

An Interview with
**Bill Wright, Gene Braschler,
Phoebe Braschler, Ray Burson,
and Lester Wright**

at the Current River Heritage Museum in
Doniphan, Missouri

05 August 1998

interviewed by Will Sarvis



Oral History Program
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Missouri Environment a.c. 52, 53

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PREFACE

I first became interested in gathering oral history in the Current River area after learning of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways (ONSR), which was established in 1964, mainly in Carter and Shannon Counties. Ripley County was originally included in earlier proposals for this federally designated land, but strong local opposition combined with Congressman Paul Jones' influence ultimately resulted in the ONSR stopping at the Carter-Ripley county line. Prior to the Park Service interest in the area, the Army Corps of Engineers had proposed damming the Current River, which also met with successful local opposition. These topics, as well as earlier timber history, tie rafting, the former open range, and other interesting subjects are discussed in the following transcript.

Don and Piney Yantis, among my first Current River interviewees, recommended that I contact Bill Wright of Doniphan for more oral history. Bill Wright's father founded the noted Wright Lumber Company based in Ripley County. My colleague C. Ray Brassieur had preceded me in gathering oral history in Ripley County, Missouri, and through these various channels I found myself in a remarkable oral history setting. To begin, I met not only Bill Wright, but a group of enthusiastic individuals who have volunteered their energy and interest for local history research and writing, the creation of a Heritage Village of period buildings and implements, and toward the operation of one of the best local history museums in the state. We met at the latter location, the Current River Heritage Museum, in downtown Doniphan, Missouri.

The session began with myself, Bill Wright, Gene Braschler, Phoebe Braschler, and Ray Burson all sitting around a large table in the museum. At various points during the recording people would point to artifacts located within view to illustrate a point. Part way through the session Lester Wright happened through the museum and stopped and contributed some of his recollections.

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.

[Begin side 1, tape I; tape meter, 000]

WS: My name is Will Sarvis, [and] I'm with the State Historical Society of Missouri. Today is August 5th, 1998. I'm here in [the] Current River Heritage Museum in Doniphan, Missouri, and with me here [are] Mr. Bill Wright, Mr. Gene Braschler, Ms. Phoebe Braschler, and Mr. Ray Burson. We're going to talk about Ripley County history and beyond, if necessary; the Current River area, land use history, and that kind of thing. I guess, just to get started, we could start with a little bit of ancestry. I don't know how far back everybody's family goes. I know, Mr. Wright, I believe your dad came down from St. Louis. Is that correct?

BW: From St. Louis, in the 1800s, Will. I couldn't tell you the exact date. But he came to Ripley County in, probably, the late 1880s or early 1890s.

WS: Okay. And you were born here in Doniphan?

BW: Yes. I've lived here all my life, in Doniphan.

WS: How'd you end up in Doniphan, Mr. Braschler?¹

GB: My mother's folks came here in 1833. They were the Pattersons. My father's folks came in 1872, I believe; 1870s. They came by way of Texas, originally from Switzerland. I mention that for this reason: my mother's folks came here with the idea of this being hog country. That meant hogs running loose and harvesting the acorns. My father's folks

¹ For more information on Mr. Braschler and his family, please see C3966 Missouri Environment Oral History Project, a.c. 37, 38. Mr. Braschler may also be heard on a.c. 41, 42 and 43 in the same collection.

came here with a different idea about farming, so it gave me somewhat of a varied background as far as timber and land use is concerned.

BW: According to Gene's ancestry, my dad was a newcomer. (laughs)

WS: How about you, Ms. Braschler?

PB: I'm a transplant. I married Gene. I'm from Boone County.

WS: Oh, you're from Boone County. And how long have you been in Ripley County?

PB: Eleven years.

RB: I'm a transplant, too. I'm originally from New Jersey. My wife is from Doniphan, and her family were the Burlison and the Estes families. They were early settlers in Ripley County. I believe her ancestors are on the list of the first landholders. Currently, in the historical quarterly, we're publishing the list of first landholders in Ripley County. So my wife is really the one [with a family history in the area], but I'm learning a lot about the history with the historical society working with Gene and with Bill, and editing the quarterly publication.

WS: Okay. Well, I don't know if it's my interest, but it seems to me that this logging history was a very prominent topic as far as the establishment of Ripley County -- economically, socially, and also in terms of the environment. Would you say that's right?

GB: Yes. Just to get started on, as they say, a level playing field -- the pine country was shortleaf pine. That's what they're talking about. In fact, I think shortleaf pine is the only pine that's native to the state of Missouri. The other important species -- of course everybody knows walnut, wild cherry, so on and so forth -- but really the important

species that you don't hear about early on is the white oak. That's the one that has really sustained the timber industry in Ripley County over the years.

WS: Has that been focused on the stave quality? Like the really high quality white oak?

GB: Yes, that's true, but really the importance of white oak goes all the way back to the early English colonies. England recognized it back then for shipbuilding. Of course, [from] then on it was through transportation; the construction of wagons, the hubs and the various parts there. It seemed like no end to the use they find for white oak..

WS: Did the industrial logging get started with the railroads arriving, or how did that work? Did the railroads come after the industrial logging got going?

RB: Didn't the logging really start from up in Grandin and come down?

BW: Grandin was one of the larger logging communities. In fact, at one time, Grandin was much larger than Doniphan. They built a rail line from Grandin to Van Buren, and railroaded those ties and the logs and all that timber on that rail line to Van Buren. That's what I've heard from the past history.

[Tape meter, 050]

Of course, back then there were no roads like we have now, and no automobiles or trucks, and so forth. They rafted ties and logs down Current River. They were taken out right here at Doniphan, right practically where the boat ramps are now. We'll take you down there later, Will, and show you the boat landing and ramps. To my knowledge, that's where the first ties were rafted down the river. The reason that site was picked to

pull them out of the river right at that point, the railroad was here; and it was close to the railroad, to load them right on the railroad cars.

WS: I wonder if there had been much logging prior to the arrival of railroads, like on a more basis for local use?

GB: I think, really, that would answer your first question there. The logging industry got started rafting on the river. I've never figured out just exactly the route, but some of the old timers said that logs were floated down the river and eventually ended up in a lumber industry in Memphis. If you track the rivers, that's hard to figure. Some of it had to be overland. Some may have gone on further than that.

But anyway, the early loggers that I had the chance to talk to early on (whose fathers had worked), this got started. But it was later than that, then, when the big industry started seeing the potential. When the big harvest started, that was dependent on railroads. And of course, they were building railroads and spurs right into the operation, as Bill said. But going back, the logging operation -- and particularly, I suspect, as you might have heard -- the shortleaf pine was initially tapped along the river and floated, either here or on further, where it was processed.

WS: Pine trees always make me think of turpentine. I wonder if there was ever a turpentine industry around here?

BW: (laughs) Did you ever know of it, Ray or Gene, Phoebe?

GB: No, I never heard of it.

RB: I think one thing you want to mention too, is that Ripley County is not a 100% forest county. There is about a third of the county [in] lowland. There was cotton here at one time. Still, rice is grown in some portions of the county. You actually have to get over to Doniphan to get into the foothills of the Ozarks. So Ripley County is kind of a bit peripheral when compared to other counties further west and north.

WS: Right. Did you have any of those black sharecroppers and tenants in your cotton area, the way they did in the delta?

RB: There were slaveholding families in this county before the Civil War, but *not* very many. There were a few in the very southeastern corner, maybe, of the county.

GB: I think what happened, there was a progression as far as the timber harvest was concerned. This includes the early harvesting as well as the later that was big business to the railroads. The early on, the pine timber -- this is what I've heard, anyway -- was harvested and floated down the river. It was some time later, then, when this area where a lot of cypress timber is located (and other hardwoods) -- but that was harvested much, much later. Now, there was *some* of that done along the river early; some cypress. But like in the little area of Acorn and Torch, these are little burgs over in the southeastern part of Ripley County -- that came later. In the memory of some of the old timers, they can probably remember when a lot of that was done.

The other progression was the hardwoods. This was *much* later. As Bill said earlier, some of the more northern counties in the Ozarks started earlier. But when the big harvest of the pine came into being, that put the focus on Ripley County. And then

later, as a lot of [cross] ties were made, you'll hear probably that Ripley County at Doniphan was known as the "tie capitol of the world" at one time. And this is possibly a little overstated, but nevertheless it was the big tie center of, particularly, the Ozarks.

[Tape meter, 100]

BW: Gene, I can remember this, when I was just a young kid, hearing that Doniphan was the largest tie shipping center in the world. Railroad ties.

GB: Yes.

RB: Even up until the 1970s.

BW: Yes. And the railroad spurs down along the river (where we'll show you later) were tie yards. Moss Tie Company, all the other tie companies, had their own yards down there where they bought ties. They were loaded on these cars to be shipped out of Doniphan. I remember seeing these tie loaders, men that spent their lifetime carrying ties on their shoulder up a platform and dropping them in these cars.

WS: Some strong men, I bet. (laughs)

BW: They were. They were giants. (laughs)

GB: And somewhat like a tennis arm. You'd see these guys, they were actually more muscular on one side, and held their necks over because they did this day in and day out. Like Bill said, the tie yards were up and down the river there, around where the boat landing is there, as far as you could see.

