

Smithsonian Folklife Interview

Larry Burkhart
Retired Forest Ranger
Hiawatha National Forest, Michigan
(Interviewed at his home in Murphysboro, Illinois)

July, 2004
Interviewer: Pat York

[The first part of the tape contains interviews with other individuals involved with the Iroquois Lighthouse and its restoration. The interview with Mr. Burkhart begins more than half an hour into the tape.]

[Larry Burkhart seated outside in a lawn chair]

Pat York (PY): Larry, they ask for you to say your name and your address on the video, I guess so it'll coincide with what you've put on the sheet.

Larry Burkhart (LB): Oh, okay. My name's Larry Joseph Burkhart. I live at 9578 Highway 149, Murphysboro, Illinois.

PY: Thank you. And you are a retired Forest Service employee, is that right?

LB: About ten years ago.

PY: And also, when I... I'm not sure how much of the microphone picks up my questions, so if you could just sort of paraphrase my questions and say, "Oh, I retired about ten years ago"

LB: Oh, okay. Okay.

PY: And so can you tell me about your Forest Service career? Tell me when you started and where you started?

LB: Well, I started in 1967 in Vienna, Illinois. On the Shawnee, oddly enough, since I'm back here again. Was there for about seven years, in timber management. And always wanted to go into soil survey, because I had a master's in soil science, forest soils. And there was an opportunity on the Hiawatha opened up, a training position. So I said yeah, and I couldn't even find it on the map. I remembered it from history lessons. And I went back, and my ranger was Jerry [Kletz?] at the time, and he said, you don't even know where you're going, do you? And I said, I can't even spell it right, apparently, and I can't find it on the map. So we found ourselves a few weeks later on the Canadian border, and stayed there about fifteen years and loved every minute of it. The winters and all. So I did soil survey for about seven, eight years, and the ORA

on the district walked in one day and resigned. And this was right before we were getting ready to take the national Christmas tree to Washington, DC. And Dick Ruppenthal was the ranger. And Dick looked at me, and I didn't know what was going on. And he said, how'd you like to go with me, take the national Christmas tree to DC? And I said, well, I can't do that, you're going to take Jim—I believe his name was Jim—you and Jim are going to take the tree. He said, no, Jim quit this morning. 'Course I didn't believe him. And I said, you serious? And he said, yeah. I said, sure, I'll go to DC with you. So that's how I got to be back into the ORA. This time you get back into forestry. So that's how I got back into that. And stayed a total of fifteen years. And then put in for the ranger's job down here, and was lucky enough to be selected for that. About ten years ago I retired. When they had the early out I said, okay. Bye. [Laughs]

PY: So you were a ranger on Murphysboro...?

LB: Murphysboro District, yeah.

PY: ... on the Shawnee. And how long were you a ranger?

LB: About seven years there.

PY: Okay. And then took the early out. You're one of the lucky ones.

LB: Took the early out when they had the buy out, and...

PY: Yeah.

LB: ... enjoyed it ever since. [Laughs]

PY: Good for you.

LB: 'Cept I miss some of the team meetings. It's kind of fun to go keep some of those other yahoos [pronounced 'yay-hoos'] straight. But... [Laughter] I don't know how they do it today, but I know how we did it.

PY: [Laughs] Well, they last too long.

LB: Well they always did. They always did. The [word unclear] always got to go home. At the Sioux, we might have a three hour drive in the winter time. Or up here we'd have an hour or hour and a half. But the rest of them go home in fifteen minutes. That was cool for them, but...

PY: Yeah. Right.

LB: it kind of blankety-blanked the rest of us off, you know. [Laughter]

PY: So, you also were involved with the Iroquois Lighthouse restoration.

LB: Up on the Hiawatha, yes. Up on the Sault Saint Marie District.

PY: So tell me a little bit about that. Tell me how it came to pass. Didn't you mention they were close to tearing down due to lack of funding, and didn't want to mess with it?

LB: That's one of the stories I heard. When I was working up there in soils, now and then you could stop and go up the tower. The building itself was closed. And the ranger at the time tried to get money for restoration. We got... I don't think he got anything, really, even for maintenance. Now and then they got a coat of paint. The old boathouse got torn down. And then occasionally they'd open the tower so people could go up in the tower and look around. There was a lot of people wanting to do that. And the local historical society apparently had expressed interest in one thing or another. And the ranger did the best he could with what he had. And he retired, and we had a new ranger come in, Roger Jewel. Roger came out of the Milwaukee office, if I remember correctly. And while he was in Milwaukee he worked with Special Uses, and wrote a lot of the old blue sheets for the region.

PY: What is a blue sheet?

LB: Oh, it's a regional... I believe at that time it's a regional supplement. We had the Washington...

PY: Oh, okay. For the... [Words unclear]

LB:... Washington directive, and then the old green sheets were forest, and the blue sheets for the region. Well he had a pretty good handle on special uses, so he came down, and he got with the folks in timber and wildlife and all that, and one day he said, come on, let's get in the car. And fairly new ranger, I could tell he was a little bit different. And I kind of liked him; a big old tall guy out of Minnesota. And we were about the same age. He might have been a little older; not much. He was one way or the other. But we hit it off real good, and got along, and so I'm out showing him the recreation areas and everything. And we go through the Indian reservation. Well he knew there was one there. And in the Sioux. And Roger had a real passion for Native Americans. And their religion. And we got talking about that, and we're driving up the road, and we go by this lighthouse. And he said, what's that? And I said oh, that's our lighthouse that nobody can use. And he says, back up; let's go in there. So he said, have you got a key? And I said, yeah, I know how to get in here. So we got inside the building. Plaster coming off the walls. The upstairs where the lighthouse keeper quarters were; it was pretty rough shape. There wasn't any heat or anything; the old boiler was still in the basement. Of course the light has long gone, and the lens out of the lighthouse is in the Smithsonian. Over time we tried to get it, but they wouldn't give it to us. We wanted to put it on display there. So he said, you realize what we've got here? I said yes, we've got a lighthouse, and we've got a real opportunity to do something if we can just get some money to do it. And he said, we're going to open this thing up. So to make a long story short, I guess, we got fiddlin' with that, introduced him to some of the folks in Brimley I knew with the historical society.

PY: Do you remember what year this was?

LB: Oh let's see. I would guess... early '80s. I've thrown almost all my stuff away. I've kept just a few of my papers. I did that not six months ago. I had, you know, when you... You got your own personnel folder. I had three of them that thick I kept, and I've thrown all that stuff away. It really doesn't affect my life anymore. Now I'm kind of kicking myself, but that's neither here nor there. I would say, early '80s. Somewhere in there. Late '70s. And so we got to meeting some people. Met the tribal chairman and some of the folks. The Native Americans expressed an interest, and of course the group in Brimley really expressed an interest. Real small town. Real small group of people, but pretty dedicated when you got to know them. So we got to talking. One day we were settin' there having a cup of coffee and just talking. Or we might have been riding around, I don't know. We were talking about the lighthouse. He said, you know, we got to get that thing open. Get us some money for it. And I said, yep, you're right. I said, you're the ranger; that's your job, isn't it? And I said, I'll help you whenever I can. And he said, the first thing we have to do—and I just love this; it's not the first time I've told it; there's nothing wrong with it—because I had told him, at one time, I believe it was the previous ranger had said—and the ranger had fought this—they were trying to decide what to do with the lighthouse. He kept wanting money. And the engineers', bless their hearts, solution was tear it down. If you tore it down, what have you got? You've got a beach. People can go pick up rocks, right? Makes a hell of a lot of sense to me. Well, that never happened. So when I told Roger that he said, we have to make this so politically sensitive that the Forest Service can't touch you or me. [Laughs] So we did, by just getting our picture in the paper with some local people, getting some newspaper support. Then we started writing a special use permit, and d was told, oh no, you can't have this clause, you can't have that clause. We just sat there grinning, because if there was one thing Roger enjoyed dealing with, it was being told he couldn't do something. He'll walk the edge. And I loved every minute of it. And he said, hey, I worked with special uses, I wrote the regional manual. I know how to write a permit. So we wrote a fairly unique permit, and got it pushed through. It took some fighting. And I don't remember what was so unique about it, but I think it was the way we were involving the tribe and particularly Bay Mills Historical Society, and how the money was going to be collected and handled, which was fairly non-traditional with the Forest Service. You can't let them handle the money. Well, why not, you know? And we were dealing with donations, not fees. We got more money through donations than fees. And let them run it. And we would just kind of be overseers. Well, there was a handful of people that wanted us to run it. Well we didn't have time to run it. Plus they wanted to run it. Why not? They do a better job than we would anyhow, so. They got in there and they painted and they scraped and they re-did things, and finally we got a caretaker, and worked out that two-year agreement, and I guess that's still going. Who knows, I might even put in for that one of these days. I told [Sharon?] I'm going to do that. Go up there and live two years in the Lighthouse. I think that'd be great. [Laughter] Go to Brimley and have fried perch and a beer on Saturdays. [Laughs] What is it? Cozy Corner.

