

Smithsonian Folklife Festival Interview

Warren Miller
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Nez Perce National Forest
Peck, Idaho
Woodlands Heritage

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Interviewed by Bob Beckley

Bob Beckley: It's Sunday, April 18th, 2004. We're doing an interview for the Forest Service Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2005. Warren, how about giving us your name and spelling it for us?

Warren Miller: Okay. My name is Warren Miller, and that's spelled W-A-R-R-E-N, M-I-L-L-E-R.

BB: And can you give us a rundown on your life with the Forest Service? When did you start, when did you pack it in, and what do you do now?

WM: Well, [laughs] how much time you got? Well, I started with the Forest Service when I was going to college. I did seasonal work. First summer I worked out on the Coconino out of Flagstaff doing timber stand improvement work and I enjoyed that quite a bit. The next summer I ended up going up in the Quinault Forest, up just south of the Olympic Peninsula and was working on a small fire prevention crew out there. I had my own pumper truck and that, and stayed out at a guard station called Humptulips Guard Station, which was number of miles south Quinault, which was the district office. And then there was a hiatus while I finished up school and then spent a couple of years in Europe, then came back, spent some time in Southern California and then got interested in doing some summer work. I went on some service trips with the Sierra Club. One of them was a service trip into the Selway Bitterroot, where we were doing cleanup of outfitters' camps and actual Forest Service administrative sites in there. The Forest Service had a representative showing the crews what needed to be done. I got to talking to him and was interested in being able to spend some time in that country doing work. So I asked him, "well, how do you get a job with this outfit?" and he said, "just write in an application." So I did. At that time you'd just write an application directly to the district. You didn't have to go through all this – I don't know what you do now – you end up writing to some central repository of something. But I eventually got a job. I had wanted a trail crew job but he was interested in having me do wilderness ranger work, so that's eventually what I applied for and got a job working at Moose Creek.

BB: What year was that?

WM: That would have been 1971. I'd been out of college since '69 so it was about two, almost three years. I was interested in a hardworking job in the outdoors just doing summer seasonal work. I had no intention really of doing more than just a season by season job. Well, that turned into a twenty year job as

so many of those things do. My formal training was in physics so I never really did end up doing a whole lot with that but I got into the wilderness management recreation backcountry ranger type work.

BB: So what does a backcountry ranger do? What were you doing at Selway Bitterroot?

WM: Well, the job changed as time went on. It started off – well, when I first got there I was doing some trail work, just logging out trails and doing trail maintenance, riprap work and that kind of thing. But then the – getting into the wilderness ranger work – to begin with we were doing primarily inventory work. When I first got there, there weren't really good maps of the trails on the district. The district didn't really know what the condition of the trails was or, in fact, really where they were, much less know where outfitters camps were and where heavily-used private camps were. So primarily what we were doing was going out, throwing a backpack on our back, and a bunch of -quadrant – seven-and-a-half-minute USGS quads – and mapping, and just doing inventory work as to what the resource was out there. Primarily the trail locations and camp locations. Another thing we were doing along with our inventory work was doing an extensive campsite inventory which consisted of setting up a camera on a tripod in the center of a camp and doing a complete 360-degree panorama of the campsite, and then – on graph paper – actually drawing a map of the campsite with landmark information, relevant information as to what kind of impacts had been going on in the camp, the idea being to set up a reference database to see what the trends were on the various campsites. My station at that time was directly out of Moose Creek Ranger Station. Moose Creek was at that time a backcountry ranger station in the complete sense of the word. That is the ranger would come in there as soon as the snow left and stay there the whole season until basically the end of hunting season, say, around the end of November or something like that. The whole staff was in there, that was the district office, and that was twenty-five miles from the nearest road. The only access was either by trail or through the airstrip that was in there. There just wasn't any other way of getting in there. There were about eleven buildings there. Like I say, it was a complete ranger station with an office, a cook house, a barn, and a workshop and all that. Then after a couple of years working that way where everybody worked right out of the central station it was decided that being as it was a wilderness district it was probably more appropriate to have more of our facilities outside of wilderness. So the wilderness rangers ended up being stationed – it was one station at Moose Creek, and then there was one station at Lost Horse which was over on the Idaho/Montana line about thirty trail miles east of Moose Creek, and another one down at Selway Falls which was twenty-five trail miles to the west on the Selway River. And I was assigned to Lost Horse. First year I was up there by myself, essentially patrolling and watching what was going on in the eastern third of the district. The size of the district at that time was about a thousand square miles, about 560,000 acres. So I was essentially the eyes and ears of the district ranger for the eastern part of the district. That meant contacting the public, contacting outfitters, talking with them, making sure they were complying with their permits. Again, doing campsite inventory work, trail mapping, doing a fair amount of cleanup work. The wilderness rangers at that time were not doing much trail work. They got trail crews to do that. The wilderness rangers were doing pretty much all else that was going on out there, including some minimal law enforcement work. Law enforcement work at that time primarily was trying to track down public and outfitters using power tools: chainsaws and that kind of thing. We were at that time entirely backpack crews – I'd go out just with a backpack. Later on the ranger decided that it was probably a good idea for the wilderness rangers – because so much of our work was public contact – it would be a good idea in the fall when most of our users were hunters with stock – it would be a good idea for us to do our patrolling with stock. Something which I resisted primarily because one of the things the district ranger said was, “well, we'll be able to

impress the outfitters if we go out there with stock.” I said, “look, the outfitters already know us. Going out there with stock isn’t going to impress ‘em. They already know our background is and such. It’s not going to make a whole lot of difference.” But I finally reconciled myself to using stock by realizing that now I could pack out all the garbage that I’d just been marking for the packer to bring out. The idea being that we each had two head of stock. One of which was supposed to be a saddle animal and the other being a pack animal. I realized real quickly that I wasn’t going to be able to go out for very long at a time with that arrangement because I packed 100 percent supplemental feed. You can’t pack supplemental feed for two animals as well as my own rig on one pack animal and expect to be gone very long. So I got a pack saddle and just walked. That way I was able to pack a lot more feed and go out for a lot longer time. Then I had two pack animals that I could bring garbage out of the woods with, so that worked pretty well.

BB: So how many years did you do that?

WM: Well, I worked eight years out of Lost Horse. The second year I was up there I actually got an assistant, which worked out well, because that’d give me a chance to go into the woods and yet have somebody back at the trail head or the portal for visitor contact. One of the things about wilderness and wilderness management that I realized pretty quick off the bat - the wilderness will take care of itself if you leave it alone, and wilderness management really is people management. And so one of the primary things we were trying to do was educate the public when they went in as to low-impact camping methods. So it was important to have somebody at the portal all the time to contact people before they went in. So for the other seven years I was out there at Lost Horse there were two people actually working out of the cabin.

BB: So a good part of your job was education?

WM: Mm-hmm, right. Because, you think about it, ultimately, what wilderness is, wilderness functions perfectly well on its own without people interfering with it. So I saw my job as much as anything was educating the public into responsible ways of going into that country.

BB: After eight years at Lost Horse, what did you do then?

WM: Well, the Wilderness Ranger at Selway Falls moved on to other places so the district ended up having me go down to Selway Falls and do ranger work there. A fellow who had been working for me stayed on. In fact, he became the wilderness ranger up there at Lost Horse. So for another, about three years, something like that, I did wilderness ranger work out of Selway Falls. Then I spent some additional time doing wilderness ranger work out of Moose Creek. I don’t exactly remember the process. I think I was in at Moose Creek for another year, and the opportunity for doing facilities maintenance came up. The person who was doing facilities maintenance decided to move on to another job someplace. So there was an opening there and I ended up getting the job doing facilities maintenance, which was a nice change from the wilderness ranger work because it was a job that required a lot of ingenuity for dealing with problems. You couldn’t just walk or drive down to the nearest hardware store and pick a piece of something that you needed to fix something that was broken, so you used what was on hand. There were many times I went out to the dump where old bailers and all this kind of stuff had been left. I’d scavenge a piece off of something and bring it back to the station and use that for fixing something.

BB: Part of your expertise is in traditional tools. How does that fit in with your work in Moose Creek and the Selway Wilderness area?

