

Smithsonian Folklife Festival Interview

Chuck Williams
Retired Forest Ranger, U.S. Forest Service

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Interviewer: Sheila Poole

Sheila Poole (SP): Please say your name and when you retired from the Forest Service.

Chuck Williams (CW): My name's Chuck Williams and I retired from the Forest Service in 1982.

SP: Okay. Would you give me a brief biography, including your education, what made you want to work for the Forest Service, and some of the positions you held.

CW: I grew up in western Colorado in a little ranching and farming community called Delta, Colorado. It's in the heart of the San Juan Mountains. And from the time I was twelve years old I knew I wanted to be in the Forest Service. And I graduated from high school in '52, 1952, and went to Colorado State, and studied forestry, and graduated from CSU in 1957. At that time I went into the army for two years, and came back out as... In my summers I had worked for the Forest Service on the Uncompahgre National Forest, in my summers from Colorado State. I went into the army, I came out as an assistant ranger on the Boulder District of the Roosevelt National Forest in Colorado. I was there a year and a half, and I moved to Fort Collins as an assistant ranger on the [name unclear] district of the Roosevelt. Worked there for about a year and a half, and I was promoted to district ranger at the Black Hills National Forest in Rapid City, South Dakota. And I was there for about six years, and in 1963 I was picked to go to California as a technical advisor on the Lassie television show. And I went to Hollywood and worked with Lassie for about five years. And in this period of time we filmed about forty episodes of the Lassie show, which the purpose was to show the work of the Forest Service and gave Lassie a great opportunity to show different events of the show. While I was still in California we started working on another idea of the environmental pollution symbol Woodsy Owl, and in 1970 I put together a little film, a little public service spot on Woodsy Owl, "Give a Hoot, Don't Pollute". It was a class project at UCLA. After the work with the Lassie program and the work in Hollywood, I went to Washington, D.C. and headed up a program for the forest service on radio and television. And I stayed in Washington D.C. about two years doing that work. And I met among other people Rudy Wendelin, who was the artist on Smokey Bear, and he and I did a television program we were doing on wilderness at the American University. And we were doing an episode, like a twelve part episode on wilderness, and worked with us on all of those episodes, and then Rudy Wendelin came on with his art, and I have a piece of his art that he did for that show which he wanted to give to me. [Displays framed picture] This is a picture of

Trapper's Lake in Colorado. It's now wilderness. And it's a water color that Rudy did, and he did it and he said, this is yours. However, we used it on the show to show art and wilderness, how they go together. Rudy also did a lot of the Smokey Bear stuff, and we'll talk about that later. After about two years in Washington D.C. I moved to Albuquerque. I came here as the director of the Public Affairs office, and I worked there for about ten years, at which time I retired in 1982, and I went into real estate.

SP: Okay. In your years with the Forest Service, what do you think was the most interesting part?

CW: I had, really, I think I was honored to work for the Forest Service. I enjoyed everything that I did. I enjoyed being a ranger. Probably the most exciting thing was probably working with Lassie, because of just the glamour of Lassie and all the locations we went to. We traveled, filmed all these shows on location. I met a lot of interesting people. Besides Lassie I met Lorne Green and Dinah Shore and Rock Hudson, and Efram Zimbalist Jr. Show on the FBI show. We did two FBI shows. I met just a lot of really interesting people in Hollywood, so that might have been the most interesting part of it.

SP: Okay. You were talking about the Lassie program. Can you kind of embellish on how you got involved in the Lassie program.

CW: Sure. The Forest Service had a cooperative agreement with the Lassie producers. If they were going to film in the national forest they would have a technical advisor on the show. The criteria for the technical advisor is they had to be a district ranger, he or she had to be a district ranger, and have four or five years experience. And it was a very competitive position. There were a lot of rangers that wanted to do this position, because it had a lot of travel involved, you were working with interesting people and characters. And so I was selected. I applied for it two years before I got it, and then they came back around and I was picked the next time around. And it was quite a transition to move from Rapid City, South Dakota, to Hollywood. And we immediately went to Oregon to film, I believe five episodes of Lassie on location in Oregon. The purpose of why the Forest Service and Lassie were together is it gave a great opportunity for the Forest Service to talk about our work; in fire prevention, working with animals, grazing, timber, recreation sites. We just had all these different ideas that we could put into the Lassie show. And Lassie benefited because it gave them great new opportunities to go into the woods and have situations that Lassie could get into. So it was a good agreement between both the Forest Service and Lassie.

SP: Okay. You had also mentioned your involvement with the owl program. Can you also embellish on the beginnings of that? How that all started?

CW: Sure. Woodsy Owl... We started on that program about 1969 really. Three of us got together and we were talking about a way to talk about the environment, because Smokey Bear was being used for things that it shouldn't be used for, outside of fire prevention. So we came up with the idea of Woodsy Owl. And I had been on a film location at Torrey Pines, southern California, and we had this little hat that was part of the hotel. And we

were in a meeting with Woodsy Owl. We were trying to come up with a hat for Woodsy. We talked about a cowboy hat and a lot of different attires for Woodsy. And I suggested why don't we put on the little alpine hat that I think Woodsy still wears today. So this is the original idea. This hat right here was the original idea on Woodsy Owl. I also put together a little television public service spot at the same time, as a college project in cinematography, and we have that and we can show it, if you like.

SP: Okay. And once you came up with the hat and the idea, where did you go from there?

CW: Okay. We worked on it for quite a long time, because to be honest with you there was some resistance in the Forest Service of having another symbol to deal with, besides Smokey Bear, and so our big endeavor was really to sell the chief of the Forest Service and his staff on the idea of Woodsy Owl. And so we put together a lot of little ideas, including little key chains and wrist watches, and all kinds of things, to show that it would be received well by the public. And from there I did go on into Washington D.C. again and continued working on the project there.

SP: And when did it finally become accepted? How did that come about?

CW: To be honest with you, I'm not sure what year it was accepted. It was considerably after the 1970 time that we put together the public service spot. I would say, I would say about 1973 probably. Part of my work in Washington, I would travel to New York City, and I took the public service... the very first public service spot we put together we took to Washington D.C. And it was a sixty second spot and it was played on the Super Bowl. [SP laughs] And it was quite an amazing thing to get that public service spot played for sixty seconds on the Super Bowl, because now those sell for about two and a half million dollars for a thirty second spot, and we got it for free. But that was part of my work, traveling to New York City, working in radio and TV, and we did that.

SP: You had mentioned when you were in D.C. that you met Rudy Wendelin. Can you about that and more about that project you worked on with him?

CW: Sure. Rudy was an exceptional artist, to really start with. He was an amazing person in a lot of ways, but he was an exceptional artist. I was doing a television series with American University, and it was on wilderness. So I got Rudy to do some art. [Holds up framed picture] And the topic of this particular thirty minute show we did was, "Art in the Wilderness". And Rudy did this of Trapper's Lake in Colorado, which is now a wilderness area, and he said, I want you to have this picture. And it's done in watercolor, and he did the painting, and we put it on the show. He also did a lot of the Smokey Bear Art. Practically all of it.

CAMERA OFF FOR A MOMENT. THEN BACK ON.

CW: Okay. There's many, many stories we could talk about, Rudy Wendelin, how interesting a person he was. But he did a lot of the art work on Smokey Bear. And on the back of this picture I have just some of that. Just a little bit of displays of some of the art

that he did. [Turns frame around} I know I'm getting a lot of rattle out of that. But he did this painting down here, which became a poster for Smokey Bear. I would say it was very early. Probably around 1980. But he could literally paint anything. He did not only water color but he did acrylic art and the whole thing with art. I don't know much else to say right now. [Puts painting down]

SP: Okay. You had mentioned to me that you were adopted by the Ogalala Sioux. Could you tell me about how that came about?

CW: I sure can. I was adopted by the Ogalala Sioux tribe in 1965 I believe it was. I was in Rapid City, and we worked with the Sioux Indians and the fire crew. We had about a thirty person fire crew. They were all guys at that time. And I was the direct liaison between the Forest Service and these guys. We met about every other week in Rapid City and held meetings. [Displays photo of himself and Sioux Indians. Camera pulls in for closer view.] As a matter of fact, they gave me a blanket and had us a big meal for us. But this, what we see here, I was adopted by the Sioux in the powwow in 1964, and they gave me a peace pipe, and I provided a huge meal for about a hundred and fifty of these Sioux Indians. And we became very good friends. [Displays wooden pipe] And these is the peace pipe that I was presented at that ceremony, and I keep it right here among some very cherished things. [Displays hard hat] This is the hard hat that I had when I was in Rapid City, and that's the symbol of the Ogalala Blackhat Sioux that I had on the hard hat. And on the opposite side of my hard hat was the Black Hills National Forest symbol at that time. [Turns hat around to display symbol] The Black Hills was one of the first forests to start use helicopters to fight fire, so that's why we have the symbol of the helicopter.

