

An Interview with

Ron Steen

in

Reynolds County, Missouri

19 May 1998

interviewed by Will Sarvis



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PREFACE

Don Yantis recommended I contact Mr. Steen for this interview pertaining to the Current and Jacks Fork rivers. I met Mr. Steen at a construction site where he was doing the stone masonry for a house. Mr. Steen and I sat on the tailgate of a pickup truck to record the session.

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. Audio quality is good.

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.

WS: I'm here in Reynolds County; about five miles west of Ellington. And sitting with me here is Mr. Ronnie Steen. We're going to talk about Current River and any number of things I guess. But I thought, to get started, maybe you could tell me your family history, like we were talking about on the phone the other night.

RS: My dad came from Topeka, Kansas, in a covered wagon here in 1917 or 1918, I don't remember which for sure. They stayed in Van Buren for about two weeks, and then moved down to Gooseneck and stayed there for years and years. They had virgin timber there when they came in there. They cut it out and made rails out of it, then farmed it and stuff like that. My granddad was born in this country. He was born in Carter County. My grandmother on my mother's side was born in Carter County, and lived in Carter and Ripley all her life.

WS: So your dad just went to Kansas for a little while and came back, then.

RS: Yes. My granddad had land in Kansas. During the war they came back here. They wanted to come back to the Ozarks. They'd been in and out of here, but they came back here to stay.

WS: Did you have any idea about your great-granddad, before your granddad? Or was your granddad the first one to come here?

RS: My granddad was the first one to come here. I don't know much about my great-granddad on either side. They came out of Kentucky, I think, originally. My granddad on the Steen side moved to Eden, Oklahoma. That's where my dad was born. Then they moved to Wichita, and then came back down into Carter County, and then went back to Topeka; back and forth. I think they moved on the train back in those days. Then they came back

to Carter County and stayed.

WS: So were you born in Carter or Reynolds County?

RS: I was born in Ripley. My dad worked for ?Hamlin? Clubhouse down in Ripley County. Dad called him Old Man Hamlin. He was a rich person out of St. Louis. He had a big cabin down there, and Dad was the caretaker of it. But we were only down there about three years. I was born there, and my older brother was born there. Then we moved back up into Carter County and stayed there until after the war.

WS: Now, is that cabin right on the river?

RS: Yes. Right on the river bank. That's where I was born, right on the bank. You could pretty near throw a rock, if you were a good rock thrower, to the river.

WS: I believe you were telling me it was your mom or your grandmother that worked for the T.L. Wright lumber operation?

RS: Yes. My mother worked for the T.L. Wright Lumber Company. Miss Wright, she was kind of the matriarch of the Wright family. She worked for them for years. She started in about 1946 and worked for them up until the late '60s when Miss Wright died. I know most of the Wrights and the Burfords and (laughing) all those people down there. I think you've met most of them, I guess.

WS: I've met some of them, anyway.

RS: Yes. Bill Royce, he moved into this country later on. He was the one that did all the reel to reels on that. He was a radio announcer. He went up and interviewed granddad and

did all those interviews and put them on the radio.¹ Then Doc Hunt wanted to re-use them, and he wouldn't let him. (Chuckles) He bought them and saved them. We can thank Bill Royce for saving the records on that thing.

WS: What made you come upriver?

RS: That's where my granddad lived.

WS: He was here in Reynolds County?

RS: No, he was in Carter County, my granddad [Andrew] McDowell, my mother's [father]. He had the McDowell cabins down on the river, a few miles above Gooseneck. He had three cabins and a house, and he rented out to fishermen and stuff like that. He did [river] guiding; and even guided hunters. He did a little trapping in the wintertime, and did all that kind of stuff.

[tape meter, 50]

He had a pretty good sized farm and worked it pretty hard.

WS: This is the one I've got the tape of here, right?

RS: Yes. That's the one you've got the tape. He worked at the Grandin Mill when he was a young man. I think he's got a story or two in there about an old horse called Split Tail (I think was his name, or something like that). But granddad was a character. Back when he was young he liked to drink a little bit. He was one of those guys that, if he ever got a drink or two, he'd have to get drunk before he quit. Sometimes he walked from the river over there out to Grandin -- which is nine miles. If he got to drinking, he'd walk out there

¹ For the recording done with Mr. Steen's maternal grandfather, Mr. Andrew McDowell, please see C3966, a.c. 32.

to (chuckling) get him some more. He did that several times when I was kid. I'd have to go stay with my grandmother. He'd stay out all night and wouldn't come in. But when he was about fifty years old he quit it and never took another drink.

WS: I'll be darned.

