

Smithsonian Folklore Festival

Billy Ball
Retired Criminal Investigator for the Forest Service
Lufkin, Texas

Interviewer: Arlena Aragon-Husband
March 2004

Billy Ball: Okay, so where shall I start?

Arlena Aragon-Husband: Your name, sir?

BB: Billy S. Ball, B-A-L-L.

AAH: And you worked for the Forest Service for how long?

BB: Twenty-seven, twenty-eight years, from January '74 to December '97.

AAH: In?

BB: Law enforcement.

AAH: Law enforcement, okay. Tell us a little bit about it.

BB: Well, as I recall, I was about the thirtieth investigator for the whole nation and when I came on board there was not a uniformed law enforcement group, as they had when I retired. And at that time Region 8 had the majority of the criminal investigators. I was the last of one of the original criminal investigators. Texas, I was the first investigator assigned to the state of Texas. There was an agent that worked Arkansas, an agent that worked Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina and there was a vacant position in Virginia and then there was also an agent in Kentucky and Tennessee, and I was the baby. In January 1974 I came to work when I was thirty-three years old and worked till I reached the mandatory retirement age.

I guess the thing I recall, I had applied to go to work for the government in law enforcement in the old mid level management pool. At that time I was an investigator with the Dallas Police Department and I was assigned to a federal drug task force. And that's where I learned about the mid level management pools and I don't think they have the mid level management entry anymore. But I had the great experience of coming on as a GS-11, which was about a thirty-five hundred dollar a year increase for my starting pay. My starting pay in January '74 was fourteen thousand three hundred and sixty-four a year and I have no idea what a GS-11 starts out at today. And I came in under the old PWAE where you were, I forgot what PWA, PWE stood for, Permanent While Employed.

AAH: While actually employed.

BB: Employed or something like that.

AAH: That's what it is.

BB: That's what it was.

AAH: WAE.

BB: PWAE, and my post duty was Lufkin, Texas. I was the registered agent here that covered fifteen counties. We had four national forests and two national grasslands. But the thing that I remember, since we didn't have the large cadre of officers that we had when I retired, like I said, there was about thirty agents for the whole nation and there were just a few part-time uniform officers scattered throughout the nation, probably wasn't a handful of those, so we traveled a lot. My job always involved traveling and the things that I remember was traveling to all these beautiful locations and I always told people what was really remarkable was I got paid to go see these places other people had to go see.

AAH: Pay to go see.

BB: Had to pay to go see. And I did work in every region except Region 9. I never, I take that back; I did, yes, I did do some work in Region 9. But I never got to go up into the Northeast and that was the place that I missed getting to go see, up into Vermont, New Hampshire, all up in that area. I would have loved to been able to gone up there and I did not go to Alaska. I turned down a trip right at the end of my career for a detail to Alaska. But I was traveling a whole lot at that time and I just did not want to deal with the travel problems getting to Alaska so I didn't go to Alaska. But I went on; I went through the drastic changes of law enforcement. I never will forget my first staff meeting and the bottom line was they didn't want law enforcement. But this was a mandate that came from the regional office. And the first staff meeting I went to, I won't call a name but there was an old forester there that stood up in the staff meeting and said if we hadn't hired him we could have planted X number of more trees, and that always stuck in my mind. I always remembered that and I said, well, I'll show them that I'm going do the best job that I can for them and I think I did that. And it was a great experience. I learned so many things about the many disciplines within the Forest Service that really made me a better investigator because we crossed so many disciplines. And it was never dull because about the time you got tired of working this type of case, something new would come up in another discipline.

AAH: Or hunting season would open up.

BB: Right. It was a learning process continuously and I worked with some fantastic people spread across the country.

AAH: Did you get in on the blow down?

BB: No, I was retired when they did the blow down. They asked me to come back and work as a, what do you call it? An AD and I had already started my own little business at that time so I did not come back and work as an AD. My experience with the Forest Service really assisted me whenever I had my own little private business and now as a judge I look back on the experiences and the knowledge and skills that I gained while working for the Forest Service has certainly made me a better judge. I certainly believe that. And you just cross so many areas. There's just no one particular area because not only did we do criminal investigations we did civil investigations. And whenever I was doing private investigations with my own company after I retired, that was all I worked on was civil cases so it brought a breath of experience into my private company. And now as a judge, this is primarily a civil court. We do criminal but we have a lot of civil cases because we're inside the city limits, so the experience and knowledge that I gained from the Forest Service has certainly been a great benefit.

I remember the old investigators that were in place when I came on board. Most of them came out of ATF here in Region 8. And they were the old still runners and as they started closing down those offices and started transferring these people to the big cities to work gun cases, well, then they switched over to the Forest Service. And I was hired, according to one of the men on the interview board, was because I had experience as a drug investigator and at that time the national forest was beginning to have drug problems. So that was one of the deciding factors for me coming on board. I thought I was getting out of the drug business and as it turned out in 1986 we all got this drug authority and we were right back into the drug enforcement and investigation business and became, in some cases, a large part of our job over the years.