BW: Near the bridge.

GB: Right. The other part about this was -- of course, during the time they were shipping the ties from here, there were a lot of sawed ties. But a big lot of these were hack ties. There were tie hackers in every little wood lot. They made a living at this. They could hack something like -- you have to trust memory -- but it was something like, eight was considered a pretty good day's work. Some of them would do more.

BW: And Gene, do you remember ever hearing about what a tie brought back then? They'd hack one and sell it for how much?

PB: Ten cents.

RB: I heard ten cents.

GB: Ten cents. So you can imagine.

BW: Eight ties a day.

WS: Hard earned money.

BW: Boy, that was work, Will.

RB: I heard sometimes the guy who bought the ties, if it was a bad tie, he'd put a mark on it and toss it out, and these guys would pick the tie up and kind of fix that mark and try to sell it again.

(laughter)

BW: I imagine there's a tie hacker's ax here, isn't there? In that back.

GB: Yes there is, back on the wall there, down fairly low there.

WS: I see that.

GB: There was a name for them. I can't think of it.

WS: Was that a broad ax?

GB: Broad ax.

BW: Broad ax.

WS: Yes, that's what it looked like. Well, I see what you mean about the white oak being so important, because all those ties were made of white oak, weren't they?

GB: For the most part.

BW: Most of the railroad ties.

GB: I can remember when post oak (which is another white oak) was almost considered as much of a weed as blackjack was in the black oak family. Later, there were a few post oak uses for some things. But the real white oak (and there are several white oaks), the one that's known as white oak, has always been the really important one. And it appears there's no end to that, even with all your modern substitutes. I have a mill owner friend here that I talk to quite often. He gets orders from all over the United States for different wood products made out of oak grown in the hills. White oak is probably one of the most sensitive to water level of all the trees, particularly the oaks. And because of that, your white oak that is grown on the hills is much, much more valuable than that grown on the river or along where there is a high water table.

BW: And Gene, isn't there a lot of white oaks in demand right now for a lot of veneer and all that? A virgin white oak tree would bring a tremendous price, wouldn't it?

GB: I don't know how much this would contribute to research, but I'll get a lick in here. This museum has the little shop here in the front. And that was one of the first concepts of

getting people in this area to produce something from the resources they have. And, believe it or not, we have one fellow that graduated from Doniphan High School here (and he's still a young fellow) that has gone into cabinetmaking with oak. Of course, that utilizes a lot of white oak.

[Tape meter, 150]

But he's very, *very* successful. He's delivering cabinets all over the whole country. We might have a chance to take you by his factory here. But he really has done what we had hoped that people would do here in the county, using resources available.

WS: You mentioned these spur lines that run away from the river and all. Is that the kind of line where they would use these Shay locomotives? Like a gear-driven, high torque locomotive compared to the regular rod-driven? You know what I'm talking about?

BW: No. Our line, Doniphan Branch (they used to call our railroad) was from Doniphan to Neelyville, which was nineteen miles. And those engines [were] the same steam engine locomotives came down to the river edge and into the tie yards. They did all shifting and moving around of cars, and pulling out the loads and pushing in the empties. It was all the same steam engine. Is that what you're referring to, Will?

WS: Yes, sir.

BW: Same engine that pulled the Doniphan Branch passenger cars to Neelyville. That was our branch main line of the Missouri Pacific Railroad, which is now Union Pacific.

GB: I missed the question there, precisely, but you are talking about the tram lines?

WS: I've seen, when you get into hilly country, they would have these gear-driven locomotives as opposed to a rod-driven locomotive. It wouldn't go very fast, but they could climb a hill. You know, like the regular locomotive couldn't go more than -- I don't know what the percentage of a slope -- but there was a brand called the Shay, and Heisler, and I think there was another kind.

GB: Right. And I think, if I'm not mistaken, early on some of these tram lines were equipped so a vehicle could be hitched to teams, either oxen or mules. I believe, if I'm not mistaken, there's some place when they started harvesting timber around in the southeastern part of the county (that would be cypress), some of the tram lines were built so that they weren't like your regular rail lines where an animal would have trouble stepping over them [the ties]. They [the rail beds] were built solid so they could step.

One thing that I'm sure Bill has heard, that his sister Dorothy² mentioned to me -- there's a tram line that comes across from King Bee.

BW: That was our dad's big first mill, the King Bee Mill.

GB: There are tram lines coming right across the road from my house, where I live. They've actually been worn out. But I know Miss Dorothy told me that when [their] father³ got ready to get married, the lady that he married was working at King Bee. They came out on a tram line, I believe, and went to Oxly and then perhaps went on to St. Louis and were married.

² Referring to Dorothy Robinson Wright Burford. For her interview, see C3966 Missouri Environment Oral History Project, a.c. 39, 40.

³ Thomas Lyon Wright, Sr.

BW: Yes. They went from there to Oxly to catch the train to Neelyville to hit the main line. They had to spend a night in Oxly at a little old hotel down there, to catch the early morning train out of Doniphan to Neelyville. Of course, that was in 1900,⁴ so I don't quite remember that (laughing) far back. But I remember our mother telling us that they went to Oxly from King Bee in a surrey, in a buggy. And another couple went with them.

[Tape meter, 200]

They went from King Bee to Oxly in a buggy -- a team and buggy -- and then caught their railroad line at Oxly, which is ten miles east of here. Then Naylor is the next stop, then the main line is Neelyville.

WS: Has there been any livestock logging in this area, [done with] horses or mules? You mentioned them pulling the cars, but I'm thinking of when they actually snaked the logs out of the woods [with] teams. And they've done that as recently as the 1970s.

BW: That was nearly *all* done by teams.

GB: Right.

BW: Way before the machines got into the woods. It was all by teams, wasn't it Gene, Ray, Phoebe?

GB: Right. We may not have pictures to document this, but you know, at one time Ripley County extended into Carter County. I know we have a picture somewhere of, I believe, it's the Chilton family where they were logging by team. But that was the beginning, yes.

⁴ Mrs. Burford indicated a date of 1902.

BW: And you know that rail line that went from Grandin to Van Buren followed the Current River stream all the way up there, I guess to avoid the hills and the Ozark Mountains. And there was a big clubhouse built up there called the Kansas City Clubhouse. You know about that, Gene. It burned not too many years ago. Was it built there and put there by some railroad people? Do you know, Gene?

GB: I believe I read just recently where railroad people were the *main* ones in there.

BW: And they owned this Kansas City Clubhouse that was supposed to be a plush, outdoor living type [of] thing that had never been seen around here before. People came down there. I've been up there to the old site. That's just a drop off bluff to the riverbed. That rail line went right by there.

RB: The loggers sometimes would go out in an area where they were going to cut, and they would set up a camp. And sometimes that camp might be there for a year or two years. They might have even had a school there. There was a school in the 1890s called Blue Hole. I kept trying to find that school in our rural listings, and it was never there. I found out it was a logging camp school that only existed for a few years. The place [was] called Blue Hole, where they were collecting logs; and they ran a tram spur to get the logs up to Grandin from there.

BW: And those were the schools for the children of those families that did the logging.

WS: In some of my research I did back in Virginia, I learned in these logging camps that sometimes the ethnicity of the people was very interesting. One camp I looked at, the loggers might be English or German or Irish or something like that, but all the actual

logging railroad builders were Italian. And they kept them segregated. I don't know if anything like that ever went on here or what, if it was all mixed together?

RB: Well, Grandin was the biggest operation, wasn't it?

BW: Yes. Don't you think, Gene?

GB: Right. This carries over even into the construction trade now, if you're around housing construction and that sort of thing.

[Tape meter, 250]

Who are usually the plumbers? Who does the plumbing? This is probably true. I haven't heard that statement before.

WS: Even the local people to the 1980s, when I was talking to the elderly people, they called them "Tallies." The Italians. It had carried on, even though they were all gone. None of the railroad builders were left, because it was very transient. They came in and there was such a boom. Then, of course, when the boom was over they all left. But I was curious about that, because they lived in different housing, and if they had schools I'm sure they were separated.

BW: They were definitely segregated. Do you know of anything like that in Ripley County?

GB: Not particularly the Italian settlement. But I think this relates to history and trying to track history. It's probably one of the reasons that little bits of history can slip away so fast. Just like you were talking about the teams. We are absolutely sure that oxen were used in here extensively at one time. In fact, I can remember myself when every barn,

just about, had oxen shoes hanging in it. But you try to find reference now, or oxen shoes, it's hard to come by.

BW: Don't you suppose that existed *a lot* down around Naylor and the low country?

GB: Yes.

BW: East of us is that lowland that Ray and Gene mentioned, Will. We just drop off to flat land east of here. Have you been to Naylor or Oxly or any of those?

WS: No, sir.

BW: That's all flat land, and it's wet land.

RB: There were east Europeans who came here and settled. There was little town called Budapest in Ripley County at one time, which had a post office.⁵ It's disappeared now.

