

An Interview with

Bruce Elliot

at his home in
Van Buren, Missouri

02 April 1998

interviewed by Will Sarvis



Oral History Program
The State Historical Society of Missouri

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PREFACE

Mr. Bruce F. Elliott was born on July 2, 1909. He began his Forest Service career in Michigan during the Depression era. In 1954 he transferred to Ava, Missouri, to manage livestock grazing on the Mark Twain National Forest during some of the final years of open range in Missouri. In 1963 he transferred to Van Buren to work on the Clark National Forest, where he stayed until his 1972 retirement.

Mr. Elliott transferred to Van Buren just before Congress implemented the Ozark National Scenic Riverways under Park Service management. During the late 1950s and early 1960s a proposal that would have expanding Forest Service management along the Current River had, for a time, posed an alternative to Park Service management. This period witnessed an increase and diversification of Forest Service recreation facilities nationwide, and Mr. Elliott relates Clark National Forest examples in his recollection of the construction of Skyline Drive and various horse trails. The Ozark National Scenic Riverways made the Current and Jacks Fork the first nationally protected rivers, and acted as something of a precedent for the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which included the Eleven Point River in its first round of inclusion. Mr. Elliott helped manage the Eleven Point under this new legislation.

The interview was recorded on Sony type I (normal bias) audio cassettes, using a Marantz PMD-222 manual recorder (set on automatic recording level) and a Shure VP64 omnidirectional microphone attached to a floor stand. The audio quality is good throughout.

The following transcript represents a faithful rendering of the entire oral history interview. Minor stylistic alterations -- none of factual consequence -- have been made as part of a general transcription policy. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Parentheses () are used to indicate laughter or a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation. Quotation marks [" "] indicate speech depicting dialogue, or words highlighted for the usual special purposes (such as indicating irony). Double dashes [--] and ellipses [. . .] are also used as a stylistic method in an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editors, Will Sarvis and N. Renae Farris.

[Tape meter, 000. Begin side one, tape one of one. Begin interview.]

WS: I'm in Van Buren, Missouri, where I'm in the home of Mr. Bruce Elliott, who worked for the [U. S.] Forest Service for many years. Was it the last twenty years of your career you were here in Missouri?

BE: Yes.

WS: I see. Mr. Elliott, to get started, I thought maybe you could just give us an autobiographical sketch; tell me your birth date, and where you were born, grew up, and that kind of thing.

BE: I was born in Fort Collins, Colorado, on July 2nd, 1909. We lived there in Fort Collins, and then finally my dad and another man, in covered wagons, went down to Texas. The family followed later on, after he got a place to stay. So we down and lived in Texas for five years. Then we came back to Fort Collins. I went to school at Fort Collins schools, and then went to Colorado State University and took forestry. I graduated in 1935. I went to Michigan to work with the Forest Service in the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] program. I was a forester in a CCC camp there. I spent a number of years at that, and then I was made ranger in the upper Michigan national forest. I was up there for about, oh, thirteen years.

Then I was transferred down to Ava, Missouri. What they wanted was somebody who knew something about grazing. The fact that I had gone to a western college, they figured I knew grazing. (Laughs) Of course I didn't, and I told them that, but they said, "Well, you've been exposed to a certain extent, so go down and try it." So I did. Over at

Ava it was open range; cattle, hogs, and sheep running everywhere. We did have some permits for grazing, and laid out some grazing allotments, and leased them out to the various farmers. We had quite a bit of open land at that time, when the Forest Service got land.

We had a big problem with fires. Everybody liked to burn. When you burn, it makes more grass. (Chuckles) So, our Forest Service lands, a lot of them were kind of targets for places to burn so people's cattle could have something to eat. As time progressed, working with the people there, it was quite a big project, but we reduced the fires by a big amount. We finally got people to where they didn't set so many fires, and where they could see, maybe, that is was helping -- not for grazing, but helping their land. So much of the country all through the Ozarks, back in those days, it was a policy to burn what you can. So all the hilltops, or one thing or another, were rock. There was no soil there. It was all washed away, pretty much. It was really very poor ground. But as time went by and these areas were protected, and fires were kept out, they begin to build up the soil somewhat. Things began to get better, and people kind of recognized that, and began to accept it.

[Tape meter, 050]

Eventually, especially over around Ava where we had our grazing area, so much of the country really did look awful. But through our program, not people necessarily on the [national] forest, but other people around -- the county agent was a big help, too, with the idea of managing their cattle, having rotation grazing on grasslands, and so forth. It

kind of took effect. I have seen an improvement all through the years with how much better the land looks, and with how much more productive it is.

Finally, the open range was taken out. In open range, your cattle could go where they wanted to. If you didn't want them on your land, you had to fence them off. But in closed range, they have to keep their cattle fenced in, (chuckles) and not get out. It was a big step forward to improving our lands.

WS: Do you remember the year you were transferred to Missouri?

BE: 1954.

WS: So you retired in the middle '70s?

BE: In 1972. I came to Van Buren in 1963.

WS: When you were in Ava, was that the Clark National Forest, or the Mark Twain?

BE: No, that was the Mark Twain.

WS: And then over here, was it still the Clark?

BE: Yes.

WS: When did the two forests merge?

BE: They merged pretty well, I think... around 1960, probably; late '50s, 1960.

WS: What were some of the differences you noticed between Michigan and Missouri, in terms of the forest?

BE: It's altogether different timber. Up there they're northern hardwoods. They're so much different than our southern hardwoods. They grow a lot of pine and fir and spruce up in Michigan. A lot of our work there was growing pulpwood. Especially a lot of the jack

pine was pulpwood; and the spruce and balsam, pretty much so. All of Michigan, pretty much, was at one time pine lands, mostly, and big pine forests. Then they were all cut off. Of course, they were burned considerably after that. No fire protection. So it left a lot of barren areas; many big, barren fields and areas. So one of the big things up in Michigan was tree planting. Planting pine, mostly, altogether. We planted thousands of acres with the CCC program.

[Tape meter, 100]

I worked in the CCC program as a forester for a few years. Then the war came and the CCC camps were pretty well disposed of. Then I was put in charge of a conscientious objectors' camp for a couple of years. After that, then, I was made ranger in the upper Michigan forest.

WS: So when you came down here I guess they had two different supervisors' offices.

BE: Yes, they did.

WS: One of them was in Rolla, maybe?

BE: I believe there was one in Rolla and one in Springfield, and then I think they went back to Rolla, after that.

WS: How many different supervisors did you work under in Missouri?

BE: I imagine about six or eight different ones.

WS: Do you remember a man by the name of Debruin?

BE: Oh, yes. Hank Debruin.

WS: Was he the supervisor when you came here?

BE: No, he wasn't. He came later on. He was supervisor before the forest split up. He was at Rolla for a short time, and then when they split up he went to Springfield. This area was included in the area of Springfield, the Mark Twain part.

WS: I guess you learned about the Pioneer Forest once you got over here in this part of Missouri.

BE: Yes.

WS: Did you ever have much dealings with Mr. [Leo] Drey?

BE: Yes. I used to see him quite often. I haven't seen him for a long time, now. He was quite a forester.

WS: Did they do any clear cutting in this part of the national forest, or was it selective cutting?

BE: It was all selective cutting up until just fairly recent years. Then they changed their policy. The Forest Service talked so many years about "cut out and get out." But to manage their timber and so forth. So that was what we were doing, was promoting that. Of course we were promoting no fires. (Laughs) In recent years, now, it seems like things have changed somewhat, and they've decided clear cutting is a good thing in some areas, and burning is a good thing in some areas. The people can't understand that, and I can't really, (laughing) myself, either. I know that you get a different situation, where you can do those things. But whether that's any better, or as good a situation as you did have -- I think all the cover, the leaves and mulch and so forth, that goes on the ground finally goes into soil. If you burn it, it goes into the air. That makes just a poor growing condition.