Then we restructured and over the years we had always done personnel investigations or internal affairs type investigations; we just didn't do them on our home unit. So I got sent around the country doing a number of those. Then later on a restructuring I got assigned to the Region 8 internal affairs section and there was three investigators assigned to it. And I was in it I think a couple of years and then we restructured again and I was promoted and made a zone supervisory agent where I was responsible for investigations and enforcement activities for Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and the Caribbean.

AAH: Almost Region 8, huh?

BB: Half of Region 8 and when I retired I was retired from that position. I think since that time they've restructured some more and there's two or three people I still visit with from time to time in the Forest Service but I've moved on to another life and I'll have to say that the Forest Service prepared me well for my new position. I have now worked for city government, military, federal government, and now the country government so maybe before I hang my workdays up I can work for the state and then I will have worked for every government entity that you can work for. [Laughter]

AAH: Right. That could be a goal.

BB: Well, it could be but I'm happy right where I am and the Forest Service was a great career and as we move on we have to let new folks with newer ideas and new innovations come in.

AAH: That's right.

BB: And we bring their experience into another governmental agency and so it's great preparation though. Let's see. I guess they'll edit this, won't they?

AAH: Yes, if they need to.

BB: Okay, it'll be edited. [Laughter]

AAH: Yeah, you probably got some really good stories, don't you?

BB: Well, I guess. I had an experience involving the Rainbow family where I made numerous annual details with the Rainbow family serving in a number of different capacities from a shift supervisor all the way up to an incident commander for Rainbow activities or festivals on the national forest, which were a major law enforcement experience. And I traveled around each year helping set up these operations so that was a great experience. Gave me a lot of experience in management and interaction with other governmental agencies and I saw a lot of different things.

Then I guess there's one investigation that sticks out in my mind and this was a two year internal investigation where I traveled probably over nine or ten different states including the Washington office conducting an internal investigation that took about two years to put it together involving, unfortunately, some of our own people involved in kickbacks on horse procurements and things of that nature. That was an interesting investigation.

AAH: I bet it would be.

BB: Really strained to put that case together because it had been going on for so long that it had just become ingrained. But it involved all the way up to the regional office areas and illegal land transactions and it was just kind of a springboard that led to a number of different things and probably revamped the procurement regulations for the purchase of livestock and worked strictly for a deputy chief on that investigation. It involved transporting around close to a hundred pounds worth of files wherever we went. I had a brand new young agent working with me and that was his opening experience and after that he left the agency and went to another agency. But that was just, you know, kind of a downside that it involved the agency's own people. But it was a real experience, an investigative experience, and it was a situation that took us about six months to even break the case open to where we had some targets. And I guess I never will forget that case.

I know that the interviewer here is an archeologist and we did a few archeological cases here where we used sensors and made some cases on archeological violations. And then there was a situation where Region 3 out of Arizona called me one time and I had to go to Dallas to the residence of a lawyer. And there was some kind of deal worked out I think where this lawyer's wife had purchased illegally some kind of artifacts. And I never will forget I had to pick up a bowl and there was an Indian bowl that came out of a burial ground and the value of this bowl was twenty thousand dollars, what they told me from the regional office out in Region 3. And I had to transport this bowl back and I had stopped. I was so concerned with this bowl that I stopped and bought some special packing to put this bowl in because I didn't want to be the one to break this twenty thousand dollar Indian bowl.

AAH: It was probably quite fragile also.

BB: And so I never will forget that and it was just a very plain looking bowl, as I recall, was black and white I believe. And then I know that we had to provide some intelligence on that case where I believe, I think I went to Dallas and I think I went to Houston, as I recall, and gathered some intelligence on some people who had bought some of these artifacts that came out of the Indian burial grounds and that's always an experience.

AAH: Did you go off on fires?

BB: I did a few fires. Yes, I had just come on board. Of course, I had, my background was working undercover and I think I conducted the first undercover fire investigation that the Forest Service had ever done. They flew me into the Clinch Ranger District in Virginia and they were having a massive number of fires up there and we developed an informant. So I went undercover with an informant and after I became acquainted with the informant it turned out that this informant had been an informant for a federal drug investigator that I had known in Dallas; tells you how small the world is.

AAH: Really.

BB: So I went undercover and I worked undercover for about a month in Virginia and developed information. We identified who the people were starting the fires. We couldn't put a case together enough to prosecute because those were hard cases to make. But I guess I conducted the first undercover because of my background and experience that the Forest Service had ever conducted and seemed like I was always breaking new ground. [Laughter] But I went back into the mountains back there and lived with this family basically back in the mountains and running around all over the mountains.

AAH: Barefoot? [Laughter]

BB: And had a big time. [Laughter] And probably can't go any further than what I'm going to say but developed some information while working undercover that led to a murder investigation and some investigation involving payoffs in local corruption.

AAH: A bonus.

BB: And that information was developed off of this fire investigation. I never did know what happened to the outcome of it but about two years later the FBI showed up interviewing me in Lufkin on the information that I had provided to authorities in Virginia. So I had a real rounded experience. I'm trying to think of some other things. Help me out, Arlena. [Laughter] You remember more about me than I do.

AAH: Let's see, what's happened; suicides, sometimes there are suicides out on the forest.

BB: Oh, we had those. We had murders on the national forest.

AAH: We find bodies.

BB: See the national forest here in Texas, the Sam Houston National Forest, was if you consider the urban sprawl was north of the forest so we had people that commuted through the national forest down the Houston and we had a number of murders on the national forest. We had chop shops where we discovered on the national forest, drug labs. I'm not sure this is the kind of information they want to put out at the Smithsonian [laughs].

AAH: Well, it's about law enforcement.

BB: Yeah. And we had suicides. Basically here in the South or in Texas it was an urbanized forest and we had urban problems. We didn't have the giant land base but, you know, we had all this volume of people and a resource doesn't create a problem. It's the people that create the problem. So we had a good law enforcement program and when I started out there was just me. And when I left, of course, here in Texas I was a supervisor but we had another investigator and we had about nine or ten uniformed personnel. We had gone to using boats that were used in and around the Sam Houston National Forest there on Lake Conroe, which was a part of our domain and which we did do some archeological cases where people were digging artifacts out around the shores of the lake there on the Sam Houston. And, of course, we used ATV's. They didn't have ATV's when I first came here. There's no telling how many miles I got on an ATV. There's no telling how many miles I got flying. And, of course, we flew for arsonists. We flew marijuana interdiction. So we were having to deal with the same situations almost that they were dealing with in the large metropolitan areas. And our officers had to develop skills in how to deal with the public in a lot of cases, most especially during hunting season, were already armed. So we had to develop those skills in dealing with those people and the other problem we had is all of our officers worked alone. We all worked alone and a lot of times you had no radio communications so you had to learn to be alert and how to take care of yourself in those situations out there. And we were real fortunate here in Texas. We only had a couple of officers assaulted over the years. I was assaulted one time on Angelina National Forest that involved a hunting situation.

AAH: If you can, tell us about it.

BB: It was a situation where it was some illegal dog hunting and I had notified the local warden. I'd gotten a call on it and was in the area and happened to check on it and I notified the local warden, who was on the north end of the county. And when he showed up he'd had an altercation the night before and he was on crutches but he was still out there working and had his leg partially in a cast. He had a half cast on. And there was one of the violators ran off out in the woods and so I went out in the woods to get him and he threw down on me with a shotgun and we had a slight confrontation but I was able to subdue him and handcuff him and get him out of the woods and we filed on him in federal court rather than state court. Had a couple of other situations where it got a little tight but we were able to diffuse the situation and all the Forest Service law enforcement personnel really had to develop skills because they were generally always alone and confronted people in very isolated situations. And probably the violators were in a multiple situation with one officer so you had to learn and develop real strong survival skills.

AAH: With loaded guns and probably drinking.

BB: Oh, a lot of alcohol and then here in the South, of course, we have all these broken land patterns so we had small communities, small cities within the boundaries of the national forest. Where if you get out West you drive for hundreds of miles at a time and you don't see anybody. And here we had ranches that were intermingled with the national forest. We had hunting clubs intermingled with that national forest, private land. Of course, we worked a lot of environmental pollution cases because of oil wells and the gas wells that were on the national forest. There were a number of situations where when oil got real high and a lot of drilling started there was a lot of oil well property theft that went on on the national forest and, of course, we'd sometimes get involved in that intelligence and assisting other agencies with that. Then we had one situation where we worked cooperatively with state and federal agencies when there was a major cocaine ring working out of the South American cartel that were delivering massive amounts of cocaine and they were meeting on the back roads of the national forest to distribute their cocaine in East Texas and Louisiana area. So it was a real experience and I was proud to be able to come in on the ground floor because, like I said, there was thirty investigators for the whole nation and I think I was number thirty. And so we did travel and it was a close knit group and it was great to see the expansion but when we went to the expansion and the increase of law enforcement personnel, you lost that closeness that you had developed with some of these other investigators. So, you know, there's always pros and cons with everything.

AAH: With moving on?

BB: But we move on and it's time for the younger group to come in and do their changes, just as my era came in and made changes. As always, sometimes change is good and sometimes it's bad.

AAH: And you never know.

BB: You never know. What else can we do?

AAH: Well, let's just go ahead and [recorder turned off].