

DROEGE, Richard
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**U.S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Region Five History Project**

Interview with: Richard Droege
Interview by: Brian Payne
Location: Mr. Droege's home in Easton, Maryland
Date: July 10, 2004

[Wav file 1.]

PAYNE: This is Brian Payne. I'll be the interviewer today. This is Saturday, July the 10th. I'm at the home the Dick Droege in Easton, Maryland. Dick, it's good to be here with you and have a chance to chat a bit.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: All right, great. Well, why don't we start with a bit of biographical information, if you could start with where you were born and when you were born.

DROEGE: I was born in Quincy, California, in 1914, which of course makes me ninety years old.

PAYNE: What was your birthday?

DROEGE: It was May 31st.

PAYNE: Okay. I'm going to write that down just so we got it on the record, in 1914.

DROEGE: My first job, meaningful job, was as a forester -- in Ocala, Florida.

PAYNE: My goodness.

DROEGE: And incidentally, that's where I got married, too. But the girl I married, she was from southern California, and I was from, of course, northern California. And that was in 1937 that we got married.

PAYNE: Got married in '37. All right. Now, before we jump to the job, how did you get from Quincy -- you must have gone to high school locally and then to college somewhere.

DROEGE: Yeah, I went to -- started in Sacramento Junior College. And I went there for two years, attempting to be an electrical engineer. And I had a heck of a time with calculus. And then I worked one summer -- I started out in the CCC Camp. And then I worked one -- I went from there back to a job with a forest service crew doing a thinning operation on the Plumas. And the fellows on that thing talked me into going into forestry. So I went down to forestry school at the University of California.

PAYNE: In Berkeley?

DROEGE: In Berkeley.

PAYNE: Which was the same place I graduated. What class were you in?

DROEGE: '36.

PAYNE: Graduated in '36. All right.

DROEGE: And you went there, too, huh?

PAYNE: I did. I was a little later. I graduated in the class of '61. But that's while my dad was in the regional office, and just went to Oakland High School and out to Berkeley. I didn't realize you were a Berkeley graduate until now. So good for us.

DROEGE: Right. I was there when old Daddy Mulford was there. He was the one that advised me to get to Florida because he thought that was the land of opportunity for foresters. But neither Mildred or I liked Florida worth a darn. And one of the fellows in personnel management there in Atlanta knew that. And he heard of this job in California where it was a fire replanting job, they called it, where we were supposed to determine resistance to control and -- make a map of all the various forests that showed the resistance to control of fires.

PAYNE: Based on vegetation or--

DROEGE: Yeah, right.

PAYNE: -- topography, and that sort of thing?

DROEGE: Well, both. And so we got back, and from there on I worked in California until, let's see, I guess it was -- I think it was in 1959 that I first -- I moved to Milwaukee. The reason I moved to Milwaukee was I'd been working in fire control with Red Nelson [phonetic]. He was

the assistant regional forester for fire. And so he got moved back to Milwaukee, and he kind of wanted me to come along, and so I--

[INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING]

PAYNE: Apologies, Dick. I think I failed to record what we've just been saying. If not, why then we've got some duplication on here, and we'll let the transcriber figure that out. But I'm going to start and say again, this is Brian Payne on Saturday, July the 10th. And I'm at the home of Dick Droege in Easton, Maryland, talking about his time with the Forest Service.

So, Dick, if we could go back to when and where you were born.

DROEGE: Well, I was born May 31st, 1914, in Quincy, California. And incidentally, it's of interest to me, but maybe not anybody else, but two years ago, my two sons and I and my brother made a trip back to Quincy. And we found the house I was born in. I was one of the kind of people that was born at home, and he was too. And we found our house where we were born. And to our amazement, it looked pretty good yet.

PAYNE: I'll be darned. This was two years ago, you say?

DROEGE: Two years ago we went up there, in the summertime -- well, it was pretty near fall, because we were worried about -- Quincy gets pretty cold in the wintertime, and we were thinking we ought to have pretty good coats and stuff. Well, it turned out that we had beautiful weather there, and we had a real good time. We went up to Buck's Lake and looked at that. We'd rented a car so we could -- in fact, we rented the car in Sacramento, because we drove from Sacramento up to Quincy. We could make that in a day, so that's what we did. But it was good seeing the old house again. And then my dad had built the house that I grew up in, really, and it was there, and real nice. And we stayed there.

PAYNE: What business was your dad in?

DROEGE: Well, he ended his -- he had a multi-career in a lot of things. He had worked in the sawmill for a long time. And then he got a job as a custodian of the grammar school, and that's where he ended his career. And then he started Leroy's [phonetic] Fixit Shop at home, wherever he had it, and he ran that.

And he died in nineteen -- I can't remember exactly the date, now, but he was -- my wife was with him then at that particular time. My mother had been in the hospital in Reno, Nevada, with a ruptured spleen; she fell. And at the time my dad died, I was supervisor of the Angeles.

PAYNE: In southern California.

DROEGE: In southern California. And right at that time we had a heck of a fire going that unfortunately had been set by one of our employees.

PAYNE: Is that right?