[Tape meter, 150]

But it seems like there has to be change. They can't continue to follow along their same old steps, lots of times. So I'm particularly confused about their thoughts about burning, and with their clear cutting. For this area, at least, we had real good cooperation from the people. I think they were well pleased with the Forest Service. But, when they started clear cutting and started burning, then they began to criticize. They couldn't understand it.

They moved around the districts, and jockeyed them around so much, that things are just different. People are somewhat mixed up; lost. For my own feeling, what the people feel about the Forest Service now, is they care very little, compared to a few years back. We used to have work crews. We had our lookout towers and our tower men. If we had a fire or something, the crew was dispatched to the fire right away. These work crews would work on roads and timber stand improvement, and parks and recreation areas of various kinds. We kept this little crew employed. It was a big interest from the local people in that some of the people could work for the Forest Service. They had that. We had the same ones back, pretty much, each year. So we'd have an experienced crew, and they knew what to do.

Today, they use the towers very little, if any, any more. It's all plane detected, or somebody calls in. When they do, you've got to look for volunteers to come and do all their work, fight the fires for them. So much of the other jobs, like road maintenance, road building, tree planting, or even marking timber for sale -- a lot of it is contract work,

any more. So the Forest Service doesn't really have any trained people any more to do that kind of work. It's not getting done.

WS: Did you ever operate one of those Osborne fire finders?

BE: Yes. (Chuckles) They're pretty good.

WS: I guess they must have been involved with some tree planting down here, too.

BE: Yes. When I first came to this district here, we planted pine; quite a little bit.

WS: Shortleaf pine?

BE: Yes.

WS: Now that's the native pine species, isn't it?

BE: Yes. What we planted, mostly, would be on south slopes where it's really dry.

Hardwood doesn't do very well there. So most of the hardwood on the south slope was poor quality.

[Tape meter, 200]

If we made a cut, sometimes we'd make a pretty heavy cut, then plant pine in those areas.

Pine, of course, are deep-rooted. They can stand droughts. They do okay on south slopes. Of course, they do okay and better on north slopes too. But your hardwoods don't. So that's what kind of planting we did here. We did put in several walnut plantations; small ones, around here on the forest; this area. We built a lot of wildlife ponds.

WS: I think the forest here was starting to get involved with recreation, too.

BE: Yes. This, what we call Skyline Drive up here on the hill. When I was over at Ava we

worked with the chamber of commerce. There was what we called the Gladetop Trail, that we established. It was a scenic drive. In the fall of the year they would have what was called “yellow wood.” The leaves would turn a beautiful orange real early; that, and the gum trees, and then later on, a real nice color. So we had some beautiful colors. There are lot of ridges where you can get beautiful views.

So we made several visits along some of our roads, and laid out a trail there with the chamber of commerce. We started one Sunday, through the next Sunday. They’d have a meet where the people would come see the fall color. They’d be escorted. They could drive or go as groups. Sometimes they took buses, and so forth. One Sunday they had a big barbeque out on what they called the Caney Tower area. There’d be hundreds of people out there. There’d be music, singing, and clogging. People would meet out there and have a big time.

Then, when I got transferred over here, there was a road here that was called Skyline Drive. It was just a rut road. You could barely get around it in a pickup, it was so bad. But it looked like you would get a lot of scenic views from it. So the Forest Service agreed to do that, so we developed Skyline Drive. We also had the beginning of a horse trail up at a place called the Corral.

[Tape meter, 250]

You could go about fifteen miles south on this horse trail. This trail was supposed to go across the Winona District. They would ride here, ride down. Sometimes they would take their trailer down there, and sometimes some of them would go ahead and ride back

on what was called the Blue Hole. We had a lot of good horse riding trips.

Then, at Winona, they had their horse trail over there. The two of them, they were connected, but that wasn't used so very much. But finally, I guess people quit riding horses a lot and interest fell down. Those horse trails are not used any more. But Skyline Drive is. There are some beautiful vistas up there. They *had* been beautiful. (Laughs) There again. It seems nobody is taking care of them. The vistas grow up. You have to clean them up every once in a while. They blacktopped the road, then bad holes got in the road. It wasn't maintained. It was kind of a disgrace. But this last year or so I think the Forest Service has paid the county to do their maintenance for them up there. So they have the road in pretty good shape again now, part of it. But the vistas need cleaning up so you can see your views. It doesn't seem to get done very well. (Laughs) You make this circle on Skyline Drive, then you come out on 103 going on down to the park. You go down through the park, back up if you wanted to. It's a wonderful drive.

WS: I guess you were here just before the Park Service came into the area.

BE: Yes.

WS: So you remember their arrival and land acquisition and everything.

BE: Yes.

WS: Did they have much interaction with the Forest Service?

BE: There was no real fight, you might say (laughs); who was going to have the land. It was figured out, laid out. They took over some Forest Service land. But it went over smooth enough. There was no big problems.

[Tape meter, 300]

WS: Were there some people working here, before you got here, that had maybe been here for a while? Long term Forest Service employees that told you stories from the earlier days before you arrived?

BE: No.

WS: I just wondered if there were Forest Service people who remembered the 1940s and '50s and all, that had been here long enough.

BE: Yes, there were some that remembered the old CCC camps that they had back in there. There were two or three of the old CCC camp sites, still, out here on this district. Then, of course, like down at Big Spring, that was state. All the buildings were built by the CCC back in those early days. They're still there. (Chuckles) Good job.

WS: When I was researching this topic, I noticed a couple of years before they passed the bill for this Ozark National Scenic Riverways, there had been an alternate bill in Congress to have the Forest Service expand and take over that land.

BE: Right. Yes.

WS: Did you ever hear anybody still talking about that, when you got transferred over here?

BE: Oh yes. That was quite a subject, there for a little while.

WS: Had that been a source of rivalry between the two agencies?

BE: Kind of; a little bit. Before the Park Service came in, the rivalry was kind of heavy. But once it was decided they were *coming* in, it all went pretty smoothly.

[Tape meter, 334. End side one, tape one of one.]

[Tape meter, 000. Begin side two, tape one of one.]

WS: Were you involved with the Eleven Point River at all, when you worked for the Forest Service?

BE: Yes. That was part of my district.

WS: So I'm sure you remember when that became the Wild and Scenic River.

BE: That happened right after I left.

WS: The act was in 1968. But I guess they didn't include it right, maybe.

BE: I guess it did come in there the last little while I was there, to a certain extent. But it developed... And of course, that's all Forest Service.

WS: I guess the policy there was to turn in back to a primitive environment.

BE: To a certain distance back from the river, yes.

WS: So they tore down the mills and the houses and all that were near the river?

BE: Not really. Of course, the old mills, they were about all gone anyway. There were portions of them; Turner Mill -- there was a big water wheel there, a sluice way -- and some of the other places that had been in existence. But they were not in operation anymore, or anything like that. The object was to kind of keep those and maintain them. I remember down by Turner Mill there was an old school house. I think it's still down there. There used to be a bunch of school seats and benches that they had in the school house. I think it's still there.

WS: Did the Forest Service try to consult with the Park Service in terms of managing a river? Since the Park Service got involved with it earlier?

BE: I don't think so; not exactly. I think, of course, they [the Forest Service] did it their way on the Eleven Point.

WS: Did they try to acquire additional land for the Eleven Point?

BE: They tried to acquire additional land, yes.

WS: Did they do that through willing seller only, or was there any condemnation?

BE: I don't believe there was any condemnation, but they paid kind of dear for some of it. (Chuckles) I think Leo Drey had quite a bit of land. But they bought his tract from him, finally. There was some difficulty there. He would sell, and then he wouldn't sell. Then he acquired some more of the land with the idea that he *would* sell. (Chuckles) They finally bought it, but it was a pretty high price they paid.

WS: I believe, from what everybody says, the timber in this area before the industrial logging, was pretty much all shortleaf pine. Is that true?

BE: That was predominant. There was always hardwood here.

WS: When the Forest Service went to re-planting, were they trying to duplicate the old forest, or not?

BE: No, all they were doing was trying to put a better species, like on the south slopes, if it was open fields, and so forth. A number of the open fields are replanted to walnut. In the latter part, we had several small walnut plantations. Some day I need to get out and look around (chuckles), and look at them again.

[Tape meter, 050]

WS: Did you have any lifetime estates on the Forest Service land, where you bought

someone's land and let them live on it?

BE: Yes.

WS: Was that very common?

BE: Not much. Most of the time once they sold out, they sold out altogether. But there were some of them that still lived there for a while longer.

WS: I imagine you folks were trying to consolidate your holdings, so maybe you would maybe trade land sometimes and your boundaries would change.

BE: Yes. That was quite common. And they still do some land exchange.

WS: What can you tell me about this practice they tell me was called "grandmawing?" What was that?

BE: Grandmawing was stealing timber (chuckles); people coming in and cutting timber off of other people's land.

WS: I guess the Forest Service was a victim of that sometimes.

BE: Somewhat, yes.

WS: Did you ever catch any?

BE: Oh, yes. We had a number of cases. But they pretty well stop. I think they did have a case here just very recently. It was some boys cutting fuel wood. But neither one of them really needed the money or the fuel wood to make money, or anything. They'd gone back up in kind of a remote place and cut several trees before they found them. So they had to pay pretty heavy. They settled it all out of court.

WS: Did you ever find anybody making whiskey on the forest?

BE: I never did, no. (Laughs) I found places where there *used* to be stills. There was one place over at Ava, a valley. They were supposed to have made whiskey there. We'd find their bottles. It was White Horse Whiskey. (Laughs) And down in that area, every once in a while you find a whiskey bottle with that written on it.

WS: That was in Douglas County.

BE: Yes.

WS: Is the forest much different over there compared to here, or not?

BE: We have better timber here.

WS: I wonder why? Better soil?

BE: Yes. As you go farther west here, and north, the timber gets shorter. It doesn't grow tall like it does here. I don't know whether that's like in the mountains, or some species only grow up so far and others grow up higher, or not. But, at any rate, that seems to be kind of like it is. As you go west from here to, say, Willow Springs and on, the timber is pretty short and poor timber.

WS: What did you do in the way of wildlife management?

BE: I don't recall I was ever building any wildlife plots, except on some of the ponds. We built a lot of wildlife ponds. They're not very big, but they're way back up in here for turkey, deer, and so forth. They were used a lot. I would also stock them with fish, a lot of them. They were used.

[Tape meter, 100]

WS: The National Forest land in Missouri comes under [Region] Nine. Did you ever get an

idea of how the Missouri forest fit into the overall region in terms of maybe how they were funded? Because sometimes these forests have a different personality within the region, if you know what I mean.

BE: I guess there's a little of that, but I think we always got our share here. And I think up north they always got their share up there too. I don't believe there was any particular problem on that. There are always things you'd like to do. There are a lot of watershed programs. You'd like to fix some dikes and change some ditches and so forth. It was hard to get money to do those kind of things.

WS: Did any of the Forest Service chiefs come to visit Missouri?

BE: Yes.

WS: Do you remember which ones?

BE: Craven was here. Here's his book.* Are you aware of it?

WS: No, I was hoping to take a look at that here in a minute.

BE: Jay Craven, and several of them have been here.

WS: Who was your favorite supervisor?

BE: Oh, I think Red Livens I might say would be our favorite supervisor. He was just a good guy. He was a smart guy. He got along with everybody real well. He was sincere, but a lot of fun, too. He was just one of us. And there was an old fellow up in upper Michigan, Wholland. He

* Jay H. Cravens, ed., *The Land We Cared For: A History of the Forest Service's Eastern Region* (Milwaukee, WI: USDA-Forest Service, Region 9, 1997).

was an old timer. He was real good. He was a real fine old man. He was my supervisor up there for several years. He was a real good old man.

WS: Did you all have much interaction with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife agency?

BE: We didn't so much, but we cooperated on all of it, whatever they would like to have, or if they had any good programs. We said we would be glad to work with them on it.

WS: How about the Missouri Department of Conservation?

BE: We got along fine.

WS: What kind of endeavors did you work with them on? Did you cooperative programs you worked together with?

BE: Somewhat. We used to have what we called the Karkhagne Club. That would be the Missouri Conservation Department, the Forest Service, and private foresters too. We'd meet quite often.

WS: Did you meet at the Rose Cliff [Hotel near Van Buren]?

BE: Yes, some.

WS: I understand the Rose Cliff was quite a center of conservation.

BE: Yes, it was. When I came over here the Rose Cliff was still there. They were still open, I think. Because I can remember a meeting or two going on over there.

[Tape meter, 150]

The older people from way back always talk about the Rose Cliff when they come to Van Buren.

WS: I'm trying to think of the gentleman's name that ran it. Ben...

BE: Ben Davis.

WS: Ben Davis. Was he still around?

BE: No, he was long gone.

WS: Mr. [Rip] Burrows was still here, though, wasn't he?

BE: Yes. He was the postmaster.

WS: Did you ever happen to hear of Thad Snow? I think he was at the Rose Cliff in the '50s.

So he was already maybe gone.

BE: He must have been.

WS: He came from down in the Bootheel. He was a cotton farmer. But he came up to the Rose Cliff after he retired to write his memoirs.

Well, did you have any archaeologists working on your forest?

BE: Yes, we've had a few. We had some digging done here down at the south end of this district. They worked there for quite a little while, digging; some students, and so forth. They worked up here around the ranger station some while I was the ranger. There used to be a lady, she would come over with a metal finder. She'd hunt around there. She found a few old gun balls. They're about that big around [*indicates about one inch in diameter*]. She picked them up. They had a museum up here on the top of the hill, towards the park. They had a lot of Indian artifacts and so forth there. One of the recreation fellows came out here from Springfield one time. They saw her out there. They went back and told the supervisor about it. So he called me up and wanted to know if that was true. I told him, "Yes, of course. She's out here hunting." He said, "Have her

stop, and not do that.” She’d find these balls. They said they would turn them over to the Forest Service any time they wanted them. They were a little bit hot about it for a while.

And then right back at the Forest Service garage up here, where they used to have some trenches back in the Civil War days, there was a little group stationed here for a winter or two.

We built a little trail, what we called the Bird Trail; that went down to the river, and around, made a circle and came back up. It was made so it would never be very steep, so anybody could walk it.

[Tape meter, 200]

Even up to this day people walk that quite a bit. And there was an old cannon that was supposed to have been pushed over the cliff there. I’ve heard people say that old cannon was down there, and they used to jump off of that into the water when they were swimming, as kids. But we never have ever been able to find any trace of it, if there was a cannon. And I’m sure there was, but I don’t know what became of it.

WS: Did you ever have any mining companies ask for prospecting permits?

BE: Yes.

WS: What kind of ore were they looking for?

BE: Iron, mostly; and zinc and lead.

WS: Now that gets involved with the Bureau of Land Management, doesn’t it?

BE: Yes.

WS: They have to handle the permits, right?

BE: Right. And we've had oil companies make exploratory drills.

WS: Well, Mr. Elliott, that's all the questions I can think of to ask you. I don't want to leave anything out in case you can think of something I haven't asked you. So I'd like to give you a chance to make any closing comments you'd like.

BE: I wouldn't do anything different on my life. I think being a forester was great. It was really most enjoyable. I went to work in Michigan, and after the first year I had enough money to pay for transportation, my wife came to me. We married, then we had three children. It's been a wonderful life for us. We've moved around, somewhat.

(Chuckling) None of us really wanted to come down here from Michigan, where the ticks and the chiggers and the snakes and the heat was, and so forth. But, we came down.

Before long, why, the kids began to talk just like the (laughing) Missourians talk. It was quite nice.

[Tape meter, 244. End side two, tape one of one. End of interview.]