U.S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Region Five History Project

Interview with: **Ben Charley**
Interviewed by: **Max Younkin**
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[Begin CD File 1.]

MAX YOUNKIN: Okay, Ben, we'll continue. What influences when you were growing up in a rural ag community like Dunlap that affected your choice to work for the Forest Service?

BEN CHARLEY: It a need of a job at the very beginning, but the job that the Forest Service had for me to do,[*I already knew*.] I had done that when I was a kid. I built fence, chopped wood. I done everything when I was a kid, and when I went in the Marine Corps, all that stayed with me.

YOUNKIN: Okay.

[Recording interruption.]

Back on track. Did being raised as a Native American have any influence as to why you wanted to work for the Forest Service, or was it just a job that became available *[that]* was convenient to where you lived?

CHARLEY: No, working for the Forest Service, the people that I was born and raised [with] was non-Indians, non-Indians, no. We all got along. I had never experienced any prejudice or

anything, so that made it a pretty nice *[time].* I thought there was no racial prejudice in this world, but after a while I found out it was different. But, yes, when I retired—when I went in the Marine Corps and I lost track of everything home, but I picked up other knowledge from other people, which made it pretty—I met other people and worked with other people.

YOUNKIN: Okay.

[Recording interruption.]

Back on track with Ben Charley. Ben, throughout your career, you worked quite a bit, most of your career in fire, and there have been a lot of major changes which you've seen in the years that you spent with the Forest Service, but I remember one of the changes that came about in 1971—you know, Congress had directed the Forest Service to develop a system to improve the California fire services for agencies that had multi-jurisdictional responsibility for fires—you know, like the county, the Forest Service, and so forth. They called it FIRESCOPE [**FI**refighting **RES**ources of **C**alifornia **O**rganized for **P**otential **E**mergencies], and I was wondering when that particular program—I know that it started in '71 or so—how that affected you or when did it affect you when you were a firefighter on the Sequoia *[National Forest].*

CHARLEY: That didn't really affect me that much because even before FIRESCOPE, there was a mutual aid in our country up there, where if CDF *[California Division of Forestry]* had a fire down below [outside of Forest Service land], well, we'd go down and help them out. If Park Service had a fire, we would help them. So actually FIRESCOPE was probably in way long before this came up because we was always helping each other out. It didn't make any

difference who you were or what you were; if you had a fire going, you helped them. That was my feelings, just helping.

YOUNKIN: So those changes that came about as a result of FIRESCOPE were just some communication differences,—

CHARLEY: That's about the size of it.

YOUNKIN: —which you guys were already implementing already in your everyday activities fighting fire.

CHARLEY: Yes. I'm not talking about other districts or other forests, I'm talking about the Hume Lake *[Ranger District]*[*Sequoia N. F]*, where they did—we helped each other out.

YOUNKIN: How did you happen to learn about the structural changes that were going to take place in the fire organization as a result of FIRESCOPE?

CHARLEY: It was just a matter of you hiring your crew, and then you get [different] directors coming in, and then, whether you like it or not, it's a job. You do it.

YOUNKIN: Do you remember the first fire you were on under FIRESCOPE? Do you recall that, and what changes seemed evident to you at the time?

CHARLEY: Well,*[what it was]* I think is that every time we go to*[the]*southland, we'd run into FIRESCOPE. Up here, we didn't change that fast. To me, it became a lot of safety conscious came in, and your briefings became longer and longer and longer, you know? But it was a necessity as far as letting people know what's going on. All it did was shorten our work day. Put it that way, you know?

YOUNKIN: So safety regulations became a lot more evident as a result of FIRESCOPE.

CHARLEY: A lot more evident, but it was already in concept with us all along. Hell, you're going to save your own life. You're not going to burn nobody up. So that's always been with us. Safety.

[Recording interruption.]

YOUNKIN: We're back on track with Ben Charley, and Ben, over the years there have been a lot of changes in the Forest Service, and a couple of big changes that I recall that had a big influence in our programs were the spotted owl issue and the consent decree settlement for women. These two changes, along with probably some other issues, really resulted in some intense upheaval in the organization. Emphasis on money and where it was spent changed, and time and resources went into these two areas. And I was curious if those changes and maybe some others that you can recall had a big influence on the way you did your job on the ground in your firefighting efforts. How did those issues affect what you were doing? You might start with spotted owls.

CHARLEY: Well, the spotted owls—the only change it made to us was the fact that their habitat—the old trees. You know, normally *[you punch]* a line in, you take all your dead trees out, and some of them you had to leave in, which—you know, it was not much of a bother. We took care of it. They'd put a line around it or put your line away from it if it was to fall, and things like that. But that didn't bother us a whole lot.

The thing that really bothered me most—it didn't bother me, but it kind of hindered my [language] talking with the people, because then I had to hire females. You change your way of addressing your people. That*[made it]* kind of hard. You get used to working with men, you say

things that it's kind of offensive towards women. [Chuckles.] Some don't mind, and some do, and the ones that do, they let you know.

YOUNKIN: Yes. I know from your background that you spent twenty years in the military, and a number of Forest Service people back in those days went from the military into the Forest Service.

CHARLEY: That's correct.

YOUNKIN: A lot of times people said that we came out of the military with a military management style. How did that help you or hinder you in a Forest Service job?

CHARLEY: Didn't hinder me a bit. My ranger—he [put it] on the line, do the job, do it right, and I knew that. The discipline I had, it didn't bother me one bit. In fact, I welcomed a good, strict supervisor. I liked that. No wishy-washy.

[Recording interruption.]

YOUNKIN: We're back on track with Ben.

One of the questions that I wanted to ask, Ben, is the workforce changed over the years. A lot of the folks in the organization went from being generalists to specialists. I was wondering how that affected your job in terms of leadership, in terms of how you accomplished your firefighting job.

CHARLEY: Well, the –ologists was no problem when they came into the workforce, on the district. Some of the guys were just like anybody else, wanting to learn, and they'd say, "Hey, can I go to a fire with you?" "Come aboard." Some of them said they didn't want no part of it. That's fine. You know, it was their prerogative. So I had no problem whatsoever. I've had

timber people come in and say, "Can I go?" "Come aboard." You know, they ask to come aboard, they're going to work for you. That's all there is to it. I've never had an –ologist that said, "I want to go with you" and then turn around and says, "This ain't for me." They'll do the work and might come back and say, "I don't want to go no more," which is fine.

[Recording interruption.]

YOUNKIN: Back on track with Ben.

Ben, we discussed a little bit about the organizational change from generalists to specialists. In the days when you started out, fire was everybody's job. With the specialization, priorities had changed. Did you have any particular problems, or how did you deal with—I know you've spoken to using specialists in firefighting jobs. Did the specialization affect your manpower resource at all and your capability of fighting fires?

CHARLEY: I don't think that bothered me a bit. What we done on the district is that the biologist people—they'd say, "Hey, can I go with you?" I said, "Sure, come on." They done it because they wanted to learn what fire was like, I'm supposing, what it was like to be on [the] line. And when they ask you to come with you, well, I take them, you know? Why should I refuse them? If they want to work and I have the space for them, yes, I'd take them. And I never had no problem. I never did have any problem. I've taken female archaeologists and all that, taken them out, and they worked just as hard as the men do. That's all I ask for.

[Recording interruption.]

YOUNKIN: Back on track with Ben Charley.

Ben, I know that you were instrumental in hiring I guess what we call non-traditional cultures in the workforce. I know that you were instrumental in hiring Native Americans. How did your unit respond to integrating Native Americans into the workforce? And what worked and what didn't seem to work?

CHARLEY: I don't believe anybody really resented the fact that I was going after Indians alone, which wasn't—I've hired black people from the poor areas. I've hired them. And I've hired females when *[they came up]*, but I've kind of maybe focused [on] the male, Native American males because they can go back and tell their people what's going on]*[as far as]* the chain of employment. rather *than* have somebody [sit] back in the reservation and do nothing, which is not right, because you've got good people out there. They just got to be taught. Yes, I pick them up.

[Recording interruption.]

YOUNKIN: Back on track with Ben.

Ben, I know you were instrumental in recruiting Native Americans from all over the Southwest. How did that work, and what was your efforts in that recruitment?

CHARLEY: I had the support of the forest supervisor, my ranger, my fire control officer, and with that, you're work's half done. They gave me free rein to go interview, so I'd call up different tribes, and I'd say, "Hey, I'm coming up, need some people, roughly eighteen, nineteen. *[year olds]*. Let me talk to them. [They]Tell [me] to come up." And they'd bring all their people down, and all the *[tribal chair[man]* would be there. I'd [unintelligible]. [unintelligible]

[get up] and tell the guy[s], "Look, I'm Native American just like you, came up through the ranks just like you, had the hard times just like you." I say[ ], "You want to come work for me?" And the guy said, "Yes." I said, "Let me show you what we do." And myself and my foreman—we rigged up a slide *[tape]* program, and we'd show them the job, what we done. We built spring boxes, we built [slurpers] for birds, animals. We done every-—we done haz*[ard]* reduction. You name it, we done it.

Well, they said, "Yeah, I like that." But then, at the same time, at the tail end of it we'd show fire shots, *[what we done on fire],* good fire shots, and that kind of stirred them. I says, "You know, we take you and you make some money. You make some good fire—get some good money. You'll be all right. You'll drive new Cadillacs home." They liked that. By the same token—but anything I done, I had to do [chuckles] by the Native American book. You know, we all got little codes that *we* do it and no one else knows this, but they convey that knowledge to me, too, and I know what they're talking about. That made it good because I could do things that no one else could, being Indian, you know?

But then I go to women, same thing, because they know—I guess they feel sometimes I have a little compassion for them, and I do, you know? If they work, ain't no problem. [Laughs softly.]

[Recording interruption.]

YOUNKIN: Back on the tape.

Over the years, Ben, what training did the region or the agency provide to help you dealt with all of the changes that we talked about in diversifying the workforce?

CHARLEY: Well, you know, they sent me to all the minority [training], you know, hiring and all that, but most of that stuff I picked up when I was in the Marine Corps. Just doing what I had to do for them took a lot of support from my people. Good forest supervisors, good FMOs, good rangers. I never had a ranger than went against me for *[what I wanted to do]*. If I wanted some money to do something, I had it. You know, if I said, "I got to go to Redding to interview some people," "Go." So support was the main thing. I've seen other guys, I've talked to other guys who didn't have that support, and they were continually fighting to do things that they had to do and they wanted to do, and sometimes they couldn't do it. But that was the Hume Lake District.

[Recording interruption.]

YOUNKIN: Back on track with Ben.

Ben, you've been involved in leadership roles pretty much your whole life in the Marines and the Forest Service and even in retirement. What leadership qualities have impacted you most?

CHARLEY: I think you have to know your people, know your job, know the job and be able to convey your thoughts to them. If you can do that and you can just about sway their feelings and their—you might say their work ethic—I always felt that if you can't get a young guy who [doesn't have] good work ethics, you don't have nothing, but if he wants to work for you, you can do a ton of work with this person. Just teach him.

[Recording interruption.]

YOUNKIN: Back on track.

The other question that I might ask you is what words of wisdom would you give to, say, a first-year Forest Service employee or crew member in terms of leadership?

CHARLEY: Well, the first-year crewman—I used to have a saying: I'll teach you, I'll tell you, you just do it. First-year crewman, you know? But that's the way they're going to learn. You can't tell a first-year crewman about leadership because he really doesn't know. It'll grow onto him as you progress during the season; then he'll come in—like, if he's got a difficult time, you go talk to him. "What's the problem?" Maybe he's got a problem at home, whatever. You help him. And eventually that's going to—I've had guys that came out real good. *[In]* four or five years, they're top people. But you got to work with them.

I've had the opportunity—like I say about the support from my superiors, and I can take a guy and keep him maybe five, six years and then turn him loose to the outside world, and he fits right in. I've got a guy right now. He's an FMO up in Oregon.

YOUNKIN: What message would you pass on to today's leaders in terms of thoughts about effectively managing our resources, from the job that you have?

CHARLEY: In fire, you've got to have a guy who has a little bit of concern. I have a real bad feeling about people who will not get out of vehicles and go see what their people are doing up on the fireline. A lot of them do, and a lot of them do not. They just won't get out and *[hump]* the hills. They leave it to the foremans. I just never believed in that, but it might be hurting some people's feelings about that, but it's just the way I feel, and I believe a lot of other people feel the same way. It's just that our Forest Service is getting a little soft, you know, as compared to what we went through, you know, which is rough times, but we all survived, you know? But I think to be a good leader, you just got to understand your people and treat them decent and work

them hard, but just treat them decent. You know, you can work a guy pretty hard and make him happy the same time. It's just a matter of the way you talk to him.

YOUNKIN: I don't want to be personal, but you must have been pretty effective because I know that you convinced three of your sons to work for the Forest Service, too.

CHARLEY: [Laughs softly.]

YOUNKIN: How did you do that?

CHARLEY: I had [four] [also one daughter and three grandsons]. I had a boy that worked in range up in Oregon, I had at least two guys here and one in—well, these three guys all work in Forest Service for the Sierra. Then they moved [to] different places. And I had a [daughter] work in Forest Service. [Laughs.] So it's just a matter of family, you know? It wasn't me. My wife probably done 80 percent of the work, because she raised them, not me.

[Recording interruption.]

YOUNKIN: That concludes our interview.

[End of interview.]