

An Interview with
**Don Yantis and Pauline
Yantis**

at their home near
Hunter, Missouri

31 March 1998

interviewed by Will Sarvis



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PREFACE

Mr. Don Yantis was born on March 23, 1912, in Paragould, Arkansas, not far downriver from where we conducted the interview. He first began visiting the Current River area during the 1930s. He bought his property along the Current River in 1952, and built his house four years later. Mr. Yantis has a great recollection concerning his lengthy past experiences on the Current River, which included johnboat excursions, fishing, fish snagging, and frog grabbing. Mrs. Pauline (Piney) Yantis was born and raised along the Big Sandy River in the Kentucky Appalachians. She makes some interesting contrasts between the Ozarks and Appalachians.

After 1964, when the Park Service began managing the Ozark National Scenic Riverways, the Yantis family made a life estate agreement over their property. For the past seventeen years they have made their riverside cabin their spring, summer, and autumn home. Their son Stuart lives just upstream from them in another riverside house, which he gained in a trade with the Park Service for other land. Mr. and Mrs. Yantis have been very dissatisfied with the increased river traffic, and particularly with jet boats. Park Service restrictions on horsepower do not apply to the lower reaches of the Current River, from Van Buren down. The Yantis family relate some interesting accounts pertaining to ONSR rangers, and an especially good story about Ranger Rick Drummond's capture of deer poachers.

I met the Yantis family at their very fine home right on the eastern bank of the Current River, near Hunter, Missouri. We sat in the glassed-in west side of the house overlooking the river, and several times during the session the Yantis family indicated trees or portions of land along the river to illustrate certain points. 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.

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

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

WS: My name is Will Sarvis, [and] I'm with the State Historical Society of Missouri. Today March 31st, 1998. I'm near Hunter, Missouri. We're still in Carter County, right?

DY: We're still in Carter County.

WS: Okay. And with me sitting here is Mr. Don Yantis. Now Mr. Yantis, I thought maybe just to get started you could give me your birth date.

DY: March 23, 1912.

WS: Okay. And where were you born, sir?

DY: Paragould, Arkansas.

WS: Is that right? Maybe you could give me some of your family history, in terms of how long you've been in the area, and what you did as a young man and all.

DY: I was born in Paragould and went through high school there. I went to Westminster College [and] graduated from there. And then I went to Chicago into the investment business with my brother's firm. From there I have done various things, mostly on behalf of my older brother, such as operate Pepsi Cola franchises and candy companies. But I've worked for the firm of F.S. Yantis and Company most of my career, until my brother passed away. Our family firm, *his* firm, was liquidated. Then, I remained in the investment business with a St. Louis firm until I retired.

WS: Do you remember what year it was you retired?

DY: I retired the first day of 1980. And it's fortunate that I did, because just prior to that I had been stricken [snaps his fingers] just like that with deafness. Total deafness. I had been

deaf in one ear for a long time and didn't realize it. I was just driving down the streets in St. Joseph, Missouri where I was operating the candy factory, and I lost my hearing just like you'd shoot the lights out. I realized after I'd gone to the various doctors to see if there was any way to get it done, that my days as a businessman were really over from the standpoint of being able to communicate with people such as you right here. It would have to be under certain circumstances, just like with you and me right here, sitting here talking through a microphone.

Not much beyond that. Everything was family, family, family. I was the third of three boys in the Yantis family. My father died when I was young. The older brother graduated from Westminster College the year that my father died. That made him the head of the family. We were in Paragould at that time. He remained my boss for all of his life. Then I stayed in business. I came to Poplar Bluff *simply because* I knew the Wright family -- one of the Wrights -- and played baseball with them. [I] knew the Current River and just wanted to get down with people that I'd grown up with, or more like it, instead of staying in Chicago-land. So I opened the office in Poplar Bluff, the investment office. That's about the sum and substance of my part of it.

WS: When did you start traveling up and down the Current River?

DY: Actually, I got to know the Current River my senior year in college. That was 1933. That was simply because of T.L. [Thomas Lyon] Wright, [Jr.,] who was an older brother of

this Bill Wright that I've given you reference to.¹ I don't know; I just came down here as his guest. He had a cabin across from his place in Doniphan. We'd party there and everything. I played baseball for Doniphan against Poplar Bluff when I was young. I'd call him on the phone, and he'd come down and play with our town team in Paragould against whoever we had to play with -- that sort of a relationship.

But it was after I left California, where I operated a candy factory for two years, that I purchased this property on the river.

[Tape meter, 050]

We made it our summer home. That about sums that up.

WS: Now, you bought this property in 1952?

DY: '52. This cabin was built in '56. We built a temporary place back up the hill a little ways, which we visited for just, oh, anywhere from four to five weeks each year. But that was only from '52 to '56. In '56 this thing was completed.

WS: When you first came here in the 1930s, I guess there were already some tourists in this area, weren't there?

DY: Damn few. The Current River was virtually unused, in a way. It was unspoiled. The federal government came in and said that *they* had discovered a river that was unspoiled, and *they* wanted to keep it in that fashion. By that time, of course, I was a landowner involved in it very much.

¹ For the Bill Wright interview, please see C3966, a.c. 52, 53. Also see the interview of his sister, Dorothy Robinson Wright Burford, C3966, a.c. 39, 40. The Wright family is mentioned at length later in this transcript.

But the federal government has been a caretaker of nothing. They have not *retained* anything in its natural state. They have allowed jet boats to race up and down this river, to wash out the banks of the river. You'd be surprised at how much land that we've lost right along the front there, from the waves coming *sideways*, which is unnatural. In the Current River, the current goes up and down, not side to side. And the waves leaping up there... You can sit there in your boat and the water will be clear. When [a jet boat] goes by, after it's gone, the water is as muddy as it can be. Now that over a period of years is going to wash out some of your bank. It has on both sides here. I can see this river is at least seventy-five to eighty feet wider than it was before the jet boats came in. They are the bane of my existence! They are the one thing that has (what I call) ruined the Current River.

Now, by "ruining" it, I mean it's not the fishing stream it used to be. It's not the placid stream it used to be. It's not the place that a person can go to to float it and look at the beautiful hills because they want to see how beautiful they are; what nature can do for you. *Now* -- and I'm telling you, it's not just one. It's dozens of boats on a nice weekend. There will be some big jet. You'll see it roaring downriver there. And there will be maybe three gals stretched out in their bathing suits with their faces down not looking at anything at all -- just getting a sun tan -- as that jet boat *roars* out on the river. And then, naturally, it *roars* back up. When you take that over a full weekend -- or sometimes during the week too, there are jet boats [with] too much horse power [creating] too many waves.

The old johnboat had, usually, a ten-horse motor. And while it created a slight wave -- by the time that it reached the bank, it had diminished in strength to the point where it just didn't even muddy the river. That's the one thing that they *could* do up there at Van Buren [at the Riverways headquarters] that they've made no effort to do whatsoever. They don't seem to give a damn, even though they've been talked to about it dozens and dozens of times by lots of people. They don't seem to care.

WS: Did you ever hire out one of those johnboat expeditions when you were younger? Like in the 1950s?

DY: Did I hire out?

WS: I've heard that some of these people would run sort of a fishing expedition, and people would pay them, and they'd go down the river for four or five days.

