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Oral History 336-01

Interviewee: Louise Bruce

Interviewer: Linnea Marshall

December 17, 1994

Linnea Marshall: This is an interview with Louise Bruce in Dillon, Montana, December 17, 1994. The interviewer is Linnea Marshall for the University of Montana. Louise, thank you for agreeing to talk with me on the Montana Wilderness Association. Perhaps you could talk to me a little bit about the beginnings of the Montana Wilderness Association.

Louise Bruce: Sure, I could do that. The Wilderness Association is a unique organization in the United States and including the lower forty-eight, as well as Alaska and Hawaii. We [the Montana Wilderness Association] are the only statewide organization based in Montana that isn't affiliated or associated with any other national organization. And the history of the organization is unique, as well. The roots of the organization go back to a group of sportsmen in various parts of Montana who had seen a decline in the game herds and also related that back to a loss of habitat—encroaching civilization upon habitat that is necessary for elk herds in the winter, and deer. Their concern over habitat loss brought them together in Libby, where their base group of sportsmen were. And their concern was over an area near the Hungry Horse Dam, an area folks call Spotted Bear. They got together and discussed their concern, actually had several different meetings that began in 1957. In 1958, the MWA was born.

The first annual meeting was held in Bozeman. It was an interesting group of people who joined together in that they were very diverse by today's standards. They were ranchers, who also did some outfitting on the side; there were farmers; there were businessmen, professionals like doctors and dentists and people who just did sport hunting on the side; there were also people who were primarily interested in bird watching, people who worked for the state lands division that had to do with wildlife—Fish Wildlife and Parks, I guess would be the people who they worked for. So there were a variety of professionals that got together, and at that point I think that they knew there had to be some sort of protection, formal protection. They weren't quite sure what that would be, but they knew that other groups were working on the wilderness. They decided that that would be a good pursuit for them, for the Montana Wilderness Association. So we were very involved in that; those early members did a lot of traveling, back to DC, traveling around the state. They spoke to a variety of hunting and fishing groups as well as to Rotary Clubs.

So from those humble beginnings, those volunteer beginnings, we've grown to an organization that is a statewide organization in three senses of the word: we have members spread out from the eastern to the western borders of Montana, to the northern and the southern borders. And we have seven chapters across the state. We really have maintained a grassroots tradition in the

purest sense in that we have had very few staff people that have helped us; it's almost essentially a volunteer organization. But at the point where our membership grew and that we had trouble keeping contact with each other in the (?) but that wasn't until the early 1980s. The organization has been around for a long time, a lot of activists have been around for a long time, but staff has not been around for too long.

LM: Who were some of the people who were involved in the initial founding of the organization?

LB: Ken Baldwin and Forrest Baldwin, they were both family members. He is still, he's 86 or 87, he still travels to our annual convention every year. Bob Coney is another founding member—he's also in his 80s—worked for FWP and was the person who was resp. for seeing that the center of the game range and some of the lowlands of the Rocky Mountain Front were kept in a state of watershed and also managed for wildlife. Other people were Clif Merritt, who is also in his 80s, still active in our org. as well as in American Wildlands, which is another fueler organization that he helped start. He lives over in the Bitterroot. Warren Kreck, who's a dentist in the Flathead, and just suffered tremendously at the hands of the opposition. I think at one point, when he was advocating for the protection of some of the wild lands in the Kalispell area, people had bumper stickers printed that said, "The heck with Kreck." He's suffered great personal attacks; that's the history of wilderness advocates in Montana; if you want to step out, be bold, take a stand, you have to expect that you're gonna meet with personal attacks.

LM: You mentioned in the beginning that there was a very diverse group of people who were involved. How did the founders reach all these groups? I mean, if the founders were sportsmen, how did they reach the ranchers and pull them in and the birdwatchers and other people?