WM: Well, it's actually sort of a sideline. The "traditional tools" wasn't part of the wilderness ranger duties. We did do trail work, so I know we were required to – ended up using traditional tools – axes and saws, but that was a pretty small percentage of our job. What got me started using traditional tools was, pretty much when I first got there to Moose Creek I ended up acquiring a crosscut saw. I'd sort of watch the saws being filed there. In the district they had an outfitter doing the filing, and I realized that there weren't a whole lot of people who could file saws. I'm kind of an independent cuss anyway so I decided that I wanted to learn how to file my own saw. For years I had – even when I was in high school - I had dreams of building my own log cabin. And I thought what better way of building a log cabin than using traditional tools, using a crosscut? But realizing that I didn't want to depend on somebody else to sharpen my saw, I started bugging folks on the district about how you file it, and I got some information from them. I realized there must be a lot more to filing a crosscut than they knew, so I started bugging the-at that time the FCO, what's now known as the FMO – a guy by the name of Emil Keck who was an old-timer and really interested in traditional tools but didn't know much about filing. Well, he realized that a couple of people in the district were really interested in learning this stuff, so he ended up going out to the coast and ultimately looking up a fellow by the name of Martin Winters, who was this professional saw filer from – he started filing in 1927 for the logging camps out there. When I met him he was retired but was still filing for contest sawyers. Well Emil looked this guy up, and he went through the process of filing a saw, showed Emil what was involved, and Emil came back to the district and said "you've got to go meet this guy because he knows what's going on." So that winter me and a couple of other people from the district – on our own time - went out and spent some time with Martin, and that got me really jacked about filing and traditional tools and crosscuts in general. So I spent the next three winters poking around on the coast from Southern Oregon clear up into Vancouver BC looking for saws, looking for filing tools, looking for additional information about filing. After that first session with Martin I went back to the district the next year and started filing their saws, thereby developing a skill of my own based on what I'd learned from Martin. I wanted to improve my skills as well as look for saws so that's why I ended up going out for the next couple of three winters poking around looking for additional information on them. Well, what started out at a hobby or as a personal interest ended up just kind of mushrooming into doing the district's saws, and I started getting pretty good at it. Then the fellow who'd been district ranger there ended up moving into the regional office, and got ahold of a filing manual that the equipment development center had put together. He sent it in to me and Clem Pope, who had also gone over to visit with Martin, and asked us to review it. We did, and we found a bunch of errors. Eventually the equipment development center asked me to come over and rewrite the manual, but the whole start of my interest in traditional tools that's grown into what I now have is the result of getting that saw way back when I started on the district. Basically it was a tangent. I just branched off from the wilderness ranger work.

BB: So now you have a manual that is out on crosscut saw filing techniques.

WM: Right.

BB: That's just been reprinted in 2004 by the Technology Development Center.

WM: Right. Uh huh. That's actually the second reprinting. It was printed originally through the government printing office and I assume the current edition also was done through the government printing office. They twice ran through the stock that they had, and reprinted it again.

BB: So did you ever wind up building your log cabin?

WM: [Laughs] No, actually I didn't! Which is kind of ironic - I still had plans late in the game to build a log cabin. I got forty acres with trees on it to build it, but I ended up getting involved doing some reconstruction work of old log cabins and realized that the life expectancy of log cabins in this country wasn't extremely long. Unless you put really large overhangs on them - when the logs check in the summer, then in the fall when you get your rains the moisture gets into the logs and doesn't have a very good way out so they end up rotting. So from a long-term life expectancy - using the resource well - I decided that probably wasn't the most effective way of using the resources. So what I ended up actually doing was I built a real small stick-frame place, the idea eventually being to build a timber-frame structure, but I haven't - I'm not there yet either. I got sidetracked doing other stuff, so nope, never got there [laughs]!

BB: Well you've done some log cabin restoration?

WM: Mm hmm. On a couple of volunteer projects, working with the Forest Service, replacing sill logs and wall logs for some old lookouts down on the Nez Perce Forest. Fascinating projects.

BB: So what kind of work is involved with restoring a lookout tower?

WM: Well these were actually lookout cabins. They were what was on the ground rather than the tower itself. Well, actually one of the lookouts - one of the restoration projects was for a combination lookout cabin. It was called a "cupola lookout" which was actually a cabin on the ground with a cupola on it which had the fire finding alidade in it. The other was a cabin which had been used for a lookout. You had the lookout tower and then the cabin itself was used for a living quarters.

