



An Interview with George Sabin Gibbs III

Louisville, KY

October 22, 2021

**James Wall 00:00**

Alright, so we are here with George Gibbs, and what is today?

**George Gibbs 00:07**

October 22.

**James Wall 00:08**

Today is October 22, 2021. And we are at the office of Ann Schell in Louisville, Kentucky. And just by way of disclaimer, if you ever want to pause the video, take a break. Just let me know. Or go off the mic. We can do that too. But that being said, could you tell me when and where you were born?

**George Gibbs 00:38**

Okay, I was born in Annapolis, Maryland, the son of a naval officer who was teaching at the Naval Academy at that time. So, I was born in Annapolis Hospital.

**James Wall 00:55**

And what year was that?

**George Gibbs 00:56**

It was 1934. April 16, 1934. I like to throw in that I was born in the free and neutral state of Maryland, which is south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

**James Wall 01:13**

And now here you are in Kentucky.

**George Gibbs 01:15**

Which is barely south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

**James Wall 01:18**

Historians call Kentucky “The Posthumous Member of the Confederacy.”

**George Gibbs 01:22**

There you go.

**James Wall 01:24**

It's another border state. So, Annapolis: Navy town, right?

**George Gibbs 01:27**

Right.

**James Wall** 01:29

And you were born in the middle of the Great Depression. Did you sense any of that? What did your parents do?

**George Gibbs** 01:40

Of course, my dad was Navy and mother was a homemaker.

**James Wall** 01:43

And what were their names?

**George Gibbs** 01:45

Robert Henry Gibbs, Jr. Excuse me, just Robert Henry Gibbs. And Elizabeth Carrington Kilgore. And mother was from Raleigh, North Carolina. The daughter of Benjamin W. Kilgore.

**James Wall** 02:09

And your father was from?

**George Gibbs** 02:12

I believe New London, Connecticut. I'm not exactly sure. His father was an Army officer in the Signal Corps. Ultimately, Lieutenant General, so my dad wound up an admiral; I was obviously a military brat.

**James Wall** 02:32

Great, great, great. Yeah?

**Lisa Tate** 02:36

I'm picking up George really well, but I'm still not hearing you through my headphones. Maybe if it's a little closer to your—maybe?

**James Wall** 02:44

Hello? Hello?

**Lisa Tate** 02:45

There we go, there we go.

**James Wall** 02:47

Yeah, let me—thank you. How about that? That's great, yeah. Okay.

**George Gibbs** 02:51

And I'm giving you too much information, but that's okay.

**James Wall 02:55**

Oh, yeah. You're doing just fine. Yeah, and that's recording too. So, if that stops or something, just let me know. Alright. So, your dad was a Navy man. And your mother was a homemaker. And did you have any brothers and sisters?

**George Gibbs 03:10**

I have two older brothers. The oldest one is Robert Henry. And he would be Robert Henry, Jr. He was, let's see, Robert was born I think again in New London, Connecticut. Because my dad by that time was driving submarines for the Navy. And I guess that was one of his duty stations. Where was I going with that, James?

**James Wall 03:49**

Oh, we were talking about your brothers.

**George Gibbs 03:51**

Okay, the other brother was Benjamin Wesley Kilgore. And he was born in Honolulu, Hawaii. So, he was born in 1931. And Robert was born 1929.

**James Wall 04:09**

I see. So, you were the baby?

**George Gibbs 04:12**

I was always the baby.

**James Wall 04:14**

Yeah. Is that how they introduced you?

**George Gibbs 04:17**

No, I got by that fairly easily; a lot of people never knew.

**James Wall 04:23**

So y'all moved around a lot?

**George Gibbs 04:28**

Yes, we did. I remember San Diego, California, another submarine duty station when I was about two years old. And that's when I developed my first medical issue with a case of pneumonia. And my mother always told me that I was saved by "sulfa drugs." That was before the days of penicillin. So, I'm very thankful for medicine in those days too. We also lived in Hawaii. And I'm not sure about his duty station at that time. I mean, probably submarines still.

**James Wall 05:23**

So, what did y'all do for fun when you were growing up?

**George Gibbs 05:27**

Oh, golly, if I go through the photo album, I see us playing cops and robbers and Indians and that kind of thing and shooting bows and arrows. My older brother was sort of the brains of the family. And I always looked up to him, followed his footsteps and did the things he did. The middle brother was the middle brother, like they say most middle children are. He played the violin and was more academically inclined.

**James Wall 06:11**

Yeah. Did you spend a lot of time outdoors?

**George Gibbs 06:14**

Always.

**James Wall 06:15**

Yeah.

**George Gibbs 06:16**

And my parents divorced when I was about twelve. And I lived with my mother. And my dad remarried. And he had an interesting career because we moved to Washington, DC suburbs, Chevy Chase, when he was assigned as Assistant Director of the Naval Research Lab in Anacostia. And I have all of his personal records. But I'm distributing all of them to all the family members. And Hannah helps me do that quite often.

**James Wall 07:03**

So he was a man of science, would you say?

**George Gibbs 07:06**

He was an engineer. And he was involved with SONAR and that kind of thing at the Naval Research Lab, and quite honestly, because they divorced, I didn't see my dad for a long time. Another duty station was Sofia, Bulgaria, as a naval attaché there. And so, I lost track of him and his career and all that he did and I've had to try to retrieve a lot of that through his files and records. I was executor of his estate, so I wound up with all of that.

**James Wall 07:50**

So, your mother—you spent most of your time at a certain point with your mom?

**George Gibbs 07:54**

I lived with mother. And that's where my interest in gardening came from. Because she was a gardener of flowers and fruit and vegetables.

**James Wall 08:12**

Sure. And her name was Elizabeth.

**George Gibbs 08:15**

So yeah, I lived with mother until I went to college. And I started Georgetown University, but I transferred after two years to NC State, and that's when I left home.

**James Wall 08:34**

Where'd you go to high school before you made your way to...

**George Gibbs 08:36**

I went to Woodrow Wilson High School in Washington DC. I'm not sure of why Wilson instead of the old BCC, Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, because I went to Leland Junior [High School], which is right down the street, and I don't know why. But that's part of our history as well. My older brother Robert and my middle brother and I were all involved heavily in the high school Cadet Corps. And Robert became Captain of B Company when he came through and in city competition placed fairly high. And history didn't tell me what, but then my middle brother came along, and he was a Lieutenant in B Company. And when I came along, I was Captain of C Company, which was sort of the dregs of the crowd and the bottom of the heap and always runner-up to B Company until I had my year and we outpointed B Company and also, I believe won the city tournament.

**James Wall 09:53**

When you were growing up, what did you think you wanted to do when you eventually grew up?

**George Gibbs 09:58**

You know what, I just migrated, had no idea, but I was gung-ho military and a sharp soldier. I knew how to spit polish shoes and make them shine and issue commands, that kind of thing.

**James Wall 10:22**

Sure. Wow, so you went to Georgetown, then you went to NC State—I think what I'm trying to ask is: at what point did forestry become something that you were aware of as a subject?

**George Gibbs 10:39**

Let me get Georgetown out of the way.

**James Wall 10:41**

Sure.

**George Gibbs 10:42**

While at Georgetown, which is a Catholic college, I was a Catholic and a Protestant, or Protestant in a Catholic situation. So, I spent a great deal of time with the Fathers and Brothers trying to convert me. And one day I told Father Law, I said, "You've done a great job, Father, because I thought I was an atheist, but you've made me an agnostic." [laughter] And while I was at Georgetown, I thought I was an athlete of sorts, I'd ran track and played ball, but I was too small, too short and all those kinds of things. But I was in the head of the drill team, in their high school cadet, our college cadet platoon, and I was a drill sergeant that issued commands and we had a good time, I could flip a rifle pretty well. And then, after my sophomore year, they didn't take but one student into the Advanced ROTC Program. And he had to be flight-capable, and my eyes were defective enough that I could not fly. So, I was the second academically ranked cadet, and therefore missed ROTC. And when they did that, I said, "Hmm, let's do something else." Well, coincidentally, my mother took me to the dedication of Kilgore Hall in Raleigh, North Carolina, which was dedicated to my grandfather. And it happened to be the forestry school headquarters. And that's when I said, "Okay, I'll go to forestry school," and I did.

**James Wall 12:45**

Did your grandfather have an interest in forestry? Is that how that came about?

**George Gibbs 12:47**

My grandfather was State Chemist of North Carolina. Among other things, he founded a dairy in Raleigh and produced milk and milk products and had a peach orchard, so was involved in agriculture. And I guess that's sort of a blend of skills that carry over to the family.

**James Wall 12:48**

Right. So, do you remember the first forestry class that you took in college? Or were there any professors that stood out to you?

**George Gibbs 13:23**

There are two professors that that were well known, well respected, and one of them was Dr. Ralph Bryant. And the other one was GK Slocum. And there was Dr. Miller as well, but those were the primary professors for me. And my, I guess, my counselor as well. I

was sort of a “float with the crowd” thing. I was a fraternity member of SAE [Sigma Alpha Epsilon] and participated in all of their sports athletic stuff. And to the point where I had an all-around athlete award, not a superior athlete award but an all-around because I'd venture into anything, including pole vault. So, I'm not a pole vaulter, obviously [laughter], but college was fun.

**James Wall** 14:31

Yeah.

**George Gibbs** 14:32

Fraternity was fun. We did the business kinds of things as well. We were a well-run, top-of-the-heap fraternity in those days and probably I think they're defunct now [chuckles], so, who knows.

**James Wall** 14:46

What was it about NC State that that drew you in instead of let's say North Carolina or Duke?

**George Gibbs** 14:53

Well, I applied to three schools. NC State, West Virginia, and Penn State. And I was accepted at all three. But if I went to Penn State I had to start as a freshman. And if I went to West Virginia I had to do something else that kind of negated what I had already done, but NC State transferred all of my credits as a straight “C,” so I started my junior year with a 2.0 average, with obviously no academic future. So, I just plodded along. But it was good because I wound up with three years at NC State before I graduated, which let me take a lot of electives. And when I graduated, I was eligible for pre-med school or maybe saltwater fishery biology or something like that.

**James Wall** 16:04

So, you got your GPA up a little bit?

**George Gibbs** 16:06

Yeah, my GPA was—I wound up “B,” or just a little better. But I was not a good student. Some things are easy, some things not.

**James Wall** 16:20

Yeah. What was your favorite subject? Besides forestry, obviously?

**George Gibbs** 16:25

Wildlife Management. And so, I have sort of a minor degree in Wildlife to go along with a Forest Management Degree.

**James Wall 16:35**

Yeah. And then you ended up doing a lot in that field later on, which we'll talk about, I'm sure. So, you get close to graduating. Did you have any inkling that you might join the Forest Service? Or was that something that you decided after you graduated?

**George Gibbs 16:53**

Oh, goodness, I don't know. I think that just kind of grew. Like lots of young men I thought I was in love and all that kind of stuff. And did get married in May, the year I graduated. But no, I actually researched job opportunities. At that time, they were very available. And I had seventeen offers. And one of them was with Indian Agency, and others USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] or Department of Interior—there were a lot of federal jobs. I chose the Forest Service because it's close to home. And so, the Croatan was close by and met the people, they were agreeable, and so I signed up and that's where I went.

**James Wall 17:49**

So, your first job was on the Croatan?

**George Gibbs 18:02**

On the Croatan.

**James Wall 18:03**

Where is that?

**George Gibbs 18:05**

New Bern, North Carolina, down on the coast. Real close to Morehead City.

**James Wall 18:13**

What do you remember about the Croatan?

**George Gibbs 18:15**

I remember the swamps and the snakes. [chuckles]

**James Wall 18:20**

So, it was a bit of a wild part of country?

**George Gibbs 18:23**

It was wild. And it turned out that another NC State grad had gone to the Croatan before Jack Kelly and I went to the Croatan. And you will probably hear more about Jack Kelly soon.

**James Wall 18:46**

So, from the Croatan, how long were—what year was this? I'm losing track here.

**George Gibbs 18:53**

1957.

**James Wall 18:54**

1957, okay. And your first job was on the Croatan.

**George Gibbs 18:57**

And I was—and I got drafted. It was interesting. I got married, and then I got assigned to an appraisal of an 1100-acre fire that was started by an Air Force plane crash. And so, Jack Kelly and I were assigned a technician to go out there and cruise that area. And we did the whole thing. And back at the time I got through, I got drafted. And I went to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training. And I remember Tank Hill very well.

**James Wall 19:51**

So, was the Korean War ramping up? Or was that over? I'm trying to remember.

**George Gibbs 19:59**

One of them was.

**James Wall 20:00**

Yeah. How'd you feel when you got drafted?

**George Gibbs 20:05**

It was inevitable. Let me be crude [laughs]. People tell me I'm like a turd, I float with the tide [laughter]. You can cut that out of the...

**James Wall 20:21**

Sure [laughs].

**George Gibbs 20:23**

Anyway, I was agreeable. I have always been agreeable to learn something new. And my father impressed upon me that if I didn't learn, I don't need it.

**Lisa Tate 20:40**

Okay.

**George Gibbs 20:40**

My father impressed upon me that if I didn't learn something new every day, I wasted that day. So, I was always adventuresome enough to just do what was asked of me. And so, I got drafted and did my thing and went to Tank Hill. And in the process of things, we had a rainy-day bivouac and a seventeen-mile hike and carry your gun and go out and sit down on a tarp and clean your weapon. And the next day I was in the hospital with pneumonia. So, I got distracted through the basic training process. But academically had taken a test. And counterintelligence said, "We want him back in basic training as soon as available." So, they sent the word down, I got to shifted back and finished basic training assigned to Fort Holabird, Maryland, which is AI school.

**James Wall 21:57**

Wow. What's "AI" stand for?

**George Gibbs 22:02**

Army Intelligence.

**James Wall 22:03**

Army Intelligence. So, what happens next? Did you get involved pretty heavily in Army Intelligence? What did they have you doing?

**George Gibbs 22:12**

I was reassigned with instructions. Everything you know is classified. And you're to report to the Presidio of San Francisco for duty. A terrible duty: take a young man and move him to San Francisco, up on top of the hill to the Presidio. So, I arrived at the gate and the MP [Military Police] told me, "What's your destination?" And they told me, I'm supposed to go to the US Army Training Group. He says, "I don't know anything about that." And then he said, "Oh, yeah, okay, you're 115th CIC, you're over there." So, that's 115<sup>th</sup> Counterintelligence Corps. And so, I spent my two years, in essence, I was a clerk, processing paperwork. But all of the investigations in the Sixth Army Area crossed my desk, with one exception, and that was my wife's application to be a secretary in G-2, again, intelligence. So, she processed, she got a job, I processed all those others, and I was low grade, like a corporal or something by then. And all of these officers' dossiers came across my desk and I reassigned them to various agents to process information. So, that's what I did for two years and wasn't a tough duty.

**James Wall 24:24**

You could do worse than living in San Francisco as a young man, I would imagine?

**George Gibbs 24:29**

I got to bowl with the officers and on the bowling team and got to play a little ball, play a little touch football, that kind of thing. I got four broken ribs when I got knocked down by a linebacker from Michigan State [laughs]. So, I didn't play any more football after that.

**James Wall 24:51**

Yikes. So, the two years are up, were you happy to get out of there?

**George Gibbs 24:59**

I went over to whatever the heck it is where they discharge you. And they issued me a grease gun and an atropine syrette. And they said, "If you will extend your tour by six months, we will send you to Laos and Cambodia." So, my assignment would be then similar to what I think Scott Mann's doing and did in Afghanistan, is that lining up the organization of the city, town, country, whatever. And there, I declined and said, "I want to go home."

**James Wall 25:43**

Probably. Do you regret that decision?

**George Gibbs 25:45**

No.

**James Wall 25:46**

Yeah.

**George Gibbs 25:47**

And when I got back home, well, I probably wouldn't be here had I gone over there. Because I don't remember which war you mentioned, but yeah, it was cranking up.

**James Wall 25:59**

That was cranking up.

**George Gibbs 26:00**

And I'd have been right in the middle of that.

**James Wall 26:01**

Wow. So, did you think you were going to go back into the Forest Service? Is that something you were thinking of doing?

**George Gibbs 26:09**

They were supposed to be holding me a job. So, I got in a car with a wife and new baby and all my worldly possessions and a '56 Chevy Bel Air. And I built a little platform behind the seat so that the baby could ramble around and be close by. And we headed home.

**James Wall 26:37**

That's a long drive.

**George Gibbs 26:38**

Yeah. Well, I made it a couple of times, but went to New Bern, North Carolina, because they said the Ranger would hold my job open for me. I could fill it when I got back. And that was H.L. Mills, who was the District Ranger. He said, "Sorry, George, but we don't have a job for you. But go to Atlanta, and they will get you set up." So, I went to the Regional Office in Atlanta, and they assigned me to the Wakulla Ranger District in Florida.

**James Wall 27:19**

Wow.

**George Gibbs 27:20**

So, I went to the Wakulla as a Junior Forester and started my real Forest Service career right there.

**James Wall 27:28**

Right, right, right. Didn't you spend some time in Montana though? Working up in our neck of the woods at some point?

**George Gibbs 27:38**

Only as a summer student in 1955.

**James Wall 27:42**

What was your first thought of getting to Montana?

**George Gibbs 27:45**

I've always tried to get back.

**James Wall 27:47**

Yeah.

**George Gibbs 27:48**

I went out there with a guy named Paul Pickenheim. And he and I and one or two other guys drove my car. And we drove more or less straight through Yellowstone and all to get there and reported to four different duty stations and—and I really enjoyed the ground duty there and did mark timber and graded logs and did the typical forestry type stuff. I got to know a lot of the local people. One of the young lady's daddy had a restaurant there and all the summer students gathered there to drink beer and have a good time.

**James Wall 28:38**

And this was in Missoula? Around Missoula?

**George Gibbs 28:42**

It was in Thompson Falls.

**James Wall 28:44**

Oh, okay.

**George Gibbs 28:46**

And I remember well the little town of Trout Creek because Saturday night was where everybody went to dance, I guess, party and dance on Saturday night.

**James Wall 29:01**

What about the landscape? Did that hit you?

**George Gibbs 29:04**

I loved the mountains, loved the wildlife, loved all of what I saw.

**James Wall 29:10**

Must have been a change from North Carolina and Blue Ridge Parkway and the Smokies. And it's a whole different...

**George Gibbs 29:18**

It's a different mountain. And that's one thing that I've learned all the way through my career is that you move, and you find something different. Tree species are different. And ecosystems change to each one and so you never stop learning. There's absolutely no way to stop learning if you're interested in what's around you.

**James Wall 29:50**

So, you started out, so you're really diving in in Wakulla, right? Is that...

**George Gibbs 29:57**  
Wakulla.

**James Wall 29:58**  
Wakulla?

**George Gibbs 29:59**  
Yeah.

**James Wall 29:59**  
And that's in North Florida, is that what that is?

**George Gibbs 30:03**  
Yeah. Tallahassee area.

**James Wall 30:04**  
Seminole Country. What was your first impression of the land out there?

**George Gibbs 30:14**  
A lot of pine trees.

**James Wall 30:15**  
Really?

**George Gibbs 30:17**  
Yeah. And we had a lot of small fires, fought a lot of fires. My first real assignment was surveying the land lines. And so, you take a staff compass and chain and you reestablish the land lines on the ground. And I found out real quick that when you wade through one of these "blackwater" swamp ponds, pulling a chain and carrying a staff, poison ivy floats on the surface of those ponds [chuckles]. So, I wound up in the hospital with poison ivy [chuckles]. And after that, got well, I've never had a bad problem with it since. So, I established some degree of immunity.

**James Wall 31:15**  
I'll bet [laughter], sounds like you got a heavy dose. [laughter]

**George Gibbs 31:20**  
Well, I had it from the neck down.

**James Wall 31:21**  
[laughter] Oh, man.

**George Gibbs 31:26**

But surveying, we had a lot of property lines, and so there were land line disputes and I had to negotiate with other landowners. And that's one regret I have with the Forest Service is later on I had a bad attitude about stuff. And I got a call from a Surveyor in the Atlanta office that wanted some information about some things I had seen, and I was resistant and did not give him the information. It's probably one my one negative approach to anything I'd ever did.

**James Wall 32:05**

What did he want that you didn't want to give him?

**George Gibbs 32:06**

It wasn't what he wanted; it was my attitude about when I retired. I'll tell you more about that in time.

**James Wall 32:17**

Sure. Sure, sure, sure. You did a lot of surveying and so you must have really got to know the land that you were working on.

**George Gibbs 32:25**

Well yeah, you got to know the land. And you got to know the people.

**James Wall 32:29**

What was the best part of the job for you on these early years? Was it really digging into the National Forests? The land? Was it dealing with the people?

**George Gibbs 32:39**

I think probably learning. I had a boss, two bosses that I worked for that gave me every opportunity you could get to do something else, maybe mark a little spot of timber over here and for sale, or go and inspect a timber sale, find out who's dealing how much and what to do about it. And that kind of thing. So, I got a lot of time on the ground with a lot of people. And one of them happened to be a heavy-duty pulpwood producer and had—my technician and I discovered that they were cutting unmarked timber. In other words, stealing timber from the Forest Service. And we started double billing him for every check in the stumps and double billing him for every log he stole. And I went to see him one day he says, "Ranger, you've got to get off my back." I said, "Why?" He says, "Because you're going to make me go broke." I said, "Then quit stealing timber." He says, "If you leave me alone, I'll get you elected State Representative. And you can become a heavy-duty politician out here." I said, "Well, that's the last thing I want." And the fact is, the man could have done that. Because his family ran the politics in the area.

**James Wall** 34:24

But you were an honest Forest Ranger.

**George Gibbs** 34:26

I was straight up.

**James Wall** 34:28

Did you ever hear of any people in the Forest Service taking bribes or doing things they shouldn't do? Was that common? Back in those days?

**George Gibbs** 34:39

Politically, five bucks and a bottle of booze will buy you a vote [laughs].

**James Wall** 34:45

That's southern politics, for sure.

**George Gibbs** 34:47

It's national politics. You know, the South gets blamed for a lot of things that I'm not sure they're all guilty of. But that was a fact, and I ran into that again when Betty's father ran for Governor of Kentucky. And he got defeated. And he was going to run again. He died of a heart attack before he got a chance to run again. But he...

**James Wall** 35:18

Betty, your wife?

**George Gibbs** 35:19

Yeah. And she tells the story of that kind of bribe. And they talk about it. So, it was common, politically, I think.

**James Wall** 35:29

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, there's a lot going on in Wakulla, or Wakulla?

**George Gibbs** 35:37

Wa-kul-la.

**James Wall** 35:37

Wakulla.

**George Gibbs** 35:39

Yeah.

**James Wall 35:39**

I'll get the hang of it. I'm still getting the hang of all the different National Forest pronunciations and things like that.

**George Gibbs 35:45**

That's an interesting forest that if you ever get time to go visit, you need to go what is now a state park. And that's Wakulla Springs State Park. And I think it's the world's largest underground spring that boils up there. And I swam with a twelve-foot alligator. And I dive off a ten-foot board and go through a log at the bottom and the gator was well-fed, never bothered anybody. But Old Joe wound up on somebody's table mount and, and I think you'd still find him there today. In the old lodge, which is hand built and interesting.

**James Wall 36:27**

Wow. [Recording Paused] Okay, we were talking about Florida. How long were you in Florida?

**George Gibbs 36:36**

I was on the Wakulla—rather unique experience—for about seven years. And you said you're interested in the land. So, I did the surveying job, was the big job to start with. And then I got into compartment prescriptions, which the whole district was divided into, I don't remember how many compartments of let's say 1957 or something like that. And the Forester on the ground surveys all the opportunities to improve the timber resource or range, wildlife, or water. And so, I started doing prescriptions because for some reason, there was a backlog and we were right up against the next one, because that determines what the crews on the ground do: mark timber or do timber stand improvement work or whatever they do, they build bridges or ramps down into the river, right, that kind of stuff. But anyway, we did the prescriptions. And so, I had aerial photographs of each area. And I would mark out timber stands in any identifiable resource that we wanted to work with and prescribe what kind of treatment should be done on that particular part of the land.

**James Wall 38:13**

Was that new at the time? I mean, were they using aerial technology, photographs, to do that?

**George Gibbs 38:17**

Yeah, I think that was a sort of a standard process. I don't know that everybody did it like I did it. I was not told how to do it. So, the assignment was you do it until I could identify different types of timber situations. And so, I started doing prescriptions and with a backlog was supposed to do them every three years, so if there were fifty-seven,

there's twenty or so that haven't been done. So, I started trying to catch up and so I spent an awful lot of time on the ground, studying the area and getting to know it, even back into swampy areas like Bradwell Bay, which they had a timber sale in there that never got cut. So, I'm surveying that and identify it and then say, "Well, I want to someday walk across this bay." And I never did, and the old story was that Old Man Carl Bradwell, who owned the land previously, left his shotgun laying on a stump. And to this day, it's still there. So, if I can wander through and find that stump, I can find Carl Bradwell's shotgun [laughter], I never made it.

**James Wall** 39:48

[laughs] Oh, that's a drag. Was that a lot—I mean, were you just—seems like a lot of people in the Forest Service, they just throw you a lot of stuff and they expect you to figure out how to do it. Was it just a lot of learning on your own?

**George Gibbs** 40:05

There was a lot of that. I think the Forest Service people were pretty independent back in those days. And, you know, we were—had the reputation of being the Marine Corps of the government service. And I was very proud of that. But to make a long story short they—Regional Office, Washington Office, always sending some new assignment down, like they started a Superior Tree Program. So, our job on the ground was to identify potentially superior trees. And I happened to have two of the best technicians that I've ever run into, and they could spot them. And so, they spotted them. My job was to evaluate the tree and send the information up the line to the region in Washington, and then they come by and accept or not, and it becomes a part of the Superior Tree Program. Old Dave Dubow was the reviewer in the Tallahassee office, and he came down a couple of times, but after that he accepted all of my evaluations. And I don't know where it ended up. At this point, down the road, I guess they regenerated some superior trees.

**James Wall** 41:30

Dave Dubow—you remember how—how that name was spelled, Dubow?

**George Gibbs** 41:34

D-U-B-O-W. And he was—may have been a Texan.

**James Wall** 41:40

Sounds like it. So, what was the person, if there was one person in these early years, might have been a mentor? Was there anybody that really shaped your philosophy as a forester?

**George Gibbs 41:57**  
Probably Joe Riebold.

**James Wall 42:01**  
Riebold.

**George Gibbs 42:03**  
R-I-E-B-O-L-D. He was an old German. He was Forest Supervisor. And he was a strong silviculturist. So, you know, I paid a lot of attention to Joe. And he did evaluations, I guess I may, I don't know. Anyway, I started as a Junior Forester, then I was promoted to Assistant Ranger. And that intensified the kind of work I could do. So, I was out by myself on 3000 acres of seedling, planting to count survival and see what was there. One experience was a rattlesnake started singing and I was knee deep in wiregrass. And it did not take me long to find my pickup.

**James Wall 43:08**  
I bet.

**George Gibbs 43:10**  
So, and snakes were common, so, but you could usually see. And in that case, I couldn't see him.

**James Wall 43:20**  
So, what was the thinking...there's been a big change over the years, obviously with fire management. What was the thinking when you started on the job? The philosophy of fighting fires and—and how to treat them?

**George Gibbs 43:37**  
Is put it out.

**James Wall 43:39**  
Just any fire, put it out?

**George Gibbs 43:40**  
Any fire, you put it out. The Let Burn Policy had not come up yet. And, but again, doing compartment prescriptions, I knew the situation on the ground. We did add a prescribed burning program, which was fairly intensive and maybe 50,000 acres a year that we actually burn the rough on the ground. Well, the history of the district had been that they burn the same area every three years, so that kept those down. Well, the fires kept popping up in all the old roughs that had not been burned. So, I checkerboard burned. And I eliminated all of, or as many as I could of the old deep roughs that caused

major damage and that kind of thing. And when I started doing that, we were having fifty, sixty fires a year. And when I left the district, it was down to about seven, so, and that's just from memory. Those numbers are not—I can't validate that. But it was a program—I mentioned it to my wife, and she says, “You've got to tell the world about that you got to, you know, that's valid stuff, everybody needs to know your burning program.” I don't know.

**James Wall** 44:40

What is checkerboard burning?

**George Gibbs** 45:12

That means that if you burn the black spots and not the white, so that when a fire gets started it'll burn over to what's already been burned and either go out or not be very intense. So, in just a checkerboard pattern, random spacing. And I did that, of course, stand-by-stand as you identify the timber stand condition, we would treat as a whole stand.

**James Wall** 45:49

So, you said seven years, was that considered a long tenure on one forest?

**George Gibbs** 45:55

Oh, yeah, I think so. And particularly, because I stayed long enough to become the Ranger, not the Assistant.

**James Wall** 46:03

Was that a good moment for you?

**George Gibbs** 46:05

I liked it, but I learned a lot. And I learned that first of all, it's easy to be an Assistant. The hard job is making the final decision as to Ranger. And so, I had a lot of freedom for a lot of time to do all those prescriptions. And I actually covered the entire district in my time and so I knew it, 387,000 acres, like the back of my hand. And I was able to do those kinds of decisions about burning and that kind of thing.

**James Wall** 46:46

So, when did you—so the buck was stopping with you, finally, when you were the Ranger?

**George Gibbs** 46:55

Yeah, yeah.

**James Wall 46:55**

And then seven years is up. How did you learn that you were moving on?

**George Gibbs 47:00**

They offered me the Ranger on the consolidation of two adjoining districts. And I said, no, thank you, I want to move on. And so, I went to Asheville as the Sub Staff, Range and Wildlife. No, Fire and Wildlife. And, and, but I need to tell you that the prescriptions also put me in places that there was an effort to identify special areas. And I identified two of them on that district. One was a Morrison Hammock. And we designated it as a scenic area. And then we did a Bradwell Bay Scenic Area. And ultimately, both of those were identified in the RARE II [Roadless Area Review and Evaluation] process, which I'm not going to talk about, particularly, but it was an evaluation to determine what was eligible for wilderness designation. And both of them ultimately became wilderness.

**James Wall 48:11**

Wow. So, this was around the time the Forest Service is starting to preserve more like that, zones like that?

**George Gibbs 48:18**

I think so. You know, the Forest Service was in a mass change of new regulations, new laws, environmental changes, all that kind of stuff. And so, the National Environmental Policy Act, and I don't remember all the names of them now—anyway, I used to. And all those acts changed and put new requirements on people. So, I figured I'd been in that place for seven years. That was long enough. I'd caught all the fish down on the coast that I needed to catch and, and so—

**James Wall 49:00**

I always think it's difficult to leave people behind, obviously, that you meet and things like that. But did you—throughout your career, did you—when you were on a job, get attached to the land, the forest? Was it difficult to leave the forest, like a loved one?

**George Gibbs 49:20**

Well, I tell it this way: that when we went there, we were not active churchgoers. And the Methodist Church reached out first to my wife, who they made the choir director and, and they got me to sing in the choir. And then the minister changed. And he came up to interview us and he said, "George, do you believe in God?" I said, "of course" I did. He said, "Do you go to church?" I said, "No, not now. I said, the forest is my church. And the forest is out there." And I said, "I go to church every day." And he says, "What would it take you to get you to come to church here?" And I said, "I don't know." I said, "You know, I work hard and party hard. And I party with all my neighbors. And all of them

come to church." And I said, "I'm not sure that coming to church that I don't feel like a hypocrite after partying with them all night, the night before." And he said, "well, George, can you think of a better place for a hypocrite to be than in church on Sunday morning?" And that's why I started going to Reverend Sprague's church, Dick Sprague. And so, he was very influential. He's one of several ministers that I say have been very influential in my Christian beliefs.

**James Wall 51:16**

Wow, that's a heck of a story. So, what was this new job like? Sounds like you had a different set of responsibilities.

**George Gibbs 51:25**

In North Carolina?

**James Wall 51:27**

Yeah, when you moved off from being a Ranger?

**George Gibbs 51:29**

Well, the emphasis in North Carolina shifted from all of the resources—range water, wildlife, recreation—to wildlife and fire. So again, I continue to do compartment prescriptions, except that I went as a Staff Evaluator of what another district's doing, so criticizing what they did, and spent a lot of time on the ground again, just, well, one of the jobs that they gave me there was a Clinchfield Railroad came down the hill and the brakes started a fire. And it burned a bunch of acreage there and next to the tracks in North Carolina. So, I spent time up there cruising that and appraising the damage, to send the Clinchfield a bill for the fire damage they did. And I turned that report in, and I never saw the end of it [laughter]. So, but then, I worked for, again, somebody that gave me the freedom to pick and choose and do. And they wanted somebody to determine from aerial detection how to spot fires from a plane instead of from a lookout tower. So, I spent a great deal of time in a Cessna 150. And I should have gotten my pilot's license because my pilot was a student trainer, anyway, I never did. But we flew all over the Western North Carolina Forest Service plus the Cherokee Forest in Tennessee plus the Cherokee Indian Agency and the Great Smokies. So, my territory included all of that part of North Carolina, Tennessee, and we mapped out what you could see, spot from a plane and, and where the blind spots would be and that kind of thing. And ultimately, it reduced the number of lookout towers by a significant number, and I don't know what it was. And almost everything I tell you is undocumented, as far as I know, other than my record of that, and where it went, I don't know. I'm sure somewhere in the archives of the Forest Service. All of it's there.

**James Wall 54:22**

Yeah. You're straddling across a bunch of big changes that are happening to the Forest Service, with the way you do things, and the administrations and NEPA [National Environmental Policy Act] and all this stuff. And, you know, that's fascinating.

**George Gibbs 54:40**

That was also the time that they sent me to—the Regional Wildlife Staff didn't happen to have a biologist available to go to NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] when the Earth Science Satellite was going up. So, I went to NASA as part of a team. I'm not sure who was involved in it other than me. But I learned that you can sit in front of a computer, and there were seventeen variables that we could change on that computer. And it was recording information from a satellite. So, I could pick out a forty-year-old white oak. And I could tell the computer that tree and all like it are white oaks, forty years old. And from that they could determine how many acorns that tree was going to produce, and how many were produced in that general area and how much wildlife that would support. And that was the, the gist of the thing that now, obviously, there are a lot of variables. So, somebody has got to sit there and do the dial. But you had choice of color.

[Recording Paused]

**James Wall 56:03**

I think we last talked, we were talking about—you were in Asheville, North Carolina, and we talked about NASA, and we talked about the work that you did with NASA. Right?

**George Gibbs 56:16**

Yeah.

**James Wall 56:17**

And where did you work after the Asheville job?

**George Gibbs 56:23**

Well, I need to tell you one more wilderness related story. One of my jobs was, again, it was like compartment prescriptions carried over into the Snowbird Drainage in western North Carolina. So, I was assigned with a technician to camp out for some period of time, I don't know a couple of weeks or whatever. And so, the district built a little lean-to cabin, canvas cover shelter for me to stay in, went up and stayed and we cruised the entire Snowbird Drainage. And in doing so, I was able to get stick bait to catch fish on a, not a hair pin, but string, and you catch native brook trout out of that stream and have them fried up for breakfast. So, we cooked and ate and enjoyed that. Well, native brook trout streams are very rare or reasonably rare, hard to come by and they're there

because of the quality of the water. And so, we designated the Snowbird Drainage as a Biological Management Area for the protection of native brook trout. It's kind of like the Scenic Areas we set aside in Florida. This was a Biological Management Area. It's another, I guess, unused or relatively new designation, coincidentally, that became the Snowbird Wilderness. So that's a third wilderness that identified through some of my efforts. Obviously, it was designated by somebody else, but they picked the Snowbird Management Area as a basis for it.

**James Wall** 58:38

Right, right, right. So, for those of us not in the Forest Service, the wilderness—when you designate something a Wilderness Area, when that happened—what's the significance of that? What does that do, effectively?

**George Gibbs** 58:53

Well, only the Congress can declare a Wilderness. Now you hear the term "Wilderness" abused a lot. I had people in Alabama designating a fifteen-acre bamboo patch as a Wilderness or strange areas as a Wilderness. A Wilderness technically has to be designated by Congress. And there are specific guidelines in the Forest Service and in the federal definitions that you have to meet for a wilderness and what that does is severely restrict what you can do in the area. Like there can be no motorized vehicles. You can't log any timber. I'm not even sure I can define what you can and can't do, but it's quite restrictive. And so, it protects that area. It's an area technically untrammelled by a man, I think is the term. And so, all the guidelines don't necessarily get followed. But when Congress designates it, that's there.

**James Wall** 59:48

Sure. So, did you see yourself when you were working for the Forest Service as more of a protector of the land? Or you were a steward? Or how did you view your relationship to your job and your purpose there?

**George Gibbs** 1:00:29

Probably more towards a steward. I believe in using the land, I believe in the multiple use concept of range, wildlife, recreation, all those things should be concurrently going on. And as a land use planner, the most difficult thing we had to do was take two opposing viewpoints and find a common denominator. And it's interesting that you can get hunters and then off-road vehicle users. And they just don't necessarily agree on how that land ought to be used and how they ought to be able to use it. And so, spent many days in conferences with Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, and advocacy groups of all time—types are trying to find a common denominator, always to answer the question: how much is enough?

**James Wall 1:01:36**

Right. That makes sense. And that was maybe one of the most difficult parts of the job probably, dealing with all these different interests?

**George Gibbs 1:01:44**

I would think so, yeah.

**James Wall 1:01:46**

So, how long were you in Asheville on that job?

**George Gibbs 1:01:52**

I think it was about three years.

**James Wall 1:01:54**

Three years? And then where'd you go?

**George Gibbs 1:01:55**

Well, they reached down and promoted me to Range and Wildlife Staff Officer in National Forests in Mississippi. And Victor McLachlan was the Supervisor of that forest. He also happened to be a bird hunter with bird dogs. And so, I got kind of interested in a sidelight there.

**James Wall 1:02:22**

And this was in Jackson?

**George Gibbs 1:02:23**

Jackson, yeah.

**James Wall 1:02:24**

What do you think of Jackson, Mississippi?

**George Gibbs 1:02:26**

Jackson was okay, except for the racial problems.

**James Wall 1:02:29**

Yeah. So, this was what, about the 1960s? 1970s? When you were in Jackson?

**George Gibbs 1:02:37**

1960s. It would be 1960s.

**James Wall** 1:02:38

Yeah, a lot going on there at that time.

**George Gibbs** 1:02:40

Well, my boys, I put them in public school. And the first year we were there, the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] decided that they were going to make different arrangements and my kids went to five schools in one year. I still tried to keep them in public school because I believed that was a place for them to be. Ultimately had to move them to private school for other reasons.

**James Wall** 1:03:14

So, Jackson, Mississippi, you were Range and Wildlife there and that was how long thereabouts? Couple years?

**George Gibbs** 1:03:23

At least, I moved there right after Hurricane Camille devastated the Mississippi coast. And so, I spent a lot of time in and out of the coastal area. But again, we got involved in compartment prescriptions. And I had one unique experience which has never been challenged and should have been. We had a soil scientist who kept pulling out maps and papers and, "This soil is this and that soil is that," and we were always trying to define where a site becomes hardwood and where it becomes pine. Where is it hardwood? Where is it conifer? And so, he'd kept maps and would be on the ground as a team trying to make a decision. And I finally one day looked down. I said, "It's right there in front of you. You've got Christmas fern over here. And you got this other fern over there. That one's the dry land fern. That's your pine site." [laughs].

**James Wall** 1:04:44

How'd he take that?

**George Gibbs** 1:04:46

We used it quite a lot. You know, Rangers would look down and they'd see the Christmas fern, they'd see—I don't know why I can't remember the other one now, but it slips me, and I don't know, I thought: okay, guys, you know, I'm pulling your leg. Let's not adopt something that's not validated. Because there is no scientific evidence or reason to believe that this is a true statement, but we used it anyway.

**James Wall** 1:05:22

Wow. Funny how that happens, huh?

**George Gibbs** 1:05:26

Yeah, I mean, I look back at it and laugh. But it may have been more serious than I know. But we used it a lot in particularly in northern Mississippi.

**James Wall** 1:05:42

So, you worked all over the South? It seems like.

**George Gibbs** 1:05:46

Yeah, pretty much.

**James Wall** 1:05:47

Was that intentional? Or did that just happen that way?

**George Gibbs** 1:05:51

It just happened.

**James Wall** 1:05:53

Or did you enjoy being in the South? Or did you want to move around a little bit more, different spots?

**George Gibbs** 1:05:58

I wanted to go back to Missoula, Montana. And every year, we have wildfires. And every year, there's a campaign fire, or many of them in, in the West. And every year, I sent in my application to fight fire and I had a red card that said I was fire management capable. But I never got to use it. They always said, "No, we need you in this place instead, send your crew." So, all of my crew got overtime and made mega bucks fighting fires. And I was back here not going to Montana or Idaho, wherever the fires may have been.

**James Wall** 1:06:48

So, you didn't get to quench that adventurous part of the job?

**George Gibbs** 1:06:52

Not that side of it.

**James Wall** 1:06:53

Wow. That's interesting. Well, yeah, nobody could blame you for wanting to get back to Missoula.

**George Gibbs** 1:07:02

Yeah. Can I digress one second?

**James Wall 1:07:05**

Absolutely, yeah, go ahead.

**George Gibbs 1:07:07**

I'm thinking back on my Forest Service experience as a student in 1955. And the Ranger's name was Irv Puphal, P-U-P-H-A-L. And when I left out there it was late September, fire season was about done. I said, "Ranger, it's time for me to drive home." And I left, and later on I got his evaluation of my performance. And it's the one negative performance rating I think I can look back on it said, "Left when needed most for personal reasons." And, and that was somewhat true. But what I did, I got in my car, drove back to Washington DC, where I was a competitive canoeist. I spent the night in the boathouse, got up in the morning and competed in the President's Cup Regatta on the Potomac River, and finished second in a quarter-mile sprint to this Czechoslovakian paddler who escaped the "Iron Curtain" in his kayak some years back. That's an adventuresome story. [laughter] But I was competitive as a canoeist and paddled a lot all over the Northeast.

**James Wall 1:08:37**

Wow. So, you don't regret that? That was an earned performance review?

**George Gibbs 1:08:41**

I don't. [laughs] I kind of look back at it and laugh at it now. I'm sure he was very sincere and genuine in that evaluation. The second part of that is I had been dating a young lady for some time and had been away from her for some time. And I thought I was going back with a serious relationship, only to find out that she had found another, so that's the other half of that story [laughter] for personal reasons. Okay, now back to Jackson, Mississippi.

**James Wall 1:09:19**

Oh, yeah. Jackson, Mississippi. So, it was Jackson and then you went somewhere else right. Where'd you finish your career?

**George Gibbs 1:09:28**

At the next stop, the next stop was—I knew Arthur Woody very well. The famous Ranger Woody from the book Whose Woods These Are, and he knew me, he knew of what I would have been doing. I came to Alabama as his Land Use Management Staff and so I took on the job of land use planning for the Alabama Forest.

**James Wall 1:10:07**

That's a big spread of forest.

**George Gibbs 1:10:11**

644,000 acres.

**James Wall 1:10:14**

So, was that an exciting challenge? Or was that a daunting task when you came upon it?

**George Gibbs 1:10:23**

A combination of it. And on the top end of it was a Supervisor that didn't necessarily believe in what we were doing. And a team that was very dedicated to get it done according to quote, Hoyle. And so, I had an exceptional team of thirteen guys, who were willing to pool their knowledge and resources and interact to produce a plan that met the requirements of all the new regulations that had been coming down: NEPA [National Environmental Policy Act] and NMFA [sic][National Forest Management Act] and so on. And I had an assistant who was extremely capable, and I hope you all have a chance to interview Bob McCallum.

**James Wall 1:11:18**

How do you spell that?

**George Gibbs 1:11:19**

M-C-C-A-L-L-U-M. He's in Montgomery, Alabama. Bob is a bright, creative. And he's got interesting story to tell.

**James Wall 1:11:41**

So, Bob, and—he was kind of your right-hand man?

**George Gibbs 1:11:46**

Very much so. Bob was the one that that fed the nuance into our planning process, like how to map and define the areas we're talking about. And there was a program called RIDs that actually divided the forest, as I recall, into ten-acre cells. And a planning team was able to bring their creative options down to what the ranger had to accomplish in those ten-acre cells, year by year. So, when we finished our plan, the plan was documented down to the—the ten acres with dollar figures attached. So, we could actually send a report up to Congress, it said, “we're going to cut 6 million feet of timber on a hundred acres.” And there they are, they're mapped out and ready for you. But for the wisdom of our Congress, that never was effective and never adopted, and Congress in its infinite wisdom always has that option to make those choices. Very frustrating to those of us who tried diligently and with great effort to come up with a plan that would work.

**James Wall 1:13:21**

Right. So, at the—when you were in Alabama, you have a huge chunk of forests and land. And at what point did you start to think about retiring or winding down?

**George Gibbs 1:13:44**

Well, I was always the mediator between the planning team and Forest Supervisor. If the planning team came up with 60 million feet, their supervisor arbitrarily said, "No, we want 80 million." So, I don't know how that ended up when it moved forward to the region in Washington office. But I know that I was always in that position to go between and make those decisions. My decision to retire was made when I was called into the office for my annual evaluation. And I made a point of saying, "Joe, you don't like me. And Joe, I don't like you."

**James Wall 1:14:45**

Joe? Who was Joe?

**George Gibbs 1:14:46**

He was the Forest Supervisor, Joe Jack Brown. And I said I'll make a deal with you that if you will transfer me laterally to Atlanta, I will take an early retirement and get out of your hair. It wasn't long before he did. But in the process, I was wrapping up the land use plan draft. And my secretary and I came to the office after I had hemorrhoid surgery and put together 3000 copies of that land use plan and got them ready to go in the mail. And so, when I walked out of the office, I was essentially done with the land use plan. And he accepted my offer. I had a heart attack early in November. But on November 20, I signed my retirement papers. And I have not been unhappy about that decision. I was a happy planner because I enjoyed what I did. And I'm happy about most of the results. But it was telling on me too. And it was harder for me to focus on getting things done. And about that time, I lost a son in a car wreck and that didn't help. And so, I happily retired and started playing some tennis and having a little bit of fun and skiing. Having a good time.

**James Wall 1:16:37**

Yeah, so this was 1984.

**George Gibbs 1:16:40**

October 20, 1984 was the date of my heart attack, coincidentally, the date that I quit smoking as well.

**James Wall 1:16:50**

Oh, that's bad luck.

**George Gibbs 1:16:51**

No, I quit because of the heart attack. You know, I was laying on a stainless table with a catheter from my groin up into my heart, watching the arteries and all work. And they injected the dye, and you can see where the blockage was. And you can see where the— what the heck do they call it? Anyway, when the balloon opened the artery, and the blood flowed free. And ironically, that was on October 20. And I've never had another blockage since. So, my conclusion was a stress-induced plaque that broke loose and blocked that particular artery. And medically, that explains that.

**James Wall 1:17:50**

So, is there something that you miss most about the Forest Service?

**George Gibbs 1:17:56**

The people. Yeah. I really enjoyed working with people. There are some animosities and stuff in the Forest Service, that you grin and bear it and one, they're peculiar in their—in that people in the Forest Service are jealous of those who earn an extra buck or have a little money. And, you know, in the Forest Service, you fill out a form, it says, "Do you own stock? Do you own something else? Outside of whatever." And so, I always had to fill it out that yeah, I own stock. Well, what I owned was ten shares of a company that was in the family. And I got a dividend every year of about \$100. And everybody ran around and said, "Gibbs has got bucks. He's got money." Well, coincidentally, that's at a time when Jimmy Carter was President. Interest rates were out the top and I never invested in stock, personally, I invested in tax-free bonds. And so, about the time I retired, about the time I retired, I was getting 17 percent interest a year on tax-free bonds. That builds up fairly quick. So, I was able to feel more or less financially independent. And I have been able to be creative and do pretty much anything I wanted to do, thanks to Jimmy Carter and later the stock market's been good and, but—

**James Wall 1:19:51**

It's good to hear somebody say something nice about Jimmy Carter for a change. You don't hear that a lot.

**George Gibbs 1:19:57**

And you're not going to hear much about Joe Biden either.

**James Wall 1:20:00**

I bet [laughs]. Who is your favorite administration to work under all your years? Which administration did you have the best relationship with?

**George Gibbs 1:20:10**

It's no question. Absolutely no question: Ronald Reagan and in my memorabilia, he signed my retirement letter, which, if I was going to keep, I would have it right on my wall for everybody to see.

**James Wall 1:20:32**

Did you ever meet him?

**George Gibbs 1:20:34**

No. I can't think of any President I actually met. I was a fan of JFK [John F. Kennedy] as well. And that was kind of interesting, because I played tennis with a Marine Colonel, who happened to be JFK's helicopter pilot on Marine One. So, he knew all of the activities of JFK, which we had a lot of time to discuss.

**James Wall 1:21:11**

Wow. You'll have to tell us about that off the record. Yeah. So, after you retired, you started working on a lot of philanthropy, right?

**George Gibbs 1:21:22**

James, truthfully, I didn't understand who I was in some ways. I think I went through a period of depression because my retirement was not fun. My retirement party was, "Thank God it's over." There were two people who were very positive and the rest of them very negative about my career, I don't know whether I was that bad a person, they didn't like me, or they were jealous. I don't understand reasons for that kind of thing. The supervisor made a nice speech, that's Joe Jack, who I didn't, you know, I was ready to get away from so—

**James Wall 1:22:04**

Did that surprise you?

**George Gibbs 1:22:06**

No, I think he was inclined to do what the right thing was supposed to be done. I don't know any Forest Service employee that I ever worked with that didn't aspire to be the supervisor. So, every staff officer had line officer responsibilities, which I think is a gross mistake in the Forest Service. If you're a timber staff officer, you should be a top-rated silviculturist and know what it is to grow timber on that area. You shouldn't be a guy that came through the administrative ranks, and rose to a District Ranger, has administrative experience, but not silvicultural experience. And yet you're the timber staff officer. The forest engineer always had a position of power because he had a big budget. And—but they were kind of a different animal.

**James Wall** 1:23:20

Yeah. Well, I mean, it sounds like any particular office that you're going to have rivalries, you're going to have some bad blood.

**George Gibbs** 1:23:27

Absolutely.

**James Wall** 1:23:28

And the Forest Service is not immune to that. But do you think the Forest Service reputation masks that? You know, this whole Marine Corps thing?

**George Gibbs** 1:23:39

No, I think it's changed. You know, the, the, there are a lot of changes in the Forest Service. And a lot of it has to do with areas of expertise and the experience and background of those who rise to various levels. I'm not sure I understand how—I totally approve of lady foresters incidentally and lady professionals—but some of them didn't have the kind of background to make them a Forest Supervisor or Chief, but they became those things and—and that's judgmental on my part, and I apologize for that.

**James Wall** 1:24:24

So, when you were you know, in that era, when you when you said that women started entering the Forest Service. How were they greeted by most people, do you think?

**George Gibbs** 1:24:44

Most of them were standoffishly accepted and that has to do with race as well. And there was tremendous emphasis to integrate the Forest Service and make it multicultural and all that kind of thing. And I think that emphasis undermined the professional proficiency and Marine Corps attitude. And as of today, I'm glad I'm not employed by it, because I don't think it's the same organization, I belonged to fifty years ago.

**James Wall** 1:25:29

Yeah. If you had it to do over again, would you work for the Forest Service?

**George Gibbs** 1:25:34

I would. I would start with the Forest Service if it was that organization.

**James Wall** 1:25:44

Sure. Sure. Well, in recent years, what are the projects that you're most proud of? In the work that you've done since retirement?

**George Gibbs 1:26:01**

Well first of all, learning to ski [laughter].

**James Wall 1:26:05**

That's a tough one.

**George Gibbs 1:26:01**

My first wife went to learn to ski while I was a leg forester on the ground on Pisgah National Forest, and she had a chance to learn to ski. And so, after I retired, she issued me an ultimatum one day because about fifty of us joined a ski club. And I went to Sun Valley. And I took my first ski lesson on ice at the training center. And she told me that she'd seen me in the bar that night [laughs]. And that's the way it was. I took my lesson in the day and the group gathered at night. But I made it through that ski lesson, and I did not ever, unfortunately, ski Bald Mountain on at Sun Valley. But I skied a lot of other areas and learned to ski in a lot of different ways. Right? There were areas of deep powder snow, and there were areas of nice gliding pathways. And I was able to accommodate that and take several trips. And more importantly, I lost my first wife to cancer. And I found my second wife. And Betty and I have had a good time doing some national—particularly Italy—travel. And I cherish those times.

**James Wall 1:27:54**

How has Betty changed your priorities in terms of your philanthropy, the work that you do?

**George Gibbs 1:28:01**

Very little with the philanthropy. That has been kind of my choice to deal with. And, but she's supportive, but not necessarily a contributor.

**James Wall 1:28:20**

So, the one question I want to ask everybody is, you know, looking back on all this long career, what does the Forest Service mean to you? At the end of the day, when you look back on this time, what stands out?

**George Gibbs 1:28:43**

Golly, that's a tough one. I will never regret being a part of the Forest Service family. I have too many good memories of too many good times, bad times, other times, and too much respect for most of the people I had to work with. Obviously, you're in a large organization with a lot of people, there's going to be some that you don't feel contributed enough or did things. Part of my ambition with this project is that I know too many who were out there dedicated—and I'm going to tell you a funny story about one of them—but dedicated to do exactly what the Forest Service expects of them. And one of them—

I'll text you his last name—Billy from South Carolina was told to wear hard-toed shoes. Everybody was told: for safety shoes they wear hard-toed boots. So, Bill had his hard-toed boots, and he walked up and stuck his foot in an alligator's mouth and the alligator clamped [slaps hands together] down. And his safety boots saved his foot, so, things like that happened in the forest to good people doing good stuff. And most of the people I knew were of that order. The other side of that is I greatly believe in the aides and technicians that are just like some of other unsung heroes that got things done. They did it every day. And the technicians that guided me through prescriptions and through fire evaluations, that kind of thing, were totally invaluable. And it's easy to recommend Braxton Barwick [?], Bud [unclear], Duggar [?] [unclear] or, you know, people like that who did things for me, they were in Florida. And only one of them I know is still alive and that's Duggar [?]. But anyway. What do you think?

**James Wall 1:31:14**

I think that you've lived a hell of a life. And that's one heck of a career. I don't think people will be happy to hear about it. And it's been remarkable, and you've moved around. And you have this relationship with the Forest Service, with the South. And it's all super complex. So, the unsung heroes. Last thing, are there any unsung heroes that you can think of: names or people that we should know about? You know, anyone who maybe we wouldn't otherwise know about?

**George Gibbs 1:32:04**

Well, obviously, the first one is going to be Rex Mann. His career dedicated to chasing the restoration of the American Chestnut. One of the guys that I think of a lot is Mark Warren, and Mark was marked for a Chief of the Forest Service-type career. But he got to the level of Land Use Planner in Florida and decided he didn't want the stress and strain of that, so he retired in Florida. But Mark was the kind of guy that contributed everywhere he went. And he was on my planning team in Alabama as a hydrologist, but he wanted to be a District Ranger. And I pulled every string I could, and I got him all the help I could. And he managed to get a Ranger's job in Blacksburg, Virginia, and subsequently the Willamette [National Forest] in Oregon, and back to Florida. And I think he actually managed The Land Between the Lakes area for a while. So, he's had an interesting career as well.

**James Wall 1:33:39**

Yeah. And you were able to help him along the way?

**George Gibbs 1:33:42**

I gave him every boost I could, and I hope it helped him.

**James Wall** 1:33:47

Well, I think those are all the questions I had. So, we can go ahead and wrap it up. If there's anybody else that you think we should talk to, or any other stories that you'd like to tell us, anything that we might have forgot to ask you about?

**George Gibbs** 1:34:09

Well, it was fun to meet people like Ranger Woody. And the people that I've met along the way and I will provide you secondary information. I have a list of people that in the South that I hope are still alive and can add to this story, validated or not, whatever.

**James Wall** 1:34:35

Well, we'll try to track them down, for sure. Well, that's all I can think of, so I guess we can go ahead and pause and if there's anything else, so we're going to—I'm going to hit this button.