DROEGE: Yeah. And it was a heck of a fire. And it was a poor time for my dad to die.

PAYNE: I guess so. And you were supervisor, hard to get away.

DROEGE: And with a big fire going. But anyhow--

PAYNE: You mentioned your mother. I've got a particular reason to ask about her, because of something Max Peterson said. He said when he was on the Plumas, your mother was quite active in the town as a reporter [Inaudible] or--

DROEGE: Well, she was a reporter for the Feather River Bulletin, the social reporter, which was a paper. And she really liked the job. Of course, she got into everything that was happening in town that way. [laughs] And that's where she was when, I guess, Max knew her.

PAYNE: So she knew all the gossip and everything that was going on in town, then.

DROEGE: Oh, yeah, right. And she liked that, really. But when we went back there and visited, why, we went to the Feather River Bulletin office, too. It's now run by quite a nice looking young woman. And we went down, and I got a picture with her someplace that's showing us in the office with her. And she did a real nice job covering the fact of what we were doing.

PAYNE: So they did a story about you, then, two years ago in the Feather River Bulletin in Quincy.

DROEGE: Yeah, right. In Quincy, yeah.

PAYNE: Well, how about that. That's something our historians can take a look at as well, I guess.

DROEGE: Right.

PAYNE: Super. Well, I want to take you back to Quincy. You went to high school there, then. And I understand you went to a junior college.

DROEGE: We went to Sacramento Junior College. First I went to -- no, I went to Sacramento Junior College for a while. While I was there, why -- I'd like to back up. We lived next door to the ranger on the Plumas, Henry Kloppenberg [phonetic]. And he was our next-door neighbor, and he had two daughters that I grew up with, too. And Henry, he had managed, for some reason, to get me into the CCC Camp. And I went in as a Local Experienced Man, an LEM, as they called it.

PAYNE: LEM, Local Experienced Man, okay. Very good. With the help your neighbor the ranger.

DROEGE: Right. And the camp was down in the Feather River Canyon, about, oh, close to -- let's see, what was the name of that town? At that time, the Spanish -- the Meadow Valley Lumber Company had a cable arrangement to haul their lumber over the mountain and clear down to the bottom of the canyon down there.

PAYNE: Which is a pretty -- that's a pretty great elevation distance, isn't it, to [Inaudible] the bottom of that canyon?

DROEGE: Oh, yeah, it was. But it worked. Well, then from the CCC Camp, why, I went back to -- which incidentally was real good experience. I always thought that the CCC Camp -- I had a bunch of -- really, when I first started there, I had a bunch of kind of wild kids from LA there that I had to learn to get along with and get some work out of them.

PAYNE: So you were a supervisor of some of these other fellows, then.

DROEGE: Yeah, right, this Local Experienced Man business. But we had a good time there.

PAYNE: This was a Forest Service run CCC Camp, or not?

DROEGE: Yeah, it was. It was. Oh, we had all kinds of fun there. Like, for instance, when we were out there in the woods someplace, we found one of these great big long grubs, the white ones, and we took it back down. And during dinner one night we had spaghetti, and so we put

the worm in the spaghetti. And then we started hollering about "Look what's in our food here!"

[laughs] And the cook--

PAYNE: The cook was upset, huh?

DROEGE: Oh, yeah. But then he said the damn thing wiggled, and of course he knew damn well it had just been put in. But we did those kind of things.

PAYNE: The CCC did a lot of good work on infrastructure [Inaudible]--

DROEGE: Oh, yeah, they did.

PAYNE: -- [Inaudible] Recreation facilities and so forth. What sort of thing were you involved in with that project [Inaudible]?

DROEGE: Well, we were building a road, that was the big job. And the Caterpillar tractors at that time, why, you had two hands were on and two feet were busy, too.

PAYNE: With steering levers and foot pedals.

DROEGE: Right. The fellow that we were working --with, the one that was running the Cat where we were trying to build the road, why, he'd [laughs] get up above us, and then he'd "pull the ears back" -- that's what we called it [Inaudible] -- the pull -- and let the thing roll out.

[laughs]

PAYNE: Yes, indeed. So after the CCC experience--

DROEGE: Then I went to work with this Forest Service crew that was doing the thinning, and they're the ones that talked me into going to forestry school. So I actually only went for two years, because I was taking classes for stuff that I should have had two years before. [laughs]
But then I [Inaudible]--

PAYNE: So you switched to Berkeley.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: And I think you said you studied with Walter Mulford, who was the founder of that school.

DROEGE: Yeah, right. We called him Daddy Mulford. And as I said earlier, he was the one that recommended that we got to the south, because that was the land of opportunity for foresters there.

PAYNE: South being all the way south, Florida?

DROEGE: Yeah, Florida. Well, that's where I got a job.

PAYNE: So you got your first Forest Service job was -- what forest was that?

DROEGE: That's the Osceola.

PAYNE: And that was in nineteen--

DROEGE: 1936. And that's when Mildred came back so we could get married. And we always laughed about it, because she came by train at that time.

PAYNE: From northern California?

DROEGE: No, from southern California. And her dad said he's only buying a one-way ticket now. [laughs]

PAYNE: So it had to work.

