

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 459-004

Interviewee: Stewart Brandborg

Interviewer: Bill LaCroix

Date of Interview: November 26, 2013

Project: Bill LaCroix Interviews with Stewart Brandborg Oral History Project

Stewart Brandborg: A little story about Bernard DeVoto. I had first learned of him, I would say, about 1946. He was the editor of the East Chair column in *Harper's* and he came out forthrightly exposing the legislation in the Congress to transfer grazing lands of the National Forest back to state ownership, with the strategy to divest the states of that ownership through sale to private properties, property holders, the stockmen. I believed the senator from Wyoming was involved, but several of the public land states' senior members of Congress were instigators. My dad - as supervisor of Bitterroot National Forest in a period when the Forest Service was a much stronger outfit and disposed to have at least an inner confidential circle to contend with such threats to the public ownership - my dad was very active in a circle that involved a close associate dedicated agent of the Forest Service and public lands, James Vessey, who I believe was in charge of information and education programs at Region 1 Missoula, but later became the regional forester for the southeastern United States, based in Atlanta. It was a herculean effort by an inner circle of this agency to kill this bill, to muster citizens in opposition to it. DeVoto, apparently, and from all signs, was a ring leader working with key agency heads to see that it didn't get through. Ultimately, by waging a campaign that involved private conservation groups, they defeated the measure.

My next exposure to DeVoto was when, as assistant conservation director of the National Wildlife Federation, the Natural Resource Council, which was made up of a dozen or twenty national organizations in the environmental movement, called then the conservation movement, invited DeVoto to a special dinner honoring him for his leadership. This must have been in the years 1955, 1956, something like that. So these folks, maybe 30, had gathered in lovely dining room in the second floor of the Statler Hotel to celebrate Bernie. Bernie arrived on a hot summer afternoon, his suit was crumpled from perspiration, it was one of the Washington, D.C. days you never forget. Everything is saturated with perspiration. But Bernie, after dinner, held forth with great eloquence. And of course [he] really worked over the nefarious sponsors of this legislation, most of whom, I think all of whom were Republican senators from the western United States. But he didn't leave a stone unturned in damning them straight to hell, and all of this happened with the enjoyment of my colleagues from the other groups that was great. It concluded with the usual speeches of condemnation, but not without Senator Duff of Pennsylvania, who had worked on - I believe it was a sponsor - of the wilderness bill. He had been invited to the meeting and he took umbrage at DeVoto's

castigation of the Republicans and he got up and held forth at some length – maybe 20 minutes – countering Bernie, doing all he could to remove the blame from this nefarious strategy for taking over the grazing lands of the National Forest. Of course the bill had gone down and the meeting ended with this explosion of the old Republican senator. Everybody shaking the hand of Bernie and Bernie returning, I guess, to New York where at that point I think he was still editor of Harper's *Easy Chair* column. It was from that point that he had distinguished himself, obviously working with the Forest Service, perhaps other public land agencies in gaining defeat through expression of conservationists over the land. This was an interesting development where the Forest Service, the agency, had spread the word to those of political capability in the agency – the Forest Service employees like my dad, Jim Vessey – my dad [was] an activist who had involved himself as the member of the Montana State Board of Education in the politics of Montana, those operatives became active on this Forest Service issue. Later, after I was in Washington we saw relatively little of this when there were legislative moves to abrogate National Forest lands or authorities, the Forest Service had withdrawn from that level of direct activism. Spoke well for my dad and the others who came out in defense of the National Forest. It probably involved some endangerment of their careers but they obviously were doing this work in the full knowledge of the Forest Service Hierarchy. In the later period I didn't see that kind of effective advocate work from agency people in protecting public lands, wildlife, and other resources, unless of a very confidential nature.

Bill LaCroix: So, before we end, I am trying to remember when your dad was hauled before the HUAC – the House Un-American Activities Commission – and I'm wondering if that had any effect on, I mean if his advocacy for public grazing lands and his associations had any effect.

SB: I don't think they were related.

BL: What do you think happened there?

SB: Oh, it's a whole story. I don't want to pick it up as a piece.

BL: Ernie Dickerman?

SB: Ernie Dickerman came to the Society as a result of his long friendship with Harvey Broom in Knoxville, Tennessee. They were fellow members of the Smoky Mountain Hiking Club and Harvey had, as a founder of the Society, had talked wilderness and wilderness values to members of the club. And indeed the membership was a solid force in wanting to protect wild country. The Smoky Mountains and the National Park of North Carolina and Tennessee was prime wilderness and Ernie Dickerman and Harvey Broom were long standing companions for hikes in that back country. Sometimes several days at a time. Ernie was helping Harvey mobilize people when the National Park Service wilderness review came up under the schedule set for

the Wilderness Act implementation. As you recall, areas were to be given public hearings by the managing agency, in this instance of course the National Park Service. It was in preparation for them, with a real concern about a road that had been proposed from Bryson City across the Smoky Mountains, across some of the finest wilderness lands remaining in the wild Appalachians and in the National Park, that I suggested that we hire Ernie to work in the local communities of Tennessee, North Carolina, and the other Smoky Mountain states to alert people to the need for a sound wilderness proposal.

The first of the National Park Service-carried provisions that were alarming to us, large areas set aside in the heart of the wilderness as enclaves for recreation, the trans-mountain road, and boundaries that were not acceptable to those who knew the wild country of the Great Smokys. So the Wilderness Society had developed its proposal, the job we undertook was that of persuading, informing conservation-minded people, particularly those who loved the wild country of the Smoky Mountains of this threat. Having them appear as they did at the two public hearings, one in Knoxville, Tennessee, the other Bryson City, North Carolina. We brought tremendous audiences speaking in one voice in support of our advocacy; get rid of those bad boundaries, those donut holes scattered through the heart of the wilderness, and the trans-mountain road from Bryson City over the mountains to Tennessee. It was a pleasure to attend the hearings. We had strong representation. The local folks from Bryson City and the tourist communities of Tennessee bordering the park were strong. They wanted full development and the enlargement of the motel, hotel, and playground facilities at each border to accommodate more tourists, not very much oriented toward wild land values but toward carnival-like facilities where local commercial entities were having a field day, particularly on the Tennessee side. So they were there in great numbers, we were there in larger numbers. Again we mobilized people from across the country through the direct mail campaign of the Wilderness Society and filled the record with testimonials supporting the Wilderness Society's proposal.

Ernie Dickerman emerged as the grassroots connector. He went to Audubon groups, hiking clubs, sportsmen groups, anybody he could on the border communities of that park, called them to arms to show up at the hearing to speak for the wilderness proposal of the Society. It was not too long after that that I suggested to Harvey Broom, then president of the Society, that Ernie join me and the staff as a representative of the Society in Washington. And that gave Ernie a whole new career. Throughout his life he had been, to the amusement of his close friend Harvey, a person that had a spotted professional career. He had worked at various jobs – salesman, representative for different companies – but not for very long in any one place. Well this job turned out to be his cup of tea. He loved it. He loved working with local people on wilderness proposals. As the Smoky Mountain proposal was passed on through agency review, departmental review, and finally to the Congress by way of the White House, this was the process that Ernie was ready to guide and participate in. Not too much to be done with the

agency recommendations, all kinds of opportunities when the Smoky Mountains proposal went to the Congress.

For various reasons, to this day the Smoky Mountain Wilderness has not been designated. At one point there was a gathering in Washington of people from the Smoky Mountain country – North Carolina, Tennessee – a busload came in, I guess that was the agency hearing, or maybe the Congressional hearing – again our allies spoke with eloquence for wilderness. Again, the commercial interests, tourism, commercialization of the two entry points to the Smokys, were on hand. A great rally for the wilderness. The senator from Tennessee was enlisted in opposition and the proposal never cleared the Congress. To this day the wilderness of the Smokys has not been included in the National Wilderness Preservation system. Other areas have suffered similar fate. Briefly, magnificent units like Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks – we have never had a concerted campaign to place those in the wilderness system, and that fact reflects a lack of vital follow through by the Society in this period, decades since the '64 enactment of the law, which gave us a 10 year period to review candidate areas of the National Park system.

[End of Interview]