DY: Oh, yeah.

[Tape meter, 100]

WS: You did that?

DY: I didn't. But I have *paid* a guide to . . .

WS: That's what I mean.

DY: Yes. I've had a party. Mine only lasted three days, because usually we entertained with our own boats. My son has a property up there. We entertained with our own boats from right here, just in and out of the cabin. In this instance, where I had the guides to take us, we went upriver first and started floating back from Powder Mill. You have Powder Mill in your records, I guess.

WS: Yes, sir.

DY: Okay. You know where I mean. I don't know; I've had guides here for other purposes many, many times. I had the coaching staff of the St. Louis Cardinals (football Cardinals, before they moved from St. Louis to Arizona, where they are now). Abe Stuber was the director of playing personnel for the Cardinals. Abe was my college coach at Westminster on the track team. I was on the track team. I asked Abe if he wanted to bring some of his coaches down, and he did. He brought the head coach and three others of the coaching staff. I had the guides to handle them because I didn't want to go out on the river. I'd rather sit here and talk with somebody while some of them are out fishing. So that sort of thing has gone on here at this cabin almost forever. We may have such parties this summer, for all I know. It all depends on who calls or what happens.

WS: Back in the 1950s, everybody was worried that the Army Corps might dam the river, right?

DY: That they were going to dam the river, yes. The dam was supposed to be down here in the area of [Harry's Root] -- oh, I'm going to say... I'm not absolutely certain about that. I better not state it. I can see the place in my mind, but I can't recall what they called the area.

WS: It's near Doniphan, isn't it?

DY: It's farther up this way.

WS: Were you involved with trying to prevent the Army Corps from building that dam?

DY: I was *concerned*. I didn't want to lose this. I knew what a dam would mean. I had been

**DY = Don Yantis; PY = Pauline Yantis;
WS = Will Sarvis**

to various other places where they had taken beautiful spots, like the Black River over here. The dam up at Piedmont. Of course, the St. Francis River wasn't much; I'll admit that. It was a swamp river. It was only seven miles from my home in Paragould. At that time, in the early days, it was nothing *but* a swamp. There wasn't an awful lot lost in the St. Francis when they dammed it. As a matter of fact, it might have been a good thing for that stream, because it was not what you would call one of the Ozark streams, except the extreme upper part of it. Whereas, the Black River, the Current River, the Eleven Point River *are* the Ozark streams. And, the granddaddy of them all, of course, is in Arkansas, which is the White River.

[Tape meter, 150]

WS: When did you first start hearing about maybe the Park Service coming in here?

DY: The first I ever heard about it was seeing a sign tacked to a tree out here. Now that's a strange thing. But the sign said, "Monument-No." They were white signs, maybe about a foot square, on cardboard, tacked to trees. I said, "Monument? What are they talking about? Monument-No. Does that mean Monument number-what?" I had no idea. I had not heard anything about it. But the government at that time referring to this as a monument. I don't know why. They have it in their laws in the Park Service, I guess, certain qualifications for a park, certain qualifications for a monument, and certain qualifications for every damn thing you can think of.

All in all, the government has been a good thing for this river because of what *would* have happened anyway. However, the government *failed* to do what they *said* they

would do. Now, when you tell somebody you're going to do something, you're supposed to do it -- particularly if you're with the government. They climbed every tree to tell us that they would preserve this river in its natural state, and they've done every damn thing in the world *but* that! They paid no attention to the stream itself. But they'll give you holy *hell* if you chop one tree back over there three miles in property that they happen to have, and you think it's on someone else's property [by mistake]. That's just a point made, which of course has never probably happened.

If you ran a business like they run that thing up there, with so many people doing so little, you would last about as long as something in the tall weeds. I have no argument with it, other than the fact that they're allowing them now to *ruin* the river! They have a restriction on the horsepower which starts up at Van Buren. But there is *no* restriction whatsoever from that point -- now, exactly where it is, I don't know. I think it's at the lower end of the park itself. There are two miles, I think, on either side of the bridge, that are unrestricted as to improvements at Van Buren. Two miles. I believe this sets in at the bottom part of the two miles, which is just below the Big Spring. Now, the exact spot doesn't make a hell of a lot of difference.

WS: When they were acquiring the land, didn't they want to take your land here?

DY: They came in and gave the terms out. I wrote them a letter and told them that it was ridiculous. They wanted to give me \$1,000 or \$2,000 or whatever it was, for this property and I would get out. A man came in my office.

[Tape meter, 200]

**DY = Don Yantis; PY = Pauline Yantis;
WS = Will Sarvis**

His headquarters were in a place up on the Jacks Fork River at Eminence. I said, "I think it's ridiculous [what you're] offering me." He said, "Well, you can either take it or leave it." And he was as rude as they ever come, I'm telling you he was. He walked out the door and that's the last I ever saw of him. Let me see, what were his words? Whatever the words were, I can't recall them verbatim. But what he meant to say -- what he *did* say was, that they were going to start procedures to condemn this property and take it over on their terms.

Well, I went to my lawyer and I told him to settle on the best terms they had for me, that I wanted to retain ownership of it. And he did. He reached the guy in time to stop the seizure procedures on their part. Therefore, I do own this property right *here*. I did own the acreage that you see over here, and back up. It was a total of seventy-some odd acres, which I did not need. And this has nothing to do with the Park Service. It happened prior to that. The next door neighbor up here, Buck Porter (where my son now lives) was running cattle. And he asked me (I didn't really know him at the time) what I was going to do with the back acreage where the two pastures [were]. I said I had no use for it. He said he'd like to buy it because he was running cattle, and I sold it to him for a reasonable price.

Then, when Buck became ill, he signed a deal with the Park Service where when he passed away or blew the whistle in one way or the other, that they would buy him out. And they did. They bought the property where my son is, which included that pasture I used to own, and all of that land back that you drove through [which] had just been cut by

Pioneer Forest. That was part of it.

WS: Oh, that's Pioneer Forest land?

DY: That part that you just drove through used to be. And the government traded that away to Leo Drey for acreage somewhere else. Leo Drey sells it as standing timber. I have no complaint against that, except this time... And it's only been cut twice in eighteen years; you can't complain [about] that. It's probably good forestry, as far as that's concerned. At least they say it is. It was eighteen years ago that they cut it the last time. They left it in pretty good shape that time. This time it's a mess. It's a terrible thing.

[Tape meter, 250]

They should have cleaned it up a little before they pulled out, but they didn't. Mother Nature is going to take care of it.

Now I understand -- and I do not know this for sure -- that the United States government has refused to sell that timber that was recently blown down by the tornado that came through here. One of my neighbors over here at Hunter who knows something about standing timber -- its value and that sort of thing -- said that there was a tremendous amount of saleable white oak over this very, very small acreage that the government owns where the storm hit. But they won't sell it. They want it to lay there and rot out. You give me a good reason for it, and I'll appreciate it.

But that's the way it is. They want to, they do. It's overbearing if it ever was. I hate that. In normal business you can't treat people like that. They have no right to ethically. They have a right to legally, but I think that in business, ethics means

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something too.

WS: So you ended up with what they call a life estate? Is that you have on this property?

DY: That's what they call it. I own this. I pay taxes on it. I can do anything I want to except to cut down trees or build edifices on the property without permission of the park. They have indicated that they will be rather liberal on reasonable requests. For instance, if I needed (and I do need to) to enlarge this bedroom back here. It's too small. But I've never asked them permission to do it. But the chances are, I've been told, that if I'd just go up there and explain it to them, they would give me permission to do it. I think that they're very fair, from what I hear, in the way that they conduct *that* sort of business.

But I'll swear to God, they pay more attention to what takes place a mile and a quarter away from the riverbank than they do what goes up and down it. It doesn't make sense. And they change hands [personnel] too many times. Not everybody can run this river and run it properly, that know *how* to. There's more hearsay. You can get hearsay for a dime anyplace you want to go. But I was told it cost them a small fortune every year tearing up these motors by bringing the rangers in that don't know how to operate them on this river.

[Tape meter, 300]

Now that part I do not know to be true, but it would not surprise me if it *were* true.

Right now I don't have a boat in the river right here. I have purchased one, but I'm going back to what I started with. It's brand new and it's already finished. A twenty-six foot wooden johnboat. Best looking thing you ever laid eyes on. I have a ten horse

motor for it, but I may wind up with a fifteen, because the man that made the johnboat has a fifteen horse in sight; knows of one that's for sale. He said he thought it might be a better motor. It has an automatic start on it. Anyway, he's going to bring the motor and boat up to me. I told him anytime after April 15th, but not before the river clears up.

I will not fish anymore. I'm eighty-six. But I do need to exercise, and it's a rough job for me to get up and down that hill. I will take the boat out and go over on the other side and tie up to a willow where the sun's not hitting me. I'll sit there and watch the river flow by and think about things. When you get [to] my age you can't plan too many activities. I've given away all my fishing tackle and everything. I gave away all my boating equipment: motor, the aluminum boat I had, and everything. Gave it away last year. But I decided I did need a boat, and I was going back to what I started with. So I've got it. I hope I can use it.

[Tape meter, 335. End side one, tape one of two.]

[Tape meter, 030. Begin side two, tape one of two.]

WS: Have you ever seen this herd of wild horses I keep hearing about?

DY: No. They're not down in this section. The ones I've read about were in the northern end, in the top part of this Ozark National Scenic Riverways; probably closer to the Eminence area or Round Springs; up around in that section somewhere. But I've never seen one around here *at all*.

WS: What kind of wildlife *have* you seen, over the years?

DY: Deer. My goodness, deer graze right in the front yard. And squirrel, of course; that's

commonplace. We have very few rabbits; some out on Hunter Road, but not very many.

We've seen coyotes. We have seen opossums, raccoons, skunks; all kinds of small animals. Even out of the river we've seen otter and mink. We saw a mink follow...

Piney? Where did that mink come from that climbed that tree chasing that... What was it?

PY: Chipmunk. The chipmunk came from the river and went up that tree right there [indicating a burr oak in the front yard, at water's edge]. All the way to the top. And here comes the mink coming up right behind it.

DY: Here comes the mink right behind it, chasing it up the tree as far as that chipmunk can go. He got him.

WS: *Got him!?*

DY: Down he went, into the river. It was right in that tree, right there.

PY: Got it, and the mink came down head first; just walking, head first, right down that tree. Of course, we see wild turkeys, but a couple of years ago we think some kind of a disease wiped them out back in here. But they seem to be coming back. I saw *five* the other day.

DY: We did see wolves over here on one occasion. One of my acquaintances who knows the river quite well said that there was a den up on this rock hillside between our place and [our son] Stu's, three-quarters of a mile up river. That's rugged hillside. I've never been up that way myself; never walked that way. I've gone by it a million times in a boat, but never to walk around it. It would be difficult to spot an animal's den from the river. But I guess that's where they were.

PY: When we first came here, there was a hotel in Hunter. An old hotel. And beside it was the doctor's house. That's from the logging days. The loggers stayed in that old hotel. It didn't fall down until maybe five years ago. And the doctor's house was purchased by Cindy Roark, who lives over in Hunter. The doctor and his wife (who was a nurse) are buried in the Hunter cemetery. This was a big logging community.

WS: Just like Grandin, I guess.

PY: At least as big, if not bigger. So that was interesting to see that old hotel, almost falling down. Finally it just collapsed.

WS: Now, Mrs. Yantis, are you from Arkansas also?

PY: No, I'm from Kentucky.

WS: Oh, is that right? What part of Kentucky?

PY: Prestonsburg, Floyd County, which is in the coal fields.

WS: Oh, in the eastern part.

PY: Yes.

DY: Yes. Huntington, West Virginia, is their shopping center.

WS: I've been up around Pike County and Letcher County. That's in the coal fields.

DY: Pike County is not far from where she is.

PY: It joins Floyd County.

[Tape meter, 050]

DY: The Yantis family is from Kentucky. It's just my branch that's from Arkansas. There was a Yantis who was a member of the first Kentucky legislature. The Yantis family

came to Pennsylvania from Holland. The name was Yandes. That was a Holland name. Presumably -- and no one really knows why -- it was changed Yantis. We only presume it was a matter of phonetics. They couldn't speak English. They were checking in, as I guess all the immigrants had to do at a courthouse or something. They questioned what the man's name was, and he said, "Yantis." That can be spelled in a dozen different ways, almost. But anyway, it's Yantis. Back through some of our Bibles and things like that I'd see the name Yandes printed out where someone has learned about it.

PY: There's the old tram road. Have you heard of it?

WS: No, ma'am.

DY: I don't know whether your [State Historical] Society makes contact with the National Park Service or not on anything, or discusses matters with them, or tries to reason with them about anything.

WS: I personally have made contact with them recently, and I'm going to interview some of the retired personnel. I don't know if you ever knew Mr. Alex Outlaw? He lives over in Wilderness. I'm going to go interview him tomorrow. He worked for the Park Service.

PY: We know the name, but we don't seek them out. They don't seek us out.

WS: So you don't have a whole lot of interaction with the Park Service people.

PY: No.

WS: I guess you wouldn't. Do the rangers ever come up? I guess they patrol the river.

PY: Oh, yes, they come up and drink coffee. A lot of the rangers we like very much. We've only had two that we really didn't like.

[To Mr. Yantis:] I want you to tell him about the tram road. We've been on it.

DY: Oh, this tram road. That was nothing but a narrow gauge railroad that was put in by Missouri Mining and Lumber Company. It ran from Van Buren all the way down through here.

PY: You pick it up in Hunter.

DY: Parts of it are now used just to drive over. I have on several occasions years ago gone from Hunter right over here to this little community; caught the tram road right over there and took it all the way to Van Buren. But I understand that it's been closed [due to] a landslide or something. I hear of that. Because there were several places where it was very, very close to the river; and several places where you had to leave it to get back to it. Anyway, that's just one of the things.

And there is a bridge (the remains of a bridge, the pillars) between the Big Spring and the town of Van Buren. It's a railroad crossing bridge, the remains of it. You can see that to this day, I'm sure.

WS: Before we had the tape player on you were telling me about some of the old timers you met when you were a young man here. Like the man who floated down on the tie raft and all? Maybe you could recall some of the old men that you met in the 1930s and the '50s and all.

DY: Oh well, there were not really many characters that had much to do around, that *I* knew of.

[Tape meter, 100]

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There was very little traffic, as I mentioned, back in those days. Some days, in the middle of summer, good weather, you would maybe not see a single boat. But it was mostly fishing. And it was float fishing. It was fishing the way it should be, with the wooden johnboats and small horsepower motors. This wooden boat I'm getting is twenty-six feet long. And a ten horse motor will move it right on up the river. It puts out very little wake. It does no damage whatsoever to the shoreline.

That's the main thing that the National Park Service should look after. That's the one thing that they promised that they *would* do is to preserve the river in its natural state, and they've refused to do it. I don't say they've "refused" to do it; they just haven't done it. They have no horsepower limit on the Current River from the two-mile mark at Van Buren all the way to Gooseneck, which is the Ripley County line. No limit. You could come in here with the Queen Mary and there'd be no law against it. Don't come in with the Titanic, though. (chuckles)

WS: When you mention some of these rangers that you haven't gotten along with -- do they just not interact well with the people?

PY: Only two.

WS: Why were they disagreeable?

PY: One of the rangers came in and sat down in the living room in there and told us that he had heard that we had big hunting parties. I told him, "Oh, no! Nobody hunts here but our son. We don't hunt." "He [Mr. Yantis] has never killed anything?" I said, "No, absolutely not." "Well, I know you have, because I've heard it from several people," he

said. He was *very* obnoxious.

DY: Since we're talking to this gentleman, we're dealing in facts. I'll confirm just what you said, and I will also tell you what his name was. His name was Lopez. And he's not here anymore. He's been reassigned to some place. I don't know what it was. But there have been very few of the rangers who have been anything but gentlemen. For the most part, *now*, they'll go up and down this river; when they go, like when they go down to the Gooseneck for the garbage. Sometimes they wave, sometimes they don't. That's all. They don't have anything to do [with us].

I had a barge down here on the river. I had it turned around and tied up. I had some, oh, rocking chairs in there; just wasn't using it on the river at all, although I had my motor block there and had used it out on the river from time to time. Nothing but a barge -- Styrofoam runners, screened in. Just a screened in area with an aluminum roof.

[Tape meter, 150]

I got a letter from the Park Service about six months after it was dated -- apparently he must have dictated the thing and just let it lay there, because there was at least a six months' span -- telling me that I was violating some law by having that structure.

PY: "Shack."

DY: "Shack," they called it.

PY: It was a place for him to go sit.

DY: I had abandoned plans to use it as I originally was going to. I was going to take it and just tie it up on the other side, instead of a johnboat, and take my tape player and just sit there

and listen to music and that sort of thing. But I thought it was too much trouble. So I wasn't going to use it for anything. And when I got that letter I didn't bother to answer it, because I figured, "If anything like this goes to court" -- and it would go to Cape Girardeau to court -- "they could postpone that thing until I was blue in the face, and I'd have to pay my lawyer, and I'd have to pay theirs too, as a taxpayer." I'm not noted for my gray matter in my head, but I've got enough sense to know that the United States government has more money *available* to it than I do. It's not *their* money, but they can spend it.

PY: So we had it moved down into Ripley County by the man who built his boat. And he's trying to sell it. We can't have it here.

DY: I don't believe that interviewing anyone who's associated, or has been associated, with the National Park Service is going to give you the information in *exactly* the way that I think *should* be given to you. What they've done, they see no harm in it. Many things they've done I see a *world* of harm in it, and I was here before they were. I have no ax to grind with them, other than the lack of preservation of the river. That's something they haven't done. That's the one thing they should do. If I had a job, I'd like for it to be to go up to Van Buren every day and just count and see how many of them go to work, then turn that in and turn in my bill. I'd be a rich man doing nothing. I don't know *what* they do. I have *no idea* what they do, but they shuffle papers and employ all kinds of people. I have no idea what their annual budget is, but it's bound to be fabulous.

PY: You know about Cave Spring.

WS: I just know the name.

PY: How about Lost Man's Cave?

WS: No.

DY: As I said, I see so many faults in what they do, and what they don't do. But like I said before, I do think they're necessary. If they didn't [manage the river]...

[Tape meter, 200]

PY: ...there'd be jet skis all over this river.

DY: If they didn't, there would be *no way* to restrict *anything*. People would come in and they'd have a whole camp. You know, cabins for rent. They'd just cut out this hillside. You don't know what people will do to this country for money. It's a shame, but it's true.

We go down to Gulf Shores, Alabama, each winter. We have for seventeen years, and every year there's a new project, new high-rise, new something. Nature is disappearing every year. It's a damn shame that certain parts of the country are not restricted. I mean, the [federal] government has the authority and the state has the authority, but they don't extend it to the extent where it stops *all* of this. It stops *part*, in certain *places*, but it doesn't stop it *all*.

When you talk with me about something like this, you'll detect a note of bitterness from time to time. And I do become bitter about it because of the way it *should* be and the way it *is*. I know *far* more -- and this is not in any way patting myself on the back -- I know *far* more about this Current River than *anybody* that's connected with the National Park Service. Yet they *never*, never, never ask me any questions about, "Mr. Yantis?"

What would you do under this given circumstances?" They don't ask anybody! They come out and, "Oh, we'll do this." And they do it. I don't know.

WS: I guess so much of your knowledge of the Current River comes from floating it for so many years. Now, I don't know, but I think Mr. [David] Keathley told me that you used to fish this river very frequently.

DY: Oh, I did. Everyone who's younger and hasn't been here all his life fishes it frequently. Yes, I fished it. But I've never been what you'd call an ardent fisherman. I would go out in my johnboat in the mornings and float downriver, maybe, three or four miles and come back. I had a live box down there in the slough. Then Piney, she's *awful good* at cleaning fish. (chuckling) We'd usually take the fish up to that gravel bar, you know; just take them up there, clean them, and come back and have fish dinner.

But I don't use the river anymore. It's the age factor and a respiratory problem which keeps me from climbing this hill.

[tape meter, 250]

I'm going to try it this summer again. Last year I gave my stuff away. I couldn't make it up and down that hill. If I find this year that I cannot make it up and down the hill, I'll get one of those real small things about the size of a lawnmower, four-wheel deal.

There's a little roadway which has grown over with leaves, rather smooth, going down, around (it comes out on a flat) which I could use if I have to. But I doubt that I will. I think that I'll be able to make it back up the hill if I don't hurry, and if I maybe stop for a couple of minutes on the way back. So that's my plan for it. You don't make plans too

far in advance when you get to be eighty-six. You'd rather live in what you've already done. Well, I've done that. I know what it's like, you know. (laughs)

WS: You mention that they never ask your advice on anything. What are the kind of questions that you wish that they *would* ask you?

DY: I wish they'd ask me if they didn't think that they should have a limit on the horsepower down here. I wish they'd come down here and ask me, "Mr. Yantis? Are you completely satisfied with the way that the Ozark National Scenic Riverways is governing the area that surrounds your property?" They've never asked me. They don't give a damn. Now, I don't mean to say that. They've never given it a *thought*, is what I should say; probably. And their changes in personnel there are such that you can't really get to know who people [are.]