Generally speaking what happens first on those older buildings is that your sill your logs, your base logs, the bottom logs on a log structure, because they're closest to the ground, most affected by the weather, will deteriorate and start rotting. So what you do is you lift the whole structure up, take the old logs out from underneath it and replace it with new logs that have been shaped to fit the existing logs. One of the lookouts called Square Mountain, over on the Nez Perce, had extensive rot clear up to the windows so the whole bottom part of the structure needed to be redone. What we did was since the floor was rotten, the floor was taken out, a bunch of cribbing was put up inside using railroad ties, and then using large house jacks, we put beams or fairly good size logs through the windows in the lookout from side to side and then jacked the whole roof structure up and then took out the whole bottom part of the structure and on a flat area down below we rebuilt the lower part of the cabin structure. It was a fairly complicated process because it was what's called "coped construction", where you actually notch the logs the full length on the bottom side of it so they fit down over the log below them and you don't have to use chinking. You do a careful job on your seal you can do with a bare minimum of chinking. So you end up having to scribe your logs to make sure that your upper log exactly fits the shape and follows the knots and everything else of your lower log. Then on the end you make your dovetail notches because they were compound dovetail

notches that were on the end of the logs instead of just a simple saddle notch. It was a complicated job. It was a lot of fun.

BB: So how many of those type projects have you done?

WM: Well, I've actually only done a couple of them, as volunteer projects.

BB: Going back to you wilderness ranger days: One thing we didn't cover is, what did you eat while you were out there? When you were out, I assume days at a time...

WM: Mm hmm...

BB: What's a typical – can you run us through an average day, a typical day, when you get started, when you eat when you're out there...

WM: Well...

BB: ...and how long does a day last?

WM: How long does a day last [laughs]! Um, my diet changed over the years. When I first started the wilderness ranger work we were given the food we would use in the field – we were provided subsistence. We ended up using a lot of Lipton Dinners, which was kind of a prefab off the grocery store shelf type thing that you just cook up in a pot. I think there were about four or five different types of dinners that we had. They weren't what I'd call gourmet but when you've gone eighteen to twenty miles with sixty pounds on your back about anything tastes good. But pretty early on a lot of our meals were Oregon Freeze-Dried Mountain House type dinners. It was a freeze-dried meal that you'd just add hot water to. They were pretty palatable. That's what I used a lot for dinners. Later on I ended up buying – you could buy freeze-dried bulk vegetables and meats and make up your own concoction for meals. So for dinner meals the bulk of it would be macaroni or quick rice or something like that and then mix in some freeze-dried vegetables or freeze-dried meats with some spices or a little bit of cheese or something to make it more interesting. Breakfasts were usually pretty simple. It generally consisted of granola and powdered milk and maybe some hot chocolate or some instant breakfast, something like that. The main meal of the day actually was lunch, which could spread out over a couple of different installations. One would start maybe at ten o'clock, another at noon, another maybe at two o'clock in the afternoon, depending on how your energy was going. Lunches would be about anything that was palatable and had lots of energy in it: GORP, cheese, crackers, dried sausage, candy bars, dried fruit. We ate a lot of dried fruit. Fairly high-calorie, as low weight as possible type meals. A lot of Wyler's lemonade because of course when you're packing, during the summer especially, you end up needing a lot of liquids, and a quart of Wyler's lemonade for lunch went down real nice. But nothing special, most of it just stuff you'd get off the grocery store shelf. Often I'd end up making my own GORP. Just take raisins and peanuts and a variety of other nuts, maybe M&Ms, mix them together and make my own stuff.

BB: You ever get lonesome when you're out there? It sounds like a pretty solitary life.

WM: Not really. Actually that was one of the things visitors would often ask me: Do I ever get lonesome out there? Not really. Sometimes it would be nice to have somebody to share something with – you know you'd see a nice sunset or a great lake or something like that, but no. I did have a dog, a Siberian husky-

malamute cross, and she went with me wherever I went, and of course she was great companionship. But no, I've been a pretty solitary person most of my life. I managed to entertain myself pretty well.

BB: Any special stories stick out in your mind of your days out in the Selway Bitterroot wilderness area?

