

G. W. Chapman
Former Forest Service Firefighter, Lincoln National Forest
New Mexico

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Interviewer: Sheila Poole

G. W. Chapman (GWC): My name is G. W. Chapman. I was born and raised in Carrizozo, New Mexico, which is about twenty miles west of Capitan, New Mexico. I graduated from high school in 1948. I went to work for the Forest Service in January, 1949. I worked for them approximately two years. My primary job was repair and maintenance of Forest Service roads. And of course always ready to be on the fire watch. And I married my high school sweetheart. We've been married fifty-four years. We have four children: Gary, Debbie, Larry, and David; which two of them still live here in Alamogordo. We have a very fine family; we've been really proud of them.

Sheila Poole (SP): And what year did you find the Smokey Bear cub?

GWC: I found Smokey Bear in 1950, at the start of the fire here. On this Capitan Fire I was making three hundred dollars extra. That's what we used to get married on. And with that three hundred dollars we bought some furniture and we did a lot of things with it. Three hundred dollars then was a lot of money.

SP: So other than finding the Smokey Bear cub, that was a good fire to start funding your wedding and everything. [laughs]

GWC: Yes. It financed my wedding and the whole nine yards.

[Film stops; starts again with GWC reading]

GWC: ... to make extra money so I could marry my wife, Leah Chapman. As you look north from the village of Capitan you can see the rugged two sections of East and West Capitan Mountains, separated with a large gap between them. It is a very rocky mountain range, and is one of the few in the Rockies that run east and west rather than north and south direction of the great western Rockies.

As I mentioned the Capitan Mountains are very rugged. They have a major river stream, though they were never developed as a tourist attraction as the neighboring Sierra Blanca near Ruidoso. Very large fir and pines grow in the deep canyons and cover the crest of the slopes. Snow caps the highest peak, El Capitan, at ten thousand feet, and there are large scale patches on the summits for a short time in the winter. Usually there are many warm and sunny days in January and February.

[Stops reading] I'd like to mention here that these rock slides they're talking about is where rocks slid off the mountains, and that's where we escaped the fire when we found Smokey Bear.

[Resumes reading] Capitan Mountain is a natural haven for deer, turkey, and bear. Usually there are many warm and sunny days in the winter, and bears do not go into total hibernation here. They sleep long hours in shallow caves, and often stand at the opening to feel the sun.

I suppose that in late January of 1950, a mild day in the Capitan Mountains, a mother bear gave birth to a tiny male cub. Bear cubs do not look at least like a bear, with scarcely any fur, unopened eyes, no paws, and no teeth. Of course they could not walk. A bear cub weighs approximately seven ounces when they're born, and that is pretty small. The cub is still in the cave one month before he has enough fur to resemble a bear. After about three months the cub is very playful, sleeping more than he is awake, and beginning to venture out and learns to root up beetles and things to eat. The cub was thirty-five pounds when rescued. Little did the tiny Capitan bear know that he was to become the most famous bear... [turns page but is unable to find where the sentence continues] Uh oh.

SP: Can you tell me about the day that you found Smokey Bear, about the fire, and how you came about finding the cub?

GWC: Well let me start with the fire. It started on May the fourth and spread over seventeen thousand acres. The country is very rugged, and you know some careless person evidently dropped a cigarette or something, and it got into the grass and eventually became a raging forest fire. So the man on the lookout tower saw the smoke coming up, and he called the forest ranger, and they in turn brought in ranchers, men, you know, the local people, and in the end they had to bring in the soldiers from Fort Bliss, Texas to help them. In real rugged mountains it took a long time for bulldozers to make a road or a path where you could get in to the fire. Then they built fire lines, you know, around the fire.

May was a very dry month in the Capitan Mountains. Only about a quarter of an inch of moisture fell, and the winds blew up to forty miles an hour. The bulldozers had a hard time; the fire kept jumping over their lines. Fifty mile an hour wind blows the sparks across the line, so they'd have to start over. And they finally got it down to just a few patches, and myself and twenty-three other men were dispatched up to take care of this one little spot.

Well, the wind was still blowing about thirty, forty miles an hour, and we were trying to build a line around this one spot. Well the wind finally blew the fire across the line that we had built. It

got into the treetops, so we had no choice but to run. And we ran up on this big rock slide and laid down in these rocks. And it was pretty hot, and so we covered our mouths with handkerchiefs or whatever we had so we could breathe. And everybody kept watching the other person because the embers would fall on their back or something and catch fire, and then we would pat it out for them so they could survive. Well, about an hour the fire blew over, and people started getting up here and there. Of course then they all twenty-four survived. And the first thing we heard

When we started getting up was this little bear crying. And we looked around and finally found him up in this tree. And we went over and got the bear down out of the tree, and we could see he was burned pretty bad; his feet and rump and this kind of thing.

SP: Was it hard... was he real resistant at first to get him out of the tree, and did he let you guys take him down?