GB: Of course, the Irish Wilderness is just on our western border here. The strange part about that is, the Irish being what they are, that was mostly Irish Catholics. But believe me, Ripley County has a good, generous supply of Irish Protestants, coming from northern Ireland and different parts.

BW: My ancestors were Irish.

GB: Amen. (laughs)

BW: Speaking of these different communities, there's a little Pulaski cemetery out east of Doniphan. Wasn't that a Polish settlement out in there mostly? Catholic?

GB: Yes. Right.

⁵ The Budapest, MO post office operated from 1912 to 1922. Source: Missouri Postal History Society, <http://www.mophil.org/mopohissoc.stm> Accessed June 14, 2004.

BW: And some of their relatives and ancestors are here. I know a lot of them. Drwenskis and Flarskis and names like that, that were familiar around here and still are.

GB: Really, one of the things that's still alive in Ripley County -- it's more or less ethnic; it's early settlers anyway, and I mentioned it earlier. The first settlers came in here were hunters and somewhat like the Indians. But the big thing going along with that was, they were hog farmers. But they didn't farm hogs like you would think about now. They let them run [on the] open range to feed on acorns.

[Tape meter, 300]

And, of course, following that was the stock law [closing the] open range. This was a big fight right on up to this century. Because when the farmers came here -- the *real* farmers (I'm hesitant to say that, but I think puts a name on it anyway) -- they came in and farmed with fences and better equipment and better machinery. Then there was a clash between that type farming and open range hog farming. It makes a very interesting story which we intend to get in writing one of these days.

WS: I'm curious about when open range ended *officially* -- I mean by law. Does anybody know?

BW: It hasn't been too many years ago.

GB: Right. In fact, if I'm not mistaken -- I know it was by county, but I believe it was even by townships.

BW: You'd be in one that had closed range, go into another and your cows and horses and all were grazing along the road or sleeping on the blacktop at night.

- WS: Would that have been voted out by referendum or initiative -- that kind of thing?
- GB: I know, I can remember myself if you were in one township and hit somebody's animal you were responsible. If you were in another one and hit somebody's animal, they were responsible. So I'm almost sure it was by township.
- BW: I believe it was, Gene, because I remember back when there was open range. You just saw hogs and cows and horses grazing right along the shoulder of the highway.
- PB: Those old court cases downstairs have case after case of mules and cows getting on the railroad line getting killed.
- RB: I think it was up 'til the late 1890s.
- WS: You're talking about court records... I wonder where you would find a record of the vote *on* open range, like on a township vote? [Would] that kind of record be preserved or not? Would that be in the county minutes?
- GB: If I were going to look for it I'd go back and look through the local paper. We know it took place after the local paper and papers were here. I would think that would be an item worth reporting. (laughs)
- WS: (laughing) You would think so.
- BW: I would say it would be back even as recently as the '40s or '50s, wouldn't you?
- RB: Yes.
- BW: I remember open range *very* well.

[Tape meter, 350]

RB: Garnet Hunt [White] had a story, and mentioned that her dad ran cattle on an open range, and then it was closed.

BW: Of course, a lot of them didn't like it when [it was] closed, because that was the feeding of their livestock.

GB: We have a fellow that's somewhat of a writer, and he's interested in the historical society. We're trying to recruit him. This is one of the things he wants to research and write about. His name is Davis -- that's Bonnie Davis' son, I believe, isn't it? Joe Davis?

BW: There's a Joe Davis and there's a Kenneth Davis.

GB: I kind of believe it's Joe. He's been here a couple of times. He lives in the county where open range was legal.

BW: It would get to be a big issue in those townships, as you can imagine.

GB: Right. And he wants to write the history of it, and of course we've encouraged him to do so. He's like everybody else, he's trying to make a living too.

[End of side 1, tape I; tape meter, 371]

[Begin side 2, tape I; tape meter, 020]

WS: One thing I'm curious about is the arrival of the Forest Service and how they went about acquiring land; if they got that on a willing seller basis, or if there were tax sales -- because of course that was during the Depression when they came in, wasn't it?

GB: Yes. I would say a lot of it was tax sales. And the reason I say that is because it's fragmented, even to this day. You mentioned Mr. [Leo] Drey. I know where I own land up in that area, from time to time the Forest Service still trades in order to get a more

consolidated area. That, I think, is probably the way the Forest Service has come into being; just little by little, and added to it through acquisition of tax land.

RB: Wasn't it first called Clark National Forest here?

WS: Yes, I think so.

BW: A lot of that, Gene, like you said -- the Forest Service would... Say you had forty acres that joined their 160 acres, and they'd like to make that an even 200 acres of Forest Service land. And they own, maybe, one forty-acre over here just to itself. Like you said, they might trade out and try to get you to do that, or even buy it out. They just slowly acquire.

RB: Do you know Cynthia Price?

WS: No.

RB: She works for the Forest Service. She's the Forest Service archaeologist-anthropologist for several southeast Missouri counties. Her husband is Dr. Jim Price at Naylor, who's (I guess) the leading archaeologist-anthropologist in this whole area. I think she could probably give you a lot of information along those lines, and history of the forest.

WS: I wonder how the local people reacted to this big federal government entity coming into Ripley County and the surrounding area?

GB: I don't believe it was comparable to a lot of places, like in Georgia and places where there was a lot of resentment. There are different levels of people, of course, naturally. There were people [who] lived in the area who were more or less just squatters to begin with. On the other end there were people who were very well educated and stood for all the

things that the very best conservationist would stand for. So there were some different levels of occupants there.

But I don't believe that I remember anything where people really resented the Forest Service. I think, in fact, it would be more like the other way. A lot of people, right away, when the Forest Service started talking about re-seeding or letting it re-seed, and people starting seeing young pines coming in and fire stopped. I know a lot of people that I knew (even though I wasn't here a lot of the time; I was gone for thirty-five years) would eagerly show me where little pines were coming back, and how much they'd grow each year, and that sort of thing. So I think the Forest Service was pretty well accepted on the same level that the [Missouri] Conservation Commission was.

BW: Gene, in several years past I can remember them coming in like you mentioned. Well, a big government operation coming in and kind of moving into your territory. There was *some* resentment. There always would be. They came in and started making changes in a lot of respects. One of them I can remember even as a kid was: All the people that owned land and even timber land every spring burned their leaves and the underbrush. They [the Forest Service] put a stop to that. A lot of them resented that. It would be that way with anything that came in new and changed. But I can remember that, because they said that killed the ticks and did all this and that. Not just on burning, but a lot of things about it.

The Forest Service had to come in cautiously, to educate the people slowly. They had a lot of resentment of these forest rangers. We'd only had maybe one person in the Forest Service anchored in Doniphan.

[Tape meter, 050]

Like up here at the Forest Service now, they have a big crew of I don't know how many. But I can remember the Harley Thomases coming in, and people like that, that were a little bit resented at first. They were, I suppose, educated and trained to work their way into the community -- into your civic organizations; Kiwanis, your churches, that sort of thing -- to kind of help win a lot of the people over.

GB: This is very true. I'll back that up. In fact, burning was very much like poaching. 99% of the people in Ripley County, if you get talking to them long enough, they say, "Well, there was some good to it." Possibly there was. I don't know. But you're right, 100%.

BW: In the spring of the year I can remember, you couldn't drive any place in Ripley County that there wasn't smoke all over. Everywhere you look. People would [say], "Oh, they're burning off their woods."

GB: One of the things I think that helped the people in the county to some extent was (and it came around at the right time) the CCC camps and WPA work. But the CCC camps, particularly. I think I was a seventh grader in school the first time my teacher ever took me to visit a CCC camp. And of course my brother was in the Cs. He was in the administrative part of it, so I would go out and spend a lot of time there. You could see people were beginning to change then, because a lot of times their boys were members of

the Cs and they were beginning to be educated. So that helped. But you're 100% right. There was resentment. I'll go along with that.

BW: Of course, it wasn't enough to stop it. (laughs) The Forest Service is here to stay.

WS: What can you tell me about this practice I've heard about called "grandmawing"? You know what that is? (laughs)

GB: You bet.

WS: Did that go on in Ripley County?

RB: Still does.

BW: Grandmawing timber.

RB: "I got it from my grandma's place."

GB: I bought a place in the heart of the grandmawing country. The fellow I bought it from was in the army at the time. He was a captain. I asked him why the fresh pine stumps were there. And there were a lot of them. Pine that wasn't quite what you would say was harvestable, yet it was, and saleable. He said, "Well, I just can't keep people from stealing. I'm away." I bought the place from him.

I started to say that a while ago. When the Forest Service came in you could buy the timber country -- it was like a gift, almost. It was very inexpensive when it came to buying it. So that probably helped the Forest Service to acquire it.

But anyway, I bought the best part of it. He had quite a bit for sale. Part of it was along the Little Black River. It had I suppose at one time maybe \$2,000 worth of black walnut along the river. I said, "Well, that's good. That's worth more than I paid for it,

even with the pine being stolen off it." Well, it wasn't long 'til I got a call and they asked me if I had sold my walnut. Of course, I hadn't. (laughs) But anyway, I came up and went out with the sheriff. We soon rounded up the people responsible. This fellow that I bought it from, his own mother was one of the people that was implicated. The others were just low-life people.