SP: Okay. Let's talk about the Folklife Festival. If you were selected to go out to the festival and present some of the programs you've been involved in, how would you do that? What kind of the materials and props would you need? Let's start with the Lassie program. What are some of the ideas that you've got?

CW: Okay. I have lots and lots of pictures. Right now they're 35 millimeter film, but they could be put into DVD. Entire series about filming various shows, because I took pictures on every show that we were filming, and I have literally boxes of slides.

SP: Okay. So those could be scanned in a DVD. Okay.

CW: And I have a lot of photographs.

SP: Go ahead, show those, but...

CW: Okay. Let's see. Those are Dinah Shore, but. This is the two primary actors on Lassie when I was there: Jed Allan. And Jack [DeMave?] And Lassie.

SP: You've got some of you in your Forest Service uniform at that time, right? Or...?

CW: I do. I have, [display photos] I don't know if you can pick those up or not, but. [Camera pulls in on photos] I have several pictures that were taken; again, they were taken from slides.

SP: Okay.

CW: But these pictures... That was taken at San Francisco at the airport, where we did a four-part series of Lassie in San Francisco. It involved the Forest Service regional office there. We established a mini-forest on the top of a building. And we utilized some of the school children there. An associate of mine, Jean [Westenburner?] was involved. She helped us put that together. We filmed Lassie on the reservation, on the Navaho reservation, and you'll recognize that as a familiar. We worked with the Indians on the Navaho reservation. And this is one of myself, of course I was on the Lassie show, with one of the trainers and Lassie. His name was Sam, Sam Williamson.

SP: You have a picture there of your son? [Rest of question inaudible]

CW: Okay. I do have a picture. After I'd moved to Albuquerque I went back to California, because I stayed in touch with Rudd Weatherwax. And we went to his ranch up at Malibu. Took my son, who's now thirty-one years old. But we went up there. And those are some puppies that Rudd was in training to eventually take over as Lassie. [Displays another photograph] While I was in California I did a lot of other shows besides Lassie. I did the Dinah Shore show, and she has a guest on there besides myself with Rock Hudson. And that's an autographed picture from Rock Hudson and Dinah Shore. And then this picture is also Rock Hudson and Dinah Shore. And the theme of this was cutting your own Christmas tree from a national forest.

SP: And what else [noise interferes with voice] Lassie and Smokey the bear?

CW: [Going through pictures; laughs] I got stuff. Okay, on the Lassie program all the people, nearly all the actors, when they weren't filming, wore hats. [Displays hat] And we had lots of these hats, and every once in a while we'd give them away to the people. I wore a hat once in a while. And we also had little pins that we had, and it was a memento to give to people when they came out to watch us film.

SP: Okay. Looks like you have an old Lassie story book here. So really maybe what we could do at the mall if selected is maybe have a way that you could hang up your photographs; maybe a display case where you can display some of these Lassie items you've brought, such as the cap and the pin and the book. Looks like you have a coffee cup, or a beer stein. [Laughs]

CW: It's a Christmas present from Lassie.

SP: Okay. And do you have, you said lots of other memorabilia from the show?

CW: I really do. I have just a lot of stuff from the show.

SP: Okay.

CW: And I have some things put together in a big scrapbook on it. This book was written by Rudd Weatherwax, and it's autographed from him to me. And basically it's a book on how to train your dog. I don't know how many were published, but I have this copy.

SP: Okay. So you have so many items, it would be nice to get them in a display case or something. At the Mall so that people could, you know, come through and look at them as you're telling the story of your involvement in the program and how the program came about.

CW: Right.

SP: Okay. Let's move on to the Woodsy Owl. What are some of the items that you have for, if you were to talk about the Woodsy Owl program?

CW: Okay. On the Woodsy Owl program, I was involved from practically day one on the program. We have the public service spot that I put together as a class project at UCLA. I have that. It has my daughter in it, and an owl. I have a lot of the original art work, in the form of slides. We could put that on a DVD. I have many little mementos of ideas that we did with Woodsy. And these were given away at times. Many of these are just little prototypes that were never, never did happen. This talks about plant a tree, shows Woodsy Owl planting a tree; of course, helping the environment. I have a lot of these little items that I have in boxes and scrapbooks.

SP: And then again you were talking about, you have the hat that started it all.

CW: I still have the hat that I got from Torrey Pines, yes. And as we said at the meeting, we talked about Woodsy Owl being in a cowboy hat, and we even were thinking of different symbols besides an owl for the environmental pollution symbol. We talked about a raccoon, because he washes his spoon before he eats; we talked about a trout and an elk. But we finally landed on the owl because he can live in the forest and yet on the edge of the city, so he can be quite a universal pollution symbol. And this hat finally became the idea; let's use that hat. And this is the [emphasis] hat that was the original prototype of Woodsy Owl.

SP: Okay. And I'm sure the Washington office would probably have materials and things, but you could certainly add your collection to whatever the Smithsonian will have at the Mall for Woodsy Owl, plus you can just be the storyteller on how Woodsy came about. And not only that, you can play your PSA and also show the slides you have of the original art work.

CW: Sure. Sure.

SP: Okay.

CW: We've got lots of stuff in these boxes. [Laughter]

SP: Okay. To put together quite an exhibit.

CW: Right.

SP: Okay. Now let's move on to Rudy Wendelin. I know you don't possess any of his art work. But what are some ideas that you have about getting involved in talking about Rudy?

CW: Rudy of course was an exceptional artist. He worked for the Forest Service for, golly, it was well over thirty years. He must have done I would say hundreds of Smokey Bear paintings, and many of them became the official poster for that year. Each year we'd come out with a new poster, and Rudy nearly always, for quite a number of years, was the artist on these posters. I'm quite sure that the Chief's office in the Forest Service has some of this art work.

SP: Okay. So maybe if they had something like a backdrop of his art work or things like that, you could again just be the storyteller of what kind of a person Rudy was, and some of the projects you worked on.

CW: Right.

SP: And just what it was like to work with him.

CW: He was just an outstanding artist, and we did of course that TV program with American University, and he art was just so exceptional, we dedicated a full thirty minute program really to art in the wilderness, and his paintings were a keynote of that.

SP: Do you have a copy of that program that might be able to be show?

CW: I don't. I don't.

SP: Would that be something that maybe the Washington office might have, to be shown at the festival?

CW: I really don't know. I know John McGuire, who the Chief of the Forest Service at that time, we had him as a guest, to talk about wilderness, because we were trying to show the various aspects of wilderness. Some people think that central Park in New York City is wilderness. And it was interesting to see this whole diversity of thinking of what wilderness was. Keep in mind this was back in the 1960s or 1970s that we were talking about this. We did have John McGuire on a panel to discuss this, to talk about the various aspects of wilderness.

SP: Okay. Well maybe that's something I can investigate then with the Washington office, and find out if there's a copy of this program somewhere that can be displayed at the Folklife Festival as you discuss it.

CW: It's possible. American University was the producer of that show.

SP: Okay.

CW: And I don't remember the producer's name anymore. It was a lady.

SP: Okay. If we were to get a copy of that wilderness program, that might be something that could be played at the Festival, and you could talk about how you and Rudy Wendelin put this project together.

CW: Sure. It was twelve episodes. Twelve thirty minute episodes on that wilderness program, produced by American University. And they touched on everything from art in the wilderness to the different concepts of what wilderness is. I'd have to think a long time to think a long time to remember what all the different shows were, but each week we had different series, and I think I was involved in every one of those twelve series with the University.

SP: Okay. Do you have any other thoughts or ideas about what you would like to say if you were brought out to the Folklife Festival? How... I know we had mentioned that you didn't want it to be just an individual focus on you per se, but what your view of how you want to incorporate these programs into, how they were incorporated into the Forest Service.

SP: Really Sheila. I had pointed that out to you earlier. I don't have any desire to promote myself, but I would... The Forest Service was a wonderful agency to work for. It treated me really good. I had a wonderful, wonderful career. I was a district ranger, I got to work with Lassie and a lot of Hollywood people. I would like to, if I have an opportunity to talk about what the Forest Service really did do, and is continuing to do for the environment and public lands. I personally still go to national forests. I probably spend thirty or forty days a summer, just out in the forest, fishing and hiking and climbing. And so I would like to have the opportunity to just talk about the Forest Service, not really myself, but what the Forest Service meant to an individual, which would be me, and how great an outfit it is. Another thought on the Lassie program is, when I was with the Lassie show we would travel sometimes on the weekends to go out and put on appearances for a group of kids. And I remember going to Palm Springs with Lassie, and we had a group of kids there, and I did the narration. We could get Lassie, hopefully, possibly, as a chance to come back to Washington D.C. and be part of this for a day or so. I think it would be really interesting.

SP: You still have contacts?

CW: I still have contacts with several of the people out there. Of course, Rudd is no longer alive, but his son Robert is, and I worked with Robert the whole time I was on the show. He was just a small child then, but we're still friends. So it's a good possibility.

SP: Well thank you for the interview, Chuck. We really appreciate it.

CW: Uh huh. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW