

Smithsonian Folklife Interview

Lynn Young

Regional Press Officer, Rocky Mountain Region

Member of 'Fiddlin' Foresters' Volunteer Music Group

Golden, Colorado

Nov. 2003

Interviewer: Steve Segin

Steve Segin (SS): Say and spell your first and last name.

Lynn Young (LY): Lynn Young. That's L-Y-N-N; last name Young, Y-O-U-N-G.

SS: And who are you with, Lynn?

LY: I'm with the U.S. Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region.

SS: And what do you do there?

LY: I'm a public affairs specialist in the region. I'm the regional press officer.

SS: And how long have you been with the Forest Service?

LY: Almost thirty-eight years.

SS: Thirty-eight years?

LY: Yeah.

SS: So what different jobs did you have in the Forest Service?

LY: Well, I've been, I was in timber sales and I've been environmental education; I was a district ranger for fourteen years and then have been in public affairs for fifteen or so.

SS: Right in here in Denver?

LY: Yes. In the Rocky Mountain Region.

SS: One of the things you do is, you're part of the Fiddlin' Foresters. What is, what are the Fiddlin' Foresters?

LY: Well the Fiddlin' Foresters are a group of five musicians that work for the Forest Service-- one is a volunteer and the rest of us work here in this office in Golden, Colorado, in the regional office—and we started getting together and playing for meetings, and you know, when the landscape architects or

whatever got together. But that was about 1993. In 1994 we were asked to go to Washington to play on the Ellipse for the Smokey Bear fiftieth anniversary, and we played on an outdoor stage there, and we played for the secretary of agriculture, a reception, and that kind of thing. And we played “Smokey Bear” and other kinds of things. We sang “Smokey Bear” and kind of did a little environmental education message. Conservation education. And that kind of got us started. Since then we’ve done a hundred and seventy programs all around the country; conservation education programs where we use music to get across conservation messages. We have three major objectives. One is to get across conservation messages. One is to, what we say, to put a face on the faceless bureaucrat. And the other one is to enhance employee morale. And we’ve played at the Olympics, we’ve played a lot of places, and we recently have been wearing old 1907 costumes, reproduction uniforms, as the old rangers used to wear back in 1907. We play old-time music, old-time string band, southern string band music, square dance music, and we sing songs like “Smokey Bear”, and we relate the songs to conservation messages. For example, we talk about the importance of water, the importance of watershed in the public lands, the watershed, and then we do the tune “Cripple Creek”. Or we talk about the first national forest, which was the first forest reserve in Wyoming, and then we do a song called “Song of Wyoming”. So we sort of relate our music to our messages. And we think we do a pretty good job of getting messages across, because we do it through music, and music goes right in here to the heart. We do songs about fire; we do “Fire on the Mountain”. We do lots of different kinds of tunes, and we put on a program that usually lasts an hour and a half or so forth. And we played for the kickoff of the Lewis and Clark bicentennial at Monticello, and we’ve done a lot of those kinds of things. Big conferences.

SS: Do you write any of your own songs?

LY: We don’t really write original music. What we try to do is try to find old-time tunes—and a lot of them are cowboy and Western tunes as well—that kind of illustrate the point we’re trying to make. Recently we’ve been talking about the four threats to national forests, kind of the chief’s initiative on how we can talk about the major concerns and large issues in the national forests, and we did a Four Threats program. We talk about the hundred-year history of the Forest Service and a new century of service. We do that in all our programs; talk about the history and some of the things that have happened throughout the hundred years of the Forest Service, with the idea of looking ahead to the future and thinking about what’s going to happen in the next hundred years. We also do a program called ‘Fire on the Mountain’, which is primarily fire songs. A song called “Cold Missouri Water” which is about the Mann Gulch tragedy where thirteen smokejumpers were killed in 1949 outside of Missoula, on the Missouri River. Very powerful song, and we very often have video and PowerPoint on the rear screen behind us when we perform it, at least indoors. But we don’t have to have that; we perform a lot of outdoor things as well.

SS: When you sing, how much commentary is there? Do you talk about fire?