The sad part was -- and I'm hesitant to tell this, because it brings it up to present day people -- but the sheriff was very, very good. I talked to the prosecuting attorney. He said, "Missouri laws just don't lend themselves to prosecuting people. You'd have to come back and forth from Atlanta." So it hasn't really been stamped out for sure. I'm not sure that a lot of the people's hearts are in *getting* it stamped out.

[Tape meter, 100]

This may be, somewhat, resentment we were talking about of the big government and Forest Service coming in. I don't know that, of course. But it is a problem, and it has been.

BW: Gene and Ray, do you remember...? Speaking of some of our past sheriffs, Jim Featherston was the youngest sheriff ever in Ripley County. I think at the time he was elected, he was known to be the youngest sheriff in the United States. He was an aggressive young man, very personable; and still living in either St. Charles or St. Louis. He wrote a book -- what's the title? *Ripples along the Current*?⁶ Have you ever heard of it, Will?

⁶ *Reflections along the Current: tales of the Ozarks* by Jim Featherston. Kansas City, MO: Harrow Books, 1984.

WS: I don't think so.

BW: There's a chapter in that book on grandmawing timber. That would be very interesting.

WS: A whole chapter. (laughs)

BW: Yes! He tells about it. And in it he mentions my brother, T.L. He and the sheriff went out on some of this grandmawing and ran it down. Stopped some of it.

GB: Bill's brother, T.L., was a good friend of mine even though he was much older. We got acquainted, I think, when I went off to college or maybe when I went off to the army. I'm not sure. But he was a very astute conservationist. He was always in the forefront of conservation and county betterment. I was very sorry when he passed on. I considered him to be one of the *real* friends of conservation, and I include the timber industry with that.

BW: He really was, Gene, and I thank you for those remarks, because his heart was really in it, and he was really interested in it. Through things like this he worked with Sheriff Jim Featherston. And they ran it down. They actually put a stop to some of it at that time. But it still goes on even now, today.

GB: When I think of T.L., I think of some of the past sheriffs. There was one sheriff. I shouldn't mention names, but I think this is pretty well known. I told somebody the other day in a facetious way that this one sheriff -- he was sheriff for quite some time and he dropped out, then he was sheriff again in his older age -- I said, "I knew one sheriff; his second time in office, at least, he stood for law and order and enforcing the law."

(laughter)

I left it open during that first time. Of course, that was back coming out of Prohibition. You didn't know *who* was really a friend, somewhat like the drug situation today. But Ripley County had numerous stills. Law enforcement then was like it is now -- somehow you get people that are in enforcement and the drug business today, they still somehow relate themselves to this very thing we're talking about, this timber thievery and poaching. It gets involved, and it's usually the same level of people, both for and against. But that's getting off the subject, I'm sure.

BW: During Prohibition we had our share of stills around Ripley County (laughing) didn't we?

[Tape recorder momentarily off to replace batteries.]

WS: We were talking about the Forest Service, and of course another thing that interested me in relation to the Current River was the coming of the Park Service. It's well known that Ripley County was once included in that plan, and now is not. The Park Service stops right at the county line. I wonder what you would attribute that change to, how Ripley County got taken out of that.

[Tape meter, 150]

BW: Gene...? As far as I'm concerned; I mean, my knowledge back to that -- I don't think we were ever in it, were we? When it was proposed and started and so forth, it was to include Ripley County. But we had a congressman from Kennett, Missouri, named Paul Jones, and he was very instrumental in listening to the people. He was very much a Bill Emerson and a Jo Ann Emerson type of person. He listened to the people, and most people in Ripley County did not want to be in the Park Service [territory]. And it stopped

at the north Ripley County line, right where Gooseneck is; Gooseneck Park and the Harry B. Hawes Park.

WS: I was going to ask you about that. I think Mr. [Don] Yantis mentioned that. Do you know the history of the Gooseneck and how that came into being?

BW: Gooseneck, yeah.

WS: Could you tell me about that please?

BW: (laughs) Let me tell you this Paul Jones story first. He was our congressman from this district. He had a very strong conservation friend, Dr. Z. Lee Stokely. You remember him real well, from Poplar Bluff, Missouri. Dr. Stokely and many of his cohorts long ago, your family [the Wellman family], teamed up when the Army engineers wanted to dam [the] Current River. There was mass opposition to that, and they won out. Current River has not been dammed, thank goodness. But they had a proposal to put two dams on Current River, one right above Doniphan and one up near Van Buren. But it was fought down. There were many hearings, from Newport, Arkansas, to Poplar Bluff and Wappapello and all the area around here.

It was led, I might say, by Dr. Z. Lee Stokely from Poplar Bluff. Among some of those other leaders were your relatives, Check Braschler, [Dallas] "Giant" Braschler, Arnold Braschler, Uncle Arthur Braschler -- you could name them all. And my brother, T.L. Wright [Jr.], my brother-in-law, Jerome Burford. Many, many. I hate to start naming names, because you leave out some people. But these were great (we called them) "dam fighters." (laughs) They had a lot of support from the conservation people

in St. Louis. Gus Buddy. If I could go back to those records I could name all these people.

But Dr. Stokely and Congressman Paul Jones -- we're coming back to that -- he surveyed and took more or less an individual survey of the entire Ripley County. It was overwhelmingly against being taken into the Park Service. I think if they did it again they'd do the same thing.

RB: Oh, yeah.

GB: Yeah.

BW: Because they see how they took over the cabins and property along the river. In Carter County they can't do *anything* up there with their property, and we can. Paul Jones was a great congressman from our district. He was a strong Democrat congressman, but he was a friend of all the people. He was succeeded (in later years, not immediately) by Bill Emerson, who was the same type [but] a Republican congressman.

[Tape meter, 200]

Through them, Bill Emerson stopped this destruction of the wild horses in Carter County and Van Buren. He led the drive to stop that in Congress. And Paul Jones' leadership and all of his support from people that I've named kept Ripley County out of the Park Service.

WS: You know, I had a feeling that Congressman Jones was the key person involved with that, because I know Congressman [Richard] Ichord -- that ran up in the district north -- he *ran* against the Park Service. But he was a freshman, and when he got in, they tell me

Senator [Stuart] Symington persuaded him to change his mind, and he did. Because he ended up supporting it. And I thought, "Well, Congressman Jones had been there for a long time, and I doubt Senator Symington could have pushed him (laughing) around very much."

BW: He could not and *did* not, thank goodness.

GB: Like Bill says, the party system doesn't make any difference. Most of these people he's talking about that *I* know were Republicans. But they were combining with [Democrats and] supporting Paul Jones.

BW: Paul Jones was a *terrific* congressman.

GB: I was in the university at that time. Dr. Rudolf Bennitt with E. Sydney Stephens really got the Conversation Commission as we know it now started, and hired I.T. Bode. The rest is history. But he was my advisor at the time. He came down here at a meeting. He came back. He couldn't believe it. I never told him anything.

But the thing is, it goes back (I think) to two things. The people that settled Ripley County, I give them credit. They liked it as it was, and wanted to see the river kept [in the condition] the Park Service said that they were taking it for. But fortunately, people don't always believe what the government tells them. In fact, I've been involved in two or three of these types of things, one out in the Kansas area there where the government wanted a national park and the people opposed it. Of course, the thing there, they said, "Well, how do you think it was preserved this long?" Which is a good question. But that was similar to what was being thrown around [in Ripley County] at

that time. But like Bill says, as far as the dam was concerned, it was no question in my mind and [that of] a lot of other right-thinking people.

People still have a fear. They go down in northern Tennessee and other areas of the country where the rivers have been raped -- possibly they're doing a service somewhere -- but there are places where you can go for miles and just see river bed, where it's [not been] picked up. People see that and they have fear of the beautiful Current River being handled the same way, regardless of who's the protector of it (in this case, the National Park Service). So that probably has a lot to do with it, I suppose; the track record of big government. So you know, it's like anything else. You need to examine every aspect of it. But I think those two things are the underlying factors as far as Ripley County's opposition [is concerned.]

Of course, Ripley County, as you know, was somewhat of an entity of its own coming out of the Civil War, and has continued.

[Tape meter, 250]

That part has continued over the years. I know Bill and his family, and I know in my family that there are many, *many* things that happen in Ripley County to this day resulting from that attitude; [things] which his family and my family would oppose. I'm sure we don't oppose everything, but there are a lot of things I'm sure we do, we feel that possibly should be done. But that's one.

As far as I'm concerned, I can honestly say that -- using the Current River from one end to the other -- I've never felt badly that Ripley County was not included. I go on

down and fish into Arkansas. I see things happening in Arkansas that I oppose very much. But I fish down there, because there are several things. They call themselves the “Natural State,” and Current River is still...

BW: In its natural state.

GB: Very much so, in that area. I'm talking too much, but I wanted to get this on the record. Arkansas is doing a lot of damage; letting a lot of damage be done in Current River through the rice farmers. They pump water out of it, and instead of having a system bring that water back in, too often it just *leaks* back in, causing big banks to fall into the good holes, the good walleye holes. It's never a perfect world. All I'm saying is, I'm glad that Ripley County *isn't* part of the Park Service. I've never regretted that, (laughing) anyway.

BW: The reason Gene and I laughed a minute ago, Will, when he brought some of that up about one of the men out of your office or supervisor or someone attended some of the meetings, did you say? Down here?

WS: Not that I know of.

BW: Well anyway, they were aware of some of the hearings and things about Current River dam; the opposition and the proponents. They held about the first meeting that I can remember. It was down at Newport, Arkansas. And I think the way the Army engineers saw it, they'd get that way out of the range of the hillbillies up here that opposed damming Current River. So they were fooled! The day of the hearing was at the courthouse in Newport, Arkansas. There were four or five or more Greyhound buses.

The group here banded together, the whole forces of Ripley County that were opposing the dam. I don't say they all did, because some were in favor. They saw possibly another Wappapello Lake, and they thought it would bring in prosperity.

So they rounded up these forces in four or five busloads of Greyhound buses.

[Tape meter, 300]

They took all of these people to Newport, Arkansas. And when these buses started driving up to that courthouse and those people poured in, the Army engineers didn't know what was going on. We got down there and had his hearing. And boy, it was heated! Some of them were *heated*, shouting and yelling and carrying on. The forces from here far outweighed the ones from down in there. They were down below us, they were more or less just kind of advocating it would be good flood control for Arkansas and all down through the lowland. I have nothing against Arkansas. My mother came from there. But anyway, they thought they wouldn't have much opposition. Well, they got fooled. And that was the beginning of it, of all these hearings.

Then they asked for a fair hearing at Poplar Bluff, Missouri, then. Well, that was getting into our home territory. They didn't call one in Doniphan. And that many or more went to Poplar Bluff for the hearing, and they were practically blasted out of Poplar Bluff. So that was really the beginning of all this keeping out the national park area and saving Current River from dams. That's just a touch on it. And I named a few of those people; his relatives, his ancestors. His Uncle Arthur was one of the *real* leaders in that.

WS: And this Dr. Stokely --?

BW: Dr. Z. Lee Stokely. He was an outdoor writer. You'll have a lot about him in conservation.

GB: There's an article of one of his series here. I believe that's it, over there [indicating part of one museum display on the opposite wall], the one that's faded. You'll have to read that before you leave.

BW: "History of Current River."

GB: He was very good friend of my dad's, when I started working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, at least.

BW: He was a dentist, but he gave up dentistry and more or less went into outdoor writing. He was a great outdoorsman, and a writer, and a conservationist. And I would say, number one man, in leading the fight...

GB: Oh, yes.

BW: ...to save Current River.

WS: I'm glad to learn that.

BW: Dr. Z. Lee Stokely.

GB: He was known nationally. When I first started working for the Fish and Wildlife Service, back then the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was just like the Tennessee Valley Authority -- they were *enemies* as far as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife [Service] was concerned.

BW: Oh, yeah!

[Tape meter, 350]

GB: I have to admit, though, now -- after thirty-five years -- the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers *and* the Tennessee Valley Authority started getting their own biologists that were conservationists, and it's changed a lot. I would say further that the Corps of Engineers in Little Rock, when I retired, they were among my best friends, professionally. They had changed that much.

But that's an article there. I used to keep all of his articles.

BW: Yes. He wrote a weekly article in the Poplar Bluff paper, the *Daily American Republic*. He passed away several years ago. I can't remember how long. Do you, Gene? Twenty years ago, maybe? [Dr. Stokely died on May 5th, 1974.]

GB: I don't know. I know every time I'd come home I'd go over to see him. I really missed him when he did die.

BW: He was a great guy. Today you would probably label him as a character. (laughs) He was funny. He was fun, and told it like it is. You might see him strolling the streets of Doniphan in pair of Gallus old blue jeans and an old hunting shirt, and a straw hat on, and maybe a week's growth of beard. You would never picture him to be the intelligent man that he was, and a doctor and dentist, and all that.

[End of side 2, tape I; tape meter, 380]

[Begin side 1, tape II; tape meter, 002]

GB: Old Z. Lee would make me a little nervous. Of course, I was just a kid. He wouldn't stand off and talk to you, he'd get right in your face.

BW: He didn't hear well.

GB: Yes. So he'd get right up to you, eyeball to eyeball.

WS: You say he was nationally known. I wonder if he published in other periodicals in addition to the Poplar Bluff paper.

GB: I don't believe so. He published in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*.

BW: St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*. Now, you could get a background on him from that. And he was a very close friend of the famous political cartoonist, Fitzpatrick. Daniel Fitzpatrick was a world recognized political cartoonist with the *Post-Dispatch*. All you'd have to do is contact them and ask for any information on Daniel Fitzpatrick through your Internet or something, and you could get a ream of that. He and Doc Stokely were bosom buddies.

GB: Phoebe said he was published in the Atlanta [Georgia] *Journal* too, she thought, sometimes.⁷

BW: You mean Doc Stokely, Phoebe?

PB: No, Fitzpatrick.

BW: Fitzpatrick. Oh, his cartoons were world famous. And during the dam fight, through Doc Stokely, he did some *terrific* cartoons in the *Post-Dispatch* on the dam. And when it was defeated, it showed (laughs) -- I'm not opposed to Army engineers, I have good friends that are Army engineers -- but it showed a picture of an Army engineer, a colonel. A colonel was always running those hearings, and you had to address him as Colonel so-and-so, just like you were in the military. And it showed a picture of a high rock bluff

⁷ Mr. Fitzpatrick worked for the Chicago *Daily News* at one time.

over beautiful Current River, and an Army engineer colonel tossing a scroll (looked like a scroll) into the river, and it was labeled, "Current River Dam Plans."

(laughter)

And I never will forget that. I wish I had it today. The *Post-Dispatch* would have copies of it, and that would go back to 1948 and '49. See, it happened soon after World War II. And a lot of the opposition to the engineers said, "They ran out of anything to do when the war ended, so they started trying to think up dams they could build." That was, of course, thrown at them for one of their reasons.

WS: How was the Rural Electric [Electrification] Administration involved with this? Were they going to administer the hydroelectric power after the Army Corps built the dam? Because I've heard that *they* were passing petitions around trying to get the dam built. Did you ever hear about that?

BW: They probably encouraged it. Do you remember any of that?

GB: I don't remember a lot of it, but I know one of the fears that people had -- you know, we were already beginning to talk about atomic energy and different power systems. Of course, that really was on the side of the ones who wanted to get it defeated in the end. When they came into it, that just gave more fodder for people to talk about. You see, this country (as I know you know, talking about the timber here), after Ripley County lost its timber, had it not been for Current River, it would have been just completely worthless bit of area. So naturally people have always had that in the back of their mind. The natives here love Ripley County and Current River. But they also could see that, when it

came down to having a place where they could -- I don't want to say a "dumping ground" -- but I think you can understand what I'm talking about; there are other areas of the United States that it appears have been used that way. I think that's what the people feared.

So when some other energy organization started coming in and talking, it really did a lot to defeat the proposals. I would say that was probably one of the bigger things, really, when it was all said and done, because it really got everybody up in the air. Z. Lee Stokely -- I know personally, because I've had senators and congressmen pay me visits in my position in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and I know he knew people -- he'd organized a lot of political help in getting that done. So it was a big story that never fully came out.

[Tape meter, 050]

BW: He was a close friend of Paul Jones, Orville Zimmerman (a congressman from our district), and *any* powerful [man.] He had a lot of political clout. He was a Democrat. Dr. Z. Lee Stokely. There was no beating around the bush about that. So there's where he had a lot of his influence. Actually, Harry Truman was a good personal friend of Dr. Z. Lee Stokely.

GB: One that really surprised me was a Kansas Republican from out in western Kansas there. Everybody knew him at the time. He let me know that *he* was a good friend.

BW: Of Dr. Stokely's.

GB: Right. So it crossed political barriers.

BW: Oh, yeah!

PB: Bob Dole (laughs).

GB: No, it wasn't Bob Dole. I knew him, too.

BW: Who was the congressman from there that ran for president?

PB: Landon.

BW: Alf Landon. Was it Landon?

GB: No, this old fellow dated almost back to Landon. He was a nationally known figure. He was tall, black-headed guy. I can remember what he looks like, but I can't remember his name. He was a U.S. Senator from Kansas. He may have been a representative earlier.

BW: Landon's daughter was our senator from Kansas.⁸

WS: So Congressman Zimmerman was still in office when this whole Army Corps proposal to dam the river came about?

BW: I would say Jones was the prominent congressman, then. Did Zimmerman follow Jones? Are you aware?

WS: I believe Jones followed Zimmerman.

GB: I believe that's right.

BW: Okay. Zimmerman, then Jones. But they were both very close allies of Dr. Z. Lee Stokely.

⁸ Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker.

WS: You mentioned that there were some people in favor of the dam -- and I think I read about that -- where they thought it would bring recreational tourism to have a big lake and all that. Were those primarily business people?

BW: Very respectable business people. I respected their opinions. Didn't you, Gene?

GB: Yes. I could understand.

BW: I could understand their feeling.

GB: But see, the thing against that, though -- there are examples like the Smoky Hill River in Kansas, for instance. It was just a muddy drainage way. They dammed it and made a beautiful, crystal clear lake. Well, here you had a different situation. You had probably what was debatably one of the most beautiful rivers in the world; one of the most unique rivers in the world -- the number of springs and the fall per mile and several things considered. You'd have to have made a diamond out of it to really justify it on that basis. That was the basis that many, *many* of your big dams throughout the country were [built upon], based upon something better than what they had. A lot of them, as you know -- like the North Fork, for instance.⁹ That was a pretty river, but yet they have a great trout fishery below it which is nationally known.¹⁰ A lot of those things were predictable, more so now than they were then. Back then, reading over a lot of the biological reports, even biologists didn't have the vision that would cover what actually happened. But I think the main thing with the Current River was one in million worldwide as far as its

⁹ The North Fork River dam and the corresponding lake are named "Norfork" after a nearby town.

¹⁰ Referring to the Norfork National Trout Hatchery.

beauty and attributes.

BW: And the thing that happened then -- and I hated this -- it just nearly can divide your community. You had good friends, some of your best friends -- you were either for the dams or against them. You had to (laughing) take a stand.

WS: I was going to ask you if there were hard feelings...

BW: Yes!

WS: ...and how long those hard feelings may have lasted.

BW: I would say there were hard feelings. But a lot of those that favored it fought as hard for it as all these opponents did against it. Some are very good friends of mine and yours.

GB: Yes.

BW: You didn't let it just, say, come into a conflict where you'd come to blows. Sometimes they nearly did, some of them that weren't close friends. It could have come to blows at different times. But it really affected the community.

[Tape meter, 100]

WS: Has that kind of blown over by now, or do people still remember that and have a grudge (laughing) about that, all these years later?

GB: I don't think it's anything comparable here to -- like I said earlier -- northern Georgia where it persists, or some place in Tennessee. There's probably some. See, another thing, the Park Service coming in to protect the river was kind of salve to heal the wound, really. I said while ago I've never regretted the fact that the Park Service jurisdiction stopped at the Ripley County line. But nevertheless, looking at it from a conservation

point of view, and what should happen -- and what does happen in most cases; I don't always agree with the Park Service, but generally speaking -- it was designed to sort of protect and prevent this thing from ever happening, really. That was [a] kind of insurance to prevent the Current River from ever being dammed. Because that's what it was all about.

At the time they didn't have the names to cover it, really. You had National Parks. You had other, lesser entities. But in order to cover this, it had to be (I think it's called) National Rivers or National Riverways.

BW: Scenic National Riverways.

GB: So that was new, which was designed to protect it forever. And, of course, anybody that's ever worked for the [federal] government or any state government knows that everybody doesn't agree, so there are going to be things that come up that you disagree with, but there are a lot of things that you do [agree with]. So really, the Park Service taking over the Current and the...

BW: Eleven Point or Jacks Fork.

GB: Jacks Fork, yes -- was really designed to heal this thing. There's no way that it's going to be dammed when it's a national park.

BW: And Will, you asked if that feeling exists; did you sense it or feel it. That's been fifty years ago (we hate to think, Gene.) But you don't hear it talked about or mentioned anymore. They're using Current River so much now. It's become more popular every year. It gets that way *every* year more so. I don't ever think of who was for it and who

was against it anymore. Because I think they've all accepted [that] Current River is beautiful. They're glad we have it. I think they feel like now it was maybe a service to preserve it. I know most of the old timers *then* -- as I said, that was fifty years ago -- a lot of them were the older business people in town. Most of them are gone. Some of their families are still here, and that doesn't exist among those families. Some of them are my best friends.

WS: Tell me if I'm right, but I get the impression that maybe the dam proposal caused a division in the community, whereas the Park Service proposal, almost everybody in the community was united against it. Is that true?

BW: (laughs) Well, it sounds like it was sort of a reversal, doesn't it?

WS: Almost. I just never heard of too many people in Ripley County being in favor of the (laughing) Park Service coming down here.

BW: In *favor* of it.

WS: I never heard of any.

BW: That's what I was going to say.

WS: You were talking about some people were in favor of the dam, and some were against it.

BW: Here's another young man -- Lester, come in here. Lester Wright, [this is] Will Sarvis. Lester can tell you a lot of things about the dam fights on Current River. Will is with the Historical Society of Missouri. You came in at an appropriate time. Lester and his family were living here, and they were involved in just what we've been talking about.

LW: Stopping dams?

WS: Right.

(laughter)

WS: Would you all happen to be related?

LW: No.

BW: We're not related. We're good friends; I feel like we are. He has a son [named] Bill Wright. Was he named for me, Les?

(laughter)

[Tape meter, 150]

LW: Oh, yes. We thought of you, Bill.

BW: Thank you.

PB: What year was that, mainly? Mid-40s? '50s?

LW: About '48.

WS: Did you go to any of the meetings?

LW: Oh, yes.

WS: Down in Newport, Arkansas?

LW: I don't remember going to Newport. We went to Van Buren and all.

BW: But you went to a lot of these meetings. There was one at Poplar Bluff after you were here, wasn't there?

LW: Yes.

BW: Newport was one of the first, Les. What year did you say you came here? To live, I mean.

LW: I came here in about '47.

BW: It could have been '46 or '7.

LW: No, I graduated from school in '46.

BW: What I mean [is the] Newport meeting.

LW: May have been.

BW: The first one could have been '46, if we could research history. But I would say '46 or '7, and they continued into '48 and '9. That's about when it ended.

LW: Right.

GB: Lester's dad brought industry here to Ripley County, and he was a conservationist and interested in the out of doors. He and my dad and my dad's older brother became friends. I had a lot of chances to hear *him* talk. No doubt, he was probably in the forefront of any conservation measure.

BW: He was among these leaders that I named, like Dr. Stokely. Lester's dad was Denver M. Wright.

LW: And Glen Shipley.

BW: And Glen Shipley. He's another St. Louis [man]. Gus Buddy. Do you remember Gus Buddy? Well, of course, the *Post-Dispatch* and [the] *Globe*, both, were on the opposition's side to the dams. A lot of their people. Fitzpatrick, I was just telling him about his cartoon. Lester's dad brought Wright Leather Specialty Company to Doniphan; a factory that opened up here and employed quite a few people to begin with. Les may know how many. But it later went into the plastics, and Lester and his brothers took over

from there and had a Vitronics plant here in Doniphan. It employed how many people, top?

LW: About 350.

WS: That's a big operation.

LW: It was a big time operation.

BW: The plant that they built is still up here on the highway. You came in by Days Inn on one side, and the Vitronics plant is on the right.

WS: I don't know if this involved the Ripley County people, but they tell me the Rose Cliff Hotel in Van Buren was kind of an informal gathering place with people involved in conservation, and they would kind of discuss these issues. Maybe Dr. Stokely was one of them. I don't know.

BW: I'm sure he was, wouldn't you Les, think so?

LW: I would think so, yes.

BW: Do you remember the Rose Cliff Hotel?

LW: Oh yes, I remember the Rose Cliff.

BW: It was an old landmark up on Current, right at the end of the bridge.

LW: All plank. Two or three stories.

BW: Did it burn, Les?

LW: It burned later, yes.

WS: That's a shame.

BW: Just several years ago.

LW: It was a firetrap, though.

BW: It should have been a historical [landmark.] Even just to preserve it...

LW: Typical old hotel. It had a bathroom down at the end.

BW: Wooden, all frame. It wouldn't have been a modern (laughing) hotel today.

WS: Do you remember George Hartzog, the Park Service director?

LW: Sure.

WS: He had some meetings around Ripley County.

LW: You're talking about Park Service

WS: Right. Did you go to any of those meetings?

LW: Oh, yes.

WS: They tell me those would get kind of (laughing) volatile sometimes.

LW: Right.

BW: (laughs) I told him how some of the dam meetings got pretty hot, Les.

LW: Right. They did get volatile sometimes.

[Tape meter, 200]

WS: I was asking them about the Rural Electric Administration. I can't quite piece together how they were involved. I'm told that they were handing out some petitions involved with damming the Current. As far as I know, they don't have engineers on their staff to actually build dams, so my guess is that the Army Corps would build the dam and then maybe the REA would administer the hydroelectricity. I don't know if that's how that works or not.

LW: That's what they had hoped to do. If my memory serves me, Sho-me Power Company (who had the power company here in Doniphan at that time), they even bought a piece of land up there right across from Philip's Bluff, hoping that the dam would go across there. They would then have the first chance to get the power.

BW: That was one of the proposed sites, wasn't it, Les?

LW: Yes.

BW: Near Philip's Bluff. That's in Carter County?

LW: Yes, that's in Carter County.

BW: They were proposing two. That would be the first one upstream. The next one was just above Doniphan.

LW: It was on my father's property. They even did test drilling there -- a well -- to make sure they had bedrock. So we ended up with a good well out of it. That's about all.

(laughter)

WS: Had that Gooseneck Park been established yet?

LW: No. The park, I guess, was there. The Forest Service owned where the campsite is.

BW: The campsite, in Carter County. And our family owned on the Ripley County line.

LW: It adjoins the Gooseneck Park.

BW: We owned fifty-three acres right there. We always just referred to it as Gooseneck.

LW: But that was always a park, right? A Forest Service park.

BW: Yes, that was a park. You go down the Forest Service road right down to the river bank.

Is it Harry B. Hawes? What do they call it?

LW: Harry B. Hawes.

WS: They changed the name?

BW: He was a senator. Gooseneck Park was just more or less a local [name]. There was a gooseneck in the river there. That's more or less, I guess, how it got its name, wasn't it?

LW: Right. It was Forest Service land, and people camped there all the time.

BW: Just called it Gooseneck Park. We called our land there, fifty-three acres, Gooseneck. [We] built a cabin there later. We called it Gooseneck Cabin.

WS: I was looking in the Congressional testimony. I don't know if you all remember this, but there for about two years there was a group of people that were opposing the Park Service coming in to administer the Current River, and their strategy was to try to get the Forest Service to expand their authorization. So they had two bills in the 1961 Congress. Senator Symington and [Representative] Ichord were favoring the Park Service bill. And then Leo Drey may have written it, and then had Congressman Tom Curtis (in St. Louis) sponsor the Forest Service bill. The result was that neither bill got out of committee that year. But they were proposing the Forest Service to take over because their feeling was the Forest Service type of recreation is the so-called "dispersed recreation" that doesn't attract millions of people. (laughing) You know, the Park Service is kind of famous and/or notorious for attracting lots of people. I don't know if you all remember that, or how people in Ripley --?

[Tape meter, 250]

- LW: I don't remember the details. It may have been something you read about in the paper, but as far as our meetings and that type of thing --
- BW: There wasn't any controversy locally, was there? That you remember Les or Gene, Phoebe? Of course, you were not living here at the time.
- GB: No, I was a student in Washington. I got to go to an earlier hearing where Stu Symington was trying to get his --
- BW: And Tom Curtis was our congressman, out of St. Louis.
- WS: I get the impression that maybe in Ripley County the thrust of the local effort was just to exclude the Park Service, and maybe they didn't have to worry (laughing) about the Forest Service one way or another, as long as you got the Park Service stopped.
- BW: We brought up to Will about Paul Jones was our congressman there.
- LW: Right. Paul wanted to stop it. We got Ripley County taken out of the Park Service bill.
- BW: I think he's the one that sent a telegram when it was killed in Congress. "There would never be a dam on Current River," was his wire. I don't know whether it came to Doc Stokely. I imagine it did, because Doc was his chief cohort.
- LW: Bill, what was the name of the association that we had then? The reason I ask (we need to hunt it up), but I understand there's some money in the bank over here yet, for that association.
- WS: Was that the Current and Eleven Point River Association?
- BW: Current River Protective Association.

LW: Francis Ederer told me that before he died. If there's money over there, we ought to get it out and have a party.

BW: Francis Ederer. His name should be included in the records.

WS: He was instrumental in opposing the Army Corps?

BW: Oh, yeah. He was definitely in with Lester and his family, and Dr. Stokely, and the opposition. *Strongly*.

LW: Francis was known as "Mr. Republican" in Ripley County.

(laughter)

WS: I see what you mean about it crossing political lines.

BW: It was not an entirely political thing. There couldn't have been a stronger Democrat than Doc Stokely. There couldn't have been a stronger Republican than Francis Ederer. It crossed lines there.

WS: That association you mentioned, that made me think of something --

BW: They organized that as a name for the opposition [to the dam], the Current River Protective Association. Wasn't that it, Les?

LW: I think that's right.

WS: I believe there's some testimony; maybe it's the 1963 Congress debating that, when the Ripley County portion was pulled out. Because that was one of the compromises. If you look at the 1961 Park Service bill, it includes Ripley County, and the '63 does not.

[Tape meter, 300]

So that was one of the changes.

Well, I guess you all remember a pretty big evolution or change in the type of tourism you've seen on the Current River; say, going back to the 1940s or '50s and then up until now. I don't know what all that would involve. You've seen the jet boats come, of course. Do you get many of them around here?

LW: Too many.

WS: (laughing) Too many. Mr. Yantis, that's the bane of his existence. (laughing) He hates those things.

BW: He had talked to Don and Piney Yantis up at Hunter. That was his pet peeve, wasn't it?

LW: He's radical.

BW: Have you talked to them lately?

LW: About five years ago. I went up there in a jet boat.

(laughter, hand slapping table)

With Bob Netherland. And stopped.

BW: I didn't know how he felt, because I haven't talked to him.

LW: She was up there on the bank. She yelled, "Lester! Your father would turn over in his grave if he knew you were out here in a jet boat!"

GB: I could start a fight right here in this group if I say what I really think, and that is, I think that anything above a ten horsepower motor on the Current River is for the bees. Should be outlawed.

BW: I have a nine horse motor.

(Raucous laughter)

GB: That would be negotiable. I would go up to fifteen. But you know, people will fight you over motor size. You don't need them on Current River, really. They do a lot of damage.

LW: You get to talking about the dams and Park Service both?

WS: The Current River, of course, is what starts it all. That's what I'm interested in. I'd heard about the dam proposal, and then of course as these gentlemen were saying, the Park Service coming in was one way to guarantee that it would never be dammed. Because once you have one federal entity like the Park Service protecting an area, it's definitely going to stop the Army Corps, TVA, or Bureau of Reclamation; whoever it might be.

BW: Like you said, Will, it sounds funny to think -- Ripley County was practically 100% against the Park Service coming in, but strictly divided on the dam situation.

WS: Well see, they were very much against the Park Service in Shannon County, and yet that has the biggest river mileage of that Riverways. It's more complicated than this, but it's probably the difference between Congressman Jones and Congressman Ichord. They did get the Riverways passed.

Well, one thing I'm curious about -- I don't know if this was going on in your living memory, but I've seen a picture of these boats that would go, I think, from Doniphan up to Van Buren.

[Tape meter, 350]

GB: Snag boats.

WS: It wasn't a paddlewheel --

LW: Supply boats.

WS: Were those still in existence in the '40s?

LW: No.

WS: What was their term of existence? I mean what years, what era?

BW: Do you remember the last of those, Les?

LW: I don't remember the paddleboats. I've got one. I have a replica of one.

WS: Full size?

LW: Yes.

WS: I'll be darned.

LW: I don't even remember them being here.

BW: Are there any pictures of those over there on "History of Current River"?

GB: We have somewhere. I don't think it's out. I think Margaret McCluskey sent me a picture.

LW: This was just an old one lung engine, a Fairbanks Morris 7½ horsepower.

BW: I've heard these stories of the Steens and the McDowells. Mrs. Steen that I referred to was a McDowell, was the daughter of this Andy McDowell that Bill Royce interviewed.¹¹ She's told wonderful stories of the paddlewheel boats, the supply boats, up and down the river. That was the only means of transportation for some of them to send eggs, produce, butter, and things down to Doniphan to the stores. They would meet the

¹¹ For a copy of this interview, please see C3966 Missouri Environment Oral History Project, a.c. 32. Mr. McDowell ran one of the supply boats referred to here. Also refer to History and Families - Ripley County, Missouri, Ripley County Historical Society. Turner Publishing Company, Paducah, KY. Published 2002.

paddleboat on the riverbank and load it on, and brought it to Doniphan and collected. As they went back upstream they took the money back to the people.

GB: I believe they were out of business before -- I know before the mid '30s, and probably before the '30s, even. There was a friend of mine that had one he used for a feeding [trough.]

[End of side 1, tape II; tape meter, 387]

[Begin side 2, tape II; tape meter, 000]

GB: It was built like a regular johnboat, only it was wider. It was outfitted with an inboard motor. It was probably one of the last ones to be used up and down the river.

BW: Do you remember ever seeing one in operation, Les, when you were a kid?

LW: No, I don't. Max Shemwell said he had ridden on them up to Deer Leap to go to a picnic. How old is Max?

GB: Max is about seventy-eight or so, isn't he? Something like that. And Max would probably one of the last people, being a son of Kit, to ride on something like that.

BW: (laughs) I can remember seeing one or two tied up down here at what was the *old* boat landing. It was right about where Hobo [Campground] is now. It tied up there, and the big paddlewheel behind it. But I never did ride in one.

WS: Was that the only route between Doniphan and Van Buren? Or did it go downriver or further upriver?

BW: No, there was a road up to Van Buren going way off from the river. It was mostly the people that lived right along the river. They didn't have roads out to the main roads.

Some of them didn't. Well, they had wagon roads.

LW: We had a wagon road that ran from Grandin across the river, there at what they call Dug Ford. It's about two miles below the county line, close to Marlboro Ranch up there.

BW: Yes. And the Steens and all them; the McDowells and the Grubbs lived up in -- did they call that Grubb Hollow?

LW: Yes.

BW: Grubb Hollow, and Possum Hollow. The Yantises live at Possum Hollow. That's the name of that. Did he give you that name?

WS: I don't think he did.

