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**Oral History Number: 459-006**

**Interviewee: Stewart Brandborg**

**Interviewer: Bill LaCroix**

**Date of Interview: December 3, 2013**

**Project: Bill LaCroix Interviews with Stewart Brandborg Oral History Project**

Stewart Brandborg: I begin today with my discovery of the incomparable wild country of Alaska. I was up there for a purpose I can't recall, but somehow fell into the influence of this Fish and Wildlife Service regional agency. I want to say Stevenson, but I will search for his name to make sure I have the correct one. He undertook to expose me as executive director of the Society to the wondrous wilderness resource of Alaska. This involved ground tours to the Kenai Country and goose flights from Anchorage and Fairbanks over the incomparable wild country accessible within a few hundred miles of Anchorage, and then on up to Fairbanks where we flew the Yukon, its headwaters, over to the north slope, where oil development was just getting underway. I'm reaching in my mind for a year, I want to establish that as clearly as I can, but the benefit of this to me, this flight, was incomparable. I had never seen the expansiveness and the rich diversity of the Yukon with its many braided channels, spruce forests of immeasurable extent, vast areas of water and marsh, the North Slope with its bare ground and sparse northern patches of timber. I think that should be phrased because I have little recall of timber – the barren ground with the tundra was the dominating feature of this beautiful landscape. This trip, from the caribou of the north slope to the vast beaver-laden channels of the Yukon, the braided streams, the immensity of the Yukon itself, with its spruce forest, drop-in landings at the remote strips coming back to Fairbanks after overview of Mount McKinley National Park, gave me invaluable appreciation of Alaska and its wilderness and wildlife diversity. It gave me a foundation for my advocacy. I believe I spent at least two weeks working out of Fairbanks for the northern part of the exploration down in Anchorage, reaching into Denali, a limited time on a trip – I believe this expedition occupied the better part of three or four weeks – out of Juneau, quick flights to Glacier Bay, some of the principle areas of the park system in southeastern Alaska. Bottom line, I was imbued with the richness of the incomparable wilderness and wildlife which I had sampled on this trip and totally convinced that a major part of the Wilderness Society resources must be devoted to the preservation of this wilderness country. It was a mind expanding, mind blowing experience for me. I returned to Washington with a new commitment to the opportunity that we had in Alaska for our preservation programs.

This land, of course, too, my commitment to the effort that we made spasmodically in early stages for the Alaskan laws that dictated how the land was to be divided between different uses, but for me and others in the Society that felt so keenly about the wilderness of Alaska, I think in particular of Harvey Broom and Bob Marshall – with whom I had been as a boy in my

home at Hamilton, Montana – his early commitments rang through clearly in my ears as I experienced this wondrous land to get an overview of all that was before us. And the great work that the Society must contribute to gain its preservation.

Bill LaCroix: Can I ask an ignorant question?

SB: You bet.

BL: The Muries, Sig Olson, Harvey Broom – were they involved with the Wilderness Society at this time? Aldo Leopold I believe had died by then.

SB: Yes, long gone.

BL: So they were for you doing this?

SB: Yes, very much so. Sig Olson had been retained in a consultant capacity by the Secretary of Interior to explore and to find the opportunities for preservation of wildlife and wild country. So he was deeply, deeply committed.

BL: Was this during the Kennedy administration?

SB: Before.

BL: Eisenhower?

SB: I'm unable to be specific. Ted Swem on behalf of the National Park Service, but as a member of the Society's governing council, was a very strong adviser to me in urging that I make the trip to Alaska, that I cover it in the wholeness of the wilderness resource – get a real feel for it – so I think my trip of some 3 weeks fulfilled that purpose with my conviction that there could be nothing but full effort of the Society to gain dedication in the wilderness system as much of that wild land as was possible. Today, some one hundred three to five million acres enjoys some form of protected status within the public land state, the Wildlife Refuge system, the National Forest system, the National Park system and the public land administration of the Bureau of Land Management. [The Bureau of Land Management was] a later arrival to the wilderness opportunities but nonetheless the administrator of vast areas in Alaska and the West that have some of the finest of our wilderness resources, for which conservationists must be giving highest priority.

Alaska was a mind blowing experience for those in the Society and ultimately, as late as 1963 the governing council met at Celia Hunter's lodge within Mount McKinley National Park for its annual meeting. This was at a late stage in the fight for basic legislation but a very critical stage for the Society and our efforts to bring preservation programs into being.

[Break in audio]

BL: That's what ultimately led to your dismissal, right? That rift?

SB: The Alaskan experience, for me, was invaluable, mind-blowing in the perspective of priorities within the Society, and timely in the fact that early Wilderness Society leaders, particularly Olaus and Marty Murie, who had traveled Alaska by bobsled in the years of Olaus's early field work, really lived in wild country, camping in the wild land for months at a time, had given so much to our whole wilderness perspective. These were old timers followed by older, seasoned wilderness advocates, people who valued every bit of their wilderness exposure and renewed their wilderness commitments with knowledge of all of the great opportunities for wilderness preservation in Alaska. These included Harvey Broom, Ted Swem, and others who felt that there were no greater opportunities for the Society than those in Alaska. Other organizations in this period of active preservation efforts were certainly committed fully in leadership roles; the individual scientists that came into play following Olaus and Marty's early explorations; and paralleling them, Sierra Club – through the work of Edward Wayburn – was vitally important; each of these individuals [and] their groups showed great awareness, appreciation, and commitment to the Alaskan preservation programs.

Sigurd Olson was retained by Stewart Udall, then Secretary of the Interior, for the purpose of evaluating, exploring, and determining what priorities in preservation areas were to be pursued, and within the opportunities he enjoyed to explore the north country, his work stood out. His relationship with the Secretary of the Interior was vital to the total effort. Sig had gained a reputation for his incomparable work in the Superior boundary waters, canoe areas, his familiarity with the canoe country, his broad experience as a scientific source of documentation, as well as his professional work as a canoe guide in these boundary waters canoe country, stood out and gained him the recognition he so richly deserved as a source of council and guidance in Alaska.

My awareness following my extended travel in Alaska brought me and, ultimately through my efforts and other members of the governing council, to the realization of the great opportunity we had there. In so doing, the whole Alaskan battlefield was opened up. This meant the Society had to invest resources into advancing the preservation programs that had come out of the 3 wilderness agencies and the Bureau of Land Management. Proposals were developed, Swem, Sigurd Olson, and others were involved in the evaluation of the interior to the Interior Department to get depth and dimension of the wildlife, which of course was there in the abundance that could be found only in that north country.

I elevated the Alaskan opportunity for the Society as much as I could and that brought some concern on the part of Clifton Merritt, who was so deeply engaged – and competently engaged

– in the protection and preservation of National Forest wild lands, some of which were scheduled for review under the provisions of the Wilderness Act, many of which were de facto wilderness, not previously designated administratively as wilderness but wild country that was fully deserving of evaluation for its wildness, and for possible inclusion in the wilderness system. This proved to be a mecca of opportunity and commitment for the Society, which Cliff fully embraced with an unduly high level of competence from the many preservation efforts that he had committed to in his lifetime, particularly within the National Forest and the U.S. Forest Service. He was a seasoned advocate. His enthusiasm for Alaska – and appreciation of it – was not dimmed, but as it became a greater priority it took a significant amount of the financial and program resources of the Society; Cliff felt that nothing was much more important than those areas of public lands that he saw so clearly from his western office assignment, and that Alaska, in some ways, diminished the amount of resources we could put into the public land opportunities of the lower 48 states.

I realized in reflection that my unequaled, complete commitment to the Alaskan wilderness fight couldn't help but impact Cliff's programs, for which he saw the urgent priorities. No one can diminish those priorities, but the resources – financial, time, and effort of the Society – were directed substantially to Alaska as we tried to maintain our best efforts within National Forests. I believe this caused Cliff some real reservations as we became more intensely involved in the fight for Alaska's wilderness.

[Break in audio]

SB: Stewart Brandborg, December 3, 2013. This relates to the internal controversy within the council of the Wilderness Society regarding the Society's commitment to and advocacy of the 1956 wilderness bill. Of course I was on hand and close to the Society beginning in I believe 1954, where as assistant conservation director of the National Wildlife Federation under Charles Callison, the director of the Federation, I was employed and given direction by Callison to support Howard Zahniser of the Wilderness Society with his efforts within the Congress to advance the wilderness bill. It was in this period, living on North Hampton Drive of Tacoma Park, that I enjoyed the company of Zahny going to work by way of Rock Creek Park after I was employed in 1956. But Zahniser lived in Hyattsville and it was a commute down Rock Creek Park, typically avoiding the traffic, that we greatly strengthened our close relationship. But the closeness developed in the years '54 – '56, probably starting more in '56 as I was given responsibility for working on the wilderness bill with Zahniser. Starting '56, I had joined the council of the Wilderness Society, being inducted at Ober's Island in the month of August as the annual meeting of the Society's council, the governing body. The wilderness bill was introduced in 1956 by Congressman John Saylor of Pennsylvania and Hubert Humphrey, senator from Minnesota. By October 27, 1959, the Society council had considerable time to deliberate and

discuss the bill in all of its perspectives, the strategies that were developed for its advancement by Howard Zahniser and our close friends and cooperators. Zahniser was the central agent, the coordinator, the principle strategist in the whole campaign beginning in 1956, really beginning with his writing of the first drafts of the bill before its introduction by the two House and Senate sponsors. The bill had been subjected to some preliminary examination by the members of Congress; opposition to it had developed; some of the spokesmen for commodity groups had come out clearly in their opposition; and the agencies, including the Forest Service, had not given support to the legislation, nor had the departments of Interior and Agriculture. It was after some thorough and exhausting discussion in the Wilderness Society council that I wrote from my home in Silver Spring, Maryland on October 27, 1959, a memorandum addressing my concerns about the earlier flow of questions from members of the council, in which they challenged the strategy of continuing our campaign for the wilderness bill.

These were heartfelt deliberations, in which Olaus Murie, president of the Society Harvey Broom, brought up some far-reaching questions about the original wilderness bill and whether in the long term interest of wilderness federal legislation was necessary and important to the Society's preservation purpose. Having been on the scene since 1956 as a member of the governing council of the Society, and having been close to Howard Zahniser in the period of its development, his authorship and the initial introduction in both the House and Senate, I was totally an advocate of the measure as a means of providing a national policy for the preservation of the federal wilderness state within the jurisdictions of the United States Forest Service, the National Parks Service, and the Fish and Wildlife Service. It seemed very clear to me that in the absence of legislation, that wild lands as we knew them were vulnerable to all of the schemes and all of the proposals for gradual but steady encroachment that would bring them to their end. We didn't have a baseline of policy under which agencies could preserve wild lands for their own sake as a resource that provided unique values that could not be furnished by any other part of the public estate that was not given clear mandate to preserve wilderness.

This October 27 memo ostensibly written from my home in Silver Spring, Maryland, the apartment in Northwest Park, 630 Northampton Drive, [was composed] to avoid some of the questions that had arisen about advocacy of legislation by the Society and under the laws and regulations relating to advocacy of legislation on the part of a private citizen organization with a tax-exempt status. This had been a real controversy affecting the programs of the national environmental groups...general intimidation to avoid overt support for legislation in the Congress for fear of losing the organization's exemption from tax as a private organization.

My memo was written after a couple of exhaustive debates within the Wilderness Society's governing council at their annual meetings, and also at the quarterly meetings of the executive committee, a small representation of council members that met on a quarterly basis in the

months when we were not occupied with the meeting of the Society's governing council. The arguments had been that the Society, indeed, did endanger its status with the presentations to House and Senate Interior and Insular Affairs committees and in communications with the members of the House and Senate and their staffs. Of course, passage of the legislation depended on clearer explanation of its public purposes and the persuasion that had been won among the sponsors of the bill over a period of time, there were many of these as documented in the *Living Wilderness* magazine of the Society, people who had signed on as endorsers and sponsors of the wilderness measure.

The Society had enjoyed mobilization of people, its membership and cooperating groups over the country. An overt campaign had been carried out to enlist conservation-minded people of all walks to appear at hearings in Washington, D.C., wherever they would be held. And these were, from the standpoint of the Society, tremendously successful. The strong voices of citizens representing their own views, representing the views of their conservation organizations were heard at hearings that, in terms of the Society and the main supporters of the bill, were very encouraging. The people in Congress, led in these initial years by Senator Humphrey and Congressman Saylor were greatly encouraged by the outpouring of support for this measure that would be a national policy of enduring programs for preservation of wilderness in perpetuity.

As a young, relatively new member of the council – I had joined it in 1956 – in this memo of October, 27, 1959, employed at that time as assistant conservation director of the National Wildlife Federation, I came out as a strong supporter and spokesman for the wilderness bill. This should be read in the context of the correspondence and awareness of the very strong and significant hesitations about continuing our sponsorship and advocacy of the measure as of basic importance to the nation's wilderness. We were convinced, of course, as the members most directly involved, Zahniser and I working the Capitol, where we sought to build sponsorship in the House of Representatives and the Senate, that in the absence of this national policy and the programs for the agencies to preserve wild lands, wilderness was subject to continuing encroachment, loss of its wildness as various conflicting, destructive uses were allowed within areas of wild country.

In this document I emerged from my corner, so to speak, as one who had witnessed the drafting, the initial introduction of the wilderness bill in the Congress, to give it my strong support. I had witnessed enough on the Washington scene and within the 3 wilderness agencies to realize that without this basic policy for its preservation and a program for its protection, wilderness would gradually disappear from the public estate. It would be gone, never to be restored in a natural condition. For me, it seems that perhaps this memo was my coming of age, having only been a member of the governing council and the executive

committee since the meeting at Ober's Island in 1956. I came out my corner. I was of course close to Zahniser [and] had become totally convinced of his leadership and his dedication to wilderness cause; I also had gained some confidence since arriving in Washington, D.C., to work for the National Wildlife Federation as assistant conservation director in the workings of the Congress and the challenge we faced within public land agencies in preserving wilderness; in the absence of a policy for each of those agencies, there was little prospect for long-term preservation.

The copy of this memorandum to the council carries the printed corner note, page 1, "Return to me for files," written by my father Guy M. Brandborg. I have a copy of the memo in my hand in which I have a note, saying "I have made my position clear on this some time ago. This matter is strictly between us," with my initial "B," a yellow slip attached to this copy. My dad had written on top of this, "This is really tops" [and] something else about sharing it with other groups, with his note, "See the back." I don't see much on the back, but it was a sample of my use of his interest in my work and his dedication to wilderness and the National Forests. I used him as a consultant in these years with my work in the Society and for Howard Zahniser. His wisdom prevailed and I often exploited it to my great advantage in working for the protection of wild country, as well as in overall guidance of my life, support of my family, and my purposes in working for the conservation movement at the Washington, D.C. level.

The memo represents much of what I stood for in the Society and the first real written declaration to my colleagues in the council of the Society of my commitment to wilderness. It also was a strong statement in support of Zahniser's advocacy, the Society's advocacy at this stage, when some reservations were expressed by a few members of the Wilderness Society council. [Their] questions [included]: Is this time to go ahead with the legislative proposal, as opposed to a broad educational program for the American people to speak for wilderness? Is this a time for us to jeopardize our 501 – C3 tax-exempt status, when it's so obvious that this bill represents a foundation for all that this Society represents in its work for wilderness preservation? The cautions and red flags were many: Be cautious and careful in your advocacy.

Howard Zahniser, to the limits of his abilities, used the names of other organizations – Citizens for Conservation, Trustees for Conservation – any time there was a direct call to the Congress for specific action. But he did not hold back in his vitally important and only source of important insight and technical information on the need for wilderness preservation. He was the pillar around which advocacy was built. There were no others that were as strong, as persuasive, and as full of the carefully documented information to justify and clearly point to the need for basic wilderness policy and the programs called for in this wilderness legislation. He was the beginning and the end of the wilderness bill effort. It was around him that it was built, that it was pursued, [and] that the strategies and logistics were worked out. It involved the enlistment

of other key and very important leaders, such as Dave Brower of the Sierra Club – he was astute in working with the Sierra Club, the Wildlife Federation, the National Audubon Society, and others – in maintaining their strong support and testimony for the bill. But the coordination, the overall strategies, emanated from Zahniser and the small groups of inner circle cooperators that he enlisted, of which Brower was a pivotal member.

For me, this memorandum represents a stage of advocacy with these members of the governing council, Harvey, Olaus, Bernie Frank, and others – Benton MacKaye – others whom I dearly loved and for whom I had the greatest respect and affection.

[End of Interview]