Mr. [Arthur L.] Sullivan was there for many, many years. I saw him one time in fifteen years. I think he was there fifteen years -- maybe twelve, something like that -- on this river. But I saw him on more than one occasion out at their golf course just sitting there drinking his Sunday beer. And that's all right, too. I like beer. I like it, but I don't.

In a position like this, I wish they would let me set the rules for just one day, and then let them live by them for a year and then see how the damn thing should be run. Because I ran a business all my life, of one sort or another, and this is no more than a business when you get right down to it. They spend money, spend it in big ways; some of it necessary, some of it is not.

[Tape meter, 300]

DY = Don Yantis; PY = Pauline Yantis;
WS = Will Sarvis

But, I get back to that original statement (perhaps not original), but the statement I made -- they *are* essential to the river or it would be like the lower river where it's just built up something fierce everywhere.

WS: Before the Park Service came in, for a while people like Leo Drey wanted the Forest Service to manage the land. Do you remember that?

DY: Leo Drey did not have anything to do with this area before they got their property from the government.

WS: Right. I mean, there was a different bill before Congress in 1961, where they were going to try to expand the national forest to go along the rivers and not bring the Park Service in. I don't know if you ever got involved in that or not.

DY: In '61?

WS: Yes, sir. And then, see, the following Congress they pulled out the Forest Service bill. That was the competing bill. And then they let the Park Service bill go on through. That was 1963.

DY: That part I'm unfamiliar with.

WS: Okay. Did you ever happen to meet Leonard Hall? He wrote that book *Stars Upstream*.² It was about the Current River.

DY: No, I didn't know him. I knew Doc Stokely. [He] used to write about the Current River for the Poplar Bluff paper and the St. Louis paper. Z. Lee Stokely. His column was

² *Stars Upstream: life along an Ozark River* by Leonard Hall. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. A revised edition was published in 1969 by the University of Missouri Press, Columbia.

called “Random [Shots] and Casts.” I’ve forgotten. And it was about the Current River, basically; all of it.

PY: At the old Lucy Lee Hospital, downtown Poplar Bluff, they had *huge* murals. Doctor McPheeters, who owned the hospital, *loved* Current River. That hospital had *huge* murals on the wall of people floating and fishing Current River. This river was also written up in *Life* magazine as one of the most famous fishing streams in America. People have taken it over with these wild, 200-horsepower motors. We see them all the time.

[tape meter, 350]

There is a group. I understand that they’re from Winona, but I don’t know. That’s just something I heard. They *all* have 200-horsepower, black, Mercury motors, and there’s a whole group of them. I won’t say how many, but if I say ten, it wouldn’t be too many. They come together. And it’s against the law for them to be lashed together, the boats. But they do.

[End of side 2, tape I; tape meter, 362]

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

PY: But as long as it’s for the Historical Society, you should know about Lost Man’s Cave. I can’t tell you because I’m not a spelunker. (laughs) That would scare me to death. But it’s near here. It’s off this Hunter Road. There is a natural spring that comes out of a *big* open cave back in there that you can go see.

DY: Who else in Van Buren besides “Cokie” [Coleman] McSpadden and David Keathley have

you talked to?³

WS: I talked for a while with Mr. Grassham, James Grassham.⁴

DY: Yes, he's the former mayor there, Chevrolet dealer.

WS: Right. We're going to have a taped interview tomorrow. And then I talked to Mr. Alan Turley with the newspaper, but he wasn't interested in an interview.

DY: I doubt that you'll get much out of Jim, either. He knows nothing about the river. I'm not saying he knows nothing about it, because he's from Van Buren, but he was not a river user as such. I know him. And he's a nice guy; real nice guy. He may be able to give you a lot of information that's not necessarily first hand. If it's something that sounds reasonable you might want to check it down. But I think your best chance for real, old, manuscript information is from Bill Wright down at Doniphan. Because I know what they had. I know that they know the river and own property along it at Doniphan and up here at Gooseneck. As a matter of fact, Gooseneck Park was given to the state of Missouri by the Wright family. They now call it, sometimes, Hawes Park, after (I think) some politician out of Cape Girardeau. I'm not sure. Senator [Harry Barstow] Hawes or whatever his title was. But Gooseneck is the native name for it, and that's at the Ripley County line.

PY: I think Hawes was a senator, and his ashes were strewn off the old bridge at Doniphan.

DY: There used to be a clubhouse on top of this huge hill here on this bank, up about six

3 For Mr. McSpadden's interview, please see C3966, a.c. 12.

4 For Mr. Grassham's interview, please see C3966, a.c. 15-16.

miles, I'd say; maybe five. It was called the "Kansas City Clubhouse." That was property that was owned, and the original clubhouse was put there, by the Missouri Mining and Lumber Company. What purposes they put it to I wouldn't know.

PY: Entertainment.

DY: Yes, that could have been part of it. But they later sold it. And a group from St. Louis bought it and owned it for a while. I knew some of those fellows, because I was a member of the same country club in St. Louis as *they* were, the ones that bought the Kansas City Clubhouse (as it was called). The National Park tore it down when they came in. Earl Livingston (who was a friend, and a construction man) wanted to buy the beams from the thing. They wouldn't sell them. They just threw them away. They said, "No, we're not going to sell them." Just wasteful. Completely wasteful. That's the [same] way with this lumber that's down on there [that is, the timber blown down by the recent tornado]. It's going to be rotted out. What good that's serving I wouldn't know. You give me one good thing that that's doing.

PY: These trees that are uprooted, this neighbor in Hunter said they were easily worth \$50,000, if they'd let somebody cut them.

WS: This property here that you own and where your son lives, did that used to belong to the Missouri Mining and Lumber Company?

DY: Yes. I used to have the -- what do they call those? -- abstracts or something, that takes it all the way back. I don't know where in the dickens that is now.

[Tape meter, 050]

**DY = Don Yantis; PY = Pauline Yantis;
WS = Will Sarvis**

But I've read about the whole thing. They're mentioned in it throughout, and various families whose names I knew of over in Hunter are mentioned in it throughout. They did have this in fee, at one time. It was theirs. I couldn't tell you just how much of this land around here that they owned, and how much they just had the timber rights to, but they cut it. In those days, I was told, what they were cutting was native pine the size of which you wouldn't believe. Those are hand-me-down stories that I've picked up since I've been here.

PY: The beams in our living room here came out of that old mill pond over at Hunter. Wasn't the mill pond at Hunter, where our beams came from?

DY: Yeah. The Grandin mill pond -- some of the stuff came out of the Hunter pond, and part out of Grandin. The stuff that sank to the bottom. But those are huge beams [measuring about twelve by four inches, and more than twenty feet long]. That gives you an idea of the size of the pine that was cut. Those things up there, my goodness; how long they are, how thick they are, and how big the trunk of the tree had to be. I don't know how many they got out of one tree, out of that size.

PY: How *strong* they are because of the width!

DY: I would say they got at least four, maybe five, cuts out of one tree of that size, right there. And that's a huge tree.

WS: But now you bought the land from somebody that had long ago bought it from the lumber company.

DY: I had gone on a float trip with T.L. Wright from Van Buren to Doniphan in about 1947 or

'8. Something like that. I told T.L. then that I was looking for a place to possibly buy and put a cabin on, because I figured I'd be living in the St. Louis-Chicago area (I've forgotten which one, at the time.) We floated and spotted two places that we liked. One was the place where my son is -- it was unimproved at the time -- and this place.

Well, when I got back from California in the first of '52, I contacted T.L. I said, "T? I'd like to know if those two places that we spotted on that trip are available or not? Still unsold?" He said, "Well, one of them is gone. Buck Porter bought it. You don't know him, but you'll like him. The other one, I don't think there's anything on it." I said, "Find out, if you will. I'd like to get into it."

He called me back -- I'm going to say it was the next day. It was in a short period. And he said, "Not only do I know who owns it, [but] he's hauling gravel for me right now, and he wants to sell it." I was down here the next day or two. We went into Grandin and made the deal and bought it. That was in '52.

WS: You knew Mr. Wright from Westminster College. Is that correct?

DY: That's correct. Actually a little before he got there, one of my brothers (the middle one) was a senior when I was a freshman. He knew T.L.'s sister, who was at William Woods. It was in the same town. I was playing a game of baseball for the Paragould team down at Harmon Field in Paragould.

[Tape meter, 100]

T.L. Wright and his oldest sister, Dorothy, came through Paragould to call on the Missouri-Pacific, which had a roundhouse there, and probably called on them for selling

ballast.⁵ [They] went by my house and asked mother; said they wanted T.L. to meet me, that they'd heard about me through Bill and his sister. She said, "He's out playing baseball someplace." And, sure enough, the game was right on the road back to Doniphan, and they saw the ballgame going on. They got off and introduced themselves. That was, of course, when I was still in college.

And then T.L. came to college at Westminster. T. was a freshman when I was a junior. We were the closest personal friends until almost twenty years ago (my goodness, I can't believe it) that T.L. passed away. That was the way I got into the Current River. I was invited up here just to mess around at his place down at Doniphan.

PY: I was born and raised on the Big Sandy. (laughing) I'm not bragging about it, either.

WS: Now, you prefer the Current to the Big Sandy, do you?

PY: Not so many refrigerators in it, and old tires. (Laughs)

WS: I've heard some people talk about the Ozarks in Missouri being kind of a remote country, and it seems to me, compared to the southern Appalachians, this is kind of *open* country.

PY: It is, yes.

WS: Because the mountains back there -- I mean, it gets rough. You can drive for three and four hours and never get out of third gear.

(Laughter)

DY: That's the truth.

⁵ For Dorothy Wright Burford's interview, please see C3966 Missouri Environment Oral History Project, a.c. 39, 40.

WS: So this country seems kind of open to me.

PY: There are four girls in my family. No boys. One of them lives in Harlan. She taught school there for thirty-five years. Her husband is a retired lawyer there. The other two live in Lexington. So I'm the only one who left Kentucky. Donald and I have been married fifty-five years. It will be fifty-six in June.

DY: We've had some mighty good rangers around here that have gone on. Some of them retired. Some of them became ill. Jerry Whittle, one of them, was one of the finest young men you'll ever see. I believe Jerry moved on because of illness. I'm not absolutely certain. Right now, working up here on a special assignment is a ranger who is more qualified for the job than any that they've ever, ever had here. His name is Rick Drummond. He used to be assigned to just where we sit, this area. And as a matter of fact, his headquarters were in the cabin that my son has turned into his home, when that was a government property. And the way my son got that from the United States government was by trading a place which he owned downstream over on the west bank. He had to put up some boot for it, but they made the deal.

[Tape meter, 150]

I think as far as the acreage was concerned it was insignificant, because Stu didn't get any acreage to speak of, and he didn't have a hell of a lot to start with on the other side.

PY: He had ten acres.

DY: But both of them were cabin sites that looked right straight down at the water. The only trouble with the one that Stu was in is in order to get there you had to drive all the way

around through Doniphan, and belly *way* out and come back in. Whereas, to get to this one, come right out from Poplar Bluff to Hunter and you're there. I told him, "Why, Stu, you haven't got a chance to get that." And he said, "Well, Dad, let me give it a whirl." So he went up and made the proposition to them. They liked it and they took it.

PY: And then he remodeled. I mean, it was in terrible shape.

WS: Well, you both have beautiful houses here on the river.

PY: Ours has not been remodeled. (Laughs)

DY: There was another cabin right up there by Stu's, farther out on the point. Stu didn't include that in the deal. I don't know whether the government would have gone along on that or not, because they kept that point and tore the cabin down. It was owned by...

PY: Judge [Orville Arch] Tedrick.

DY: Judge Tedrick of Poplar Bluff. He was a friend of Buck Porter, who owned the property originally.

PY: And Rick Drummond lived in it when it was a cabin, as a ranger. But he's head of the D.A.R.E. [Drug Abuse Resistance Education] program now.

DY: Did anybody in Van Buren mention the Shockley family to you?

WS: Not that I recall.

DY: They owned this river from... (I'm pointing at it with my thumb), there's a fence right over there. You can see where there's a fence line where there's a pasture. He owned from there all the way past Stu's. It must be a mile and a quarter of riverfront. Bob and

his son Carl.⁶ Bob's dead. Bob Shockley worked for the Park Service in one of those project deals where they showed people how to make johnboats, out at Big Spring Park. He's dead now. But I believe his son Carl would be pretty close to my age; or in his seventies, anyway. If Carl is living now, he would know quite a lot about this.

PY: Oh, a lot!

DY: Far, far more than I could tell you.

PY: He owns a sawmill right straight across the river, over in there, Carl does. They live over there now. See, he was raised... They owned *all* of the property you're looking at. *All* the way; way above Stu's. And the home place was up there on that end of the property. This was a cornfield across here that belonged to them. They owned an *awful* lot of land.

WS: Was that a cornfield when you all first moved here?

PY: Well, of course!

WS: Oh, I see. So you've seen it grown up into woods.

PY: Oh, sure! Yes.

DY: I don't believe that Rick Drummond could help you in what you have here, because Rick was a ranger, and while he knows the locations of all these places, he knows probably nothing about the *history* of it. If you ask him, "Do you know Don Yantis?" He says, "*Know* Don Yantis? That son of a bitch! *Everybody* knows him."

(Laughter)

[Tape meter, 200]

⁶ For the interview with Carl Shockley, please see C3966 Missouri Environment Oral History Project, a.c. 28-30.

Rick is a dandy. He's the kind of a ranger that you enjoy having walk in. I'm not sure he could help you.

WS: He's still around here?

DY: He lives up at Van Buren. He has that assignment where he goes to schools and talks to the children about nature and about preservation, and all that sort of stuff.

PY: Dope.

DY: Rick is a dandy. He's perfect. He didn't know the meaning of fear. He didn't. When he got onto something, that there were poachers around, he was going to get them or they were going to get him. And it always turned out that Rick was the winner.

One time he got word of some guys that were right across the river, not too far over, that said there was some poaching going on over there. So Rick and the state man, Tom May, worked out a deal. They went all scurvy looking as they could be. When they got near to where that area was that this outfit had set up camp, why, they got out of the car and BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! They shot their guns a few times. They waited for a while, then got in their car and went down the road. They looked over and saw the camp set up right next to the road. They stopped. One of the guys came out and said, "What were you shooting at up there?" They said they were shooting at deer. These guys said, "Don't you know deer season is out now?" He said, "Well, what do you care about it? We wanted to get deer." It wasn't deer season yet, see.

So, they got to talking. They said, "Come on in. Have a drink." Rick went in alone. He had left Tom May up the road with his radio. He got into a card game with

them, and he cussed the Park Service and everything else, you know. Had all these guys. They said, “You don’t know how many deer we’ve got out of here. This guy over here (and he pointed to him), he’s got five of them in his deep freeze over at Sikeston.” They started bragging about all the deer they had poached. Rick was taking all of it down in here [points to his head]. And Tom stayed right in his truck.

So they got into a card game. They played cards. I think Rick spent the night. I’m not absolutely sure of that. But anyway, he said, “Excuse me a minute. I’ve got to go to my car and get something.” He got there, got his phone, got Tom and said, “Tom, come on in.” And that was Tom May, the state man. He was in charge of the outdoors. Ranger; same job as a ranger. Anyway, he came in. They said, “Well boys, this is Sheriff May here (or whatever his title was), and I’m Rick Drummond, I’m with the National Park Service.

[Tape meter, 250]

Sorry to say you’re all under arrest.” One of these guys said, “You’re a ranger? And you sat here and talked with us, and you drank our beer. You know, and another thing about you. If there’s anything I hate, it’s a damn liar!”

(Laughter)

I thought Rick, when he told me about it, thought he was going to die laughing!

But if you run into Rick Drummond, start a conversation. He may be able to give you some leads that I don’t know about.

WS: Was he from here originally, or did they transfer him from somewhere else?

DY: He was transferred here from someplace else. His daddy was in the Park Service before him. He was *born* for the job.

PY: Over near Joplin.

DY: He's rougher than a cob, too. I mean, he is fearless! Absolutely fearless. He's a good friend of mine. He'll do anything to help you. He's not a nit-picker. There are some of these guys that don't want you to do anything, you know, but Rick wasn't that way. If it was something that you were doing that might not be exactly according to the way they had written in the book, if it did no harm, [it] didn't bother him. And that's the way he is to this day, I'm sure.

WS: Were there many other rangers like him, or was he outstanding in that regard?

DY: He was outstanding in that regard -- *although*, I'm sure there were other rangers who, if you *knew* them, you would say they were every bit as good as Rick in that regard. But you don't know them all. They have to be assigned to your area. There are some of them that never get over here, that are upriver at this, that, or the other place.

This Jerry Whittle I mentioned to you was one very much like Rick. He came in to help you, truly. Oh, I'm sure that Rick was not one of a kind, but he was pretty close to it. As far as *I* know, he is the most likeable, most helpful of the rangers that have ever been around here on a frequent basis. They have some younger kids that they bring in here in the summertime that [are] nice young boys, but they're here one summer and they're not the next, so they don't count.

WS: Do you ever get many trappers up and down this part of the Current?

DY: At least one every year. Last year there were two, weren't there, Piney?

PY: Yes.

[Tape meter, 300]

DY: Two to three at the most, but always one. Even when the price of pelts went down to nothing, one guy would trap.

PY: See, we go away in the winter, generally, for three months.

WS: Oh, you're gone for three months. And you've done that ever since you've had the house?

PY: No, this was our seventeenth consecutive year that we have gone south on the Gulf coast for the winter. It's too treacherous for us back in here. We have seen the ice build up on our patio like that [indicating several inches.] We keep wood in the house in the winter. Like that basket, and piled it up by the fireplace. Because many is the morning [that] we'd step out on sheer ice. And if you'd *fall* on it, you'd land in the river, because the whole *bank* is just ice.

DY: If you get back in Van Buren to talk to people, ask about Carl Shockley. Lewis Shockley, his brother, was a police officer of some sort up at Van Buren. The Shockley family, they would know an awful lot about things that took place in the past. But I have given you the two places to get the *real* McCoy. One of them is the Missouri Mining and Lumber and Company, which you say you already have their stuff. And the other one is the Wright family. Bill Wright in Doniphan, Missouri. If he can dig [it] out, [he] has some of the stuff that refers to the old days and the logging of the river. He'll be of great help

to you *if* he can dig it out, and I don't know whether he can or not. Maybe Dorothy, his sister, would be able to, regardless of her condition. If it's bad, why, it wouldn't be too bad for her own brother to go up and talk to her. She's right there in that same town, in the rest home. But I was told that she gets out from time to time and goes up to their home just to be at their home. Dorothy's in her nineties.

WS: Mr. Keathley seemed to think that you, at one time, used to keep notes about how many fish were caught on fishing trips and that kind of thing. I don't suppose you still have any of that information, do you?

[Tape meter, 350]

DY: Oh, I do in these guest books, but it's unimportant, really. I'd keep records of the gigging downriver.

PY: Snagging.

DY: Yeah, that's right. Snagging, not gigging.

WS: That's different from gigging?

DY: Yeah. What they do when they snag a fish, is they put various sinkers on the thing, and then have several branch lines out on their line with treble hooks on them. And when the suckers are spawning, why, they cast those out and they just jerk that as they reel back in. The fish don't bite the bait. The bait catches them, they're so thick. That takes place down here just about a mile this side of Gooseneck. There's one spot that they always go to to spawn. One of the native young boys talked to Van Buren people about it. They

didn't even know it. His name is Ronny Steen, and he now lives over in Ellington.⁷

WS: Oh, Mr. Keathley told me to go see Mr. Steen.

DY: When you get right down to it, he knows more about the Current River as it *is* than anybody because he lived on it. He was born on it. He could run the river under any circumstances. He was a huge man in size. He just knew the river, period. It's about all he ever did know, was things concerning the outdoors. Oh no, I take that back. He was probably as good a stone mason as you've ever seen. That was his real calling, stone masonry.

[Tape meter, 390. End side one, tape two of two.]

[Tape meter, 002. Begin side two, tape two of two.]

DY: [Mr. Steen would be a source] of information which might *lead* to more information that you need. I'm not saying that he could give you verbatim what actually happened in his presence, but he might *know* of so many things that you could check out. You would have your best chance, I do believe, through Ronny Steen on finding a person who could tell you places to go to get more information.

WS: I'll definitely give him a phone call.

DY: Ellington is where he is now, and his name is Ronald Steen.

WS: I understand you did some trapping yourself in your younger years.

DY: No.

⁷ For Mr. Steen's interview, please see C3966, a.c. 31. He is the grandson of Andrew McDowell, whose interview is in C3966, Missouri Environment Oral History Project, a.c. 32.

WS: You never did any trapping.

DY: I've never done any hunting, never done any trapping. I have never done any frog gigging, although I've run the boat for those who have grabbed frogs. They don't gig them; they grab them. That was my job. I would get in the back of the boat. We'd go out at night. We'd go five miles downriver, and then come back up with a flashlight spotted on the bank. We'd spot a frog. If the man doing the frogging up in the front would holler, "Frog!," why, he'd throw his light on it and I'd just go over there with the boat, cut the motor, then just get the paddle, and just ease in. He'd get to him, WHIM!, grab him.

No, I'm not a trapper. I've never been hunting in my life.

PY: Never trapped, never hunted. All we did was fish. When we got to be sixty-five and didn't have to have a license, we quit. (Laughs)

DY: I don't believe our son has done any trapping, either. He hunts deer, I know that; and fishes.

PY: We have one grandson who hunts. He's twenty-eight; going to get married in May. And we have a great-grandson.

WS: Well, Mrs. Yantis, you mentioned the Big Sandy River was more polluted. But I wonder if in other ways how you might compare or contrast this eastern Missouri Ozark area to the eastern Kentucky Appalachian area.

PY: Oh, there's no comparison.

WS: Only contrast?

PY: You think of these as mountains, and when you see the mountains that I came from... One of my sisters in Harlan, they have a cabin on top of Pine Mountain on their own private lake. You talk about height! You almost get a nosebleed. And the Big Sandy River is *so filled in* with trash. I don't know how it is right now, but when we were growing up, we weren't allowed *near* that river. It was just too trashy. People throw their old tires over in the river. Just ignorance.

WS: And you've never had that on the Current River, as long as you remember.

PY: No, no. This river is so different from when we came here.

Those trees down there, like that big burr oak tree -- I used to walk around it to mow on the flat down there. Now the river has it all ready to fall. We'd love to have it cut, because it's leaning now and it's going to fall.

DY: This tree right down there, that's a burr oak, and it's the only burr oak I know of around here. Its days are numbered. If you're on the river, it's already washed out all the way under the tree. The root structure goes back in. That's what is holding it up, but in terms of time, it's not too many years that that tree will be there.

PY: And it will pull a lot of our bank with it when it goes.

DY: I got permission from Rick to cut the thing, because it endangers anyone who comes up to our boat. If they're tied there, that thing will [smacks his hands] come down and kill the whole damn boatload. But I guess I should probably get the same permission I got from Rick in writing from the headquarters and let them come do it. That would be safest thing. Otherwise they would throw me in Leavenworth.

[Tape meter, 050]

PY: We used to say, “You can read a newspaper in this river at twenty feet [deep].” I mean, it’s *nothing* as clear as it used to be. It used to be just like spring water, it was so clear. We had a sandy beach across the river here, where our children learned to swim. We’d go over there in the afternoon, because that west sun would hit the cabin, and we’d all get in the boat and go over there with the children. And the neighbors would all come. The beach hasn’t been there for years. I don’t know how to guess how many feet is missing over across the river because of these big boats; so fast. And smart alecks, they’ll pull those jet motors up to spray each other, you know. This river will never be the same. It used to be so *clear*, and so *pure* that the kids would just take a drink out of the river! But if you did that today you wouldn’t survive.

DY: I wish that I could give you something useful. And I know what you’re trying to do. I get a pretty good picture of it. But our real experience goes back to 1952 when we bought the property. And that’s not far back in the history; not very far back.

WS: Well, in living memory it is, because there are a lot of people that don’t remember *that* far back.

DY: Well, that’s true. That’s the reason I was trying to figure out some way to get this information -- which I *know* exists -- through the Wright family. That’s the reason I mentioned Missouri Mining and Lumber -- if you could get their files. I don’t know what kind of files a corporation like that keeps. But I know that Bill Wright -- he might even have a conversation with Dorothy, which he could pass on to you. I wouldn’t suggest at

her age of ninety-something that you interview her, although Bill might say, “Why, sure! She’d love to talk to him.” And it may be true, and if so, she could give you all kinds of information that *I* can’t give you, because Dorothy took over the T.L. Wright Lumber Company when her father passed away. She was the oldest one of the girls there in the family. What is Dorothy? Ninety-three or four?

PY: Probably.

DY: About that.

PY: A lovely woman.

WS: Well, I can’t think of any more questions to ask you.

DY: I wish I could have been more value to you, but I can only tell you what I know of, or what I’ve heard.

WS: Sure, that’s fine.

DY: That’s about the sum and substance of it. But I think the one thing of value that I have given you is the name of the Wright family, if you can get to see Bill Wright. Somewhere in their archives they have an *awful* lot of information. Their daddy told them many times -- and T.L., the one I went to college with, said, “Daddy told us, ‘I want to tell you kids something: don’t ever sell Gooseneck. Don’t ever sell it.’” They had given the adjacent land to their Gooseneck cabin to state of Missouri, and in turn, the state of Missouri gave it to the federal government. And that is the southern extremity of the [Ozark Riverways], Gooseneck; [at the] Ripley County line.

PY: When we first bought this property, we had two stores in Hunter. Can you imagine?

**DY = Don Yantis; PY = Pauline Yantis;
WS = Will Sarvis**

WS: Not much left there now.

PY: One store had a liars' bench, and it was always just loaded with men.⁸

[Tape meter, 100]

[We] just had a good time. And we had a post office; *lovely* post mistress. It kind of has gone downhill. Plus we had the hotel and the doctor's big house. (Laughs) All of it's gone.

DY: Your name is Sarvis.

WS: Yes, sir.

DY: There's a flower of some sort.

PY: No, it's a tree. It's in bloom now.

DY: A tree. I've heard her say, "That's a sarvis," a thousand times. I didn't know what she was talking about.

WS: Back in eastern Kentucky they've got them too, I guess.

DY: Is it spelled the same way as your name?

WS: Yes sir, it is.

PY: It comes out right before the dogwood.

WS: Right. Do they have them in Missouri?

PY: Our woods have *lots* of [them]; or *did* have, before they rimracked it. Isn't that a shame?

This used to be the loveliest wooded area until this past year. The tornado hit. One of the

⁸ A "liar's bench" was seating placed outside a business such as a grocery store or gasoline station. Local men would gather there to gossip and tell tall tales.

trees went down through Stu's roof, in the guest house -- and ceiling. And he was home when the tornado hit and uprooted all those trees. And then, this lumber company was not the one we had before. This one was from Van Buren who logged. They've left the biggest mess I ever saw. *Big* old parts of trees in our drainage ditches. You know what that's going to do to our road. They've sunk our road in places [by] a foot. You can see where they hauled two trailers of logs at a time, double trailers.

DY: There's a guy who has been here at the river, and I met him down at T.L.'s Gooseneck Park. I'm struggling for his name; but he still writes outdoor articles for magazines. He is from Jeff City, I believe. I think he'd be a good source of information, because he's written about every doggone thing in the world. I saw one of his articles just the other day. As I say, I met him when he was down at T.L.'s Gooseneck cabin, when he was with some fellows from Jeff City. Joel Vance. Did you ever hear of the name?

WS: I'm wondering if he might be related to the famous Randolph Vance.⁹ He came up here in the '20s and '30s, I believe. He gathered a lot of folklore from the eastern Missouri Ozarks. He might be his son.

DY: The relationship I don't know. But Joel Vance, he's probably about my age; maybe a little younger, [but] I couldn't guess his age because [it was] just that one time that I met him. But I've read his stuff a dozen times that I've picked up in doctors' offices and places like that. Outdoors stuff. He's written about the Current River. He would be one hell of a good source of information.

⁹ This was actually Vance Randolph, who was a collector of folksongs and a writer.

[Tape meter, 146-165; Incidental conversation omitted. End of side two, tape two of two.

End of interview.]