conner, it was really his baby to start with; he made it happen.

LIBBY: I don't remember him, so did he stick around, was he here for the whole time?

NELL: He retired soon after the visitor center opened, but he was very influential, and Matt Perry was heavily involved at that time. And they had a design team, and the

unique thing at the time about our visitor center, at least my understanding is, the Service had several visitor centers at different refuges, and they were all based on the standard design building, and then you put your exhibits in. This was designed around the exhibits. They knew what stories they wanted to tell in the design of the exhibits, and they built the building around—at least that's what I was told—the building was designed around it. It had three different, as I recall, they said three different target audiences. I believe one was education, reaching out to the teachers and the educational community. Another was for exchange of scientific information for conferences, so we had an auditorium. We had meeting rooms for scientific meetings and conferences. And then of course "the general public," the community. So, a lot of programs, the self-guiding exhibits, plus trails, and programs and education efforts.

LIBBY: And this was a national visitor center, right?

NELL: Yes.

LIBBY: Was the intention that it was for, when the planning started, was the intention that it be a visitor center that really was for the National Wildlife Refuge System and was it meant to be–?

NELL: I don't know if it was for the refuge system; it was for the Fish and Wildlife Service, I think. And definitely national, because the exhibits dealt with issues all over the country. Back then we were dealing with climate change, global warming; the first thing you went into, it was sort of "gloom and doom," global warming, back before anybody was talking about such things.

LIBBY: Interesting.

NELL: And then you went in to a part dealing with migration and migratory birds issues. And then you went into a series of different habitats from all over the country, the west coast, Hawaii, and exotics, and the prairie potholes. And a lot of different areas and what their issues were. We did upgrade them once since it opened, but they probably need upgrading again. And there were issues dealing with the research that has been going on, not just at Patuxent but all over the country. And then there was a section dealing with endangered species from all over the country—from Kemp's ridley sea turtles to black footed ferrets to mission blue butterflies, masked bobwhite quail — all kinds of critters, so it was national in scope. And then the big dioramas on wolves, and whooping cranes, and sea otters.

LIBBY: I went there once, and I remember being pretty amazed. I thought it was a beautiful facility.

NELL: And they try to make it hands on, a lot of it, but again it's been—it opened in 1994—so it's been a few years.
LIBBY: And is that where you worked for the rest of your career?

NELL: Yeah, I mean, of course when I started out, the visitor center hadn't been built yet, so I worked on the main campus, and then I was located out of the North Tract Contact Station, and then the visitor center when it finally opened. And, again, there were sort of three of us in charge of different parts of it, and everybody else left, and it was just me. So, I sort of inherited the job of "Visitor Services Manager" by default.

LIBBY: So, Hal O'Conner, he was the Center Director.

NELL: He was the center director.

LIBBY: But he wasn't the–

NELL: And then John Stasko came in, and he was–

LIBBY: As the refuge manager.

NELL: Well, yeah. And then Sue McMahon became refuge manager when John left, or even before John, it got very complicated.

LIBBY: Was Sue McMahon, was she the deputy there?

NELL: At one time I think she was, but then she became the refuge manager, and then John moved into the visitor center as manager, and then he left before too long.

LIBBY: He went to the regional office.

NELL: Yeah, I think, did he go to Back Bay first or did he come from Back Bay? I can't remember. But then he eventually went to the regional office.

LIBBY: Which is where he retired from.