LB: Some of the folks that were the sportsmen were the faction or group, some of them worked for the state for instance, or they knew other people through sportsmen clubs or through presentations they'd done at rotary meetings or for other organizations, so it was a very serendipitous path that they followed in terms of finding other people. Found some college professors; Dorothy Bradley, who ran for governor of the state a couple years ago, her father was one of the founding members, a professor at MSU. So just a huge difference: the university connections or professional connections or public speaking, or letters to the editor was also where they found people. Or just somebody's sister's friend sort of connections, in terms of how they eventually got out the word. Eventually they had a group of people who corresponded regularly and put out, not necessarily a newsletter, but some sort of more form of bulletin as a way of communicating (indecipherable).

LM: Louise, let's get back to the Wilderness Act of 1964. What was there before the act to protect our national lands?

LB: The Forest Service had several different classifications, or a tract has several different land classifications for protecting areas from development, which would include road building, timber harvest lining, or they're building a cabin or some sort of thing. They protected those areas as primitive areas, essentially declaring that they would not be put in development's way and just set aside for either their—mostly they were set aside because of the wildlife habitat factor,

something that was a very important part of the Forest Service culture, they're sort of commodity-orientation, the Forest Service founder Gifford Pinchot, started the Forest Service, his philosophy was a very utilitarian philosophy, and to preserve things so that you could use them in the future. It wasn't just preservation for preservation's sake; there was always a purpose behind it, whether it was for watershed or habitat or hunting.

Some of the early conservationists who were wilderness advocates that were within the agency itself were the Bob Marshall and the Bob Marshall Wilderness conflict there. He was actually the one who established the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and was the strongest advocate in its early days. The agency also set aside areas—we don't call them primitive areas, but we have some sort of roadless category for them—sometimes it was temporary, sometimes it was more lasting. The areas that were not as easily accessible, were harder to build roads to, and were by their very nature more wild, tended to be left alone. That's really how early conservationists were able to toe the line, since there were other areas that developers were concentrating on. So conservationists and early advocates who were just preserving wilderness for wilderness' sake could, would look at these large tracts or something in the wilderness like the Bob Marshall and start building a case for saving them just the way they are, because they are wilderness areas valuable for society.

The first real entry into the wilderness preservation process legislatively—as far as citizens go—it seems, agency people advocating for the protection of wild lands for a number of years. Then in the early '70s, there was a citizen initiative to see that the Lincoln-Scapegoat addition to the Bob Marshall Wilderness was added to the wilderness preservation system. What the wilderness act did was there were certain areas that were designated wilderness by that wilderness act. So a whole bunch of areas were brought into wilderness status when that act passed: the UL Bend Wilderness in eastern Montana, the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex, several more throughout the state. What we've seen in Montana is after the wilderness act, in various pieces of legislation, additional areas have been added. It's been a very incremental process, which has created a great deal of frustration.

Let's go back to the Lincoln-Scapegoat: like I said, Cecil Garland, was one of the early presidents of the Montana Wilderness Association. He wasn't a founding member but he joined shortly after. He worked in Lincoln and actually ran a grocery store, and was also working for the Forest Service. At the time, the Forest Service was getting ready to run bulldozers into what they called the Lincoln backcountry, which was an area that was just very pristine, very wild. And he just couldn't see the need to develop. So he began a campaign that said "we won't go back there," and he did that through the Montana Wilderness Association. And out of his own initiative, he built alliances with hunters and outfitters, with other loggers—because he was a logger himself, done that with the Forest Service. Basically traveled all over the state, came to Dillon here, spoke at a rotary meet. I remember talking to him earlier in the fall of this year, and said, well, remember Dillon, and the president of the rotary club stood up and said, "Well, now Cecil, he's gonna be here, he's our guest speaker tonight and he's gonna talk about wilderness. I know that's not everybody's favorite subject, but you all need to be polite to him." And so he got up and was so nervous that he—and he chewed tobacco, he had a slug of tobacco and kept that same slug of tobacco in for an hour while he spoke about wilderness. Got done, was glad to

have lived through it, and Joe Helley(?), who's a rancher in the area, came up to him and at this time, I'm not sure if Joe was still working for the Forest survey or not, and he said, "Well, anybody who can stand up with the same slug of tobacco in for an hour and talk about something I don't like. I think he's probably okay." So, that was Cecil's Dillon story. He found people who didn't necessarily agree with him, but were at least willing to listen. He made several trips back to Washington, D.C., did a lot of lobbying. Senator Mike Mansfield was real helpful at the time.

Eventually, the Lincoln-Scapegoat did become wilderness. But it was the first time that it ever happened in the history of the US, especially in the history of wilderness as a nation, a wilderness area has never been designated based on citizen initiative before. That was a real big step for the Montana Wilderness Association, and that's also one of the things that we just really need, if we got the ball rolling in terms of citizens advocating for the protection of wilderness.

Since that time, a lot has happened with wilderness as a nation. Bills have passed, the Lincoln-Scapegoat was designated wilderness; we saw another bill that Lee Metcalf had sponsored and passed in '78 which established the Lee Metcalf Wilderness complex, which was actually three different units and the reason why there were three units is because the influence of developers, primarily the developers in Big Sky and also timber industries, were able to keep their hand in the pot so those people could make sure that their areas they really wanted to develop were right there in the wilderness. So we have the Spanish Peaks Wilderness, which is the northern unit of the Lee Metcalf; the Taylor-Hilgard unit, which is the southern unit; and there's one other unit that's south of that, I can't remember the name exactly. It's got three different units to it.

Since '78, a bill has not passed Congress. We've had several attempts to pass a bill; there was a bill that had passed both houses of Congress in '88, but was vetoed along the way. Which is also another one of those historic events, where a woman's vote never been vetoed by a president before. After having passed the Congress, the president would veto a bill, but we've had administrations that have been very favorable to wilderness, declared national monuments and declared—this administration has declared places off limit to development and then some movements like that to prevent development. But the presidential veto is just...

LM: How much has the Montana Wilderness Association worked with other conservation groups to achieve their goals? What other groups have you worked with?

LB: The Montana Wilderness Association has worked with a lot of different groups throughout our history. What most conservationists find, or activists will find, is that you do have to find allies outside your organization to help you win whatever it is you're trying to forward. That you do have a lot of common with preservation, that you can work together. The most recent coalition that we worked with—that was unsuccessful legislatively—was the breaking ground in the Kootenai Accords. That was a process that began in the early '90s in Libby, Montana, where some of our members reached out and found members of the local labor unions, and said, "Let's sit down and let's stop talking about these generalities and philosophies and different land use philosophies and let's look at the maps and see what we can agree on." So we started a process which became known as the Kootenai Accords where we had a group of independent loggers and labor union members and AWM members that could agree on certain boundaries of the

wilderness area. The same process then took hold in the Lolo National Forest, the two together became known as the Lolo-Kootenai Accords. So we worked with loggers, we worked with business people, with people who aren't normally seen as part of the preservation fold, to achieve wilderness protection.

As far as other preservation groups, we've worked with groups that are regional groups like the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, which are pretty geographically focused in that they don't look at Montana in its entirety. But we're able to sit down with them, figure out what we can do together that would promote wilderness protection within the greater Yellowstone ecosystem. Or to do some washed-out efforts for the Lee Metcalf wilderness, which is in the greater Yellowstone. This past wilderness bill that got sponsored by Pat Williams, in the third Congress, I think it was HR-2473, that bill was actually the biggest wilderness bill that Montana has ever had. Had that passed the US Senate, then it would have been bigger than the wilderness act itself. It had more lands in it than the Wilderness Act of '64. So it was a very big, very substantial bill, and would have been a big step forward for the state and the nation, for protection in Montana.

But back to working with GYC, the bill that I just mentioned, we were able to bring some new areas into the process that we hadn't been able to before because there hadn't been the local constituents. That's how areas get added to the legislative process, is you can have a group of people, a constituent base that can effectively advocate for that area. When there is opposition, they can speak to that and defend what it is they are trying to protect. In the case of southwestern Montana, we were able to add a substantial part of the Tobacco Root range, which is kind of where the sun sets when you're standing in Bozeman and watching the sun set over the Tobacco Roots.

Also a little corner in the Sentinel Mountains, which are along the Idaho-Montana border are actually (?) lands, not Forest Service, so they weren't included in this wilderness bill. However, there is a very small little finger that we've declared national forest, that extends down on the end of the Sentinel Range, was between Mile and Marshey. It seems like a real insignificant little piece, but we were able to pull that onto the table despite of the fact that the wilderness act says the minimum size of an area has to be 5,000 acres. It was an area that was much smaller than that, but it was contiguous with the Sentinel range; it has great habitat for the mountain goats, its part of the biological corridors that the game animals use to move between Yellowstone and the greater system of the Continental Divide ecosystem. That was a significant step. The other part of that triangle is the Snout Grass Range(?), which is part of southwestern Montana outside of Dillon. That range had never made it into the process before because it didn't have any constituents for it. But in working with the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and in also just building interest and building our membership in southwestern Montana, we were able to get those areas added.

Other groups we've worked with have been the National Wildlife Federation, the Montana Wildlife Federation, those have been primarily on habitat issues. They're big issues. We've worked with other wilderness organizations or groups that work on wilderness as part of their agenda, mostly the Bitterroot, on specific issues like the Bitterroot-Selway case. We have held joint press conferences on Rock Creek, which is outside Missoula. We've worked with the Wild

Rockies, with Trout Unlimited.. .so there's a whole variety of groups that we'll call on, say, "We're gonna do whatever, a press conference, or we're gonna do a meeting, a door-to-door drop, we're gonna really focus on this particular area and we know that that area is of great importance to you." So we have a long history and tradition of working with a lot of different groups and a lot of different people.

LM: How does the Montana Wilderness Association decide on a project to work on? For instance, working on Rock Creek. Was it the local constituents who said, I feel the need for this to be done, and bring it to the MWA?

LB: That's right. I spoke earlier in the interview about how we are very grassrootsy, almost in the pure sense. And what that means to us is that the state board of directors, which we call the council, doesn't decide what the organization should do and then pass out orders to local activists. We have chapters as I mentioned earlier, and each chapter has leadership that they elect, that's just a slate of officers or a slate of officers and a board of directors, is up to them. At any rate, the individual chapters—or if you don't have a chapter in an area, the general members—get together and decide, what's a priority for them? What's mostly the danger here? In terms of being lost in the wilderness system? Or are there existing wilderness areas that are suffering from overuse or violations from snowmobiles or whatever. The local groups sit down, and we rely on them because they know the areas the best, the people who hike the ground and provide the maps to us that we put together and make our puzzle. We really get our action or devise our action plans or our work plans based on our local informants. So local folks decide and it comes to the state council and we go ahead and make sure that people have either the staff assistance they need or the money that they need to do mailings or door-to-door drops or whatever else that they've said they need to do. So it's real, from the ground up, the way the organization is structured.

LM: At what time did you begin to get involved with the MTA?

LB: I first came to Montana when I graduated from high school. I graduated from high school in Colorado and knew that I wanted to stay in the Rocky Mountains and was looking for a place that was a little less populated than, say, Colorado State University at Fort Collins. I ended up coming to Montana; I actually had a track and field scholarship at the University of Montana. My degree ended up being in forestry, in forestry and recreation.

My first contact with actually being in the wilderness was when I first came to Missoula in 1979. I just loved Missoula, did a lot of hiking in the Rattlesnake Wilderness, which is another citizen initiative wilderness that passed with the help of Cass Chinsky, who's been a longtime advocate of the Rattlesnake Wilderness in Missoula. That also was just a significant historical event in that one person could move enough people to get Congress to say yes, the Montana delegation in particular, to say this should be established as wilderness. It's a wilderness that's right outside, right at the border of Missoula. That's an outstanding asset to the community; great source of pride, I would think, for the community.

I spent a lot of time hiking the Rattlesnake and the Lolo Peak area and the Mission Mountains and Glacier, so having done a lot of hiking and really valuing my time in the mountains and pristine areas. I was drawn towards the wilderness in Montana, and that dream came right into the MWA. I was always sort of penniless, so I never joined, but I did a lot of volunteer work for them and ended up working on a campaign of one of the professors of this group for forestry, Bob Blaine, who ran for the legislature and was an aide and was elected and first served in the '83 session of the Montana legislature. After I worked on his campaign and I got interested in that—he was also with the Wilderness and Civilization program, which is where I first met him—so I became real interested in the political side of how you protect wilderness as well as just demonstrating letter-writing and, how does this process work?

I actually ended up as an intern at the state legislature, which doesn't designate forest service and federal land, but there's a lot of energy on that state level, too, not just federal lands, but the state sections. So I work in the legislature there, became interested in the political process, and then got, I was living in Helena where a lot of these environmental organizations are based—MWA is based there—and I got to know Bill Putemere(?), who was a staff person, the first staff person for the Wilderness Association. He was working in the office across the hall from where I was working. So I got to go over there and actually see what this organization was doing, and got a little more interested in the process.

One thing led to another, I ended up graduating from the University of Montana and moving to Yellowstone National Park and working there. It was at that time, when I actually had a job, that I started joining organizations. Joined the Montana Wilderness Association, had always been an active member in the sense that I wrote letters, organized letters, and did those sort of things. But it wasn't until I moved to Billings in 1989 that I decided, I need to do something more. That I had something more to contribute to this organization, especially being from an area that really doesn't have a tradition of conservation advocacy, for lack of a better word. I found that there's a lot of wild country in the Beaverhead National Forest, more wild country than any other forest in the state, yet little of it is protected, so little of it has been included in any wilderness legislation. That's when I decided I was going to go in and run for the state council. Had several conversations with a second staff person, who was Bill Katchel(?), and he said, well, we have a vacancy on the board right now. Just the council (indecipherable). I asked the council if they would put me into the vacancy. So I've been on the state council since 1989 and worked mostly on building grassroots networks in areas where we were lacking it among constituents.

(phone rings, tape turned off)

LB: We were building on grassroots constituencies where we didn't have a lot of grassroots activities or chapters, and since I've joined the council in 1989, I was on the council for several years and then the vice-president of the org. for two years, and now I'm just beginning my third term, my third one year term as a president of the organization. Three consecutive one year terms. So then sort of ended up in a leadership position for this organization since 1989, so it's a fair amount of time. In that time, we've developed constituency bases in Dillon and southwestern Montana, we've also expanded into eastern Montana—there's a lot of wild country in eastern Montana, but the focus has really been, and the activism has really been, in Missoula in western Montana where it's really obvious that there's wild country. There's mountains and

trees and rocks and lakes and elk and all of those things you'd think of and associate with wilderness. But in eastern Montana, there are island ranges: there's the Big Snowies, the Little Belts, the Pryor Mountains, that are very wild, they're just a different ecosystem altogether from the western part of the state and they're just as valuable ecologically and spiritually to native Americans and just all the city folks in Billings who need to get away and seek refuge in wild country. So we built a constituency base in Billings, and we have a chapter there.

We've a chapter in Lewiston, Montana, and Great Falls, and expanded our membership to include people along the hi-line of Montana. The Sweetgrass Hills, for instance, outside of Chester, Montana, we have a core of activists there. And out to Wolf Point and around to Glendive. So we've been steadily getting the word out, because one of the major focuses of MWA is—I know we've talked mostly about legislative work and the designation of wilderness, but the primary focus of the organizations is really education. Because the founding people knew that they would not achieve their legislative goals if they did not get the word out and educate people as to why these areas are important to protect. We have a big education component to our organization.

We have our most successful program has been through the wilderness walks program. We're now in our 37th year of offering wilderness walks throughout the state of Montana, we actually have a book that we published, it's about a sixty-page publication that talks about walks that are offered in just all corners of the state and are led by volunteers, members of our organization, and sometimes they're not even members of the organization, but they're members of allied organizations.

End Side A.

Side B.

LM: This is side 2 of tape 1 of a conversation with Louise Bruce about the Montana Wilderness Association.

LB: I'll just continue from where we left off, which was talking about the wilderness walks program, how extensive that is and how it's our most important educational component of the organization. That one program, I think, has done more for us in terms of building knowledge and awareness about wilderness and what it means, and it's not just a theoretical place, that it's somewhere that's in your backyard: it's somewhere where you like to camp, you like to hike, you like to fish, or you just like to walk around, or maybe you just want to know that it's there. Or maybe you got your elk there or something. That's been a very successful component of the grassroots part of our work.

Other grassroots things that we do just to build—so you know what other things we work on in terms of recruiting members—is we also belong to an organization called Montana Community Shares, which is an alternative workplace-giving program that collects a collection. actually, a coalition of organizations that work on social and progressive issues in Montana. Everybody's familiar with United Way, we refer to it as an alternative to United Way; but interestingly enough, we joined this program two years ago, and we've been able to access individuals that we

hadn't been able to reach before. Aside from wilderness walks, joining Montana Community Shares and the outreach it's provided us has given us more members than almost any other thing we've done. So we realized, after joining Community Shares, that there were a whole lot of people that we weren't reaching by our traditional means of newsletters or press releases or just news stories. It's given us this whole other aspect of the population to find, to work with, and those people in turn have then gone out on wilderness walks. It's just a big network building, acting.

LM: Louise, what are the current projects that Montana Wilderness Association is involved in?

LB: The current, most current project that we're working on, the most important current project we're working on, is the publication of a roadless inventory of the state of Montana. That would include national forest lands and Bureau of Land Management lands. The reason why we're working on that is that, as we've gone through the statewide wilderness bill process, we've found there wasn't one, one set of maps did not exist on the conservation law at all, that was a comprehensive set of maps that had all the wilderness areas—or all the areas that we would like to see designated as wilderness—on it. As a result of that, there was a lot of confusion; people weren't quite sure what the big picture was. There's been a lot of discussion over the number of acres that should be protected. It's sort of a hollow argument, because we're really interested in protecting and preserving the integrity of an area. If it takes one acre, great. If it takes fifty, great. If it takes several million, then that's what we want. We're really after integrity.

So after we had battled with other conservationists and even amongst ourselves, we decided what we really needed was to get together one comprehensive publication that was put together and generated by conservationists, clearly define what is it that we wanted. So we've been working on that, and the work on that has been dependent on local activists and organizations sending us maps, making sure that the boundaries are accurate and protect what we want to protect. That's an ongoing current project that involves a lot of mapping, a lot of descriptions, a lot of communication with on the ground activists.

In addition to the organizing that I've already talked about, the building of chapters and these local constituency bases to advocate for the protection of wilderness, we're also working on expanding the wilderness walks program—I spoke of that earlier—and in other forms of legislation, we always keep an eye out for appropriations, of course, because the appropriations of the Forest Service, that the Congress gives the Forest Service, really dictates what the Forest Service is able to do. Will they be able to go into roadless areas, build roads and harvest timber, or at least begin the legal process to go ahead and do that. So we watch appropriations pretty carefully.

Also on the legislative front, since this Congress is gonna be a lot different from Congresses that we've worked with in the past, there's a lot of uncertainty. We're sort of bracing for whatever might come down the pike. One of the things that we worked on with the previous Congress was forest management reform. Dealt with bans on clearcutting, new forestry techniques, those sorts of better management issues that were before Congress. I'm not sure what the future of those initiatives will be, but there are an awful lot of conservationists that are talking to each other and trying to figure out what can happen or what might happen or what should happen. Something in

Congress. And of course we will also look to the administration to work with them, because Congress is just one way of achieving some of our goals. The administration and working the Forest Service and the administration, Assistant Secretary of the Forest Service, or Agriculture, in charge of the Forest Service. Jim Lyons is an ally of ours, he'll be very important.

So nobody's quite sure what the future will hold, but the one thing we do know for certain is that all of our victories have been based on individual action and individual advocacy. No wilderness area is protected just because somebody thinks that it should be. It's protected because there's a base of people that are out there working hard, being visible, writing the letters, doing the programs. Making sure that the opposition is countered on whatever charge they're making. So that won't change; our work will stay on course. We will continue to organize and continue to educate people on the importance of wilderness and keep working, of course, to see that all the wild lands in Montana are protected.

LM: Thank you very much, Louise, for talking with us. This is the end of the tape.

End interview.