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Interviewee: Ken Winterberger
Interviewer: Clark Grant
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Ken Winterberger: My name is Ken Winterberger, and I got my degree in—a Bachelor of Science degree in Forestry—in 1976. Like a lot of people during that era, it took me five years because I took several periods and went off and worked someplace else or worked. I moved in ’76—pardon me—in 1976 I went up to—actually in ’75—I went up to Alaska. Kind of got hooked and I’ve been there since.

Clark Grant: What initially got you interested in that field of study?

KW: Actually, when I was growing up, my uncle—sort of uncle—was a game warden in Wisconsin. Whenever the family would go up to Wisconsin to visit—because most of my family lived in Wisconsin—I was really intrigued. Of course, I was nine, ten years old. It was kind of like, wow, this is really neat! I had the opportunity to go to the University of Illinois—Carbondale. My family made a lot of trips out to Montana and I got intrigued with the University of Montana, primarily as a wildlife major. I mean I was interested in wildlife. I got out here in ’71 and was very quickly brainwashed into the idea that habitat or forests were more important from all aspects—wildlife, everything else. The habitat was the key so I veered off into forestry.

CG: Did you know Bob Ream?

KW: I knew Bob Ream as a professor.

CG: We interviewed him earlier today.

KW: In fact, I met him—I knew that he was in the audience there when the dean gave his talk and at lunch we talked. He didn’t remember me, but, of course, as a professor I certainly remembered him.

CG: What work did you end up doing after school?

KW: Well, while I was here—in fact, I was just telling this story, one of the reasons I definitely wanted to go in here and talk about this oral history sort of stuff—Bill Pierce, a professor of mensuration essentially, when I was here. He was fantastic. He was a really neat guy. One of his jobs—other than teaching mensuration—was he was the guy that took care of all the students’ summer employment. My first year here—1971-1972—I had applied all sorts of different places. Didn’t have anything, but I had a lead for working at a sawmill in Plains [Montana] but I didn’t have anything definite. I had sent in an application in and they said, Well, come on out.
We can probably get you on the green chain—which is the lowest end of the sawmills at that time. I didn’t have a place to stay, so I thought I’d stay under a bridge until I got a job and got a place to rent. So that’s what I was going to do.

Last minute—I had moved out of the dorms and everything—I came in to see Doc Pierce. He had these half glasses that he put on the end of his nose and he’d kind of look over them like this. He’s on the phone.

He looks at me and he goes, “Yeah. Yeah, uh huh. I think I’ve got someone for you.” He asked to come in his room and he starts interviewing me. He goes, “Do you know anything about cars?”

I was kind of like, “Yeah, I guess.”

He goes, “Yeah, he says he knows about cars.” I’m thinking, I’m a forestry student. What is he leading me into? He goes, “You got any problem starting on Monday?”

This is Friday, so I was kind of like, “Where?”

He goes, “In the sticks in Idaho.” I’m thinking to myself, the Styx? The Styx—a ranger station? I’ve never heard of a ranger station called the Styx. I was totally baffled. He gets off the phone—he tells them, “Yeah, I’ve got someone. He’ll be there. St. Mary’s? Yeah, he’s got to drive a truck, okay, fine.” He gets off the phone and he says, “Go down to the regional office and tell them you’re the guy I sent down there. They need you in St. Mary’s, Idaho on Monday morning. Your boss-to-be (or the district engineer) has a truck—he has two trucks to get up river” because I was going to work at Red Ives Ranger Station.

Red Ives was a seasonal ranger station. It was only open during the summer and so he [the district engineer] had to ferry all these vehicles up and of course it’s only one guy. It was in the spring. The river was really high, the road was washed out. So, I spent my first summer as the district grease monkey, which was completely off my radar. That’s not what I was thinking I was going to be doing, nothing to do with wood or trees—anything—other than the fact that I got to do a lot of stuff other than take care of the vehicles. I got to work on a re-seeding project with the road crew, doing a hydro-seeding project. Got to do all sorts of clearing with debris. Went out with the packer and dynamited some big boulders off of the road. I mean, just all sorts—I mean it was kind of like this is what forestry—okay. I can do this. This is great. So, I ended up going back working on the timber crew at Red Ives Ranger Station the following two years and then my—what would have been my senior year—at the last minute I got this opportunity to go up to Alaska seasonally. At the time it was called forest survey and now it’s called forest inventory and analysis.

When I first went up to Alaska—Alaska’s one of those places where either you love it or hate it, and I loved it. I got hooked. I came back to school realizing that remote sensing—or at the time, aerial photography or photo interpretation, photogrammetry, that sort of thing—was really

Ken Winterberger Interview, OH 443-012, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
important. Because that’s how you had to do stuff. You couldn’t visit every place. So, I came back and Professor Gerlach (?)—he was the photogrammetry, remote sensing prof at the time. I took every class I possibly could take from him. I really wanted to go back up to Alaska the following year and they didn’t—that was—the Forest Service was having—similar to today—it was having some financial issues. They weren’t theoretically doing any hiring, but they said, “Well, we can get you on with some folks in Portland.”

I go, “Okay. Well, fine.”

Again at the last minute—just after I graduated—they called me up and they said, “We’re not going to hire a big crew, but can you come up and work for us this summer?” I did, and I’ve been there ever since.

When my kids were growing up, they’d ask when they were little, “What do you do, Daddy?” I told them I counted trees. I’ve worked for the Pacific Northwest Research Station counting trees. Forest inventory and monitoring. Our office is responsible for all of Alaska—all the forest land in Alaska—Hawaii and the Pacific Trust Islands. So, long story but that’s—yes. (laughs)

CG: That’s good. So a small chunk of land then?

KW: Yes, but it’s kept me off the streets.

CG: Is that work gratifying for you?

KW: It’s my passion. Yes, I really love wild land inventory and monitoring.

CG: What is that motivates it? Is it a fascination with natural systems or is it a civil service aspect?

KW: I think it’s a combination of things, but it’s just a curiosity, I think. Alaska, because of its size and the difficulty of getting around, there’s a lot of basic research still being done up there. Especially because of recent interest and obvious climate change things have—Alaska is kind of a hot spot for that sort of thing. The permafrost is subsiding because of increased temperatures. The mean annual temperature has gone up a lot, specifically if you look at world maps. You look at Alaska, the temperature has way the heck up. We have several things happening very quickly. In the arctic in general or the boreal, it’s pretty common to see that, but Alaska is kind of a hot spot. We have forest migrating upslope into areas that haven’t been forested before. We have a natural barrier in the Brooks Range, so it’s not going to the Arctic Ocean, but it’s going out into areas that haven’t been forested before. The white and black spruce, which is more cold-tolerant—or they like colder temperatures—they’re not doing as well as they have in the past. Because we are forest inventory and monitoring, we have been looking at them for a long period of time and it’s kind of interesting to see a lot of those slowing down. It’s curiosity, I think, more than anything.
CG: Where does that come from? Was that imparted to you from your father maybe?

KW: I'm not sure. I've just always been curious. (laughs)

CG: That's a fine answer.

KW: Yes. Science.

CG: I know it's a complex topic, but if you had to speak on it, what do you think will happen?

KW: That's a good question. In Alaska, it's really obvious that things are happening. We have had—in fact, talked today to someone from Alberta—a forester from Alberta. Was commenting about the fact that well, everybody gets excited about fires, which are more common, but one of the things that has become much more common—and there hasn't been as much activity because it's not as in your face as a fire, obviously—is insects. I know locally you've had pine beetle. In Alaska, we've had spruce bark beetle. Devastating, essentially, the spruce bark beetle infestation on the Kenai Peninsula in the Anchorage area. The only reason it stopped was because the beetles ate themselves out of their homes. There was nothing else to eat, so the population finally subsided. That sort of thing is happening more and more in the boreal. You have huge, huge insect outbreaks and nobody really knows—because defoliators, they're not going to kill the tree, they just kind of defoliate the tree. It doesn't grow as quickly. If you have that repeated, you know, many, many, many times, it's going to kill the tree, but it's going to slow the trees down a lot. Like I was saying earlier, you have the trees moving into areas that haven't been forested in the past. What that means, we haven't recorded it, so we don't know. You can make some guesses, but—

CG: Do you feel like your time here at the university prepared you for the career you ended up getting into? Were you, looking back could you have ever guessed you'd be where you are now?

KW: No. (laughs) I think what I got here was—and I think foresters in general, but I think here I really got—with all the stuff they had for us to do—the Forester's Ball, the Forestry Club, going out and doing projects for different folks—it was—“make do” isn't the word for it—just a lot of stuff. Even if you concentrated on forest science or range science or whatever, you really came away from here, I think, as what I like to refer to as an “omniologist.” You had an interest and understanding in a lot of things. You may have an expertise in one area, but they really wanted you to know about a lot of stuff and the interactions of all those things. If you are doing forest inventory like I've been doing for 37, 38 years, you do really appreciate being able to see all those different aspects because if you are just looking at one thing, I would have stopped counting trees a long time ago (laughs). Like my daughters, when they got older they said, That counting tree's stuff, dad, it can't be that difficult; they don't move around. (laughs)
CG: Is retirement on the horizon at all?

KW: Actually, I’ve been telling several folks that have asked the same question—we’ve been doing forest inventory in Alaska since the ‘50s. We had a lot of forest inventory plots that we put in interior Alaska, which is the big part up north of the coast. We did that up through the ‘90s and then we got into what’s called an annualized inventory system, which is primarily on the coast. We didn’t necessarily abandon interior, but at the time when we first started it was—the thought was, Well things aren’t changing all that dramatically. Black Spruce doesn’t grow that quickly, things are just slow. That was before the real interest in—it was before the idea of climate change came about. People were thinking, We don’t need to worry about it that much. Well, about ten years ago or so, that sort of took off and people realized there is a lot of stuff happening in the interior. A lot of people—university, native incorporations in the interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Park Service—a bunch of people were saying, The forest inventory and analysis group needs to get back in the interior because we need to know what’s happening. Back then I said, “Well, when we get back in the interior,” I was pessimistic, thinking I wouldn’t be working for a long time, but I said, “When we get back in the interior, I’ll think about retiring.” It looks like we are really close, so the answer to your question is a couple of years, I think.

CG: Well, no rush.

KW: No and right now, I’m really enjoying what I’m doing.

CG: One final question. What, if any advice or words of wisdom would you impart to students who are here now?

KW: Get involved in all the stuff the school has to offer. I only know a couple of the folks on the staff here now, but I know that they will bend over backwards to get you involved in all sorts of stuff. That thing I said about the omniology I think is really important. If you’re in natural resource management, inventory, monitoring, whatever—you really need to know the system and there’s a lot to be cognizant of. So get involved.

[End of Interview]