BW: They call it Possum Hollow. (laughs)

LW: One gas boat ran from Doniphan to Philip's Bluff, which was run by Harry Grubbs.

BW: That was the Grubbs boat. That's the one Steen told me mostly about.

LW: Right. He was well known, better than anyone else. Another one ran from Doniphan up to where the Kansas City Clubhouse is?

WS: They were telling me about that.

BW: I think so. I mentioned the Kansas City Clubhouse to Will.

LW: I can't think of the fellow's last name. It was Red something. But he used to run the fishery census on the Current River here, from Van Buren to Doniphan. I'll think of his

name sometime. But his dad ran that [supply boat] route. That was a full day trip, from here up there, and right before dark they'd get in there.

BW: That was a full day's run.

WS: Did they take the mail on those boats?

LW: Grubbs hauled mail, yes.

BW: I imagine they did. And people met them at the riverbank. They knew about their schedule, when they would run. And I've heard her tell about taking eggs and butter and milk and things down to the river to put on that supply boat, and bring it down to Doniphan. Then they'd bring it up to the merchants. And then they'd take their money back.

WS: Would they haul anything as big as chickens or pigs or anything?

LW: Oh yes, they hauled chickens in chicken coops, and pigs.

BW: Yes. They'd haul live chickens.

WS: Was Doniphan kind of a base for this boat? Because Doniphan had railroad access, I guess.

LW: Yes.

WS: But they didn't have railroad access to these points further upriver.

LW: No.

BW: Their main contact with civilization was that supply boat, paddleboat; to come to Doniphan with their produce and things.

WS: I would guess during certain seasons you might have to suspend operation, like [during] high water.

BW: Oh, yes. Sure. They were out of business.

(laughter)

But maybe once a week or once every two weeks they gathered up enough eggs.

LW: I was thinking twice a week they would run Grubbs boat.

BW: Yes. But what I meant, if they were flooded or anything, the people that depended on them bringing eggs and things, they'd just be out of luck for a week or two at a time. The river floods real fast and is down real fast.

[Tape meter, 050]

Unless it's been a long siege, it never stays at flood stage for a long time.

WS: I don't imagine it gets cold enough very often to freeze, does it?

LW: No.

BW: The last big freeze was -- how many years ago? A few years ago, in the early '90s. It froze nearly over down at the boat landing. And that's just been since the early 1990s that that was built. The Conservation Department built a boat ramp down here.

WS: Do people still trap along the river down here?

LW: Yes.

WS: Do they get permission from the various landowners, or do they just do it?

LW: They just do it.

WS: What do they trap for?

LW: Mostly 'coon and mink, beaver. Mink brings the best price.

WS: Have they been reintroducing the otter this far downriver?

LW: Yes.

WS: What do you think about that?

LW: I don't think we need them. We need the fish more than we need the otters. Well, there's otters here naturally, anyway. Down here in the southern part of the county along the Little Black and the ditches that run into Little Black, there's a lot of otters down there already.

WS: A lot of people seem to think the otter is a big fish consumer.

LW: They are. That's their main feed.

WS: What about these chip mills I've been hearing about? Is that around Ripley County or not?

LW: We had one here several years back. Remember out here east of town? Some colored man ended up owning it, and he went broke. They hauled the chips over to Wickliffe, Kentucky.

BW: Yes, over to Westvaco in Wickliffe, Kentucky.

LW: The only one I know of now is at Mill Spring. That's the one all the controversy is about now.

WS: Is it a proposed chip mill?

LW: No, it's established. Mill Spring, south of Piedmont. You can probably get a lot of information in the paper on it.

BW: And this Lignetics has just gone in out here three or four years or more ago. Sawdust products, taking the sawdust and making wood pellets to burn. Those are big in the east and cities and so forth.

LW: Anything else you want from me?

WS: I've pretty much gotten through all my questions.

[Tape recorder momentarily off.]

GB: It's almost like introducing a new animal in an environment where it has no enemies. They [the otters] have really built up along the river. Anywhere you go down the river, you see fresh tracks just about anywhere you go.

BW: And beavers are pretty busy down below us, aren't they?

GB: Yes. Although all over Current River has never been really a hotbed for beaver like some places. I'm not sure why. But otter are definitely building up in population.

WS: I guess it didn't affect you all down here, but I think it was in the late '80s the Missouri Trappers Association (or some organization) actually filed a lawsuit against the Park Service. It's unusual that they're allowed to hunt in Park Service land. That was one of the compromises when they established it. But they were going to try to separate trapping from hunting. They're allowed to do it. I don't think there are that many trappers up there, but there was a lot of community support for that [the lawsuit.]

BW: Do you know of very many trappers actually here, Gene, anymore? There used to be quite a few.

GB: There's a few up on Little Black [River]; just kids, mainly.

BW: You don't consider it a big thing in our county anymore.

GB: No, I don't think so.

BW: A lot of people used to trap, actually partly for a living.

WS: Giggling is still popular, I take it. I see the gigs up there.

GB: You bet. (laughs)

[Tape meter, 100]

BW: *Very* popular. Look at that paddle -- what do you call it, Gene? That's Ray Joe [Hastings]'s, isn't it?

PB: That's what they used when they had the rafts.

GB: That's a steering paddle for a log raft.

BW: When they rafted logs down Current River and ties.

GB: They usually had two of those, on opposing corners.

WS: This pole looks like the real thing.

GB: It is.

WS: That's not a reproduction, is it?

GB: No. He's taken out at least twenty and preserved them. The usual was to use a pine sapling. But we took one out that was a hickory. I think we've got a picture of it over there where we were lifting it out. It was unusual to have a hardwood paddle handle. But you can see the pivot peg there. They usually had one of those on opposing corners to guide the rafts of logs with.

Incidentally, before Ray left, he mentioned Colonel Williamson's manuscript, *Current River Does Not End at Doniphan*. One thing that I might mention is, the thing that bothered Carl, people that write, they just don't mention Current River below Doniphan. Even the Kansas City group that floated. They had a float trip, and they mentioned one place down there, Cane Chute. But the name places, they continue on down the river. And Carl wanted to see that that was made into history. Most people say, "Well, after you go below Doniphan, the Current River becomes a docile old stream." Which is anything but the truth. In fact, some of the roughest places on the Current River today are on down south, even into Arkansas.

BW: Snaggy Bend. (laughs)

GB: Yes, Snaggy Bend. There's one that she hates for me to go through. It's way on down into Arkansas a ways. But it is one beautiful area, and one good fishing place. There's an island there, and about every year it's made a new cut.

I just mention that. I think Arkansas has just rearranged their limits and everything to be compatible with Missouri's. Finally they renamed that part of Current and Eleven Point, that area, as the Ozark Streams portion of Arkansas. Before that they had a ten inch limit as opposed to Missouri's twelve inch, on smallmouth. I don't think they have anything on largemouth or Kentuckys even now. But they at least changed their smallmouth fishing. And I think walleye would be compatible with Missouri.

But the Current River is still identifiable as Current River, only as far as Reyno, [Arkansas,] anyway.

BW: Will, I didn't know if you realized, we're just ten miles from the Arkansas line.

WS: Oh, I knew it was close; I didn't know it was *that* close.

GB: Current River runs into Arkansas, then back into Missouri just to say goodbye, then back into Arkansas. The old Pitman's Ferry is really what gives Ripley County a part in history because of the greats that have crossed there. Really, there is evidence that probably a thousand years before Pitman's Ferry the Indians crossed right above Pitman's Ferry in an area called Island Ford. Island Ford just happens to be the place right on the state line where time doesn't seem to change it enough to where it's different. The difference of it is, most of these fords on Current River are in enough of a curve to where you get one side that's nice and smooth, walk into gravel (or ride into gravel with your team or whatever), and the other side is usually somewhat steep; not really steep, but that's one of the things that makes the [ford] crossings a problem.

[Tape meter, 150]

The Island Ford historically (as far as I can find out) has always been gravel on either side. The island right below it tends to keep it that way, as well as each side. It's usually wide. It is swift, but it usually gets down low and has an approach on either side that's reasonable. You can trace the old traces there. No telling; thousands of years, probably, they've been there.

BW: And Pitman's Ferry is right in Arkansas.

GB: Right below it, right.

BW: There was a little community of Pitman, Arkansas. It still exists, such as it is, right over the Arkansas line.

GB: And the old trace there is still plain too. It's actually the Natchitoches Trail and the Southwest Trail (whatever you want to call it,) but there's an old ditch sort of area that goes just as straight as can be from Pitman's Ferry crossing to Pitman and on down through Maynard.¹² Even the old trees probably date back to the Civil War. It's historic.

BW: Will, you're going to need a tour of this museum. You're also going to want to make a tour of Heritage Village, which these folks are really *greatly* responsible for; Ray Burson, Phoebe and Gene, and Nick Hatch, the head man here at the museum.

[Incidental conversation omitted, tape meter, 170-184.]

[End of interview; tape meter, 184]

¹² The Natchitoches Trail is also known as the Old Military Road in this area. Source: History and Families - Ripley County, Missouri, Ripley County Historical Society. Turner Publishing Company, Paducah, KY, 2002, page 39.