WM: Oh man. They're all really special [laughs]! I think one of the more interesting, one of the more memorable experiences I had was one time after a lookout had been burned down. It was a lookout that hadn't been used for many years, and it was decided that rather than to leave it there as an attractive nuisance, to burn it down. A lot of the hardware and windows had been salvaged out of it rather than to burn the whole thing down, so the packer and I, a fellow named Ian Barlow ended up packing them out. Well, it was about eighteen miles from the lookout to the trail head. So we got up about four-thirty in the morning. We had the night before had gone up to the lookout and had gotten everything manned up and ready to put on the pack animals. Well, about four-thirty, or just daylight, we started packing stuff up – mostly windows. You can imagine a full-sized window that was probably about so wide and probably four and a half, four feet long, I guess. We packed them up, the foam mattresses used by firefighters, we packed them up in that, then wrapped them up in canvases, or mannies, loaded them on the animals and headed down the trail. Well, we had to go down the trail off the bare wall to the Selway River and then another about fifteen miles out to Selway Falls. Well the stock was in a bad mood. We had wrecks all along the way. The Selway Trail in some places is pretty steep – you don't want to have a wreck on it. Well, we had wrecks in some pretty inopportune places. In one point the mule in the back ended up spooking and coming around until it was actually in front of the lead horse, and so got everything all bolloxed up. Every time this happened you'd swear that you hear glass breaking in there. Well, we finally got out to the trail head about one in the morning. We didn't even unpack stuff. We just took the packs off, laid them on the loading dock, put the stock away and went to bed. Next morning we said well, there's really no sense in unwrapping this stuff because all the windows are busted, from the sounds of things coming down the trail, all the wrecks we had. So we headed on down to Grangeville. We figured we'd find a dumpster someplace, packed out at the jump base there at Grangeville – we'd just take them out, unwrap them and throw the whole mess in the dumpster. Funny thing, on the way to Grangeville we got a call on the radio. It was in October at the end of the fiscal year and it was one of those times when the government didn't have any more money. So we were called on the radio, and they said well, you're not supposed to be working today. Well, we were already on our way so we said oh, right! So we just carried on. We got to the jump base, unmanned all the stuff, and we ended up having only two windowpanes broken in the whole bunch. So we said well, that's cool. In fact I've still got some of those windows at home and I've actually incorporated some of them into my buildings! But that was one of the hardest, most nerve-wracking trips I think that I had in all the time I was there. It's interesting how it's that type of experience which is most memorable – the one that's most difficult. The one that's looked back on and you say, you know that was quite a trip.

BB: We have about three and a half minutes of tape left. Is there anything you want to sum up within that three minute timeframe?

WM: You know, one thing that I haven't really talked about at all is the way of life at a backcountry ranger station like that. I've talked mostly about what I've done, but one of the things I look back on and remember most about in that whole experience was what happens when you get a group of dedicated working people in a backcountry ranger station like that where you don't have access to the outside. You

develop your own culture and your own community. You depend on each other. It's like your own little family, your own close-knit community in there. You help each other out. If anybody has something that needs to be done you pitch in and help them. That Moose Creek community or the community of those people, twenty years later, at this point in time, still exist. People are scattered all over the place, but there is this scattered Moose Creek Community that every once in a while gets together and shares experiences. It's something that I think is unique to a backcountry ranger station like that, that you don't get from an environment where at five o'clock everybody goes home. There was no going home. Where you were was home. It was your life. It was a lifestyle that – the job was your life – and it wasn't a separate thing like most situations are these days and it was something that I wouldn't trade for anything. It was a tremendous experience. It was something that was very formative in my younger years, and it's sad to see that way of life pass because it was a very special sort of thing. People working for the forest service these days don't have that opportunity to experience.

BB: Okay. We're just about out of time on the tape. Any other final thirty-second thoughts?

WM: [laughs]

BB: This is going to the Smithsonian. They're planning to do the Folklife Festival in 2005 on the Mall. If by chance you were asked to go back and be one of the participants would you have an interest in doing that?

WM: I would be interested in doing that. I'm not sure that I'd want to go back to Washington DC in the middle of the summer, but being able to share some of the experiences that I've had with people would be a neat thing to be able to do.

BB: Good! Okay. Well, thanks!

WM: Well, you're welcome. It's been a pleasure.

BB: It has!