RS: Never took another drink. He made johnboats there in Ripley County, in Doniphan. He made johnboats when he lived on the river, too. He sold them up in Indiana, and Illinois. He sold them all over the country; Kansas and Arkansas. It would take him about two days to make one. He'd make two or three a week. He'd not get in any big hurry. He made them up 'til he was, I think, about eighty-four or eighty-five, when he quit making them.

WS: What kind of tools did he use to build those boats?

RS: Well, he started out with just a hand saw, drawknife, and stuff like that. But later on he had him a band saw to cut out the gunnels and all that stuff; and some power saws, you know. But he first started out, though, he didn't have any power saw. It was all hand saws and stuff like that. Later years, why, he got pretty good with his power saws and made a little better boat when he was older (laughing) than he did when he was younger.

WS: Now, did you usually use pine to build those boats?

RS: Yes, pine. Then, when he moved to Doniphan, why, they've got some cypress down in there. Then, later on, they started using marine plywood. There was a company that started making twenty-four foot marine plywood, and that's when he started making the better boats. He figured out that the walnut gunnels made better gunnels. So they used walnut for the gunnels, and they lasted a lot longer than the other stuff. That walnut

lasted a lot longer than anything else with the water like that. He made a lot of boats.

WS: I guess he saw quite a bit of the early tourism in this region, then.

RS: Yes. He had a cabin, and people came there to fish and hunt ever since I can remember; even before that, though. He had people before I was born coming there. My grandmother cooked for some of them, but some of them cooked for themselves in the cabin. They usually had a couple, three extra bedrooms; they kept fishermen in there pretty near all summer. Then, in the fall, if they had a hunting season, some of them would come down and my grandmother would cook for them. They grew just about everything they cooked; the chickens and all that stuff, the pork. Just about everything that they had, she did the cooking.

WS: Were most of those people that came up to go fishing and all, were they from St. Louis?

RS: Most of them. And Illinois; some of them from Illinois. But most of them were from St. Louis. Granddad had a real good clientele of people from St. Louis. His cabin stayed booked pretty near all summer. Centralia, Illinois -- they had a college over there, and those kids, the coach would bring about twenty of them over there every year. The ones that had the best grades and stuff, he'd bring them over there for a week or ten days. It was a treat if they made good grades. They were the ones that taught me how to smoke cigars, when I was a kid. (Laughs)

WS: Whatever happened to that property?

RS: My granddad sold it and moved to Doniphan. Then the Park Service has got it, now.

[tape meter, 100]

WS: That's in Carter County.

RS: Yes, in Carter County, not too far before you get into Ripley County. One of the old landmarks down there is Panther Springs. I don't know whether you've heard of that. It's just about a mile above there.

WS: So it's downriver from where Don Yantis lives.

RS: Yes. It's about three miles down the river.

WS: Now the Shockley farm was right across the river from where the Yantises are, right?

RS: Yes. The old Shockley farm is directly across, and then the newer one is just up above the Yantises. It's about a mile, mile and a half up there. The Shockleys owned about a mile and a half of river frontage, or two miles. You think that wouldn't have been worth some money if the Park Service hadn't taken it.

WS: Well, you're down there where the river is pretty big, then.

RS: Yes, it's quite a bit bigger down below Big Springs. Like in the summertime when it gets dry, though, it's pretty hard to run; back in the old days, when you had props on those boats. Now, with the jet boats, you can run over three or four inches of water, or something, if you keep it wound up. Right in the section where we lived, the guides would come down to above there -- because there's some bad water right in there -- they'd come down from above from Van Buren, then run back up. Then the people from Doniphan would come up from down below, but they wouldn't come on up through Gooseneck down there in Ripley County, because it was so bad. So we were right in between two real bad places, and there wasn't too many people on the river, then, back in the late '30s and early '40s. We'd be out in the fields working and hear a motor boat out on the river, why, the first thing we'd all run to the river to see who it was. It was pretty

rare, back then.

WS: Last night the Shockleys showed me a picture of an old paddlewheel boat that used to come up the river from Doniphan. Did you ever hear about that?

RS: Yes. My granddad ran one of them. J.A. McDowell, he ran one of them. Harry Grubbs had one. There were several on the river. I think Gene Smith had one at one time.

They'd run up and down. Some of them went part way and some of them all the way to Doniphan. Some of them would go down one day and come back the next.

WS: What kind of cargo did they carry?

RS: They carried just a little bit of everything. They carried flour and groceries, and even hogs, and I think cows, once in a while. I think some of them even shipped out hogs for the market, down by those boats. They carried a little bit of everything.

WS: How much of a draft did a boat like that have?