NELL: Right. Patuxent was -people would often say after so many years you get stale - but I never felt like that at Patuxent because things were always changing. First there was the research center, and then it was the North Tract, and then it was the visitor center, and there was always something different going on; different kinds of programs. We had partnerships with Gallaudet: we did teacher workshops for deaf teachers from all over the country for one of the programs—you know, partnering with the big program they had—how they can use natural resources. And we had "birding for the blind." And we had all kinds of - we had habitat camps for inner-city youth and worked with some incredible teachers - just so dedicated. And it was just so rewarding to see how these people cared about their kids and what they did. I just always felt that the Service had such opportunities to introduce kids from all levels in society, and adults too, to the outdoors and how the importance of the environment - the importance of - I've always thought that the outdoors is therapeutic. It's wholesome, it's mentally therapeutic and just a good healthy situation and something people should get involved with. And the staff, oh the people in the Service, just from the beginning even my first exposure at conservation

camp. The people in this field are a different class of people, I think, in many positions: they care, they're dedicated, it's not just a job, it's a part of their lives. They care about what they're doing, they work long hours, they don't fit the typical stereotypical government role, the perception of the government workers playing cards and goofing off. They work, and they work long hours and often without compensation. And they do it because they care about what they're doing. And particularly with refuges, I think, it's like a family. You get to know people doing the same thing, and you have a bond that connects you. And I think this is important, and this is why the value, I think, of the Service, the value of places like the Training Center here and the Retirees Association, keeping this family together - and I think it's important.

LIBBY: Absolutely, completely agree.

NELL: I have to say, though, I put in 43 years before I retired, and I got so I was - – some of the technology and the social media - I just couldn't keep up with it. I felt like I was not doing justice by staying around in an era that I couldn't keep up with.

LIBBY: Did you have younger people coming in who were doing that then?

NELL: Some, but I felt like I needed to be more part of it and I just didn't have time to; Joe would call me at 11 o'clock at night, saying, "Do you know what time it is?"

LIBBY: You would be at work at 11 o'clock at night?

NELL: Sometimes, yeah. That was the only time you could get something done - after everybody went home, because during the day it's disruptive all the time. You know, you're running here, running there.

LIBBY: Did you put in really long hours?

NELL: I did. I put in very long hours, but I loved it. It was fine. And, of course, by that time, I was back full-time; the kids were pretty much gone so I could do that, and it wasn't a real issue to me. And I think the bureaucracy got a little overwhelming, too. A lot of the requirements and the policies got frustrating. I think the thing that disillusioned me a little bit - well, actually it did a lot - toward the end was the new Friend's policy. After years of talking about partnerships and working together and with the community and having people help you, then to come out with a policy that seemed to split the friends and volunteers away from the Service and not allow them to help in ways that they had previously helped, it upset me, and I couldn't find answers. I kept calling people in the region and in the Washington office, nobody could tell me what law or what legislation or what required this change. I later found out it was, I got the impression at least, that it was a purely political thing or at least a lot of it was motivated by politics. But just the way it was done kind of left a sour taste in my mouth. And I felt that it was sad in that it made the staff work twice as hard. There were a lot of programs that we used to do we couldn't do anymore. A lot of opportunities to bring money and to bring people into the Service disappeared, and it was just very unfortunate and, again, I looked

at the legislation, and it seemed to encourage these kinds of partnerships and people working together. And, again, nobody ever was able to tell me why not. I even became a nasty activist and I wrote some letters and never even heard responses.

LIBBY: So, you had a friend's group that you worked with?

NELL: Oh yes.

LIBBY: And you had a volunteer group and you managed your volunteers, and there was a lot of overlap between your friends and volunteers?

NELL: Well, we considered friends and volunteers basically synonymous. I don't want to dwell on that part, and you can delete all that if you want.

LIBBY: No, no, I think it's important.

NELL: It just concerned me because I cared, I cared when I saw what it was doing to the people (and I talked to people nationally too) and how it was affecting the Service and its program. And I think it was doing a disservice to the employees and to the public that we served. We're public servants.

LIBBY: The Friend's Agreement certainly caused a lot of problems.

NELL: And of course this happened after I left, but I was still very involved. I was a troublemaker for a while there, but anyway I'm trying to get over that and hopefully things are getting back together. I think people are adjusting. But for a while there was so much emphasis on investing in people—and our employees and our volunteers are our most valuable resources—and they are, they are. And I felt like that was being abandoned by certain leadership, and I felt betrayed by my family—my Fish and Wildlife family—and it hurt; it hurt deeply.

LIBBY: So, was that a factor in your decision to retire?

NELL: No, it was getting to that stage with other things. And there were other policies – I guess I never really read the details, but I think there was a policy that was coming out related to gifts. And I said, well you have to go through all this gobbledygook - and I can see why some of it - before somebody could make a donation. If they had this in place when the visitor center was built, we wouldn't have gotten our beautiful wolf sculpture up front, or the eagle sculpture in the lobby; these were valuable pieces of art. And if you had these complicated policies in place, people couldn't do good things for you. Why do this? Why inhibit friends groups from raising money to help you, and putting ties on how they can spend it? You could do so much more if you could free up some of these things. We used to be able to do more with the friends' funds without having to go through the government bureaucratic process. So that kind of stuff was– o again, I don't want to dwell on the negative, there's too much positive things and too many wonderful people in this agency.

LIBBY: What do you think were some of the projects you were really happy to be associated with and things that you contributed that you thought really happened because of your involvement? Can you give me a couple examples of those?

NELL: Oh, dear me, well we've talked about a lot of them. And I don't know if they happened because of my involvement.

LIBBY: I'm sure they did.

NELL: But I certainly support them, the special programs for unique populations, for the deaf community, for the underserved communities. I mean we would go every summer for years to a school in Anacostia, the worst of the areas in D.C., and work with the elementary school, and bring the kids out to Patuxent and then do things in their community and get them involved. And a lot of it's because we just connected with the right teachers. And if we had the resources, I mean the things like that that you could do.

LIBBY: But you did it on a shoestring.

NELL: Well yeah, but now, of course it's so much worse, they don't have nearly the staff even than what we had back then. But if you had the resources you could do more and more. Well they've abandoned the program now; they don't do that anymore. But they do have mini-camps, and we had some wonderful camp-like opportunities for young people.

LIBBY: Were you a supervisor?

NELL: Oh yes. The whole Visitor Services, eventually, like I said there were three of us to start off with in teams at the visitor center and then the other two left and then it was me sort of by default.

LIBBY: Did you end up getting some permanent staff who worked with you?

NELL: Oh yes.

LIBBY: You did?

NELL: Oh yeah.

LIBBY: Rebuilt, and so you were a supervisor?

NELL: Yeah. I was in charge of the Visitor Services Program at Patuxent.

LIBBY: How many visitors a year do you think you got at Patuxent?

NELL: Oh, we didn't get anything like big numbers. You know, again, going back to the J.C. Appel thing, most of the people we got were people that wanted to come there, that had an interest anyway, or were just curious or were just looking for something for the family to do. I did a lot—well, I tried to do a lot—following from what other people were recommending and starting, promoting us in the community, and with the tourism industry, and the conference and visitor bureaus to try to get groups, bus tours or whatever; make people more aware that we were there. But I think, like many refuges, people that come to a wildlife visitor center or to most refuges come because they have at least an inkling of interest.

LIBBY: Right.

NELL: Unlike people who go to the beach and are looking for something to do. And I think there's where your great opportunities probably exist.

LIBBY: But you worked with hunters also, because you ran a pretty big hunt program.

NELL: Oh yes, yes. When I first went to Patuxent, there was no hunting at all.

LIBBY: Oh, really!