GWC: he resisted somewhat, you know. He didn't want to turn loose of the tree. [laughter] I don't blame him. Then I wrapped him in my field jacket, army field jacket, and we carried him back to base camp to get him to Mister Ray Bell, the state game warden. On the way out you could see all of his friends that wasn't as lucky as he was and didn't make it out of the fire. Most animals, they get disoriented and they'll run straight into the fire rather than away from it. But even if you run away from it in the wrong direction, the fire can move faster than a deer can run

Anyway we gave this bear to Mister Ray Bell. They doctored him up the best they could and fed him some warm milk. And then he flew him to Santa Fe shortly after that. And they doctored him up, and then they brought him back to Capitan for a little while. And it so happened Ray Bell lived next door to my wife's parents. So I got to see the little bear just about every day. And he grew up, and he started to run pretty fast because they fed him Pablum and warm milk and honey. It wasn't too long that he was just too hard to handle around the house. And they had a little poodle dog that they'd wrangle and fight and turn over chairs, and so, you know, they had to get rid of it.

So they took him back to Santa Fe and tried to get him to stay in the forest. Well you know, he was raised by humans; he didn't know what to do, so he wouldn't leave. He stayed there. So then they took him back in of course, and fed him some more. And then they decided they would try to make a national symbol out of Smokey Bear. You know, to replace just the cartoon they had; I say cartoon. [laughs] Then he was flown to Washington, D. C. Two or three months after that.

JP: Were you surprised? I mean was it a surprise to you when you found out they were going to make him into the national symbol?

GWC: Well it was in a way, but like I say, I had other things on my mind about then: just getting married, and moving down here to Alamogordo in October, I think. But they flew him to

Washington, D. C. In a piper cub airplane. And they stopped at a lot of airports on the way and showed him to people. Some airports wouldn't let them land when they told them they had a bear. [laughter] So anyway they got him to Washington, and of course he really became a celebrity then, and on a lot of TV shows. For a while they could handle him on a leash and take him to school children and all; but it got to where they couldn't handle him, so they just left him in the zoo.

JP: Was he always pretty good with human though? What do you mean, they couldn't handle him? Was he just too big?

GWC: Yeah, he probably weighed close to three hundred pounds by then, you know. They were afraid he'd hurt somebody. You just never know what a wild animal is going to do. Well anyway, he stayed in the zoo until 1976, when he died. And then they moved his body back to Capitan, his birthplace, and he's in the park there. There's a memorial for his death, and his grave is there, along with the other memorabilia for Smokey Bear.

SP: I know you go around to schools a lot and you tell the story of finding the Smokey Bear cub. How long have you been doing this, and can you tell me a little bit about what you do and how the children react?

GWC: I've been going to schools and different organizations for about ten years now, and gosh I don't know how many schools. Usually third or fourth graders. And I give this presentation. I use these props over here to, you know. Children like rulers and pencils and this kind of thing. I've given it to several organizations, like the National Federation of Federal Employees; several different sorority groups. And a lot of these bears that I have up here were given to me by people that I gave the speech. But the children, they can really work on your mind, because they ask questions that you hadn't even thought about in years. And after you do two or three you remember some of those questions, you know, and it makes it a lot easier to carry it on.

JP: Do they ask you things like, what was it like to catch the cub?

GWC: Yeah. Course most of them are real interested after the bear went to Washington. I say I don't really know because I wasn't part of that; but this little magazine I'm going to give you—one of those Smokey Bear magazines over there—it pretty well tells what happened after he got there. And I have to be careful; some of those magazines are in English and some are in Spanish. So you can only give the Spanish-speaking ones to some grade school kids, because they couldn't read it anyway. Some of the clubs, there's a lot of Spanish-speaking people there; well they can read it, you know. And the kids really like these, well there's color books they use, or two or three little games in there they can play. And of course pencils and rulers and all kinds of things that kids really go for.

SP: So when you do your program you always have these materials, like pencils, rulers, the Smokey Bear comic book, the book markers, all that.

GWC: Yes. Mona gives me all kinds of stuff to take to the kids. Usually we don't have enough to go around to each kid, but each kid does get something. Some get rulers, some get pencils, some get those little stickers over there. Usually I give one [banner?] there; it's a calendar depicting Smokey Bear, and on the back I think it has just one year on there. Two thousand four, that was put out for the hundredth anniversary.

SP: So if you were selected to go out to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, what would you need to go out there to do your presentation?

GWC: Oh, I might bring a few of the props that I use here, and magazines. I'm sure they have some up there.

SP: When you're giving your talks, you're more comfortable in a smaller setting? Is that right?

GWC: Yes, especially with the small school children. Usually they sit on the floor in a semi-circle. And I usually sit in a chair, and maybe a little table there that I put my props on. And the children seem a lot more relaxed, you know, in their own room, their own environment, and then giving them the story. I usually just talk to them like every day. And as I say, it's surprising how many questions that you can get from them. [laughs] Young kids. Some of the things that I never thought about.

SP: It's better for you to give your talk in a smaller group and smaller setting then. So if you're at the Smithsonian, maybe do something like, we could have a section with a small little storytelling, and the kids could just come and you could just sit there and you could talk to them one on one and pass out your materials and things like that, rather than a huge group of people. Is that what you kind of think is better?

GWC: That suits me better. But a large crowd doesn't bother me either. 'Cause I've given this to the NARF people and there was probably a hundred and fifty there. And the sororities usually have thirty or forty. They're grown people. That doesn't bother me too much.

JP: Okay, so either way.

GWC: Either way is all right. In a large group it's better to use a podium or something like that. But for a small group, the young, it's better just to get them down close to you, and have them sit down low where they can really pay attention. It works out real well. I've probably given that to about forty or fifty different classes over the years, and a lot of numerous social clubs and fraternal organizations and different things. It's fun. You enjoy it after a while.

JP: Yeah. Well, what do you get the most joy out of when you do this?

GWC: I think the small children is the most enjoyable for me. Because they really pay attention. The teachers usually keep them quiet and don't let them interrupt. Then when you have the question time, that's when you can get in trouble. [laughs] But the kids are real cute. Most of them are real nice. Never had any real trouble with any of them.

SP: Were you a fire fighter your entire career with the Forest Service?

GWC: No. I went to work for the Forest Service just working on road maintenance, and then we fought fires on the side.

SP: Okay. What is your fondest memory of the whole experience? Finding Smokey, I mean.

GWC: Well one time we went to a fire up on the Lone Mountain, west of Carrizozo. It was between Carrizozo and Capitan. And this fire was right on the tip top. And me and this fellow worker, we went up one night. As we neared the top we could hear these little explosions. Once we got up there we found out that airplanes flying over had dropped out their ammunition. They threw it out rather than fire it. So this fire was exploding some of it. That was kind of scary you know. I still remember that one real well.

SP: You mentioned to me that for quite some time the Forest Service didn't know how the Smokey Bear cub was brought down out of the mountain. Do you want to talk about that?

GWC: Well, I brought the Smokey Bear down and got him to the game warden. And then shortly after that I moved out of Capitan and was gone, so there was a missing link there that nobody ever thought about until years later, and during conversations I'd mentioned that I'd rescued Smokey the Bear. And then Mona Fredericks picked it up and started telling people, and asked me to come down and do these talks. I said well, I'd certainly be glad to. And then Bill, the pilot of the Smokey Bear balloon, he said I want you to write something up and send it in. We can get

it put in as an amendment to some of these books. So I'm going to have to do that one of these days. [laughs]

SP: Oh yeah. Definitely. And you started doing this you said about ten years ago?

GWC: Uh huh.

SP: So all that time people had no idea until then that you had been the one who wrapped him up in the jacket and brought him down. They had been trying to find out the story behind it?

GWC: Well yeah, like I say, I was only twenty years old so I didn't mean much to those grown men, you know. [laughs] Just this kid up there. Once he was in Santa Fe and ready to go, it got, I should say I guess, more political than anything else. Which is very good for Smokey Bear, good for the United States, good for everybody that reads Smokey Bear and knows about Smokey Bear.

SP: I always say he's as popular as Mickey Mouse.

GWC: He's probably better known than Mickey Mouse, really.

SP: Yeah. How did your family, when your kids were growing up, did they go around talking about, my dad is the one who brought the Smokey Bear cub?

GWC: Oh I'm sure sometimes they did, yeah. Like I say, just word of mouth is the way it really got started. And you can see [indicates offscreen memorabilia] there's clipping in the newspaper, you know, and then I got quite a bit of publicity when I rode the Smokey Bear balloon. And people would say, I didn't know that. Yeah, that was fifty years ago, [laughs] I don't remember it too well either.

SP: So are you now like somewhat of a celebrity down here in Alamogordo? They'll say, there's the man who found Smokey Bear cub?

GWC: Yeah.

SP: That's great. Looking back at when you found the Smokey Bear cub, is that something now--

'cause you said you didn't mention much about it over the years-- do you look back now and kind of proud that you were involved in all that?

GWC: Oh yes. Very proud. You know probably Smokey Bear, the way it's presented today and given to these small children, has probably reduced the fire hazards quite a bit. Because they learn to put out a fire, and not to throw matches, or play with lighters. And parents are even more aware now and watch their children more than they used to. Used to be years ago in the mountains they kind of run wild. But parents now kind of control them. They know to bring extra water to put out their fire if they have one. And if they don't have water, in the books and all, and the posters tell them to stir the fire and put a little dirt with it and mix it up until it's dead out. And Smokey Bear's really brought this to the front. And I think it's a great thing for the nation and every individual that that information is out there. And Smokey Bear has been very good

END OF INTERVIEW