DROEGE: It had to work. And I went to Jacksonville and met her. I had managed to -- I intended to have \$500 before we got married. That was a big sum of money for us, of course. Well, it turned out that I did have a car, but it was a 1936 Plymouth that was used. We had a real Forest Service wedding. I had convinced the ranger to be my best man. Then I kept trying to tell him that he was supposed to protect me and that sort of stuff. And he always acted like, well, it's -- and then after we were married and were walking down the aisle, why, I could see the rest of my fire crew -- I mean, my crew that I was working with, the Forest Service fellows, sitting on the back row. And I could tell they thought we were going to -- they had all kinds of ideas, I think, for me.

PAYNE: They were up to something.

DROEGE: Yeah. Well, when we walked back down the aisle, this ranger I was worried about doing his job, they all jumped up there, and he stopped right in the aisle and said, "Sign this book." And they all had to sign. And then he handed me the keys to his car, and he said, "You

take my car." And of course, they had all kinds of stuff tied on [my car], and I took his car and went -- and didn't have a bit of trouble.

PAYNE: You made a clean getaway.

DROEGE: Right.

PAYNE: Very good.

DROEGE: But we had a Forest Service lady playing the organ. The whole thing was a Forest Service wedding.

PAYNE: I'll be darned. And that was in Florida. How long did you stay in Florida, then?

DROEGE: Well, I think it was three years. Actually, I was using these CCC boys to make type maps, and they were pretty good. And the previous guy that had my job there was an engineer. And engineers, why, you have to -- everybody had to pace three feet. It didn't make any difference whether you were ten feet tall or two feet tall, you had to pace -- well, we changed that. And we found out what they could do. And then we, instead of going through all the continuous bogs they got down there, instead of going right through it, we'd go around it. And that way you got it where it belonged in the map and so on.

PAYNE: And maybe kept everybody's feet dry a little bit at the same time.

DROEGE: Yeah. And when we got ready to leave, Florida didn't want me to leave there. The state forester made me all kinds of promises if I wouldn't go away. [laughs] But we did, because we just plain didn't like Florida and all the bugs, particularly the damn cockroaches that are about that long, you know, about two inches long, it seemed like.

PAYNE: Sure. Those are what they call the Palmetto bugs sometimes, and they get big.

DROEGE: Right, yeah. That's right. Well, Mildred had a lot of trouble with mosquitoes, too. And anyway, we finally got out of there. We had a one-wheel trailer. Have you ever seen a one wheel trailer, that you hook to the -- it had to go exactly where you went, and it had to back up, then, because it was hooked at two places. And that was easy to run. And we had all our worldly goods in this one-wheel trailer, [laughs] because we didn't have very many, and we headed for California.

PAYNE: Back to Region Five. What forest did you go to?

DROEGE: Well, we went to this fire replanting project, which was in the -- actually the office was in Berkeley, but I thought I was going to the Sierra to start working. And I had gotten down to the supervisor's office there in Quincy--

PAYNE: On the Plumas.

DROEGE: -- and we radioed down to the Sierra, and asked them if there would be housing when we got there, because we knew that office was way out of town, and no place to rent a house, really. Well, we were on our way down to the Sierra, and we went into the -- we visited one of these daughters that had been next door to us, and she said, "Well"--

PAYNE: The ranger's daughter.

DROEGE: Yeah. And she told us that we weren't supposed to go to the Sierra, we were supposed to go to the Stanislaus, which is the shortest notice I've ever had for [laughs] -- and I remembered that I was in school in Berkeley with John Hall [phonetic]. And I remembered that his dad was supervisor of that forest.

PAYNE: The Stanislaus.

DROEGE: The Stanislaus, so we went there. And he was real, real nice to us.

PAYNE: Were you on the forest staff, or were you part of the regional project?

DROEGE: Well, it was part of this regional project, but I was--

PAYNE: You were assigned to the Stanislaus.

DROEGE: This J. R. Hall, who was supervisor, he ran that forest, and he didn't need anybody else to -- if you want to -- he was of the type that, "You ask me if you want to change anything." [laughs]

Well, Mildred was pregnant by then. And then they sent me clear up to the high country there to work on some trails. And Olive, his wife, found out about it, and so I got called right back down there. [laughs]

PAYNE: Interesting. So the wives had some influence in those days, didn't they?

DROEGE: Oh, yeah, they sure did. Then from there I went to my -- was assistant ranger on the Tuolumne District. And at that time I was working for -- gosh, I can't remember his name now. But anyhow, I worked there until I -- as assistant ranger, and then I somehow got back to Sonora, still an assistant ranger. And it was there that I got my first appointment as ranger, and that was on the Bridgeport District of California -- I mean on -- well, it was in California, but awful close to Nevada.

PAYNE: That's still on the Stanislaus?

DROEGE: No.

PAYNE: Which forest were you on then?

DROEGE: Well, we're on the Inyo now.

PAYNE: On the Inyo. Okay, so now you've gone south and almost into Nevada.

DROEGE: Yeah. And then I got moved to Carson City as ranger. And in Carson City, on the district, we had a Conscientious Objectors Quaker bunch, and they were--

PAYNE: And this is wartime.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: Okay, in the '40s.

DROEGE: Yeah. And we put them to work on cleaning -- there was a power company had been located in the canyon of -- and they had gone out of business, and the thing had been knocked down. But there were a lot of used brick, and they cleaned the used brick for us. And we hauled them into town. We were going to build a ranger station -- and thought we'd build it, because I was living in a rented house then. Well, they determined that we shouldn't be building anything because it was wartime.

And so they said, "Well, if you can show that you've really got a desperate need for the thing, why, you could maybe build something." And God, I even got the governor to -- who used to ride to work sometimes in my pickup -- [laughs] but I got everybody in town practically to say how desperately we needed this ranger station and they still turned us down.

PAYNE: Is that right?

DROEGE: It was Bob Daring [phonetic]. You remember him?

PAYNE: The name is vaguely familiar.

DROEGE: Well, he was one of the assistant regional foresters. At that time, Revere [S.B.?] Show [phonetic] was the regional forester. You ever heard his name?

PAYNE: Is he the Show of Show and Kotok [phonetic] [Inaudible]--

DROEGE: Yeah, right. He is.

PAYNE: [Inaudible] Author of several publications on forestry?

DROEGE: He is.

PAYNE: He was the regional forester.

DROEGE: Right.

PAYNE: And the other fellow you mentioned, the assistant who turned you down was Daring?

DROEGE: Daring, I think. I believe that was his name.

PAYNE: So you didn't have a ranger station?

DROEGE: We didn't get to build the ranger station.

PAYNE: What did you do with all the bricks that the Conscientious Objectors collected [Inaudible]?

DROEGE: They finally built a ranger station with them, but it was years later.

PAYNE: Something that your story illustrates or reminds me here is how often you moved in those days. When you were on a district, why, you'd move from one place to another fairly frequently.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: Which must have been difficult, both the learning how to do the job at the new place, not to mention the living conditions and the family disruption.

DROEGE: Right.

PAYNE: Tell us more about how that worked out. How about the job aspects of the frequent moves? [Inaudible]

DROEGE: Well, when I got onto that district there, why, we got paid for protecting a lot of the private land that was around Lake Tahoe. And it belonged to one man who was kind of a queer duck. And he had built a house that was really kind of a castle. But he had an idea that if he kept building he wouldn't die. [laughs] So he kept building and building on this house, but--

PAYNE: And you were protecting his land, you said, for [Inaudible] fire protection primarily, or from vandalism or anything else?

DROEGE: Yeah, right. And I'd like to tell you a story, but you better turn the machine off now.

[INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING]

PAYNE: -- on to record here. There we go.

DROEGE: We'll go from -- well, one of the things that happened there is that -- well, at Bridgeport I'd met a fellow that -- we had one cattle range that had about -- oh, I think it had ten or twelve permittees on it that all ran together. And this fellow was their rider to keep the -- and they'd move the cattle from here to there so they'd have feed and all that kind of stuff.

Our oldest boy was just a baby then, and we needed milk. And he said, "Well, why don't you ask some of those cattlemen and see if there isn't somebody there that's got a cow that's got milk?" So I did, and they told me they had one. And my bargain with them was the cow would be milked during the day, and then at night we'd take the calf off of her and then I could milk her in the morning. Well, [laughs] that was quite an experience, because she was a range cow. She was a white faced cow and wild as hell, you know. And the only way I could milk her was I had to let the calf get on one side, and then I'd kick the calf under the chin, then I could pull down--

PAYNE: [Inaudible] And grab a hold, huh?

DROEGE: Yeah. But we didn't get very much milk, but we got enough to take care of Roy.

PAYNE: Very good. You were a long way from stores or--

DROEGE: Oh, yeah. Well, there was a little store in the town of Bridgeport. It wasn't much of a store, but it had the essentials.

PAYNE: But not fresh milk?

DROEGE: Not fresh milk. It was about three miles into town, I think, from the ranger station. And incidentally, that ranger station was by -- a guy was ahead of me, was a fellow by the name of Henry Atchison [phonetic]. And the only thing they had for heat in the house was a fireplace. And it was a big -- one of these long design houses that went clear back and had three bedrooms. And it wasn't near enough to have a baby in that kind of a house, but that's what we had. And at that time the supervisor on the forest was Kelly Trau [phonetic]. Have you ever heard of him?

PAYNE: I don't believe so.

DROEGE: Well, he was quite a boy -- a man. But this ranger had two horses, and I wanted to get one of them, and finally he sold me one of them. And that's the one I always had to loan them when Revere Show was going to ride with him, because he was real gentle and nice, and so--

PAYNE: So he needed a gentle horse for the regional forester.

DROEGE: Right.

PAYNE: How often would a regional forester get out on a district? I could imagine it wouldn't be real frequent.

DROEGE: No. I think he only came there where I was once.

PAYNE: Okay. Because I know you mentioned earlier how the forest supervisor was pretty much in charge of the forest.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: How did the supervisors relate to the regional office in those days? Communications weren't real good.

DROEGE: Yeah, right.

PAYNE: So were they pretty much on their own?

DROEGE: You mean the supervisor?

PAYNE: The supervisors didn't get much [Inaudible] direction that they would receive from--

DROEGE: That's the way it was, yeah.

PAYNE: They were pretty independent.

DROEGE: Yeah. There in the forest with Kelly, we had an advisory board, and he didn't really want any advice from an advisory board, but he had to have them. He had one meeting in Reno that I attended. And he, to my surprise, by the time he got done talking to those fellows -- I thought he needed advice [laughs] but he didn't take any of it.

PAYNE: The members of the advisory board were local citizens, or other [Inaudible] folks?

DROEGE: They were permittees.

PAYNE: I see. So they had a stake in the management.

DROEGE: Yeah, right, right. And one time we had a fellow that had a band of sheep that he started complaining that somebody on his range, adjoining range or something, got onto his range and stole a lot of feed. And it turned out that what actually happened was that -- Kelly worked it down and questioned him so that he had a band of sheep there, and he had enough for, I don't know, three or four weeks. And it sounded like he said that, "Well, now, let's see, we got this man that's been on that range for three or four weeks. And they stole all that feed." And anyway, it sounded like he got it down to where they could say, "Ate pretty fast, didn't they?" [laughs]

PAYNE: [Inaudible] Couldn't eat that much feed, huh?

DROEGE: Right.

PAYNE: Well, those are the sorts of problems I guess a Forest Service officer had to deal with, though, disputes between permittees.

DROEGE: Oh, yeah, right. I don't know, they must still have to do that.

PAYNE: I suppose. Although, who knows, maybe now they go right to court. An awful lot of things go into court these days.

DROEGE: Yeah, that's right.

PAYNE: Well, this was still on the Inyo, and on the Bridgeport District there.

DROEGE: Well, then I went from there to Susanville, to--

PAYNE: On the Lassen.

DROEGE: -- the Lassen, as their fire training officer. [Interruption here by Dick helping his dog climb onto the bed adjacent to his chair, so let's just delete the phrase he never finished, and my comment "Very good" that referred to the dog. BP]

DROEGE: And then I went from there to -- the first job was in Descanso, clear in southern California, you know, the last district next to Mexico.

PAYNE: This was after you left the Lassen?

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: How long were you there [Inaudible]?

DROEGE: Well, it wasn't very long [Inaudible].

PAYNE: You mentioned you were in Susanville on the Lassen, and then went south. But I just asked: How long you were on the Lassen?

DROEGE: Oh, it was about a year, I think. And then I got transferred down to the Descanso, which at that time was the -- you know the salaries were figured in "Ps."

PAYNE: In the Ps, before the GS System.

DROEGE: Yeah. And this was a P-3 district. So I got my first check that was bigger than \$2,000.

PAYNE: My goodness. What year was this?

DROEGE: Oh, I've got a thing there that tells us.

PAYNE: Oh, good. We'll take care of that.

DROEGE: I think I've got it out there someplace.

PAYNE: Let me go back to here.

[INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING]

PAYNE: All right. We turned it off a minute. We're recording again. And I was just about to ask where Descanso was, which forest that was?

DROEGE: And that's the Cleveland.

PAYNE: The Cleveland National Forest, which is -- well, by now you're south of Los Angeles.

DROEGE: Oh, yeah. We're clear -- it's right against Mexico.

PAYNE: Right. [Inaudible]

DROEGE: [Inaudible] there was a just a few miles, or not even -- I think it was about less than a mile from the southern boundary of the forest into Mexico.

PAYNE: Okay. Right on the border. What differences did you experience in the resources in southern California compared to where you had been before?

DROEGE: Well, this was my first experience in -- we had practically nothing but brush. And up in the Laguna Mountains, there was timber and it was pretty nice, but it wasn't timber we were selling or anything. And we might remove some dead ones or something, but it was part of that -- people in San Diego could get -- or in the surrounding area could get up into the mountains.

Incidentally, there's a girl named Phyllis Walker, who was the -- Noel Walker was one of our neighbors -- in fact, they both were when I was the ranger at Bridgeport. And her husband worked on the district where I was. But she lives in Fallbrook, in southern California now. But I talk to her on the phone once in a while.

PAYNE: Oh, you do? Still in touch?

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: Very good.

DROEGE: Well, this was all started again after we'd forgotten all about each other. [laughs] But anyhow, on the Descanso was when I first started -- well, I'd just gone to work there. We had a Marine camp on the district for training. They were training. But they were useful on fires. And this first fire that we had on the district, as soon as I got there, was -- we lost, I think it was six or seven of them were burned to death.

PAYNE: Oh, my goodness, of these Marines?

DROEGE: Yeah. And they had got into a box canyon, a pretty steep sided canyon, and the fire jumped it, and they just couldn't get out. But the interesting thing was that after they got them all out, why, the commander of that group called me and said that they were ready to go again.

PAYNE: My goodness. Even having lost some of their men.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: Did this lead to any changes or reassessment in how we were fighting fire?

DROEGE: Well, they never should have been doing that anyway. We knew enough to do that, but I didn't know what they were doing then.

PAYNE: You mean, they were inadequately [Inaudible] trained--

DROEGE: I just had arrived there. I forget who the fire boss was, but I think -- but we had some Forest Service employee was the fire boss. And anyway, they shouldn't have been in that place where they could...

PAYNE: But obviously it was a lack of experience or training, or--

DROEGE: Yeah, right.

PAYNE: -- miscommunication or something there.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: That's a shame.

DROEGE: Yeah. Well, Norm Farrel [phonetic] was the forest supervisor there. Did you ever hear of him?

PAYNE: I've heard of him. I may have met him.

DROEGE: Yeah. But the Laguna Mountains down there, this timbered area on top, there were a lot of summer homes up there. There were quite a bit on private land, but there were some of them on Forest Service land, too, that we had special use [permits] for them.

PAYNE: Sure.

DROEGE: But I had one of my more interesting experiences on that one. Somebody had an old plane, a two-wing thing that I could use for looking at the fire. And while I was doing that, why, something happened to the plane, and he had to land. And there was of course no place to land. But there was a place out in the valley down below there, in Imperial Valley. And we finally limped along until we got that far. And I didn't get hurt at all or anything.

Incidentally, in other times, I've crashed in a helicopter twice.

PAYNE: My goodness. While on Forest Service business?

DROEGE: Yeah, oh, yeah.

PAYNE: Oh, my.

DROEGE: But I'm jumping ahead there. But I'm on the Angeles again, now.

[Wav file 2.]

PAYNE: Okay. So you're on the Angeles. You're going from the Cleveland to the Angeles now.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: One of your very many transfers.

DROEGE: What happened was that our regional forester was Charlie Connaughton .

PAYNE: I knew Charlie Connaughton.

DROEGE: You did?

PAYNE: I did. He came to our wedding.

DROEGE: Oh, is that right? On one of the fires, I guess it was the fire on the Cleveland that I somehow I got pneumonia, so I was home in bed in San Lorenzo, California. I thought that Charlie was going to sometime make me -- I was hoping that he'd make me supervisor of the Angeles, because Red Nelson and I -- he was my boss -- we'd had several feasts of Passover [laughs] because I'd been passed over [laughs] for the supervisor of the Inyo, and passed over for the supervisor of something else. But we were hoping that Charlie would make me supervisor of the Angeles.

Incidentally, Bob Mendenhall was the supervisor, and he'd been supervisor for twenty-eight years, I think some damn thing like that.

PAYNE: One of the people that didn't move.

DROEGE: One of the people that didn't move.

PAYNE: If you were living in San Lorenzo, you must have been in the regional office at that point in time.

DROEGE: Right.

PAYNE: So you'd come up from the Cleveland to the regional office, and then hoping Charlie would find a spot for you?

DROEGE: Yeah, right.

PAYNE: Did it work?

DROEGE: Yeah, right. That thing I got from the LA supervisors, you know, the county supervisors there. Because that's a pretty impressive [laughs]--

PAYNE: We're speaking of a certificate on the wall from the County of Los Angeles, signed by a bunch of folks on it. I'll take a closer look at that later.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: All right. So were you in fact made supervisor of the Angeles?

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: So hurray. That means that the Passover ended.

DROEGE: Right. He finally -- I guess he came over to see me in San Lorenzo, either that or he called me. But I think he was there, I think he came over and told me. If I could just get my -- I just had a nagging fever, just a little -- and it'd just come up every damn day. I'd think I was good, and then it would start to come up again.

But I finally got on the Angeles. And I enjoyed it very much there, except for fires. I had a real nice house in town there on North Chester Street. Are you familiar with any streets in Pasadena?

PAYNE: No, I'm not. I've been to Pasadena, but it was a long time ago [Inaudible].

DROEGE: Well, the only trouble that I had that was real bothersome, I'd take my car home so I could listen to the radio on it when I needed it. And basically, I knew that the only time they ever called me was when something bad had happened, you know, and somebody got burned up or some other thing.

PAYNE: So fire was the major concern there? [Inaudible].

DROEGE: Oh, yeah, on the Angeles, yeah.

PAYNE: How about recreation? Was there recreation pressure [Inaudible] building?

DROEGE: Oh, yeah, right, yeah. And we had three ski areas on the Angeles, too. And Mount Baldy had a real nice ski area. And there were two other ones up there. But one of the places that we had a helicopter was stationed at Jalayo [phonetic], and that was up quite a ways. And that's where one of the times that we started out from Jalayo in the helicopter, and for some reason, the damn thing just ran out of up. [laughs] And it didn't die, but it just you wouldn't--

PAYNE: It wouldn't rise.

DROEGE: And we went down and we landed in a steep, steep little canyon. It was enough so one track was on one side and one track was on the other side, and we just went down in the middle. [laughs]

PAYNE: My goodness.

DROEGE: And I always remember the fellow that was in charge of this crew up there was a long, tall guy. And I can still see that guy coming down over the brush down there [laughs] to see what happened to us. He was sure we were dead.

PAYNE: My goodness. And this is while you were the supervisor?

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: Yes, indeed. That would not have been good to lose the supervisor in an aircraft accident.

DROEGE: No. [laughs]

PAYNE: But you said that was the first of those.

DROEGE: One time, after I had been in the regional office quite a while, why, we were on another fire on the -- I can't remember, I think it might have been on the San Bernardino. But anyhow, it was night and there was just one teeny little bit of fire going up there, and I was going to be a hero and go up and get it. So I got in the helicopter. And I think the fellow's name was Freddie Bowen [phonetic]. But anyway, he tried and tried, and he couldn't quite get it off the ground. And he said, "Throw out your head lamp." And he just took right off. [laughs] And everybody just about died laughing at me about that.

PAYNE: That head lamp must have weighed, what, a quarter of a pound?

DROEGE: Maybe, yeah. [laughs]

PAYNE: Oh, my goodness. I asked about -- you've been talking about fire a good bit, because that was a major concern. And I asked also about recreation. You mentioned the ski areas. I know today, locating a new ski area is a major item of controversy. In those days was that sort of development well accepted?

DROEGE: Oh, yeah.

PAYNE: It was.

DROEGE: Yeah. Both the boys and I learned to ski a little bit on that one on Mount Baldy. It was hard to live within the rules because the guy that had that ski area wanted us to ski there so badly, and so we did. And we'd ski for nothing.

PAYNE: [Inaudible] You were responsible for the land there?[Inaudible].

DROEGE: Yeah. And at first, my -- the son that's there [points to photo] holding the -- on the bottom of that one, that's Dan. He is the most graceful skier. But Roy was the "get on top of Thunder Mountain" type of guy, [laughs] and he'd muscle his way down the hill. And he's always been that way. But anyway, that's where we learned to ski a little bit.

And in those days, why, the prize skis were Head skis. So the Forest bought me a pair of Head skis.

PAYNE: Well, good for them.

DROEGE: Well, I was supervisor, so they damn well had to. [laughs] I had an interesting arrangement there with the -- we didn't have a helicopter all the time. But the chief of the LA County Fire Department, Keith Clinger [phonetic], had a helicopter all the time. And so I had the secretary of agriculture one time. And it was when we didn't have one, so I borrowed his. But I had to give him some of this nylon rope to pay for it. [laughs]

PAYNE: As a trade or a little barter.

DROEGE: As a trade.

PAYNE: Well, it sounds like it probably was a pretty good deal, because helicopter time is expensive, I know.

DROEGE: Yeah. But that was illegal as the devil, but it worked.

PAYNE: It worked. It got the job done.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: Well, you had to take care of the secretary of agriculture. About what year was that? I need to get a reference here. This is still, what, in the '50s here?

DROEGE: It was before I left the Angeles. I left there in '59, so it must have been about '58.

PAYNE: Okay, good, good.

DROEGE: I only lasted on the Angeles for three years, I think. Then I went to Milwaukee.

PAYNE: Did you ever come back to Region Five after Milwaukee, or was that the end of your California--

DROEGE: That was the end of my California time. After I went to Milwaukee, and then as assistant regional forester.

It was interesting, one time I was -- Ed Cliff was chief then. We made a canoe trip on the Superior, in all those lakes up there, and I argued with Ed the whole damn time it seemed like.

PAYNE: About what?

DROEGE: Oh, just--

PAYNE: Everything.

DROEGE: Yeah, I don't know what the issues were [Inaudible] -- so I thought, "Well, this is the end of my career." [laughs] And it wasn't but a few days after that that he called and said, "Do you want to be regional forester in Region Seven?" And I said, "Oh, sure." [laughs] And he says, "Well, you've got to ask your wife." [laughs] And he wouldn't okay me until I'd asked Mildred about it.

PAYNE: Okay. Again, the influence of the wives, although not many women were employed as Forest Service employees--

DROEGE: No.

PAYNE: -- they were paid attention to by some of the folks, that's for sure.

DROEGE: Right. Well, Ed was one of them. But I got to be -- after I guess it was -- I think this is after Region Seven got closed down and I got moved into the regional office -- I mean, in the Washington office, and I was assistant regional -- I mean, assistant chief for -- I had fire and recreation. This is when Bernie had timber, mostly.

PAYNE: Bernie being my dad, Bernie Payne, right.

DROEGE: Nelson had two assistants, and one of them was your dad and one of them was me.

PAYNE: This is Red Nelson, who was at that point a deputy chief for National Forest System.

DROEGE: Yeah, right.

PAYNE: Okay. And then you and my dad were his two deputies, or assistants.

DROEGE: Yeah. And [laughs] I had the best secretary that anybody could possibly have.

PAYNE: Who was that secretary?

DROEGE: Well, her name was Sandy Meade [phonetic]. And she was the kind of a gal that just if you really needed something and the pressure was really on, she'd never make a mistake.

[laughs] And your dad had a pretty good secretary, too. But Red had one that was absolutely useless, practically impossible [Inaudible].

PAYNE: Okay. I won't ask for a name on that one. We don't want to mention names there.

DROEGE: No.

PAYNE: So your secretary probably ended up rescuing the boss every now and then.