PY: [Laughing] Great.

LB: That'd be great. Then go back and open the Lighthouse up. But it was a lot of fun. And I know they did some work on Round Island Lighthouse, down on, down in the Straits. Down at [name unclear]. I'm not sure how that was done. That's been in a couple movies. "Somewhere in Time" in fact. Then Jim Bruce up at Manistee had a... No, Munising; up at Munising... had one

on, oh what's that island up there? It was an old wooden lighthouse if I remember right, and he was trying to get something done with that.

PY: Oh. Grand Island.

LB: Yeah. Grand Island. Yeah.

PY: Yeah. That's in private ownership.

LB: Oh, it is? Oh yeah, That's right. I remember hearing that now. That's right. Yeah.

PY: But they're working on it. They're trying to get something done. But it's still dilapidated.

LB: Yeah, and it takes a lot of money. I know, I can remember times that Roger said, what you doing this afternoon? I said, I haven't got a lot. Come on, we're going to go plaster. And we'd just go out, start plastering. We had a friend, a [word inaudible] state trooper stopped out one day. He and I were good friends, and we'd tease back and forth a lot. And we even got him to help. And I know some of the other districts, and a couple of the other rangers, said Aww, you guys aren't supposed to go out and spend your time plastering and hammering and nailing. That's not what your job description calls for. And it'd just make us go out and do it all the more. And the forest supervisor we had was cool. He just, he just let us go. [Laughs] And we got a lot of work done that way. And got a lot of local people involved. It was just a fun thing to do.

PY: Yeah. It's one of those great things.

LB: Oh yeah. It's fun. And then since I moved down here—I think it's since I retired—I had a couple questionnaires from the Hiawatha. And I didn't even answer; I just called them on the phone and said, what in the hell's going on? You want to charge people to walk down on the beach? Give me a break. You know, they're trying to raise money. I understand that. We all were trying to raise money. I said, if you want... it's just like having a fee to enter the national forest. And that's, I just can't, as a taxpayer I just cannot agree with that. And one of the proposals was to charge people to go down on the beach. And I called them up, I talked to a friend of mine up there who was in recreation at the time, and said, are you really serious about this? And he said, well the proposal is serious. And I said, I'll tell you what. You and I are going to have a problem if you pass it, because every summer we come up, when we come up about every year, Sharon wants to go to the lighthouse, go down on the beach and pick up some more of those old sauna rocks and bring back to Michigan [Corrects himself], back to Illinois, and one of these days we're going to have enough sauna rocks to build our own sauna down here. So don't bother me when we're picking up rocks, because I'm not going to pay the fee. [Laughs] And oh, they just, you can't be that way and this, that, and the other. It's a lot of fun.

PY: Well. So tell me about, when you moved down here. You were a ranger during a real controversial period of time down here, weren't you?

LB: Yeah, there was a lot of controversy. I knew it was kind of a hotbed, but I hadn't really researched it that much.

PY: Being on the Shawnee.

LB: Yeah, what was really going on on the Shawnee, 'cause the ranger I started with at Vienna, when he heard I was coming down here he called me on the phone and says, what in the blankety blank do you think you're doing moving down here? You know what it's like, don't you? I said, yeah, I'm from southern Indiana and I've got relatives in southern Illinois. I know. We're going into a piece of redneck country. I know that. And I said, just a little piece of eastern Kentucky stuck down here, that's all. The rural South, south Georgia, don't matter. [Laughter] And when I got down here I found out real quick. I had about a three- or four-week honeymoon, and then I met a couple of the local folks, and they just blew up. And it's unfortunate. In the long run they've—and it's not just here, but a lot of places—they've learned, the people who do not want trees cut have learned how to use the courts and the system to put a stop to us. And we're not perfect. I know, I looked at some timber sales down here that I could understand; if it was at my back door, like I saw a couple of them, I'd probably be pretty upset too. But the push was on for timber. I mean, a lot of times we'd say it wasn't, but there was, for all of our targets. I mean, there's nothing wrong with that. But we just made some people mad, over some things that weren't really timber-related. And the one I remember, it was trout lining in a local lake. And I told the guy, we were not, the Forest Service was not in support of that. And we were sitting at a meeting with the state, and everybody agreed. I said, I love to trout line and jug fish. So that's... I'm going to support that unless the state has a biological reason that we shouldn't do it. Nobody said a word. Well the next day or two, I get these closure orders on the lake, come across my desk from the state. And I called them and I said, what in the world's going on here? Well, we've decided to do it. And I thought, oh God. So I go down to this guy's store and tell him. And we had a timber sale just up from his store, and he turned around and looked at me, and he says, you son of a B. And he pointed up there and said, you'll never cut that sale. And we never did. And we never cut another one afterwards. It all started over him being lied to, as far as I'm concerned, about fishing. And we could have told him right up front if that's what it was going to be. And he thought we laughed all the way home. And I told him, Joe, that's not true. I begged him, tried to reason with him. Well, you're not going to reason with him. And everybody kind of sold him short. And I remember telling our team, I said, you better not, you better not sell him short. This country was founded on a minority viewpoint. And they're protected. Minority viewpoints are protected, whether you like it or not. And sure enough, they got a bunch of them yahoos [pronounced 'yay-hoos'] together, and they pulled her off.

PY: Yep.

LB: And to this day they're still holding on. I guess. I've kind of lost contact with them. But [shrugs] oh, there were some tense moments and everything; and there were some of them, it was kind of fun to deal with them and what not. We could laugh about some of it, but some of the employees, it was pretty intense for some of the employees; I felt sorry for some of them.

PY: Sure.

LB: But...

PY: So, tell me about retirement.

LB: It's great. [Laughs] I do a lot of woodworking.

PY: Do you?

LB: Oh yeah. And I sell some of the stuff. Entertainment centers, and dressers. I build some of the weirdest things for people, you know. Just one of a kind kind of stuff. Mostly hardwoods: walnut and cherry and oak.

PY: Uh huh.

LB: Poplar; whatever they want. Go visit the grandkids in Indiana. And I enjoy mowing grass, so I enjoy all this. [Indicates his surroundings] Yeah, retirement's okay. Just save your money, save your money before you retire. Don't burn it all.

PY: So you can travel, or...?

LB: Yeah. Sharon and I aren't big travelers, but now and then we'll... We go down to Florida maybe once a year with our, one of our kids. Run up to Sault St. Marie and visit everybody. Go out to Brimley and have that fish dinner and beer I told you about. [Laughs]

PY: Yeah. [Laughs]

LB: And the office manager, Pat Brighton, and Sharon and I got to be real good friends over the years. So we go up. She lives right out on Lake Superior. She's got a little trailer there. And she'll always call and say, you coming up? Yep. Well I got a case of beer in the icebox, and I got the trailer plugged in. You got a place to sleep. So we stay out there with her for two years on Lake Superior. [Laughs]

PY: [Laughs] Excellent.

LB: Oh yeah, it's a lot of fun.

But as far as the lighthouse is concerned, if we can go back to that for a minute?

PY: Go ahead.

LB: I was going to mention. I forgot all about it. In '84, 1984, I attended the Outdoor Recreation Short Course at Utah State. And the paper was entitled, "A Tourism Model for Brimley Bay Mills and Sault Saint Marie Ranger District, Hiawatha National Forest, 1985." I've got a copy someplace; but it's in the house. We're packing some boxes and stuff now, and it may have got packed. But it should be in the [original] office. And the whole theme on that was tying not only the lighthouse but that lakeshore into Brimley and Sault Saint Marie. And Brimley Bay Mills,

Brimley Bay Mills bought into it, 'cause they were closer. And it actually got used. It was one of those papers that actually got used. One of the things we mentioned in there was—after talking with some folks at Michigan State—was gaming on the reservation. I remember getting questioned on that when I had to go do the oral presentation. They said, what do you mean, 'gaming'? I said, gambling. Oh, you mean you would propose gambling on a reservation? I said, I guess they can do what they want. They're a sovereign nation. SO if I could go out there, shoot some dice or play some poker, I'd go. [Laughs] And the guy thought, you're... [Shakes his head] And then I said something about advertising with billboards, and he didn't like that either. So I said, well, that's all right. That was my proposal. [Laughs] I didn't see anything wrong with billboards on the road if they're done tastefully, with the community. And I didn't see anything wrong with the Indians having a casino. Well guess what they're doing? They got casinos. And it was well accepted by the tribal chairman and some of the people there. And one of the most interesting things about that whole stay up there was when, not too far from when I left and Roger left, I forget just what the occasion was, but he and I were invited to a meeting at Bay Mills at the Catholic Church there. And they had a ceremony of some sort, and right before that, I believe it was one of the, it might have been Herman [Cameron] and his wife; they were old, long-time residents on the reservation, well respected. And we got a big boulder and they had a plaque made, and we put it up on the overlook, overlooking the bay. And a lot of people didn't want that, you know; you're giving in to the Indians. Well, we weren't. We were honoring a couple of pretty neat people. And anyhow, we got invited to this, and we were both given a blanket as I remember. Now I've not even unwrapped mine. We were both given a blanket, that as we journey through life, and have need for comfort and shelter from the cold, we have a blanket from them that we can stay warm and go right ahead. And in talking to a couple of friends of mine that were Native Americans up there, they said, that's a pretty high honor. And I've never forgotten that.

PY: That's really great.

LB: So that was neat. It was a fun time up there. It was probably the highlight of my career.

PY: That's great.

LB: And we had a good district, and nobody fussed and fought, and we just had a ball.

PY: Well, I've got about two minutes left on [Speakers overlap]

LB: Okay. It's your shot.

PY: So I was just wondering if there was anything you'd like to add? To the story, or to the adventure, description?

LB: Anything to add?

PY: Yeah, anything that you would like to add, about what it's been like {Speakers overlap}

LB: Oh, overall, from a career standpoint, even with all the frustrations there, it was a ball. It was a real hoot, as far as I'm concerned. And I know it's changed now. In fifty years from now people will say, it's going to change now. So I can be a little critical, I guess, but I don't know. You're probably doing just, having as much fun as I am, but maybe in a different way. Or maybe in the same way, I don't know. But I enjoyed my stay, and met a lot of nice people. And we still stay in contact, and all the guys and gals up at the Sault, I just love them to death yet. We have a good time. We get up there, we all get together and have a big party in the afternoon or evening. I even take some ribs from southern Illinois and we smoke them now and then up there.

PY: All right.

LB: Take my hickory and cherry along, and we do some old slow cooking. [Laughs]

PY: All right. Well thanks very much, Larry.

LB: Well thank you, and good luck to you and the Forest Service.

PY: Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW