An Interview with John Currier

May 24, 2022

Denver, CO

NMFSH Accession No. 2021.074.022

0:00:05.8 James Wall: Okay. It is still May 24th, 2:10 PM. We're here at the Sonesta Hotel in Denver, and we're talking with John Currier, and we're interviewing you on behalf of the National Museum of Forest Service History. A few disclaimers, if you ever need to pause the interview, go take a break, you can certainly do that. If you want to stop the interview, end the interview at any time, you can do that. The big thing is, it's not a journalistic interview. It's an oral history. So this is an archival document. In other words, it doesn't become record until it's in the archives. And so before it becomes an archival record, we're going to send you a copy of your footage. You can approve it or tell us what you want it to take out.

0:00:47.9 John Currier: That's fine.

0:00:48.2 James Wall: So feel free to fire away. But with that being said, could you tell me when and where you were born?

0:00:54.2 John Currier: I was born in 1944, March in Beverly, Massachusetts.

0:01:02.0 James Wall: And where is Beverly within the state?

0:01:05.1 John Currier: It's a little bit north of Boston. My dad was in the military fighting in the Pacific, and so my mother's family was there, and that's where she was when I was born.

0:01:18.9 James Wall: And I saw that you grew up in Portland, Maine?

0:01:23.1 John Currier: When dad came back from the Philippines, his home was in Portland, and so we moved back there. The Currier family, I've got a family tree that goes back to 1750, and they're all from Maine.

0:01:38.2 James Wall: Wow. And so were you an outdoor kid when you were growing up, were you interested in forests and streams and watersheds and things like that? [laughter]

0:01:46.8 John Currier: Just the opposite. Portland is the largest city in Maine, and I grew up right in the heart of the city. My experience was with the city park, the Oaks, they called it, and that was the only time I really had any trees.

0:02:07.3 James Wall: Wow. So how did you come to the subject itself? It must have been in its infancy as a academic subject when you were going to college.

0:02:15.5 John Currier: Actually, it was my English teacher, Ms. Sullivan, in Maine at that time, I probably still do. In your junior year in high school, you have to take a minimum of essentials in English, and you have to pass that in order to be advanced to a senior. I failed it. So I had to go to summer school, and Ms. Sullivan informed me that based upon my English ability, I should not consider going to college because I wouldn't make it. So I took the University of Maine's catalog and went through it, and the course that had the minimum number of English classes was forestry, so I decided to become a forester. [chuckle]

0:03:02.1 James Wall: That sounds like me with history, except mathematics in place of English. [chuckle] It was the least amount of math. So this is a... In other words, we interviewed somebody

earlier and he said in junior high, he knew he wanted to be a hydrologist. [laughter] You were on the opposite end of the spectrum of...

0:03:21.0 John Currier: Definitely, couldn't be further from it.

0:03:23.9 James Wall: Getting into forestry sort of through the back door?

0:03:27.5 John Currier: Right. But then when I got to the University of Maine, the first forestry course was Introduction to Forestry or Forestry Orientation. It was two one-hour classrooms a week and a two-hour field. They had a wood lot right out beside the school, School of Forestry. And when we first went out there, my knowledge of forestry was, "well, you have Christmas trees, and you have trees with leaves," and that was the extent of my forestry knowledge. So they had us get together in groups of three, and I got together with two kids who grew up in Northern Maine, and all they did was forestry stuff all their life growing up. But being on the campus, they had a hard time finding from one classroom to another, so it was a symbiotic relationship. I would take care of them in the classrooms and they would take care of me in the woods, and all three of us ended up graduating.

0:04:36.2 James Wall: Wow. So by the time you got to college, was there a professor, was there a class that since you went on the path that you ended up on?

0:04:52.9 John Currier: There were various orientations in the School of Forestry, and I chose forest science as opposed to utilization or management and so forth, and so I had more of an indication that I'd wanted to do something more. And as I went through my undergraduate years, forest watershed management seemed to really interest me, and I had a professor then that encouraged me into that.

0:05:21.4 James Wall: And what was it about watershed management that spoke to you?

0:05:26.4 John Currier: The idea that one of the biggest premise of the Forest Service is creating a continuous supply of good water, and I thought I wanted to be part of that basic philosophy.

0:05:44.5 James Wall: And how did you go from majoring in this, emphasizing in forest science to getting a permanent posting in the Forest Service? What happens in between?

0:05:56.2 John Currier: Well, I stayed on at Maine and got a master's degree in Forest Watershed Management. And then when I graduated, I went and applied to the Forest Service, and they were going to hire me as a, or did hire me as a Jjunior forester. And I asked if I could go on the White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire, and they said no, but they had one real close, and I ended up on the Glidden Ranger District in the Chequamegon Forest in Wisconsin, which I thought was better than Alaska [laughter], closest.

0:06:36.0 James Wall: Not what I thought by close, and it's...

0:06:37.6 John Currier: It's all relative.

0:06:40.3 James Wall: It's within the top, the continental states, I suppose. A lot of people seem to end up on the Chequamegon National Forest. What is it about that forest? Do you remember sort of

seeing it for the first time?

0:06:53.8 John Currier: I'd never heard of it before. And then when I got there, it was the first time away from home other than college, and it was really neat. The district people really took care of me. They could see how green I was. The district clerk got me a room over the local meat store. The district ranger took me down to the bank, showed me how to set up and get my paycheck put in. They were basically taking care of me. I wish I could have stayed there longer. I was only there three months.

0:07:34.3 James Wall: So everybody has, in these early years, somebody that takes them under their wing. Do you have a mentor that you remember from the early years of your career that looked out for you or sort of taught you a few lessons?

0:07:48.2 John Currier: No, not really. As I say, I was only on the forest for three months. And then when I became a hydrologist, when I went on a forest as a hydrologist, there were no other hydrologists, and there weren't many people who knew what a hydrologist was or could tell me what I was supposed to do. They were real good. They gave me a brand new Jeep and a budget for materials and stuff, but nobody could tell me what I was going to do, and so I just had to build it as I went.

0:08:22.8 James Wall: Yeah. So there's a continuum, it seems, of stories here. On this end, there's very rare people who always had good bosses, knew what they were doing, welcomed by everyone they went to, and then probably more common as like district ranger hated me or was indifferent. Didn't know what we did. No sense of what we were doing. It was all about just getting the cut out. Where would you say your career fell on that one?

0:08:52.2 John Currier: I think they were very supportive of me, and were hoping that I could help them. I was on the Monongahela National Forest during the controversy. I was there in '74, and the controversy had started about ten years previous to that, about clear-cutting hardwoods in the Appalachian area of West Virginia, and people were dead against it. It just looked so bad. And so they were hoping that somehow I could help them to get the public more on board, that the Forest Service was there to protect and conserve the forest, not to destroy them as some of the people were seeing on these clear cuts.

0:09:40.9 James Wall: I see. And by the time... So you took a sojourn obviously to join the armed forces?

0:09:50.5 John Currier: Well, I won a lottery. [chuckle] It's the only lottery I'd ever...

0:09:55.6 James Wall: Not the lottery you want to win. [chuckle]

0:09:56.6 John Currier: Right. An all-expense paid trip and all the bullets I could shoot. But that changed my career too, because I ended up in the Army Corps of Engineers, and I spent a year teaching at the Fort Belvoir Army Engineer School, road construction and design, specifically the hydrology, the drainage component of that. So I became very familiar with road construction. So then when I got on the Monongahela and the other forests, it was the forest engineer that I really tried to help and could understand their road construction. They could see that, and I think they allowed me a little bit more freedom to work with them in helping to ensure that they didn't have

water problems with their construction.

0:10:48.8 James Wall: I see. So what would you say were, throughout your career, your biggest accomplishments that you're proud of?

0:11:05.0 John Currier: On the forest, like in the Monongahela, it was determining that we had a lot of fish kills, trout kills in the headwaters. And the local environmental groups were saying, "Well, it's caused by timber harvesting," or, "It's caused by roads," or, "It's caused by acid mine drainage." And they were really beating up the Forest Service on killing the trout. It took me two years of doing data collection, but I proved that it was none of that. It was acid precept. We were east of the Ohio River Valley with all the industrial complexes, and so all of the air pollution was going east, and particularly in the summertime when it hit the mountains on the Monongahela, the heavy thunderstorms would drop large quantities of rain in a short period of time, and the pH in the water could change ten to a hundred-fold fold in just that small period. The smaller the storm, the more concentrated the water, the more concentrated the pH, anywhere from a ten to a hundred-fold increase in pH, and then it would be gone once the storm was gone. So people would go in and look and they couldn't find out what killed them.

0:12:26.4 James Wall: Wow. So the so-called acid rain, right?

0:12:30.0 John Currier: Yeah, exactly.

0:12:30.5 James Wall: Which is an accelerated version of kind of like what climate change would do unabated, 'cause the water is absorbing carbon which raises the pH.

0:12:36.1 John Currier: Right. So that was a big one there. Yeah.

0:12:40.6 James Wall: Wow. So you were able to determine through a significant amount of data mining and science to prove this?

0:12:46.1 John Currier: It took almost two years to come up with that. I was measuring stream quantity and quality, but about the size of this table, about this round, and there were automatic samplers that would automatically pull a sample from the stream and bottle it in whatever time period I wanted. And so I would do that continuously and then go in and change every thirty days, and put new bottles in and test that. I was also testing the rain that fell, and a stream gauge to determine how much discharge there was, and so you could see the discharge going up and the pH going up significantly also, and so that's what basically made that determination. Even the environmental groups had to accept that data, but one of the guys complained that, "Oh, it's too bad," 'cause he couldn't get God into court.

0:13:51.7 James Wall: Wow. Was this happening in other places?

0:13:56.7 John Currier: Probably not as much as West Virginia with the mountains, the Appalachians stopping it, but it was probably occurring in Pennsylvania, probably Virginia, anywhere that the Ohio River industrial complex would have that acid pollution going over.

0:14:16.9 James Wall: Gotcha. So, what did the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] make of all this?

0:14:25.1 John Currier: That was just for Forest Service report. I'm not sure EPA ever saw it.

0:14:32.0 James Wall: But you put the data into their system?

0:14:34.2 John Currier: I put all the data into STORET, and as far as I know, it's still in there.

0:14:38.4 James Wall: Now, one of the other big things that you did in your career is you did work with the EPA, or they contracted you with the Forest Service to do the Water Systems Development Group?

0:14:51.6 John Currier: We called it the WRENS document, Water Resource Evaluation of Nonpoint Sources. It was a contract between the Forest Service and EPA. EPA wanted the Forest Service to determine... Initially, I think, what the engineers in EPA wanted were standards, what standard concentrations of pollutants from timber operations. What we gave them were best management practices. You can't set a standard. You have to go with whatever is best for the conditions in the field.

0:15:32.1 James Wall: So before this, there is no sense of a standardized, sorry, best management practices. How do you then create that essentially out of thin air or in the absence of that? Who did you talk to? What was involved in that?

0:15:48.3 John Currier: We involved NFS hydrologists, the best in the country, and then also included all hydrologists or most of the hydrologists from our research facilities, National Forest System, National Research, and brought them together and broke it down by temperature, oxygen, sediment. So there were a variety of things, and then we had chapters. What were they? I think there were twelve chapters in there, each one describing how you would mitigate a particular like sediment in the stream or increasing temperature and stuff like that, and then there was one chapter that pulled it all together and showed you how to analyze for a timber operation. I will leave you some information on that.

0:16:47.4 James Wall: Yeah, so…now, we don't get a lot of people who worked in the South here, or I haven't interviewed too many. Mostly because of the geographical limitations of having a museum in Missoula. But anyway, tell me what you can about the Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests. What is the work that you're doing there? And how did you end up in South Carolina?

0:17:14.4 John Currier: It was a promotion. I was the forest hydrologist on the Monongahela. I took the position as the watershed staff officer on the Francis Marion and Sumter. So I moved every two to three years, initially, with a promotion, and then figuring, once my kids got in high school, then I was going to stay wherever I ended up. But down there, you have two components. You have, along the coast, swamps of Francis Marion, and then you have the Piedmont area where the Forest Service basically created the forest out of used up farmland. The soil was very poor down there, and then it was extensively used for farming, so that what was left was very poor conditions. They had, you know what a gully is? They had gulls, large, multi-acre areas that were nothing but bare. The soil was so bad nothing would grow on it. And then you had the Deliverance, movie Deliverance, the Chattooga, the Pickens Ranger District, that was way up in the mountains, between... The Chattooga River Wild and Scenic separated Georgia from South Carolina. And the

people up there were just like they were in the movie. [laughter]

0:18:38.0 James Wall: I lived in Augusta for a year, in Augusta, Georgia. So, I know that part of the country and... Well, part of the issue with the South and the soils is that for hundreds of years, you had a cotton monoculture, no crop rotation, and they just leeched everything they could and ruined the soils.

0:19:00.6 John Currier: And what they were trying to do before I got there, is the gullies, they would have boy scout units collect Christmas trees and throw them in, and the gulls nobody could figure out. Based upon my engineering in the Army, I was a platoon leader for a heavy equipment; bulldozers, 290 earth movers and graders, and what I proposed to the forest supervisor is we went in and cut any trees that were there, and then we reshaped the whole thing with big heavy equipment. So instead of steep grades and gullies, we kind of made it a bowl shape and put terraces so that as the rain came down, it would get into one of these terraces spread out and sink in. The gullies were gone because we just eliminated them. Once that was done, then we would go in with grass seed and seed everything and make a wildlife opening. As soon as the grass seed had germinated and had stabilized the soil, then we could go in in a year or two, three and plant pine back on. And it was very, very successful. In fact, the forest got the first National Forest Stewardship Award for that effort.

0:20:18.9 James Wall: Wow. That's a creative solution to a really difficult problem. So, why after all this, you finally make your way to DC and you get involved in Legislative Affairs? How did that come about?

0:20:38.4 John Currier: Well, first I went into Washington. They made me an offer I couldn't refuse. [laughter] I went in with a two-step promotion to be the watershed person manager in State and Private Forestry. So I was in that position for two and a half years. And then I lateraled over to be Legislative Affairs. Man, I wish my English teacher could have seen me writing testimony, [laughter] and bills for Congress. And so that's how I ended up in Legislative Affairs. It was something different and challenging. And on a forest, I could influence that. With watershed in State and Private, I could influence a little bit more. But in Legislative Affairs, you can influence the policy and the procedures then and further into the future on how the Forest Service was going to be implemented.

0:21:38.8 James Wall: Yeah, at the root.

0:21:38.9 John Currier: So that was really interesting.

0:21:39.0 James Wall: So you had mentioned before the interview that you had some intelligence on how chiefs are replaced, but that must mean that... I'm imagining during these three years you sort of saw how the sausage was made, so to speak.

0:21:54.4 John Currier: Yeah.

0:22:00.3 James Wall: 'Cause a lot of people that go to DC that I've interviewed hate it and they leave and they don't ever want to come back. Was that the case with you or did you have a different...

0:22:09.7 John Currier: No, I enjoyed both of my jobs there. I helped to influence the watershed and State and Private Forestry, which in turn, State and Private Forestry works with all the state foresters. So you're influencing a hell of a lot more than the National Forests when you think about it, particularly in the East. And then, Legislative Affairs, everything was... Every day was something different. And I was appointed as the Alaska person. Anything that happened to Alaska, I got, and then they would make other duties as assigned.

0:22:53.2 James Wall: So, which Congress people were you working with?

0:23:00.0 John Currier: I didn't work with the Congress people. Basically Legislative Affairs, and it's a small group, less than 15, 20 people. When anybody from the Forest Service—Chief, Associate Deputies—go up to testify, then we would prepare their testimony and prepare a briefing book on possible questions they might get, questions, here's the answer. And to do that, we would go up and interact with the various congressional staff who are going to be taking the testimony. I'd try to find out what questions might you have so I could have an answer there so that when Max Peterson went up to testify, if somebody asked it, he could give him an answer right then and there.

0:23:45.4 James Wall: Were you the first hydrologist, or you must have been one of the first hydrologists to get into this position, right?

0:23:55.0 John Currier: Actually, I got into the position as a forester. 'Cause I had my undergraduate degree as forestry. I switched as a hydrologist when I went to South Carolina as the Watershed Staff Officer. I asked if I could fill that as a 460 Forester. And the reason for that was that, looking ahead, there really wasn't a heck of a lot of promotion potential. So I went into the Washington office as a forester. I went to Legislative Affairs as a forester. And then when the next position was open, I talked to the Director of Legislative Affairs and the Deputy Chief, and I confessed that I was a hydrologist, a closet hydrologist, and if I could do that, how about opening it interdisciplinary for hydrologist, geologist, recreation specialist, that that position should be interdisciplinary, and they did, as far as I know from then on.

0:24:57.7 James Wall: Wow. Which is crucial because so much of, without the Clean Water Act, hydrology doesn't become a probably ingrained profession in the Forest Service. So keeping that legislative momentum going, I guess is big. Although this was in the heart of the Reagan Administration, which everybody talks about is this strange time where they want to cut as much timber as possible. That seemed to be kind of the main emphasis, at least for Reagan, probably. And yet the budgets are being sort of slashed left and right. Was that accurate?

0:25:36.5 John Currier: I don't know. I was not directly involved in the budget part. I was more directly with testimony and with... Oh, well what was the word? The really weird—when a Congressman called and wanted to know how many vault toilets the Forest Service had. Because one of his constituents asked him to find out 'cause he had a new vault toilet that he wanted to sell to the Forest Service. So, those are the kind of things that you would get to come up with and you couldn't just wing it. You had to give them a solid answer.

0:26:13.5 James Wall: So you had to spend a day calling people and asking about the toilets? [chuckle]

0:26:18.9 John Currier: Well, getting with the recreation folks and so forth, to find out, "Hey, how

many?" And then they would have to check their records, weird stuff like that.

0:26:29.9 James Wall: Democracy.

0:26:30.4 John Currier: And one time I got thrown off the hill. I called up and told the C hief don't let him come back on the hill. There was a Native American tribe in Alaska, one of their corporations, they wanted to switch land with the Forest Service, equal acreage, acre for acre. But what they didn't tell the Select Committee on Indian Affairs and the Senate was that they had clear cut their land and the Forest Service, the land that they wanted was virgin timber, and oh yeah, it had a gold mine on it. So I was going up with a briefing paper, handing it out to members of that committee's staff to point that out, and somebody called the Chief and said, "Keep Currier off the hill." They didn't want that information circulated.

0:27:23.4 James Wall: Wow, it sounds like you learned a lot.

0:27:25.7 John Currier: Oh, yeah.

0:27:28.9 James Wall: And then the longest posting you had was in State and Private Forestry in Pennsylvania.

0:27:35.1 John Currier: Kids were in high school.

0:27:35.6 James Wall: Yeah. How did you get to that?

0:27:38.3 John Currier: Max Peterson... Generally, a tour in Legislative Affairs was around three or four years. Pretty burnt out, right? And so, I was getting my time, about ready to go, and Max asked me if I wanted to go to Command and General Staff College. I was in the Reserves as an Engineer, and he knew that. We talked about it. And the Forest Service had one slot in the Army's Command and General Staff College, a resident one-year program, and he wanted to know if I wanted it as far as a promotion, potential for promotion in the army. The problem with that is that I could then have to move twice in a year, and I didn't want that for my kids, so I turned it down, and that's when I ended up getting that job in NA. And they were in high school, and I just put down roots until they were through.

0:28:40.0 James Wall: So, what was your day-to-day life like in that particular job?

0:28:46.2 John Currier: I was the Assistant Director for basically resources, similar to a Deputy Regional Forester. I had water, timber, utilization, forest utilization, forest products. And I had three staff units out in the field; West Virginia, up in Minnesota, and one in New Hampshire. And so, it was something different going on all the time, and it was really rewarding. Had some really good folks out there working with the states to expand and improve State Forestry Programs and Product Utilization.

0:29:24.6 James Wall: I see.

0:29:27.1 John Currier: Yeah, really enjoyed it.

0:29:27.8 James Wall: Alright. So we're a little bit... We've got a little bit of time, but there's a few

questions I always ask at the end of everybody. I like compare answers. What's the part of the job you miss the most?

0:29:41.6 John Currier: Interacting with the folks, the staff.

0:29:45.7 James Wall: The people, in other words?

0:29:46.5 John Currier: Yeah.

0:29:47.9 James Wall: Is there a favorite time in your career? Not necessarily where you were accomplishing the most, but where you were having the most fun, enjoying yourself?

0:30:00.3 John Currier: Oh, yeah. That would have been the first forest, the Monongahela.

0:30:06.9 James Wall: West Virginia?

0:30:08.1 John Currier: Yeah, I was on my own. I set my own program. Yeah, that was a lot of freedom.

0:30:15.8 James Wall: I see. Another question I always ask is, if you could go back in time to when you were first starting out on the job in the forest service, knowing what you know now, what piece of advice would you give yourself on how to survive in this business?

0:30:35.5 John Currier: I guess don't be locked in. Be willing to try new things. Things are going to change, and I want to be the one directing those changes, making things better.

0:30:53.2 James Wall: That's a good answer. And the last, of course, is what does the Forest Service mean to you as an entity now looking back in your life?

0:31:04.0 John Currier: It really made me have a very fulfilling career. I really felt good about the work I did. It was only in the later years that I started having concerns, but for the most part, I really enjoyed it and if I had to do it again, I'd jump right in.

0:31:33.4 James Wall: Well, it sounds like you had a hell of a run. Well, thanks so much for sitting down and sharing your memories with me. We'll let you go.