RS: I think granddad said they could run in about sixteen inches of water; sixteen to eighteen inches of water, on some of those. That's not too bad. They kept the river then -- of course, they snagged it -- and they kept it down a little narrower, and it was pretty swift. It was real easy to get up and down it when they kept all the snags out of it. But I like it better with (laughing) the snags in it, myself.

WS: How did they snag it? Did they just do that by hand?

RS: They did a little part of it by hand. Dad was always telling me they did a lot of dynamiting. They'd go in there, and if there were some big logs down there, they'd dynamite them. He said when they did, the fish would just roll up. So I think they finally made them quit that because it was killing so many fish. But they had winches and stuff,

that I think they pulled them out with. And a horse and team got in there and pulled them out. You can see in those picture there -- they had regular crews that did that. They went up and down the river and worked it.

WS: This card said that was the government. I wonder, was that the federal government that was doing that?

RS: Yes. It was the federal government, I'm pretty sure.

WS: Maybe the Army Corps or something.

[tape meter, 150]

RS: Could have been, but it was sponsored by the government. That was one of the ways of getting up and down through there. They rafted logs and rafted ties. On Current River you can still find ties that they lost. My dad was talking about when they were rafting those ties, they'd go into some of them -- there'd be one on the front, maybe one guy in the middle and one guy on the back. A guy would go around a bend, they might not see him for thirty minutes or so. They'd be going around the bend, it was so long that where the bend's at, they wouldn't see each other for twenty or thirty minutes. But every once in a while they'd run into something, sink them, tear them up, and they'd have to re-do them again. They lived a rough life back then, the way they worked. That was hard work.

WS: Now you say it was your grand dad McDowell that ran the last tie raft?

RS: No, my dad, Howard Steen. My granddad never did run many rafts. I don't think he ever hardly did any. But my dad, he did the last raft in the Current River. And O.M. ?Estes? and _____ Buffington and a few others helped them. Dad was just a young man then, when he was doing it. But he was the one that was contracting to do it. They did it

on so much a tie. My dad was just about your size [five- eight, 150 pounds], and he'd pick up those big old seven-nine ties out in the bottom where they let them dry, and carry them to the river. (Chuckles)

WS: A strong man.

RS: Yes. For a little guy he was really strong. He never did weigh over 150 pounds, but he could pick those old seven by nine ties up and carry them to the river.

WS: How old were you when you started trapping on the river?

RS: People don't believe it -- I didn't start trapping on the river -- but I started trapping when I was three years old. (Chuckling) I found a trap, and I'd take it into the house and mother would set it. I'd take it out. We always killed chickens when we had the chickens. I'd taken the chicken entrails out and throw them in the log and set my trap down there.

But I started trapping on the river when I was about six years old. We trapped when we were going to school. We walked through the woods. It was about two and a half miles straight through the woods, with no houses or nothing. It was just straight up one big mountain over to another one to the school house. It was about two and a half miles. And we always trapped in the wintertime through that way, going to school and coming back. We'd catch a few old possums and get a quarter or thirty cents out of them. That was a lot of money then. I caught a gray fox when I was about four years old, and I got three dollars out of it. I thought I was rich, then. (Laughs)

WS: Did you have to skin them?

RS: Oh, yes, back then you had to skin them and stretch them and dry them, then ship them off. Today, these trappers that catch them now, a lot of them just skin them and throw

them in the deep freeze and sell them. They don't have to stretch them or anything.

WS: Sell them green.

RS: Yes, sell them green. The big companies can stretch them and do a better job on it than the people did. Back in the '60s and '70s, I used to take them out -- just whole beavers; never skin them or nothing. Just throw them in the deep freeze and take them up to Ed Bauer in Smithboro, Illinois. He'd buy the whole carcass and all. They had skinners up there that could skin a muskrat in less than a minute. I couldn't even get ready to skin one in a minute.

[tape meter, 200]

A couple of minutes, or three, for a coon. That's all they did, all day long, just skin those things. Unbelievable how fast it was.

WS: Did you use like an old steel jaw type of trap?

RS: Yes. Steel jaw. Then, in later years, they came out with a Conibear. That's a killer trap. You had to use it underwater for beaver and stuff like that. It's a good trap. You just set it over the mouth of the den. It's got about a ten inch square section. When it comes together it kills them right then. It chokes them to death right quick.

WS: What was the most common animal you caught when you were trapping?

RS: Coon. Coon's about the most popular. A lot of muskrats, and possums, too. But the one that brought the most money was the coon, compared to everything else. Mink brought more money, but you didn't catch very many of those. There weren't many of them around. Everybody was after the mink.

WS: No otters?

RS: No otters. I caught an otter in the early '70s just below Van Buren. And Dorothy Belvedere, with the Park Service, chewed me up one side and down the other. I caught it and it drowned in the river. The river got up. I didn't find it for three or four days. I laid it on the back of my truck bed and took it into town. I gave it to Tom May, the game warden. He brought it into Big Springs and Dorothy Belvedere came in and chewed me out one side and told me I'd killed an endangered species. I mean, she ate me up one side and down the other. (Chuckles) But finally she let me go. They did put me in the Park Service records for catching one. I don't know whether that's good or bad, but. (Laughs)

WS: They've reintroduced the otters now, I guess.

RS: Yes they have. There are a lot of otters over here on Jacks Fork. And there's some down in the Current River. But now, it's like everything else, a lot of people are complaining that they're eating all the fish -- which I don't believe they're doing. I don't believe there are that many, to eat all the fish. But a lot of them say there isn't near the fish on Jacks Fork as there was, but these rivers are so accessible anymore; they've got so many people on them fishing a little bit, canoeing, and stuff -- I think that's more the problem with the fish than it is the otter.

Even back when they put beaver back in here -- beaver doesn't even eat fish. Some of the people down on the Current River in Ripley County said, "Beaver is eating all of our fish." (Laughs) That's a true story. A lot of them said, "Beavers are eating our fish." And beaver don't even eat fish.

WS: Who brought the beaver in?

RS: Conservation Commission.

WS: That's before the Park Service [arrived]?

RS: Yes. They brought them back in in the late '40s and early '50s. When I came home from the navy in '56, that's the first year they had a beaver season. Beaver has probably changed Current River more than anything else. A lot of people don't believe that when I say that.

[tape meter, 250]

But beaver, when they got so many of them there, I've seen places where they cover half an acre or maybe a little more -- up to maybe an acre on a side of a hill -- where beavers have had dens for several years, and then it would fall in. They make deals about like this pickup bed here, with holes in them. Then they'll have a hole off here, then they'll have another big area. Then they'll have a hole over there and then another big area. They just keep going like that. I mean just constantly, go. They eat the bark off of some of those trees, off the roots. But I've got down in them and crawled around in those things. I wouldn't do it now, but I used to. I was a little braver back when I was a young man. Around those places where they had their dens, they just take out so much dirt out of there, when the river would get up, why, then it would wash away. They changed the river and made it run different than anything that's changed it in a long time.

WS: Did you ever hear your granddad talk about the beaver being here, like before they trapped them out, I guess?

RS: No, they weren't even here. They'd already gone when granddad was a young man here.

WS: They must have trapped them out a long, long time ago, I guess.

RS: They trapped them out in the 1800s. The fur trappers trapped all that stuff out. My uncle

supposedly caught the last beaver in that slough over there in 1904, across from where Yantises live. There's an old slough over there. Granddad knew there was an otter caught in this country in 1904. His brother was the one that caught it. That was the last one down in that country for years and years. I don't think they ought to multiply quite as fast as the beavers. The beavers *really* multiply fast.

WS: Over the years when you were trapping, did you ever notice -- like you said you caught coon most of the time -- but did you see some of the species that you were trapping go up or down?

RS: Oh, yes. Muskrats, when I was a kid, were real thick on the river. Later on, I think when the beaver got in here, why, they thinned out a lot. When I was a kid, muskrats were probably the number one thing to catch, because you could get a dollar or two out of them, and there were lots of them. You had to have a boat or a motor. Most of us, we just used a boat. But they come and go. There are no muskrats like there used to be on Current River. Used to be, every day you'd go in to just about any old bay and catch fifteen or twenty muskrats. Now if you go in a bay and catch two or three you're lucky.

WS: Wonder what took down their population?

RS: I think part of it was the mink. And I don't know if the beaver just ran them out, or what; or killed their young, or what.

[tape meter, 300]

I don't really know for sure. But after the beaver got here they sure went downhill.

WS: Did you ever take people on a fishing guide yourself?

RS: Yes. I used to guide when I was young. I had a guide's license for a few years when I

was a young guy.

WS: You had to have a license?

RS: Yes.

WS: Who issued the license?

RS: The Conservation Commission. Yes, you used to have to have a guide's license. I think you still do.

WS: Did your granddad have to get one too?

RS: Oh, yes. My granddad and dad all had guide licenses. Later on I think you even had to take tests to do that, to get your guide's license. When Dad worked it, he used to haul passengers out of Big Springs. When he did it, back in the '20s and early '30s -- you had to have a license for every different thing -- but you didn't have to have a [guide] license. But later on you had to have a Coast Guard approved license to run that boat out of Big Springs. And he had to take a test.

WS: Now, did Mr. Leo Anderson down there, did he have that kind of operation, too?

RS: No, he just had cabins. He had a guide service. He guided half the people that guided out of there, but he didn't guide himself, I don't think. Leo had the cabins down there. That's where Joel Montgomery and the Bodell's have got their place down there now. They bought that from him, Joel Montgomery did. But he had quite an operation down there. He had a big clientele too. He was an archaeologist. He went around digging up all the bones and stuff out of southeast Missouri; artifacts. He had lots of Indian artifacts that he'd dug up all over the country, and lot of them in Current River.

WS: I wonder what ever happened to them all?

RS: Lester Wright at Doniphan ended up with a bunch of them. Ray Joe Hastings got some of them. I had about 5,000, and I let Ray Joe Hastings have them. He bought them from me. I was going to buy some other antiques, but he never did pay me for all of them. (Laughs) He's still got them.

WS: Where does he live?

RS: He lives in Doniphan. Him and Lester Wright, they've got the museum down there. They do a lot of work together down there. Lester Wright, he bought all Leo's stuff up there. I think they gave some of those artifacts to the university. I think the university has got more artifacts than they can discover. In fact, the Park Service has got artifacts, but nobody has ever seen them. They've got them back there in boxes; marked. They'll probably stay back there until somebody makes off with them. (Laughs)

[end of side 1, tape meter, 359]

WS: I'll bet you remember when they were talking about damming the Current River.

RS: Yes. My dad was dead set against it, and everybody in this country was just about against it. My dad and a lot of people -- Jerome Burford, the Wrights, and all the people up and down the river -- they went down to Little Rock to the meetings and all over the country. I guess we finally got it stopped. They were going to build it in spite of whatever, but they never did. Just about all these people in this country [opposed it.]

It [the resulting lake] wouldn't have been over Big Springs, I don't think, all the time, but it would have backed up right to it, and in flood stage it would have been over it. So basically it would have ruined it. It would have been a terrible thing for this country. It would have been good in a way, but just too much bad stuff that would

happen in there. The Current River is too pretty to dam up. The Black River over there with Clearwater [Dam] -- it was a pretty river, but it wasn't near as pretty as Current River. And all the springs and stuff on Current River are just too pretty to dam up.

My dad, for four or five years, they went all over the country to meetings, and had meetings, and had pie suppers and then fund raisers so they could send people here and there. They showed up in bunches. They even pretty nearly had a few (laughing) fights in some of them. But they got her stopped. Well, they did the same thing when the Park Service came in here, especially the people around Eminence. Now, they were dead set against it. They really didn't want it, and they worked hard to keep it out.

Then, there was Cokie McSpadden; and Dunie Bollinger was the representative over there at the time. They were for it. They decided it would help the country. But after they went out and made a lot of people mad; after they got it, they wished they hadn't have. Because a lot of people wished the Park Service had never come in here. The Current River would still have been a pretty place. And it's still a pretty place, but in the summertime it's so doggone crowded. On the weekends I won't hardly even go on Current River. I'll wait and go through the week, or wait until summer is over. Then I'll go on the river. There are just too many people on it now. Crowded.

WS: Do you remember, a couple of years before they passed the Park Service bill -- Leo Drey and those people were trying to get the Forest Service to expand to keep the Park Service out? Do you know much about that?

RS: Yes, a little bit. They tried to, but they never did get much done on that. You know, Leo Drey was a pretty good old boy way back there. If people around here needed some

timber, he'd let them cut timber on him, some of the sawmill guys and stuff like that. But Leo Drey, back when he sponsored that Natural Streams Act -- he was the big man behind that -- and he made a lot of enemies around here. Then, the worst thing that Leo Drey did to this country was that Greer Spring. Are you familiar with Greer Spring?

WS: I've heard about it. I haven't seen it.

RS: It's on Eleven Point. It's a beautiful spring. It used to have a grist mill on it. The grist mill sat up on top of the bluff, and it's way down in the bottom. Anheuser Busch wanted to put a water deal in there and draw out one to two percent -- not over three percent -- of the water out of that thing, and bottle it. They would employ about seventy-five people, back away from it on top of the hill. After they got in there nobody would have ever known they were there. Bottle water now is a big thing, and it's been a big thing for several years. He bought the thing to keep Anheuser Busch from getting it and putting that in, which would have helped this country. You know, seventy-five or a hundred jobs, where you would never have missed the water, you never would have to cut down a tree or anything.

That water fluctuates from time to time. When it's real dry, it down small. And when it's real wet it's up big. They would have never, never missed that water. But Leo Drey is the one that did it.

WS: Is that in Oregon County?

RS: Yes. Beautiful place. My grandmother Steen would come down from Nebraska we'd always go over there. She was a pretty good sized lady. Even when she was up in her seventies she would still walk down to that thing just to see it.

[tape meter, 50]

It was a beautiful place -- *still* a beautiful place. But once they got the plant they would never have known it. It would have employed a lot of people. It would have really helped this section of the country, especially up around Winona. Well, people would have been driving from here to work over there. They drive from here up to the mines.

Leo was a good old boy back in the old days. But Sierra Club and some of them -- I'm not that much against Sierra Club, but I don't like some of the things they do. They get a little too far-fetched on some things. We've got to have a little control. But my grandparents and my dad and them all, they pretty well took care of this country, the parts that they had. They were pretty good stewards of the land. They took good care of it. They used it, but they still didn't tear it up.

My dad worked for the Forest Service back in the '30s on up 'til after World War Two. He worked for them for years, and years and years. He took good care of the country, the land that he owned and the land that my grand dad owned. He wouldn't let my uncle cut the big trees down around where the cabins were. There are still great big trees down there, four or five or six feet through, that granddad wouldn't let my uncle cut down. Because he thought they were too pretty to cut down around where the people camped, down there where the cabins were. There are a few of since that have died; you've got blow-down and storms. But they took good care of the land.

WS: I'll bet you know Bruce Elliott there in Van Buren.

RS: Yes, I know him well.

WS: I guess there aren't too many of those Forest Service people that stay around and retire in

this area. They kind of move them around, don't they?

RS: Yes, they move them around. Bruce Elliott. And Jerry Kladiva, he used to be a ranger in the Doniphan district. And I think he worked in the Van Buren district, too.

My dad worked on a little old tower there; Panther Tower, is what it's called, there down from Eastwood. I remember going up that thing when I was a kid. And I wouldn't let my kids go up that thing like we did. Then, we lived at Briar back during the war when everybody went to the service, and Dad went to Briar Tower. It was a hundred-foot tower. Us kids were little then; ten, eleven years old. We'd climb that tower from one side to the other -- not climbing the rails -- we just hung onto the rail out to the ladder. We'd just get up there, and the wind would blow, and those things go back and forth two or three feet. I wouldn't let (laughing) one of my grandkids or kids get on that now for nothing in the world.

WS: I guess you well remember the open range days.

RS: Yes.

WS: When did they close that?

RS: I think that was in the early '50s.

WS: Do you remember which county you were living in when they closed it?

RS: I was living in Ripley County. I had several encounters with cattle and horses in the road. Those cows like to -- at nighttime, that road would still be warm -- they'd come out and lie down on that doggone thing. You'd come down the road and there'd be a bunch of black cows out there. I pretty near hit them a few times. I never did hit one, but I came close. They closed the range. That's one of the best things they've ever done, though.

After they closed the range, got all those cattle and horses out of there, why, it helped things a lot.

Of course, they had wild horses down below where we used to live. There was a small herd of wild horses that people owned down in there that ran around, way a long time before these ones up here at Eminence.

[tape meter, 100]

When I was a kid there was a few that ran around down there. Somebody had a horse, it got old, and they didn't want it, they just let it run out. There were about eight, ten, sometimes twelve of them running around there in the country. After they closed the range, they died off. There was one old stallion in there, and I think somebody caught him and sold him. After that they got old; they disappeared.

WS: That was down in Ripley County?

RS: Ripley and Carter, right there at the edge.

WS: Never heard of those; I always heard of the ones up in Shannon County.

RS: These were before the Shannon County ones. This was back when I was just a little kid. Up into the '40s. I think some of the people down there started buying horses for mink food. Some of those guys caught them and sold some of them off. There wasn't a big bunch of them, but there were several around down in there.

WS: They didn't have the group of defenders the way these over in Shannon County had.

RS: No! People really didn't think of them much *as* wild horses, but they were, because nobody really owned them. Maybe at some time somebody owned some of them, but most of them, they just ran out. They were up in the old fields. They didn't pay any

attention to them. They didn't really *think* about them as wild horses then. But they were, about half wild; you couldn't get too close to them.

But these up here [in Shannon County] now, man, they like those horses up there. That old Clark boy went up there and caught them -- they were about ready to kick his butt, I think. (Laughs)

WS: Yes, I heard about that. Some of them disappeared.

RS: Yes, they went up there and caught a bunch of them. The Park Service paid him to do it. But I think he went back up there and a bunch of their equipment was torn up and stuff. They had some nasty notes. They quit it right after that. Our old buddy Bill Emerson, he was always pretty good about stuff like that. He got in on that and got it pretty well taken care of. With all the people in here, he was the one leading them.

And I don't see how the horses are going to hurt it that bad. If you had a big herd up here of 100-150 it would be a different story. But when you get down into twenty-five or thirty horses, I don't think they're going to be near as hard on that land up there as five, six, seven, eight, nine, or ten thousand people up there. I worked up there a few years ago where those wild horses are, there on Shawnee [Creek]. I'd go down there and watch them. There was about five in that one bunch. And they've got paths around there, but I don't think they're hurting the river or anything like that. All the old farms, years ago, had cattle and hogs that went in the river. People used to drink out of the river then; springs.

WS: I guess you've seen quite a few of these superintendents come and go over the years. I wonder if there was one that maybe stood out in your mind as being more agreeable with the community, or the less agreeable with the community.

RS: When they first came in here I lived in Doniphan. There were two Thompsons, I think, the head of the Park Service. That second one, I think, was pretty agreeable with a lot of people. And Randy Pope wasn't a bad guy; he was a pretty good guy.

[tape meter, 150]

But the first encounter I had with the Park Service, I'd come up from Doniphan in a boat. I had my pistol on. There's a _____ down there. It was in the fall, and I was looking down to see if I could see any fish in that hole down there. This boat with three people came by. It looked like they all had pistols on. They came within four or five feet of me, just right by the edge of me; and just barely halfway waved. Then they went on down. We ran up to where my granddad's had the cabin; McDowell's cabins, there.

I was standing on the bank. I had my pistol hand, and here comes this boat back up the river. There wasn't anybody, hardly, on the river then. I was standing about fifteen feet up on the bank. Dave Essex (come to find out) was the one that was running the motor. He was a Park ranger. When they got out pretty close to us, in the middle of the river, he just turned his boat and head right in to the bank. Just about the time the thing hit the bank, he grabbed his pistol -- he put his hand on his pistol and jumped out in about knee-deep water and ran up and took his mouth right up to me, right to my nose. I mean, I could have kissed him -- *smkk* -- like that (laughs) if I had wanted to. I was trying to hold him back like that. He had his hand on his pistol. So I thought, "Who in the hell is this guy? Is he crazy or something?" And you know, he had his hand on his pistol.

So when he jumped out of there and put his hand on his pistol, I just put my hand on my pistol. He said, "I'm a park ranger! I'm a park ranger! I want to see your license!"

And I said, "Show me something." He said, "I don't have to. I'm a federal marshal, too. I want to see your license!" I said, "Hey, fellow. I don't know you from nobody." He still had his hand on his gun. I still had my hand on *my* gun. He said, "I want to see your license!" I said, "I'm not going to show you anything until you show me something." He said, "I don't have to!" I said, "Yeah, you do."

And that Thompson spoke up in front of him. He said, "Show him your identification." (Of course, I didn't know his name was Thompson at the time; I did after.) He'd put his hand on his gun, then put it back -- he didn't know which way to do. (Laughs) He was going back and forth. Finally, Thompson said, "Show him your damned identification." So he finally got his hand off his gun, then he put it back, and he reached back with his other hand, his left hand, and pulled it out of his upper pocket there, got it out and showed it to me. When he did I said, "Well, you can take your hand off your gun. I'm not going to shoot you if you're not going to shoot me."

He said, "We've been having a hell of a lot of trouble with these people around here." I said, "You haven't had any trouble with me, have you?" He said, "No." I said, "Okay." I started to show him my stuff. I said, "The way you act, you're going to have a *lot* of trouble with these people around here, when you jump out, grab your gun, and run up to somebody. You're going to have a lot of trouble with people around here, acting like that. People around here aren't used to that. You can't shove them around."

Dave Essex was a bad egg, too. He thought everybody was a bunch of crooks and criminals, and stuff like that. He'd been in on some big raids where they got these big poachers, up north where they were killing thousands of ducks and stuff like that; and

deer deals. But he thought everybody around here was the same way. He made just about as many enemies for the Park Service as anybody that ever came in here, in the first bunch. He was really bad news. Dave Essex.

WS: Now that Thompson man, was that Dave Thompson?

RS: Yes, I think it was Dave.

WS: Seems like a lot of people thought he tried pretty hard.

RS: Yes, I think Dave was the better one of the bunch. Well, Randy Pope wasn't bad. But Dave Thompson, he tried to kind of get along. Then Essex would make everybody mad.

[tape meter, 200]

You just can't come in and take people's land and do like they did to them -- take their land, take all their stuff away from them; take their homes and their places, and harass them when they get on the river, and do all that stuff -- you just can do that and make people like you. Nobody is going to like you when you come in and take their land -- and then start harassing them and bullying them around.

They had these little old girls in here -- one of my pet peeves. The girls; I don't know. They might have been trained to use guns. But they'd strap a gun on a couple of those little girls and send them up the river. They'd run the Current River with a jet boat, and they didn't even know how to run it. They couldn't run it. They'd get up there and run into gravel. Somebody would have to come along and fix their motor for them.

Those little girls didn't need to be out on Current River with a boat and a gun. Because there isn't many people out there that's going to shoot anybody. There's probably more of them that get into trouble with those things than there was not to. That kind of

aggravated a lot of people too. They didn't want you to carry a gun around, but they wanted to carry *their* guns. And that doesn't work too good. These people around here have carried guns all their lives. They still like to carry their guns and hunt.

Another thing that really made a bunch of them mad -- even on these roads, like up here on Shawnee. They've got a sign that you have to unload your gun and put it in a case. Well, you're just going a little ways. It's on a county road. They want you to take your gun out and take your shells out of it and put it in a case, put it in the trunk. That's made a *lot* of people mad. That's the latest thing that they've done.

WS: That's recent.

RS: Yes, that's recent. That's in the last four or five years. They've *really* made a lot of people mad over that. On those county road, they've got a big sign up there, "No firearms." All that crap. It's a real aggravation. It aggravates me too. You know, we're just going to drive down and look at those horses. And I always carry a gun. My gun is up there in that pickup there. I carry it in my car too. I always carry it loaded. An empty gun isn't any good to you.

WS: Were you still trapping back in the 1980s when they were trying to outlaw trapping in the Park land?

RS: Yes. Art Sullivan called us in when they did that. He called me and two or three other trappers around there in Van Buren then. He said, "Ron, you boys; I hate to do this to you, but this is our regulations here. We don't allow any trapping in these national parks and stuff." Of course, I used to sit around and drink with Art. I built his fireplace and got to work on his house. We'd sit around and get drunk together every once in a while. I

said, "Art, that isn't the way it is. This is not a park. This is a scenic river. When you came in here, you agreed that all rules and regulations would be [those of] the Missouri Conservation [Commission]. Now you're trying to change it."

[tape meter, 250]

And that's what they were doing. All the [hunting and fishing] rules and regulations were supposed to remain like the Conservation Commission's regulations. That was in the rules and regulations, the way I understand it, when they wrote it up -- when they signed in that thing. But the Park Service, they don't make a law. They just make a regulation. If nobody fights it, it then becomes law in their idea.

That's when Judge Wangelin (originally from Grandin) -- he kind of sat them down and took over and got it kicked out. But they've got a few other things. You can't use glass minnow traps and a few other little things. You can't dig worms and this and that. But they'll come back again one of these days and try to outlaw trapping again. They've got all the time and all the money. It may be another year or two. A new park superintendent comes in, he'll try it. Because somebody back up in Washington or Omaha will say, "Let's stop trapping down there." They'll do it again. They will get it done. "If we don't, all right. If we do, that's what we're here for." You know. But they don't want to live by the rules and regulations they made a long time ago.

The Conservation Commission has done a good job on just about everything that they've ever done. We've got one of the best conservation commissions in this country. There's a few things the new one [Conservation agent] is doing that I don't approve of, but he's not too bad. (Laughs)

The Park Service, though, they just keep on and on. They've got all the time and all the money. Some day they'll get it done. But I haven't trapped in the last four or five years.

WS: Did you finally just get tired of it?

RS: No, I didn't get tired of it. Our little girl; we had so much [medical] trouble with her. She couldn't walk or talk, either one. It was just a constant job taking care of her. It was just a day and night job; a constant job. I never had time to trap, much.

WS: Well, Mr. Steen, I believe I've gotten through all my questions for you. I appreciate you taking the time off of your job here. I don't want to leave anything out, though, if you'd like to make any other comments about something I've left out.

RS: I can't think of anything right now, but as soon as you get going I'll think of a bunch of them. (Laughs)

WS: Well, I can come back by some time.

RS: Some time, if you come back by, maybe I'll have some more; I'll think of some really bad pet peeve, or something.

(laughter)

Maybe I'll do a little better next time.

WS: I may have some more questions, myself.

RS: Yes. If you get any, come by. I'm glad to talk to you.

WS: All right. I appreciate it.

RS: I might even buy you a soda.

WS: Okay.

(Laughter)

[end of interview; tape meter, 302]