NELL: No, absolutely not. And of course, again the scientists didn't want any part of public use. Of course, we got the North Tract, we got 8100 acres from Fort Meade in 1991/92, and we opened that whole area after they did some clearance for ordnance. And of course, we were able to ease into hunting, even though we were an urban area, because Fort Meade had had a hunting program. And part of the legislation that transferred the land required that activities going on at the time of the transfer should continue. So we definitely continued it on the North Tract, but we also introduced it on central and south tract. And in the early times, when I went there, I mean the scientists would tell you – "terrible browse lines". A lot of the plant species were disappearing, a lot of the wildlife that depended on those species, the understory, were becoming scarce. So, hunting has improved the habitat, and it was wonderful to be able to sort of sneak in undercover and not make a big thing about opening to hunting. We just sort of did it gradually and it's worked out very well. And I know when I used to first give tours at Patuxent, people would be shocked, "You have hunting?" And you explained to them that, "Hey, we've destroyed the mountain lions and the wolves, there are no natural predators anymore; they're destroying the habitat." And I think gradually people too became aware that "they're destroying my garden, they're getting out in front of my car causing damage." And I think the public is more aware that you need programs like hunting. And we had a good program, too, in that we had volunteers that would help process the meat and donate it to the soup kitchens, if the hunters, you know - solicit extra stuff from the hunters if they didn't want it. And that was a good positive PR program too.

LIBBY: It is, definitely.

NELL: I mean, certainly there were some rocky times getting into the program, but I think it worked out and it's still going on, and I don't know, I mean I'm not there anymore nor was I directly involved in that program, but so far, I think it's going well.

LIBBY: So what year did you actually retire?

NELL: I retired at the end of 2012.

LIBBY: Okay, so almost five years.

NELL: Yeah, hard to believe. And I still go in and volunteer when I can. Because of family stuff I can't do as much as I used to, but I enjoy it, I like to keep in touch.

LIBBY: Who's your supervisor now as a volunteer?

NELL: Diana Ogilvie is the Volunteer Coordinator. She's wonderful; she had been volunteering with the Crane Program. She's actually– she was in the military as a musician and she's introduced music and wildlife together for kids programs.

LIBBY: Oh, that's great.

NELL: And it's been very good. She does a wonderful job with the volunteers; she does an excellent job.

LIBBY: So, we're kind of winding down, is there anything– I see that you have some notes that you wrote down that you want to make sure that you share.

NELL: I'm just seeing if I've covered – I can't remember. I was going through the list you gave me to start with.

LIBBY: There's a lot to capture.

NELL: There's a lot, and I know I'll think of things - oh I forgot to mention this, or I forgot to mention that.

LIBBY: What we're really interested in is mentors, who might have been some of your mentors, your biggest challenges, your biggest accomplishments? I think you've covered a lot of that.

NELL: I think we've covered most of that. I think it's just I wish I could help more. Thank God for volunteers. We have wonderful people that give their time and talents to help, and it makes a huge difference. I wish we could do more, because of the Friends Policy. They used to run the Tram Program for us. They used to charge a little bit of money for it, so it was an opportunity to make money for the refuge because that's where the money went. And [they] hired the drivers. Now the government has to pay a contractor for somebody to drive. So, you have a third party to make money in the

middle, so it's just inefficient, whereas before we had a wonderful system that worked well. At one time they wanted us to go to the Fee Program. Well there's red tape involved with the Recreation Fee Program. It's insane; nobody wanted to do that. So, it's just, again, I don't want to start talking negatives.

LIBBY: But you had a great career.

NELL: I had a wonderful career, and, again, I was so fortunate.

LIBBY: Twenty-four years at Patuxent?

NELL: Close to that I guess.

LIBBY: That's a long time.

NELL: Forty-three with the Service, again part of it part-time. It was great to be able to meld family with career. I felt very blessed and fortunate and to have a career that I loved, and people I loved to work with, and I still love to keep in touch with. It makes a difference.

LIBBY: It does.

NELL: It's family, it's meaningful, it's very special and not everybody can say that.

LIBBY: No.

NELL: A lot of people every day get up and go to a job they hate.

LIBBY: And you loved it.

NELL: I loved it. I did.

LIBBY: You gave a lot of yourself.

NELL: And it gave back, so it's good.

LIBBY: Well, we thank you for your service.

NELL: Thank you for yours.

LIBBY: Thank you. Thank you, Nell.