DROEGE: Right, she did. She and her husband now live in Pound, Virginia. Do you know where that is?

PAYNE: No, I don't.

DROEGE: It's way down in the southwest corner.

PAYNE: This is Sandy Meade and her husband.

DROEGE: Yeah, right. I've got an e-mail address for them, that it starts out with "TwoMeades."

PAYNE: You mentioned your time in the Washington office. I know my dad said that when he was in Washington, and things started looking bad, which they often did, with congressional

mail and all sorts of problems that reached the Washington office, he liked to head for the field, because out in the field things always were working like they were supposed to.

DROEGE: Right, yeah.

PAYNE: Was your experience visiting the field similar to that?

DROEGE: Well, one thing I had to do that I was expected to do was I went to the house committee that had this land business, acquisition. They were interested in that. I remember the chairman of that was Julia Butler Hansen, I think.

PAYNE: From the state of Washington.

DROEGE: Yeah. And I had to be able to -- she could pick out on this list that we had, anything on there and ask me why we were wanting to do that. And particularly there was expensive land in Oak Creek Canyon on the -- where in the hell is the one--

PAYNE: Near Sedona, in Arizona.

DROEGE: Yeah.

PAYNE: Is that the Coconino?

DROEGE: Yeah, I think maybe that's right.

PAYNE: I've been in Oak Creek Canyon, and it's incredibly valuable land and a fantastic recreation site.

DROEGE: Well, she had to be convinced of that all the time.

PAYNE: We didn't own that land at this time when you were testifying before her.

DROEGE: No. We were trying to buy it all, and it was expensive. And so we could condemn it, but that didn't make it cheap.

PAYNE: Right.

DROEGE: So for all the Forest Service appropriation, both your dad and I would have to go and back up Ed Cliff, who would be really answering the questions. But we'd go to the staff meetings there, your dad and I, and we didn't sit at the table. We sat around -- we could sit in back of -- [laughs] we were in back of Red, really.

PAYNE: In the chief's office at the staff meetings, right?

DROEGE: Right. And incidentally, one time Max Peterson said that John McGuire was the chief's choice. But I know that the assistant secretary of agriculture that -- I can't think of his name now -- he called me over into his office one day and said, "Who ought to be chief now?" And I said, "John McGuire." [laughs] And so he was.

PAYNE: And so he was. And a very fine chief he was.

DROEGE: He was, too. He's dead now, too.

PAYNE: Yeah, that happened, unfortunately [Inaudible]. Let me see where we're -- we've got you all the way from Quincy to Washington DC. And that's quite a career. I wonder if looking back on it, sometimes you get absolutely unexpected twists and turns. Is there anything looking back in your career that sticks out as something that was a big surprise?

DROEGE: Well, one thing was that they gave us -- some of the people training and how to handle controversy, you know, with the employees?

PAYNE: Sure.

DROEGE: And I never went through it. But we had a colored gal in New York, she was appealing something. And Robertson, I think, was the name of the assistant, the chief then, and he called me and said he wanted me to go to New York and handle this.

PAYNE: A difficult personnel case, in other words.

DROEGE: Right, yeah. And I said, "Well, I haven't been trained for it." He said, "That doesn't make any difference." He says, "I know you Forest Service people can handle anything."

[laughter] So he gave me a pretty good lawyer to take, and the two of went in there. And we never did get that woman before us because she just wouldn't—[testify]

[End of interview.]

WORD LIST FOR RICHARD DROEGE
[spellings of words in boldface need to be verified]

NAMES

Red Nelson [deputy chief] Correct
Henry **Kloppenberg**
John Hall
Julia Butler Hansen
Walter Mulford
Palmetto bugs
Revere Shaw Show, pronounced like chow, but I don't know about "Revere"
Shaw & Koetauk [forestry publications] Show and Kotok
Bob Daring
Kelly Trau forest supervisor
Norm **Farrel** forest supervisor
Charlie **Conniton** Connaughton
Bob Mendenhall
Freddie Bowen [helicopter pilot]
Keith **Clinger** [chief of LA County Fire Department]
Ed **Cliff** [chief in Milwaukee] Correct. Ed was FS Chief when Dick went to Milwaukee
Sandy Meade [Droege's secretary]
John McGuire [chief] Correct

PLACES

Quincy, California
San Lorenzo, California
Ocala, Florida
Plumas Forest
Cleveland Forest
Osceola Forest, Florida
Inyo Forest
Lassen Forest
Stanislaus Forest
Reno [not sure he's saying Reno] Reno makes sense, as it's near Carson City
Box Canyon Not a proper name, simply a description
Laguna Mountains
Jalayo [helicopter station, Angeles?]
Imperial Valley
San Bernardino
Tawalami District Tuolumne
Descanso
Mount Baldy
Jalayo helicopter stationed there ?? I wonder if this is La Jolla.

Sedona, Arizona

Coconino, Arizona

Pound, Virginia

SCHOOLS

[University of California at] Berkeley

BUSINESSES

Leroy's Fixit Shop

Feather River Bulletin

Head Skis

ACRONYMS

MISCELLANEOUS

[assistant] **radial** [forester] regional

tight maps type, forest type maps