Smithsonian Folklife Interview

Lee Thornhill
Deputy District Ranger
Apache Sitgreaves National Forest
Lakeside, Arizona

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Interviewer: Cathy Schmidlin

[The first nine minutes of the tape consists of shots of burns, interspersed with very brief and informal conversations with the Forest Service employees conducting the burns. These employees are not referred to in the summary of the tape and no release forms have been obtained from them. Consequently they have not been included in this transcription.]

[Nine minutes into the tape, Lee Thornhill is shown indoors.]

Cathy Schmidlin (CS): Okay. Go ahead and introduce yourself, and tell me how long you've been working with the Forest Service.

Lee Thornhill (LT): Lee Thornhill. I'm the deputy district ranger on the Lakeside Ranger District of the Apache Seagreaves National Forest in Arizona. I've been with the Forest Service for almost thirteen years now.

CS: And tell me Lee, what attracted you? How did you get into doing fires? Is that your… Tell me a little bit about what you do in your regular job, and then how you got involved in fire, what attracted you to it.

LT: Okay. When I first started on with the Forest Service, I had come out of college, and I was actually a range conservationist. And my boss at the time was on a Type II team. We were, you know, I was started on the Tonto National Forest, which is a large fire forest occurrence, that does occur. You know, we had a small district fire, and he asked the [abbreviated job title inaudible] if I could come out there. I hadn't had any training and I got out there, and the first smell of smoke, man, I was hooked. That is what I wanted to do, I knew that, and I was able to move up and get some training while I was there, and just loved doing the fire fighting. It gets in your blood. You know, some of the structure fire fighters from the cities, they think we're crazy for going into the woods, and a lot of us think they're crazy for going into burning structures. So it does, it gets in your blood, and it's something you really want to do.

CS: So even though it's not your regular job. What is it that you usually do in your normal job?

LT: My normal job, I started off as a range conservationist, like I said. And I moved up on a range staff on another district, and now I'm in a leadership role as a deputy district ranger, which is a developmental position, and soon hope to have my own district as a ranger.

CS: Okay. And will you continue to do fires?

LT: If my supervisor allows me to do fires, I will continue to do fires.

CS: How hard are you going to push on that?

LT: Well, as hard as I can push. I've been very fortunate; I've had excellent supervisors that have allowed me that opportunity to continue on fires. Although it does put a strain on the family during that fire season, my wife and kids all understand that I love to do this. My parents aren't too thrilled that I'm going out on fires, but they understand it too, that it's something I want to do.

CS: Well, tell me something about that special fire fighter, fire fighting tradition culture within the Forest Service. What makes it so attractive and what makes it so special and unique?

LT: You know, there's a great bunch of people that are out there with the Forest Service, and the fire service in general. And you know, you get to meet all these different people from different places and different cultures, and you get to know them, and learn what they do. Because not everybody's a fire fighter on their professional job back home. And so you build those relationships, and those relationships last, have lasted a long time and will continue to do so. And I think there's that camaraderie there because the fire service has gotten smaller, and it doesn't matter whether you're staying on fires within region or whether you're actually going out of region somewhere. You still wind up seeing the same people over and over and over again. And I think that's a big part of it. We do it because we like it. It's not just a job; it's something that we really like to do.

CS: Tell me about it as a tradition. Describe to me as though I don't… the first time I've ever heard about fire fighting culture within the Forest Service. Can you describe some of that tradition?

LT: Well you know, some of that tradition, when I first got into the Forest Service, it was the good old boy system. If you wanted… you had to start at the ground level. And everybody has to start at the ground level, but it was very difficult to move up. And it was very difficult for women at that time to get into the fire fighting part, a role out on the line. Especially out on the line. Going out in the woods and digging line and burning out and all that good stuff. There role was mainly restricted to the fire camps. ICPs. You know, in the thirteen years that I've been with the Forest Service I have seen that dramatically change, and there has been, there are major opportunities for women that have come into the fire fighting service and have really moved up, and there are some excellent, excellent opportunities. It's just really great.

CS: Tell me a little bit about the skills. What skills maybe didn't you have prior to getting into fire fighting, and what skills have you been able to not only attain, but maybe improve? How

does that help you, not only… I understand you're on the Incident Management Team, so tell me a little about that, and then how does it help you in your regular job?

LT: Okay. Well, I think that… I started at the ground just like everybody does, and was given the opportunity to help-- after I'd had a few years of actually going out on fires and stuff—I was given the opportunity to start help training on some of those basic classes, and that really… I believe you learn a lot more if you have to teach the class, than you actually… You always learn something. And I've been fortunate in my career to be able to get some of the advance training and move up into there. You know, I've done the fire line stuff, I'm on the Incident Management Team now as a resource unit leader. Working on the situation so I can be a Plans chief is my goal one day. And I believe that those opportunities I've been given, I've been fortunate. There's no doubt about that. And in my leadership role back home, I think that allows me to bring some of those skills to the team and help the team out also.

CS: What specific kind of skills are you talking about?

LT: Well you know, there's a lot of people skills involved in any type of leadership. There's personal issues that you try to avoid, but when conflict happens there's different ways to get around that and solve those conflicts. And I think that… That's my everyday job. But on the team with those conflicts it makes it a lot easier by having some of that leadership training that's not within the fire fighting part of it, to work things out.

CS: Okay. Traditionally you think of fire fighters, probably you'd think of the physical hard work that goes on. So what are the non-traditional skills that maybe you would get if you were trying to attract somebody to come into fire?

LT: You know, that's always a hard thing. Back when I started it was still, the culture was still there within the Forest Service that you were expected to go on fires. It wasn't in your job description, but even though you weren't a fire fighter you were still expected to go. And now as we're hiring new people on, that culture's not there. If somebody wants to try to do that, then yeah, we'll allow them to do that. We'll give them the training and get them trained up, and then put them out with qualified people. But there's a lot of people… And I think that's why to Forest, the fire fighting service part of it, has gotten smaller. There's just a different culture that's come in there, and being a leader, and having to take human resource for managers, and some practical leadership and things like that, that allows me to manage the people who work for me a lot better.

CS: Okay. So it sounds like it's really helped you in your regular job [in your department]. Talk to me about some of the maybe traditional kind of skills or… from when you first started out [now being experienced]. How many years of experience do you have under your belt?

LT: Well in the fire fighting arena, I've been involved in fire for the whole thirteen years that I've been with the Forest Service. I started out digging line, having fun. I've moved up in the line positions, and have now transitioned over onto… I knew that at some point in time I was going to be a little too old to be out there digging line, and wanted to have another avenue. And so I went into the Plans arena, and I really enjoy that. And I think that really helps me both having…

In what I do as a resource leader, you know, tracking the resources that are there on the fire; knowing what those resources are capable of; and then putting the plan together, the incident action plan that we put together on a daily basis. And that really helps me, because I have to do a lot of coordination with operations sections chiefs who are in charge of all the operations out on the fire line. And by knowing what type of crews and what type of engines and their capabilities are, that allows me the ability to help them out too. In saying, well I think you might need a strike team leader here, or you might need… you've got a couple dozer bosses that are still hanging out over here. And it allows me to interact with them a lot more because I understand both sides of the equation. I understand the operations side and I understand the Plans side, and how that works.

CS: This sounds like it really helps you with your management skills, and maybe even the strategizing type of skills, which is important to [words inaudible].

LT: Right. It is. And I'm able to visit with operations folks and see the big picture, and look out ahead of time, so that I can visit with the other folks in Plans and tell them, okay, they're talking about de-mobing here in the next three days, and they're talking about some heavy stuff starting. Just to get other people geared up on what's going on out there.

CS: Tell me how this tradition, or the culture of fire fighting, has changed since you've been in it, within the Forest Service. What changes have you seen?

LT: Well, there have been a lot of changes. When I first started there wasn't very many women, as I stated a while ago. And it is just so… I think it's very important to have a lot of diversity, both cultural and minority, and have the women in the fire fighting service, because they offer a lot of good quality folks. There's no doubt about it. And the diversity just makes everything more exciting.

CS: And what about the fire fighters themselves? It seems like there's kind of a tradition whether or not… I've heard somebody say that even the fire fighters themselves have changed. The people who are attracted now, coming from different backgrounds. And tell me also about how does this reach into the, maybe the Native American culture?

LT: Okay. Well I'll tell you, the fire fighters that I started out with were, they were the macho type guys. They did it for the adrenalin; they did it for the money; and they did it because it was hard work and they could say, I'm a fire fighter. You know. There's still those people out there, but I'll tell you what. The fire fighters now, they're more educated, way more trained. The safety issues that have come about in the last thirteen years… Safety is such a big issue. When I started, if the crew boss told you you were going to do that, then that's what you were going to do. And it didn't matter whether you thought it was unsafe or not. And now, if somebody doesn't think it's safe you can speak up, say hey, I don't that's safe, and give your reasons, and then the crew boss or whoever you're working for needs to be able to explain to you, yes, here's our mitigation measures and this is why it's safe. So it has changed. That culture has changed. It used to be hard to get into. Now I think a lot of people have seen the light. We've had a lot of people retire; a lot of good fire folks retire, and there's kind of a big gap in there, that we've got some good qualified people, but there's a big gap in there and we're trying to push those people up, maybe a

little bit faster… Well I know a lot faster than we used to. And I think that's where the training and the quality people that we still have left need to be working with those folks and do a lot of mentoring.

CS: So what kind of skills are demanded from you and your co-workers on Incident Management Team? What kind of people are you trying to recruit now? If you said the job has kind of changed. More sophisticated? More demanding in certain areas? More specialized?

LT: Yeah, you know, it has [emphasis] become more sophisticated and more specialized. You know, we've got GIS now and we carry a person that does GIS. Geographic Information System is what that is, and we order a mobile office supply so that we can have those people here doing the copying for us and doing some of that Geographic Information System stuff for us. We order now somewhere in the neighborhood of about sixteen computers because all our resource tracking—it's called I-Suite—there's a resource tracking system there, there's a finance part of it so that people can get paid, that's part of that. And there's also a cost system that's part of that. And it's all interconnected. It's on a network. And so we're having to get people… It's not the old days where, yeah, you check in; you sign your name, say what you're doing here, and go on about your business. That's not it anymore. The way that system is, we need some highly-trained, quality people that are computer literate. And that's where we've all started, and those skills… We're working on them. We're working on trying to get some people there. And it's just taking a little while. It is a new system. We've had it for a couple years, and now that it has gone national, and that's what all the teams are using.

CS: So do you see it that it's become even more specialized even since you started?

LT: Definitely. It's become way more specialized since I started with the team back in 2000, on the Incident Management Team. If you were brought a computer, you were lucky. A laptop, to be out there working. And now the team actually has five team computers, and then we order another sixteen on top of that. So it is, it has become more specialized. And I think all the functions have become more specialized. It's not just in Plans and it's not just in finance. It's the whole team has become more specialized. The national mobe guide, mobilization guide, for a Type I team, says that you will have twenty-seven individuals and six trainees. So you have thirty-three people, that that's the national guidelines. Well there is no way that you can do that with thirty-three people. Not the way the incidents have become so complex anymore, and I know in the Southwest area, the two Type One teams that are here, we'll carry on average about sixty or sixty-five people, including trainees.

CW: So tell me more about the teams. What kind of culture do they bring? What's the specialness of the teams and the uniqueness, and why are they relied upon to do what they do?

LT: Yeah, it's real interesting, because there's a lot of people on the teams that, there's probably about half of them that their major job is not fire. Which is real interesting. We've all grown up, at one tie or another most of them were out on the fire line early on in their careers, and they've just gone different ways in their professions. And that brings a lot of diversity to the team. But we all get along. And I think that's great. There's some great team that go on, and the interactions and everything. And that helps us as we go out on incidents, to be able to

communicate with different publics that are out there. And different agency administrators that we're working for. You know, it may be that someone in finance has a relationship with someone, a professional relationship with someone there at that agency that we're working for, and can really get us in good with them so that we can get a lot of good work done. And a lot of good work done for the public.

CS: And what kind of work? What's the expectation of an incident management team?

[Voice drowned out by off-screen voices. Camera turned off.]

[Camera and turned back on again.]

CS: Okay, so Lee, tell me about, what is it… What kind of specials skills do incident management teams have that make them so much in demand?

LT: Well, you know, as we were talking earlier, that everyone's specialized in some form or fashion on the team, but we've got a lot of good people skills. And communications is a big part of that. And what the incident management teams do is, they take a large problem and take bites out of that problem; take it and break it down, and take the bites and start taking chunks out of it, to where it's a more manageable situation. And then either solve the incident, whatever that case may be. Contain the fire, help with the floods, with people that are going on…

[Off-screen voices become louder again. LT looks off-screen.]

[Laughs] Just cut it. That's okay.

[Camera turned off. Turned on again.]

CS: Lee, tell me, how did the skills and experience that members of an IMT have, how did that help you, how did that come to your aid when you went to New York? And tell me about some of that. Do you remember getting notified and [last words inaudible]

LT: Yeah, I do remember that whole morning, as a matter of fact. Woke up with the radio, and it was going on, and the first thing that went in my mind was, okay, Orson Welles all over again, right? And then they kept going on, and I went downstairs, and turned on the TV in time to see the second plane hit the tower. And my wife and I were talking about it, and probably within the first five minutes that we were talking about it she said, well your team's up, number one on national rotation. Are you guys going to go? And I said, no, this is way too big for us. So I went on to work, and about an hour and a half later got word that we were being mobilized, and that we had to drive to Albuquerque.

CS: What time was that?

LT: That was about eight thirty that morning. And so went home, went to school, told the kids--told my daughter goodbye, told Cody at the house goodbye—got a ride and met some people and drove to Albuquerque. And they told us we were going either to DC or to New York. And a

couple hours later it got finalized that we were going to New York. And I remember catching that plane in Albuquerque. It was about three o'clock in the morning, somewhere; two, three o'clock in the morning, and it's an eerie feeling knowing that you're probably the only commercial flight in the air. And as we were landing in Baltimore… We were probably thirty minutes out of Baltimore, to drop off Gage's team from Region Five from California, and one of the guys had spotted an F-16 out our wing. The right wing of the airplane. And I told those guys, you know, those guys don't travel by themselves. There's either two, three, or four behind us. And the pilot came on about ten minutes later and informed us that he was talking with them and everything was okay.

So yeah, you know. Being in New York, there were a lot of people on the team that we didn't know. Nobody knew what to expect when we got there. They were talking, okay, we're going to do a receiving and distribution for all the workers that are down there, and for whatever else. We were there to help. And that was the whole idea. We got there… We were staying there, we were working in the Javits Center where the USAR folks, the Urban Search and Rescue folks were staying, actually. And they were based out of there also. And the FEMA folks, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, were stationed there. And we got a warehouse next door, started setting that up. And then, since we do have some city fire department folks, which was really great, since this was an interagency team, they went down and visited with the Fire Department of New York City folks, and… you know, fire departments are not set up to run twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, on an on-going incident. They're set up to go in there, drown the fire, and do a little rehab after that, and maybe go check it the next day. Or two. They're in and out of an apartment building fire in four to six hours. We're used to running twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for weeks on end. And managing the people that we have under our control. And I think the fire department finally realized that they were up against the wall; that they were running into it. So we came in there and helped them do some planning, and working with the other agencies that were there. The briefings that were being held… We moved down to Duane Street fire station, the Duane Street Manor as it's called. The Plans section did, and some other folks, moved down there, and that's where we were working out of. It's about three blocks from Ground Zero. And we had the coordination of, I believe there were thirty-two agencies total, that were at those briefings every morning. Now we didn't run the briefings. What we were doing was setting up the plan—the Incident Action Plan—for a twenty-four hour period, and it was real interesting.

CS: What does the Incident Action Plan do?

LT: Well the Incident Action Plan, what that does is it describes what the actions of that time period is, whether it's a twelve hour day or a twenty-four hour day. And on a fire incident, and of course we were having it there; you had the fire weather… or you had a weather forecast that was there, in New York. We also have a fire behavior forecast for that day. There's the 204s, the division assignments, the group assignments, that list every individual crew or engine, that says where they're going and who they're working for. And there's always a safety message in there, because safety is important. Safety's number one, in any job that we do. Because we need to go home and be back with our families at the end of the day or the end of the incident. There's usually some finance stuff that gets thrown in there, and there's some other odds and ends that are in there, that are important. And every incident is different. And usually our incident action

plans are in the neighborhood of twenty-five to thirty pages. Single pages. Well, when we were in New York, the first plan that we produced for them was seven pages front and back. And the-- well, he's the chief now, he was the deputy chief at the time—the highest-ranking member that was left of New York, of the fire department there in New York, Chief Caruthers, when he picked up that seven-page document he goes, well, this is getting a little heavy. And we knew we had our work cut out for us. And our deal was, we had a little chalkboard and we had posted it on there, and when it got more than that chalkboard could hold we had to start cutting stuff out.

CS: You took your planning skills and you were able to apply them.

LT: Right. We were able to apply them there. But you know what? It took more than planning skills; it took a lot of people skills. Everybody there with the fire department had lost friends and relatives that also worked for the fire department. And it was a very personal deal. Chief Pfeiffer lost his brother, and he was there with us working on this, helping us do everything, and doing some coordination with us and the fire department and some other agencies. And he had been working since it happened. And he had a feeling he had lost his brother when the towers collapsed, and it didn't get confirmed. It had been confirmed, oh, we were probably about ten days into it.

CS: Do you feel that your ability to work with a lot of different agencies came to your aid, or do you feel like you had to maybe improve those skills?

LT: You know, I think it helped, because we work with a lot of different agencies anyway, and one of the things we learned really quickly is that these agencies in New York had never, most of them had never worked together before. The fire department did not understand the capabilities of their emergency offices services and some of the other services that other agencies there in New York provide. The Mass Transit Authority, the New York Police Department; all they know is, yep, they can stop traffic for us and they can write tickets for people. So it was real interesting, and I think they learned a lot also, as we did too.

CS: So it sounds like the section where you worked, the management team was separated for a time. What was that like, describe, and then also talk about how did you overcome then this challenge of integrating into or gaining the trust of FDNY?

LT: Yeah, you know, the Plans section was separated from the rest of the team, and that has occurred. I think one or two other times, and it makes it very difficult, communicating. And the travel time between the two places where the rest of the team was and where we were, it was probably twenty minutes either driving or on the subway-- when they got the subways back running again, close enough to it so we could actually catch one. It's always difficult, and we never like doing that. Because there's a lot of information sharing that goes on amongst the team, so that we can get all of that information out to the different publics, different agencies that we're working with, that the different functions are working with. And so we really had to step that up. Had to step it up pretty hard. We brought in a lot of people that we knew off the other Type I Southwest Area team to help us out, 'cause we were pulling a 24 hour shift and we just were not geared up to do that for a long period of time, and we knew that. So that was okay. You know, with the relationships that were built there with the fire department of New York, ours Plans

chief is the city department from Flagstaff. We had several other folks that were there in plans, that actually worked for fire departments in cities. So they already had a relationship, just because they were from city fire departments. Now none of them were near as big as New York City, but they had that commonality in there, so everybody was… that helped right off the bat. And that's how we actually got in there. If we hadn't had any city fire department in there, they would have never asked for our help. That's the way I feel.

CS: So it sounds like you established maybe some new relationships…

LT: We did,

CS: And learned some new skills. What was it you learned from the FDNY?

LT: [Laughs] Well, the FDNY, you know, one of the things we learned was that everything is around the corner. And that may be two blocs or it may be four blocks away, but it's just around the corner, you know. They're great people. Everything that you, that I had heard about New York City-- you always hear the people there are rude, they don't have any couth, and things like that. That was just… When we got there nobody honked the horns at us, 'cause we were cutting people off. And people were just so nice. The fire department folks were great. They were great. Captain Cully there at Duane Street Manor, that was his fire department, and he was just a great guy to be around, and anything we needed, he pretty much got it for us. And we knew we couldn't be too demanding, 'cause everybody else was wanting things too, but… But you know, one of the things that I think we did… We learned some things from the fire department, and we've actually gone back and helped, and taught them the Incident Command System that we use on large fire incidents, and have had several trainings back there in New York. But one of the things that I think we were able to provide to the Fire Department of New York was to get them to open up, to be able to ask for help when they needed it, and to allow them to understand what the other agencies within New York City actually do, so that they can help them.

CS: I've heard too that since you left New York, that that relationship continues today. Tell me a little bit about that.

LT: That does. That relationship continues today. We've actually had some fire fighters from New York City that have actually come out on a couple of our wildfire incidents, 'cause they wanted to know what it was like, and they wanted to see the Incident Command System in action. They were up in Montana last year, in September of 2003, and they were just… There was five of them that came; well actually, there was two groups of five that came out separately, and all those folks are just great. And some of them actually went out on the line; they spiked out; they camped out overnight with the fire crews, and got in there and got dirty and dug some lines. So it was really good. And they got a sense of how… at least our team. And they visited other teams also. So it was really great. And the camaraderie's still there. We're trading shirts, we're trading hats and things, and so it's really great. It really is.

CS: What has been maybe your most memorable experience when you were back in New York?

LT: You know… Gosh, there were so many things that went on back there. And I think that… I was thinking about this the other day. McDonald's was there. They had a mobile kitchen that was there, and they served somewhere around a hundred thousand meals to all the rescue workers that were there. We sat down there one day and we were eating our meal, and you get it in a little McDonald's bag, and at the bottom of every bag they were sticking a letter in from kids. And not just from New York. We got them from the state of Kansas, Pennsylvania, Texas, all across the country. But you know, you open that thing up and it's just, thank you firefighters for all that you do. And you know, it really hits home. It really does.

CS: So do you expect to see [words inaudible]?

LT: You know, I think that would be great. They've had some opportunities that I'm not sure they've actually used the Incident Command System in New York City, and I'm not sure whether it may be they're comfortable with it yet. I think that we will see them, and I hope that we do so that they can get a better grasp of it, and a better understanding of how it actually works in progress. And maybe they can do some small situations there in New York City that they can implement that and start getting more comfortable with it. I think that's where they're at. They don't have anybody that's experienced in the process of it, and how it works.

CS: How would you re-create for people in large cities that maybe have no idea of what incident management teams are? Maybe they've heard of firefighters but don't really have a good understanding of what all is involved, and not just suppression of big fires, but also responding to incidents like what we had in New York, or other natural disasters. What are some things that you think you could re-create for people to get an understanding of what a firefighter does?

LT: Well you know, some of the things that we could do: we could get an engine out there. We could have them lay some hose. We could show them all the tools that people carry. Maybe even get a crew out there and have those folks, and all the stuff that those crews carry. And you know, I don't think a lot of people understand, we're not at home. And we're not able to go down to the store every day when we're out in the back country. And having been on a crew, you've got to carry enough stuff to cover yourself for twenty-four hours. Because that helicopter may get broke down that's supposed to be bringing your supper. Which may just be one of those MREs – Meals Ready to Eat—but it's better than nothing. So you've got to be prepared for those situations. And to be able to show them that; maybe dig a little line, if we've got some ground out there, and do a little mock fire situation. And maybe, you know… The Incident Management, when you're there at the Incident Command post, it's just like a big tent city. And there are towns that we have come into, and we have doubled the population. When the population of a town is seven or eight hundred people, that's a lot of people; but when we've got some fires going on, we've had… I've been on fires where we've had twenty-five hundred people on one incident. And to see people's eye with all the little tents that have popped up going, oh my gosh, how are you doing this? How are you feeding all these people? Feeding those people three meals a day, all the potable water that's needed, and everything else, all the little niceties that we're used to having at home… We get some of those. But we've got to feed ourselves. There's no doubt about that.

CS: [Inaudible question]

LT: No, I think that’s it Cathy. I appreciate it. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW