

**Oral History Number: 443-017**

**Interviewee: Sue Vap**

**Interviewer: Clark Grant**

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Sue Vap: My name is Sue Vap, and I graduated in 1972.

Clark Grant: What's your degree in?

SV: I have a B.S. in Forestry.

CG: You have a story to tell?

SV: I do have a story to tell.

CG: All right.

SV: When I decided to go into forestry, my parents were not exactly thrilled with my career choice. They had other things in mind. But I kind of stuck to my guns and said, "Let's go to Missoula and at least get a tour of the Forestry School, meet the dean." Okay, so my dad agreed to that. My mom and dad—we take this family trip, we come here, we meet Dean Bolle. He assures my dad everything will be fine. I mean, I don't know how he knows that, but he—so, okay. Great. I get to enroll in forestry school. You know, there aren't very many women. You go to a class and you do kind of stand out because there's only a few of you. So, you get called on a lot. I quickly found out: Number one, I got to do the assignments. Number two, I got to pay attention, I cannot sleep through class. All right.

I make the Dean's Roll, the Honor Roll. Back then if you were female and under the age of 21, you were not your own person. Everything about you went to your parents. So my grades, anything like that, I never got a copy of it. It was sent to mom and dad. And so mom and dad get a letter from the Dean: "Dear Archie and Phyllis, Your son Sue has made the Honor Roll." I don't know anything about this. My dad puts the letter in an envelope, mails it to me at college. I'm staying at the dorm in Jesse Hall. I remember getting that mail. No note from my dad or anything. I just open it up and here's this letter from Dean Bolle, "Your son Sue." I immediately stomped over here to the Forestry School, knocked on the Dean's office, and said, "We have to talk. This has to change." (laughs)

This was at the time too when the song "A Boy Named Sue" was very popular. Some of the guy students heard about it and it was a continual source of teasing for all that freshman year. That was kind of my start into the Forestry School. It's like any experience in life. It was good and bad. Lots and lots of good things, but there were some struggles too. Sometimes being a female

in the Forestry School at that point in time, from 1968-1972, had its moments. (laughs) But I am so glad that I came here, that I got my degree in forestry. It was the love that I have, the being out in nature, it just, it fit me to a T. I had an absolutely fabulous career. I worked for the Forest Service and the National Park Service. I retired as the Fire Director for the National Park Service at the Boise Inter-Agency Fire Center.

I am now retired and getting to do lots of cool volunteer things, like the Talking Books Program for the Blind, and Sewing for Charity, and golfing with my retired fire director buddies. But I have got to see and do some incredible things in my life. I learned a lot here. I learned how to use a chainsaw. I learned how to be in a world where you really did have to learn to do some collaboration. How are you going to get along with all those guys, but prove yourself as well, and do a good job, and not just be one of the crowd either? It was a tumultuous time here at campus because the Vietnam War protests were going on. Here I am in one of the most conservative majors on campus and—but it was all that twist and pull, and dichotomy of things that was happening that made it, going to school here at that time, such an exciting adventure. I'm so glad I went to school here. I love being a Griz fan. I live in Boise, Idaho right now, so you got to be kind of a Broncos fan whether you want to or not. So I wear my Griz stuff on Bronco day, but it's great. It's wonderful to be back here for the 100th. The day yesterday at Lubrecht [Experimental Forest] was absolutely gorgeous, and it just reminded me of why I like what I did and still do.

CG: Do you have more thoughts on the gender equality of the matter, and have you tracked a change in it in recent years?

SV: You know, definitely I saw changes in my career. More and more opportunities for women. One of the things—like when I went to school here, you had to have two summers of some kind of work as part of your graduation requirements. I remember filling out one hundred SF-171's [Federal Employment application] trying to get a summer job. I got things back like, "Well, our secretarial pool is full," "We don't have any administrative work available," "We're not hiring women to work with men." It was very frustrating.

I remember going to several of the professors, saying, "I understand this graduation requirement, and I want to do this graduation requirement, but I'm going to need some help getting a job. I'm not getting any job offers." So they worked with one of the forests, and got some student requisitions. That was the way—and of course, they hired two of us, they weren't just going to hire one of us. They hired two women, so that we could—because we couldn't live in the bunkhouse at fifteen cents a day. We had to rent an apartment, which of course cost a chunk of our summer wages that we were hoping to move towards tuition for fall quarter. But at least we got a foot in the door.

My roommate at that time was Marianne Grover (?), and she and I worked at the Phillipsburg Ranger Station on the Deer Lodge National Forest. They called us, "Those damn women" and put us together, but we went out did everything we were asked to do. We did our stand exams.

We did our wildlife surveys. We got stuck a lot. Turns out those roads were built, a lot of them, in the winter. So they were frozen when they built them, and in the summer they had these little kind of potholes and really kind of marshy things. At the end of the summer, we found out that the guys, of which there were four doing similar jobs, they got stuck just as much as we did. But there were four of them, so they could usually get pulled out. We got to know every logging company on that ranger district because, I mean, we got smarter as the summer went on. But we definitely had our moments where it was like, oh, we need some help here. (laughs)

The opportunities for women today I think are fantastic. It's so wonderful to see how many women are going through the Forestry School now, seeing women on the Woodsmen's team. I hope that the women continue to appreciate the strides that were made for them because—like being the first woman on a fire crew, doing the non-traditional things. They had women as lookouts, but being on an actual fire crew, a hotshot crew, pulling your weight out there, right along with the guys, day in, day out, on really tough, hard assignments—there were lots of women who blazed that trail. I hope the women today truly appreciate what has happened for them because I think they have even more opportunities than we had.

CG: What was it initially that drew you to this work? Why did you want to do it?

SV: You know, that's kind of a good question, in the sense that I was kind of contemplating engineering and botany. We took some aptitude test in high school and I remember I scored really high in outdoor things. I also remember my dad saying, "You know, you need to find something that you will be happy at. You don't want to be in a job that you hate going to from eight to five for the next 40 years."

That was part of my argument back to my parents that, "I think I can be pretty happy in forestry." And, "It won't be a mundane eight to five job." And it truly wasn't. Every day was an adventure going to work. I mean, I just feel that my soul is complete when I'm outside in nature and can just appreciate the beauty of what we have. I don't think we realize as Americans just how lucky we are to have all the free, open space that we do have. The beauty of this country is incredible. I wanted to have a hand in keeping that for generations to come.

CG: That actually was going to be my next question, is, how your desire to serve the public tied in to all this?

SV: Well, I think being a civil servant was a noble profession, in spite of what Ronald Reagan may have thought about. (laughs) I was glad to be employed by the federal government. I was proud of the efforts that we could make in inter-agency collaboration. At the end of my career, when I became the Fire Director for the National Park Service and worked at the Fire Center, you truly saw all the federal agencies coming together, as well as the states, and working through some very difficult issues and fire seasons. From 2000-2004 we had incredible fire seasons. We were at preparedness level five every one of those years. To just see people setting aside agency differences and working towards a common good, there's nothing better

than that, absolutely nothing better than that. Yes, just the collaborative efforts that I found myself involved in. Getting together and working on a trail that's going to go through multiple ownerships, and coming out with a finished product that everybody's happy about. There's a sense of satisfaction there that you just don't get from pushing paper.

CG: Do you have any advice to impart to students going through this school nowadays?

SV: Oh, I think they should make the most of their experience here. I mean, being involved in the Forester's Ball, the Forestry Club, the Wildlife Club, you're going to make some friendships here that are going to last you a lifetime. It was so fun yesterday to see people that I hadn't seen since graduation day. We could just pick up the conversation and—where's your life gone? What've you done? We still had lots of things in common. Going to college is, I think, a really special experience and you need to experience it. You need to be a good student, but I don't think you need to let that totally overwhelm your life. You need to have some fun while you're going to school, and just kind of come out as a well-rounded person. Then accept that new job, and hit life with a bang.

CG: Now, you said you're doing a lot of volunteering since retiring?

SV: I am.

CG: So you're enjoying retirement?

SV: I am. Oh, retirement's wonderful. There's life after fire. You know, being the Fire Director was a great job, but it's 24/7—if you're going to do it right. At least, that's how I felt about it. I was glad to give them those years, but when it was time, when I turned 55 in June and I retired in July—because that is one of the few perks of working for the federal government—I had no regrets. It was time for the next group of folks to step up to the plate and have their turn. I'd had mine. I show up at the Fire Center once in a while for a retirement party or somebody's going away luncheon, but I try not to second-guess what they're doing now. I appreciate the hardships that they're facing.

But retirement is wonderful. I have a group of other retired fire directors. We go golfing once a week. I volunteer at the Talking Books Library. I can put in 40 hours a week there easily; they need extra help. I love that work. I'm an avid, avid reader. Providing a service for people who can no longer hold a book and read the written word—I'm really thankful for that opportunity. I have a group of lady friends. We do sewing for charity, although I'm glad nobody looks at my seams very carefully. I'm waiting for my husband to retire, so we can do a little more camping and hiking together, but we do what we can. I'm getting to actually spend some more time outdoors and not have to be on a working mission. It's good.

CG: I have one more question.

SV: Sure.

CG: One final question, which is—it's about your perception of forests on a macro level, especially since you spent so much time planning on the macro level. When I look at a forest, I can think of a couple things that jump out at me—the ecological aspects of it and how it functions biologically. I'm curious, what jumps out at you when you think of forests?

SV: Well, I've learned over the years that forests are not forever. I think as a kid I definitely had the perception that these trees are going to be here for me forever. That is not true. Fire is a part of our landscape. Most of our ecosystems have fire history in them at one point or another, some more frequent than others, of course. I tend to look at it now as a much more dynamic ecosystem than something that I originally thought was more static. But it's not. There's going to be changes constantly. I think because of where we are with climate change right now, we're going to see more changes in our lifetime than previous generations have.

CG: And so do you caution them? Do you caution these generations right now?

SV: What I think I would say is, "Appreciate what you have right now, because it could be different tomorrow."

[End of Interview]