LY: We talk about fire and the threat of fire and the fuel conditions and so forth. It’s not a long lecture, but it’s probably a, oh, anywhere from one to three minute introduction. When we do “Smokey Bear” we talk about the most successful advertising campaign in history, which is the Smokey Bear campaign. We talk about, you know, the value that had and the value it still has. We talk about recreation; all the multiple uses. We do a tune, just an old-time fiddle tune, called “Mississippi Sawyer”. We introduce that by talking about the value of wood and wood products, and the products that come off national forests, and the importance of public lands to America.

SS: Going back to the hundred-year Forest Service tradition, how do you think the Fiddlin' Foresters fit into that? Has music always been a part of Forest Service culture?

LY: Well, we believe that old-time rangers, who a lot of times were cowboys and just farm hands from around the West, played a lot of music. I've got pictures of old cowboys playing music. But our music comes from that same era. The old-time string band music is about a hundred years old, you know. It was kind of the European music that was played in the hills of not only the South, but there was a lot of music in the West as well, and the cowboy songs and so forth. And so it has the same flavor. But the way that we present the music, we talk about major laws that got the Forest Service and public lands going; the Forest Reserve Act and the Organic Act and the Multiple Use Act, and some of those things. Mainly try to get people aware that public lands belong to them and this country is in no small part what it is because we have this vast amount of public land that every citizen owns; not the government, but the citizens own. That's different than most countries in this world.

SS: How many members are there?

LY: There's five members. We have a bass player, who's our computer technician here in the building, and actually was a musician before he took up computers; he played in army bands and that kind of thing.

SS: What's his name?

LY: His name is Doug Wagner. Our banjo player is a hydrologist by profession; has been a former district ranger. He's in charge of a species conservation project here in the region. His name is Jim Maxwell. He's been playing the banjo since he was a teenager. The old-time, claw-hammer style banjo. And I started playing music back in college, which was a long time ago, back in the '60s. Folk music, you know, Kingston Trio kind of stuff. I started, played banjo for a number of years-- I play a lot of different instruments but banjo was the main one—and then ten or twelve years ago I started predominantly playing fiddle, so I'm the fiddler in the Fiddlin' Foresters. And we have two guitar players. One is Jane Leche. Jane is, works in our recreation department here in the building, and she does customer service and rec fee demo. Beautiful voice; she's been singing I'm sure all her life. She plays guitar, and she's kind of the lead singer that sings a lot of the tunes, although we all take turns doing that. And then Tom McFarlane, who is an attorney here in Denver, and a volunteer, and has been traveling with us for nine years that we've been doing this; just got his thousand hour certificate of appreciation from the chief for volunteer service. It's actually been way more than a thousand hours. He plays guitar, lead guitar, and a lot of lead singing as well. So that's the five of us. Fiddlin' Foresters actually started way back in the '70s, with the district ranger that was in Wyoming at the time. That's where the name came from. Denny Bschor, who's now regional forester in Alaska, and a range conservationist on his district, Tom McClure, who happens to now be in this building as well. And they coined the name Fiddlin' Foresters, and they played at picnics and reunions and old folks homes and a few Forest Service meetings and so forth; and they all moved away and those of us that were still here just kind of continued on and began playing in uniform and representing the Forest Service as an agency. And we do it on official time, as official business, kind of like you would go give a banquet speech, well we give a banquet program. But it's music rather than lecture.

[Screen goes blank for a moment, then image of LY returns and the interview is continued.]

SS: You guys do a number of concerts each year. Do you set up a program or theme? Who selects stuff?

LY: Very often. Well for example, our next program is for all the district rangers here in Region Two. And they want to talk about working together; they want to talk about, you know, the history of the Forest Service and a new century of service. What it takes, how we do this, is we have an operating plan that is signed by our directors and the regional foresters that kind of gives us the go-ahead for this to be an official program, to spend X number of days and hours a year on this kind of thing. We set up on a stage. Usually the stage requirements are, you know, at least twenty-five feet by ten feet, something like that. We have a sound system that we rent each time that we perform, and a sound person that runs it for us. It takes five mike stands and about eight mikes. The guitars plug in; they're acoustic guitars but they've got an acoustic blender to plug in. So it's not a complicated kind of sound system. It's a lot of equipment to haul around, and stage lights. And we don't charge a fee to do this, we charge our expenses. So if we go to California like we did the month before last, to the Sequoia National Park to put on a program, we just charge them our transportation costs and our room and board per diem, and the region here picks up our salary costs to do this. So that's the, kind of the logistics of what we do. If we go to a place like Washington, DC, we don't usually take our sound system; we just work with somebody at the other end as to what our sound system needs are, and they provide the sound system for us. And we ship our costumes in advance and that kind of thing. We require a little changing room and a place to tune up our instruments and leave our cases and that kind of thing. But we're not complicated in that it doesn't take a lot of electronics and it doesn't take a lot, 'cause it's old-time acoustic music. So it's kind of the real folk music; it's everybody's music we call it. And people find that you don't hear that kind of music very often, and it's very—particularly for older people, but we find for younger people too—it's very appealing for people to hear familiar old tunes, you know, like “Arkansas Traveler” and some of those kinds of things.

SS: So if you were asked to perform at the Folklife Festival, obviously it's going to be hot back there and the costumes are going to be hot, and it is two weeks long, with a break in the middle. I'm not sure logistically how many shows you could do, but what do you think you guys could handle, reasonably, I mean, if you were to be asked to perform for two weeks?

LY: Well, that's a little hard to say. Of course this would be a real important program for us, and we would attempt to do as much as we could. In the Olympics we did two shows a day for seven days, and that really was... Each show was in a different place. We would play a venue out in the snow, in the freezing cold in the morning, and then we would play downtown Salt Lake at a visitor's center in the evening. And we found that that was too much; we needed a break in between. We did a tour in southeast Alaska, summer before last. We did seven shows in seven days in seven cities. And had somebody to take us around and get us everywhere we were going, and that was real hard. We really needed a day's break in between. Because it's... For every show there's about eight hour's work involved, in terms of setting up and rehearsing and that kind of thing. But we have done a lot like the Western Stock Show where we played three days in a row and then take a couple days off and then play three more days in a row, you know, a program. Very often it was an afternoon and an evening program. You know, and once we're there we could do that. We would just need to get out of our costumes and have a break in between. We don't mind working, but if it takes too much out of us, it shows onstage that we're just cooked. And so I think we could reasonably do... We did eleven shows at the Olympics in seven days. That was probably a little too ambitious, but we can do that kind of thing.

SS: Are there any other musical groups in the Forest Service?

LY: Well actually there's some just starting up that I've been hearing about. There's a musical group in South Carolina called The Blues Rangers, and I've been sending them our operating plan. I hope it's a legacy of the Forest Service that we get started what I call performance interpretation; that we're able to help talented Forest Service people kind of, first of all be legitimate at playing music and get across messages, although it's different than we usually do. We usually print a brochure. We think we're more effective than a brochure. We hope we can help groups like that. And there are at least two, maybe three groups that are kind of starting out and feeling their way. The Chief of the Forest Service, Dale Bosworth, is very supportive of us. In fact the whole leadership team, as well as our regional forester. Because they've been to our performances and they've seen the value. They've seen the very emotional responses that we often get from our audiences in terms of joy and tears, and we talk about the tragedy in the Forest Service, especially fire tragedies, as well as the fun things. And we like to, you know, do jokes and pull gags, and we're pretty experienced now at doing a stage show. Jane is a theater major in college as well as a recreation major, and she's got a good feel for putting shows together, and our experience of, you know, how you pace a show, and how much humor and that kind of thing. We're pretty used to performing now, so we've done a lot of programs; and we've been featured here in Denver on, actually newspaper and television as well as a... Because it's such an unusual thing for the government, other than the military, to have a band that uses performance as a mechanism to get across messages. And it's kind of a, not really recruiting, but people that see us, it takes us out of that faceless bureaucrat kind of thing, and puts us in more of a people that work for the Forest Service, rather than bureaucrats. And so it's a lot of fun for us and a lot of fun for our audience.

SS: The Fiddlin' Foresters have become, obviously the musical ambassadors for the agency, but also you've established a new part of Forest Service culture, the musical tradition. Even though there may have been, it was never formal. I mean, I guess you guys could say you're the continuation of that group from the 70s, the first group. The only group back then...

LY: That's correct. The 70s, 1978 actually, started the first Fiddlin' Foresters, and they never dreamed, and frankly we didn't either, this would evolve to the point where we are now. And perhaps playing on the Mall in Washington representing the Forest Service, you know, would be a wonderful experience for us, and we think for the public as well. We never dreamed it would evolve to that; and evolution is probably a pretty good word, because it just started out "hey, let's play at this picnic" kind of thing. Then we kept... When we played for these meetings we thought, well, we ought to get across some messages, you know, instead of just telling jokes and that kind of thing. Chief Jack Ward Thomas back many years ago asked if we would play for the North American Forestry Commission, which is the chief of the Forest Service from Canada, the United States, and Mexico, and their entourage. And we played in Nashville. We told them we couldn't be entertainment. And we aren't; we don't play bars and socials and that kind of thing. What we do is, we put on interpretive educational programs. So we said, we're not entertainment, we need to put on an educational program. And he said great. So that's when we really started developing messages and tying them to tunes and songs. And we have... We don't introduce every tune with a message, but mostly we do. We try to get across a general, overall message about public lands, and we try to get across some specific messages. But the... We want people to come away with a feeling of, "that was a lot of fun and that was a good thing, and we're glad the Forest Service is doing that". The Chief has told us that he really thinks this is an important program and he wants to find us a

way to continue it. I should mention that before 2005 I'm going to be retired. In fact I'm retiring next June, in 2004, Going to be moving to Wyoming. But we continue to keep the Fiddlin'... We're going to keep the Fiddlin' Foresters going; I'm going to do that as a volunteer. So I don't really see that changing a lot in what we do except I'll be a retired volunteer rather than a current employee, but still representing the Forest Service. And I think that will be a great volunteer retirement activity for me.

SS: Do you guys produce any... I mean, do you guys make a CD or any other company literature that tells the story?

LY: If we had a nickel for every time we've been asked that we could fund our whole program for the year. We haven't yet made a CD. One of the reasons is, if we took taxpayers' money and made a CD, then we couldn't really legitimately sell it.

SS: You could give it out as part of the interpretive...

LY: Right. And what we'd like to do is get a foundation, something like the National Forest Foundation or some other foundation, to fund the CD, and then we could sell it through our interpretive associations, the same groups that we sell guidebooks and those kinds of things. We could sell it at front desks around any Forest Service, or as far as that goes Park Service sales outlet. But also we could sell it, what I call "from the stage". We could sell it during our programs. And what we would do, we would sell it for the interpretive association; the money would go back to the interpretive association for more interpretive programs. And hopefully they would set aside a significant part of that sales for the Fiddlin' Foresters so we could do programs that really can't now afford us, like a school group. We go play at a school. We have to rent a sound system for \$350 and so forth that we try to pass... We don't have a budget. If we try to pass that on to the school, they really can't afford that. We'd like to do more schoolteachers and school groups, and those kinds of things that really can't afford just our expenses. So if we could build up a pot that was in the interpretive association, then we could travel from that to do interpretive programs and be a lot more available. We don't do this as a full-time job. We all have other jobs. So we try to limit... Our rule or our guidelines are one out-of-town trip per month. Sometimes we'll take two and sometimes we don't take any. We do generally around thirty programs a year. Twenty-five to thirty. And so that's a couple a month; sometimes three times a month. But we all have jobs and we all have bosses who don't want us gone all the time off doing this, and they are very gracious allowing us to do as much as we do. I personally do the booking and write the programs and the set lists and most of the logistics. And we usually do PowerPoint programs behind this; we usually produce a brochure that we pass out with our program we're going to do that evening, as well as our conservation messages in there. Keep track of everybody; plan rehearsals, and all that kind of thing. So I spend a lot of time with it; I spend, oh, sometimes it's up to half my time I'm spending with Fiddlin' Foresters.

SS: As a performer and a manager.

LY: Do all the business management and travel vouchers and so forth. And we do divide some labor. Jim Maxwell, our banjo player, does all our booking for playing and room reservations and that kind of logistics, car rentals. And that really helps. Jane backs me up a lot on, whenever we need that kind of thing. And Tom McFarland, our volunteer, is sort of our sound system expert, and he does a lot of the sound system... Talking to the people on the other end, making sure we have the right kinds of plugs and all that technical kind of things. And our bass player, Doug Wagner, is on a fire team, so he doesn't travel

with us much in the summer. And so whether he would come in 2005, what he would have to do is take himself off the team to assure that he would be available in the middle of the summer. And I don't know if that would happen or not; whether we would actually have four people or five people. We also have... In fact with my brother, who's a bass player who lives in Washington, and when we perform in Washington he performs with us. He's a bass player as well.

SS: Does he work for the Forest Service?

LY: He retired from the Soil Conservation Service after thirty-some years, and has played old-time music for years and years and years. But anyway, I'm not exactly sure if Doug Wagner would travel with us or not. We'd have to get a commitment from him and his boss to step down from the team for that time. We'd have to approach that later.

SS: We were talking about stage lighting. You rent that equipment or you coordinate with the Washington office. Any unusual or special things you would need to adequately perform during the Folklife Festival? Anything to make it special for the 2005 centenary that you would want?

LY: Well, if the performances are outside on the stage, that pretty much eliminates doing video and that kind of thing, just because of the lighting aspects of it. If we were to perform indoors, that would be something that we like to do for new employee orientation and those kinds of things, we have a lot of historic pictures of the last hundred years, of firefighting, of logging, of old rangers on horseback, even have some old video that, silent video days from the twenties that we will run behind us while we're performing. We don't actually refer to it. It just sort of enhances our program. So if we were to perform indoors... Typically outdoors that doesn't work very well, in the daytime anyway. And we have actually done it outdoors at night. Usually in a rear screen where we stand in front of the screen and it's projected from behind. We have done it where there's a screen on either side of the stage where they project on those screens on either side of the stage, and then have video of us live, you know, when we're not running something on PowerPoint or VHS, then they'll put us up on the screen.

SS: {inaudible 30:52}

So it depends on the venue we would play. If we play indoors and the stage was large enough to use a rear screen, or the projector was above us and shot down behind us; we've done that before as well. But what we don't do is stand for it projecting on us. [Demonstrates with his hand how the projection would hit the performers instead of the screen.]

SS: Now obviously the venue is outside – the Folklife Festival is on the Mall. But, I mean, they do use tents, and I could see one possible avenue is, during the day is you have a stage set up in a tent. That would maybe create the right amount of light and you could show the video.

LY: We actually have done that, when we performed at Monticello, they had a... For the centennial of the Lewis and Clark. They had this beautiful facility; it was a great big tent. It was in the wintertime, and it was heated. And it had a very large rear-screen setup behind it. We didn't know that was going to be there so we didn't bring our program, but that would have worked very well inside a tent. So I guess I'm including a tent as inside.

SS: Let's see. Is there anything you think you need to add? About the Fiddlin' Foresters, that would...

LY: Well I want to stress again the agency representative part of the Fiddlin' Foresters, from the Chief and the Deputy Chief, Associate Chief, and all the regional foresters. In fact one of the regional foresters is an original member, and it would be great if he could come and play with us. We just put on a program a few weeks ago for the National Leadership Team: the Chief, the directors, the deputy chiefs, and all the regional foresters. And Denny Bschor, the regional foresters, and his wife and Tom McClure played with us as the original Fiddlin' Foresters. It was a lot of fun. And that would be great, if they could...

SS: A reunion tour.

LY: Yeah. Be a part of that program as well. But we represent the Forest Service, and we have clear to the top, including the secretary and the deputy secretary, lots of support. So we'd really like the opportunity to do this. I think it would be fun. Actually I grew up in Arlington, Virginia. My dad worked for the Department of Agriculture, and as a teenager and when I went to work in Virginia, I would always go to the Folklife Festival, and that's where I got some of my interest in old-time music, was going to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

END OF INTERVIEW