

Smithsonian Folklife Festival Interview

Betty Holder  
District Ranger, Fortine Ranger District  
Kootenai National Forest, Montana

May 2004

Interviewer: Bonnie Dearing

Betty Holder (BH): Hi. I'm Betty Holder. B-E-T-T-Y H-O-L-D-E-R. I'm currently the district ranger on the Fortine Ranger District of the Kootenai National Forest.

Bonnie Dearing (BD): Betty, tell us a little bit about your educational background.

BH: I have an associate's degree in cadastral surveying, that's land line surveying, from the Flathead Valley Community College.

BD: And what was your first connection with the Forest Service?

BH: I joined the Forest Service as a cooperative education student through the college, and worked in engineering.

BD: And when was that?

BH: That was in 1981, and I was working in Eureka, Montana.

BD: And tell me a little bit about your career. Where did you move from cadastral surveying?

BH: Well, when I was in cadastral surveying, I worked there for a couple seasons while I was still in school, and then continued to work at the engineering zone there in Eureka, doing a number of jobs. Did some transportation planning and a lot of land line surveys as well as road and trail surveys. From there, the engineering organization was experiencing some pretty dramatic budget cuts, so we went ahead and did some reorganization and I actually lost my job. So I went to be a resource clerk on the Fortine Ranger District. And it was a great career move because I got to learn about different programs in the Forest Service. When you're in engineering you're dealing a lot with surveys and with some real specific things, and there's a lot of times you don't see the big picture of what the Forest Service does. So by getting to go into that resource clerk job in the district I got to learn about the fire program and the fuels program, and just a lot of things that I wouldn't have got to learn about. So that was a great opportunity. And from there I went to the Rexford Ranger District and worked in small sales. Did small sale preparation and small sale administrations and timber sales. Also did all of the appraisal packages and timber sale packages. And from there I went to the Plumas National Forest in northern California, where I was the assistant timber sales officer for the forest. And once again

budget kicked in and we had some budget cuts and my job was eliminated, and I was fortunate enough to get the opportunity to be the district timber management officer on the Beckwourth Ranger District of the Plumas. So I got to take on the entire timber program: the planning, the preparation, the administration of that entire program. And got to do that during the Salvage Amendment in 1995 and '96. And we put out a very large program. Had a great time doing it; worked real hard, and did a lot of things to improve the health of that particular district, which was kind of an east side district, and got to convert some of those forests that had typically been pines back into pine. They'd been overrun by fir, and we got to convert back into some of those pine stands that can be there and can live in that ecosystem.

BD: You said your training was in timber survey, so having... I'm sorry. You said your training was in engineering survey, so having a timber management job was a little non-traditional, wasn't it?

BH: It was very non-traditional. It was... You know, typically to get those jobs you're a forester. And you went to school to be a forester Or an ecologist at least. And for me to get to do that when I've only got a two-year degree first of all; and then it's only in cadastral surveying, was a pretty great opportunity, and one of those things where I was in the right place at the right time. They had the need, and I was there, and I needed the job. And for them to get to let me do that, and show that we could do that, was impressive. And a lot of on-the-ground skills that I've learned, but it was still a great opportunity.

BD: Okay. And then how did your career develop [word unclear].

BH: Well, I spent the time there doing the timber sale program on the Beckwourth Ranger District of the Plumas, and then once again budgets cut in, and we were doing some workforce planning, and we eliminated all those types of positions on the forest, all the timber management, district timber management positions. So I went back into the SO, and for a few months I took on the lead for the engineering group that does road maintenance and also did a lot of stream restoration work. We had our own heavy equipment and our own heavy equipment operators. And then from there I got fortunate enough to go into a position called the rural development and partnership position; and what we did there is we worked with our communities with rural development programs through the state and private program. Also looked for opportunities for us to get funds for different programs. Got some funds from the state to do some cleanup. The Plumas had quite a bit of population centers and we were finding a lot of garbage and trash throw on national forest land, so we got to do some cleanup with state funds on that. And so did some of that, working with communities on different programs. And from there I got to come back to Montana, got to come home, to the Judith Ranger District on the Lewis and Clark, where I was the assistant district ranger. And did that for about a year, and then got the actual district ranger position in the same place. And stayed there for a couple years and then went back to Fortine, kind of where I was the resource clerk, and got to be the district ranger there. And again, that's really unusual. Eureka's my home town, so not only did I get to go home as a district ranger, but I got to go home where I'd worked before and be the district ranger. Doesn't happen very often.

BD: How do you think that being a non-traditionally educated person in the Forest Service, do you fit into the culture of the Forest Service?

BH: I think I can be a catalyst between our professionals and the communities. Because I've lived in those communities. And because I don't have the education, I can ask some of the same questions. Because I don't have the education that our professionals have, and thank goodness we have them because we need them out there and we need them to know what's going on. But I can get answers and ask questions that I think the community would ask, and that people without those educations would ask. And I think I can communicate in terms they can understand. Where sometimes when you've been educated and you've been dealing with that resource for a long time, you're so used to the scientific language that it's really hard to talk to people that haven't been through those skills and that education. So I think it makes it easier for me sometimes to talk to folks and to ask those kind of questions.

BD: Would you like to share some of the anecdotes of your career?

BH: [Laughs] Anecdotes. Oh my goodness. You know, one of the great things about the Forest Service is the people we get to work with. And I've made such wonderful friends and had such great teachers throughout the Forest Service. People that just really care about each other. And so that's been a great, great piece of this. We talk about family meetings in the Forest Service, and I think for the most part when it really comes down to brass tacks we are a pretty close-knit group. Fire assignments are always a highlight for me, because you get to meet new people, and get to go out and focus on one job for a little while, and do that kind of work.

BD: What kind of fire jobs have you had?

BH: I'm a resource unit leader, which does the job of keeping track of where all the resources are on the fire, and also puts out the action plans for every day, so they're responsible for getting that plan out. I'm also an information officer. So I get to work on working with the media and the communities on what's going on with the fire. I'm trying to think of some anecdotes. I should be able to come up with some, but I'm not coming up with any right off the top of my head.

BD: Are there any special projects that you worked on that you [Rest of sentence too faint to hear].

BH: I am. I'm really proud... There was a program, and I need to call and find out how it turned out. There was a program on the Plumas, where the local tribe was putting together a resource camp for Native American kids from across the state of California. And they were going to weave their culture and their heritage into a natural resource education program. And we were going to help them with funding it, pulling together some specialists to come in and do some of that work. And I need to call back and find out how that turned out. I'd like to see what happened with that program. I'm pretty pleased with the relationship that we developed with the community of Stanford. I really felt at home there, and really felt like the Forest Service was an important part of that community. And working through range issues and some of those things I think was a good thing. It's something that I really enjoyed doing, and I think the ranchers had some really great ideas and we got to implement some of those, and they solved some of the issues themselves. It was exciting to see that.

BD: Why don't you describe a typical day for a ranger?

BH: Oh my goodness. It's way more meetings than I would like it to be. I'm trying to think. You know, we meet with a lot of special groups on what they want; what they're looking for from the land. So I can spend a day, for example, have a seven o'clock meeting with an economic development group in Eureka about programs they're trying to put on; and we've got grant programs to help support some of those. And then go back to the district and meet with a range permittee on how he's going to manage his allotment for that year. And then maybe sit in on a timber sale meeting with a timber sale purchaser; a pre-work on what they're going to do in the timber sale. And then maybe be in an interdisciplinary team meeting on a sale that we're planning or on a project that we're planning. And on the good days I get to go to the woods once in a while and see what's really going on.

BD: Now anything else you'd like to share. [Sentence too faint to hear]

BH: Oh my goodness. I'm not a great talker, am I? You know, I just... The Forest Service has been such an incredible opportunity for me, to get to make good money and to work with people of just excellent quality, great educational background. And it has wonderful benefits. It's a great place to be employed, and to be a working mother and get the flexibility of schedules. And the opportunities that I have gotten to have are just incredible. And you know sometimes I get lonesome. I think, man, I'd like to have been with this outfit in the old days, when they were out there on horseback and the ranger was doing a lot of the on-the-ground work. But the opportunities for women weren't there in those days, so I actually got lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time to get to do the things that I do. And it's a great place to be, and for me to have gotten the opportunities that I've gotten is pretty incredible.

BD: What are some of the [words inaudible]. Do you ride horses?

BH: I haven't a lot. I did learn to ride an ATV, which was not something I ever thought I would do, and I've taken a couple of pretty rough trips through a place called the Middlefork on the Stanford, on the Judith Ranger District, and was terrified, but it was good to know that I could do it even though I was scared to death. Any day in the field is a good day. You know? You get, just, you get out there and you realize that what I'm here for is to take care of this resource. And that's a privilege, that this nation has this incredible resource called the national forest, and it's there for all the citizens of this nation, and that they're going to entrust with me the decisions to take care of it for them. To know that I manage it for all of them, and that I'm there to serve them means a lot to me, and so any day I get to go out and reinforce what I'm there for, is to take care of that chunk of land for the American public means a lot to me.

BD: This video is being recorded for the Folklife Festival, and what will happen [is that?] the Smithsonian will select people to [work?] on the Mall to talk to the American public about the Forest Service. What would be a message [that you would convey?] if you're selected?

BH: One of the messages I would convey is that this is their resource. And it is their treasure, one of their national treasures, and as many of them that can that can know what's going on and be involved in helping make decisions about those resources, it's to their benefit to do that. And

also that it is a renewable resource. It was set up with a different mission from the Park Service and some of the other agencies. And we have resources that we can use and still provide habitat, and those resources will grow back in the way of trees or grass, and there's a great heritage to that; to using the land and to using it wisely. And the other thing I'd say to people is, the fact that we manage it according to targets and the funding that we get from Congress, and they're the folks who elect those congressmen, or the legislators. And so when they do that they need to make sure that their views are being represented there, and take that voting responsibly. Because they're the people that are giving the Forest Service some of their targets and some of their goals. And so when I hear that maybe we're not representing the American public, to me we are because we're meeting the goals and objectives we're being given by the very people that were elected by the American public. So I hope they take that real seriously, that that's how that gets done. And then I'd say, man, if you have a concern, come talk to someone. Find out what's going on. The Forest Service if anything provides more information than most people want on what's happening, and that's what we're there for. So I sure hope people take advantage of that. I know the people in the small communities do. It's the one in the large cities that are further away that it's harder for them, But if they could make that effort that would be wonderful.

BD: Can you think of any fun activities that would be educational in value but would also be a hands-on activity that people could do on the Mall? Skills that the Forest Service has or something that [someone would] like to learn about?

BH: Yeah. Huh. You know, we have a lot of outdoor skills that I think we could teach. Compass, [word unclear], you know, those type of things that we use and how we use them. Some of the fire fighting equipment that we use. And I can't off the top of my head other than that, I can't think of a whole lot. Maybe some of the equipment from our lookouts people might be interested in.

BD: Okay, they were planning [rest of statement inaudible].

BH: I'd like people to see—and I don't know how to do this, but I'd like people to see what really is out there. To get a sense of what variety is out there in our national forest and our grasslands. What a variety of habitats we have, and what a variety of activities we have. And I know there's people that are a whole lot better at that than I am, but there's a [word unclear] available out there. And I know that people are taking advantage of it that know about it, but I'd like to make sure that the rest of the public knows what we really offer.

BD: Do you have any final words that would sort of convey to a listener the Forest Service family culture? Why you're happy to [rest of sentence inaudible].

BH: Well, this weekend was an example, and Bonnie, you were part of this. I've been off the Lewis and Clark since February, but this weekend a bunch of us got together and we went to a Forest Service cabin and we spent time together. And it's because we're friends; we're not just co-workers. We spend enough time together in the woods, and together, that we share values. We share values about the things that are important to us, and so we spend time together outside of work. The district I'm on now is very community-oriented. There's two districts that are fairly close together, and they have maybe eighty employees. And this year we raised six thousand

dollars to give scholarships to local kids. That's the kind of... You know, the integrity is there and the honesty is there. And so it's just a great place to be because the people are the highest quality. They really care about each other and they care about the communities they work in, and they are hugely, hugely dedicated to the resources that they're working with. I make people go home, because they want to do more than they can do in a day's work, and they want to give more than is humanly possible.

BD: Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

BH: You know, the Forest Service mission talks about taking care of the land and serving people, and it sounds real simple. And if we hold on to those, it is simple. But resource decisions come with such values. Whether to cut a tree, or whether to allow cows, or how to manage wilderness. It comes with such deep-seeded personal values that it's not simple. But we need to hold on to what we're there for, and I think the Forest Service does that real well.

Thank you.

BD: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW