

**Oral History Interview of
Robert “Rob” Carl Lee Jr.**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
October 28, 2015
Lubbock, Texas**

Part of the:
Natural History Interviews

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Interview Series Background:

The Natural History oral history collection includes interviews with individuals involved in biological field research, especially in mammalogy and ornithology. Most of the interviewees are faculty members in biological sciences at research universities. The collection focuses on academic studies in botanical and zoological taxonomy, ecology, conservation, and animal behavior.

Transcript Overview:

This oral history interview features Rob Lee. Lee talks about his interest in biology, his work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and his time as a special agent. Lee also discusses moving to Lubbock, his retirement, and his involvement with the South Plains Wildlife Center.

Length of Interview: 02:30:11

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Keywords

biology, conservation, Texas Tech University, South Plains Wildlife Center, natural resource conservation, wildlife conservation

David Marshall (DM):

The date is October 28, 2015; this is David Marshall interviewing Rob Lee at the Southwest Collection Texas Tech, Lubbock, Texas, and Rob if we could just start with your date and place of birth and full name.

Rob Lee (RL):

It's Robert Carl, with a C, Lee Jr., and I was born on October 1, 1947 in Toledo Ohio.

DM:

Okay, and you lived in Toledo until you were in high school, is that right?

RL:

Completed my freshmen year of high school in Toledo and at that time my father had an opportunity to take a job in California, he was in California while he was in the Navy at the end of World War II, always wanted to go back, and this was his big opportunity, so he left early. Two months later, at the peak of the summer heat, my mother and four us, I was the oldest at thirteen and we drove to California, took us nine days because she could only do about three hundred miles a day with all the kids. It was in 1960 four door Chevy Bel Air with no air conditioning.

DM:

Of course [laugh].

RL:

It wasn't a wagon train, but at some times it was pretty miserable.

DM:

Now where in California did you go?

RL:

Settled in Manteca, California, which is just about in the center of the state in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley, sixty miles south of Sacramento and about equidistance to Oakland, San Francisco area

DM:

How far from the coast is that? Is it on the coast?

RL:

No, it's right in the middle of the state so—

DM:

So you were in the Sierra Nevadas?

RL:

It's in between the coastal range and the Sierra Nevada, it's the agricultural heartland of California.

DM:

Were you close to Sequoia and Kings Canyon and some of those National Parks in there or—?

RL:

Everything was about a hundred miles away, kind of like it is in Lubbock, [laugh]

DM:

Right, The Hub [laugh], okay well that's an interesting place to grow up

RL:

It was a disappointment because it was the San Joaquin Valley, and when you think of valley you think of some topography there, but the Valley's over 300 miles and about a hundred miles wide, so we really didn't see the mountains from there.

DM:

Did you ever go up in to the mountains?

RL:

Oh, all the time.

DM:

Was your family outdoor oriented?

RL:

Not so much, but I did get to bug and spend as—I grew up outside in Ohio and tried to do that in California. I didn't have any friends; it was a big change for me. I was from a big family in the east and only one other family tried to move away, and an unfortunate accident killed my uncle as he was scraping ice off of the windshield, they didn't even get out of the state, and so after that nobody wanted to leave, and we were the first after that and only one since to really leave the state.

DM:

When you say you had some outdoor activities in Ohio, were you interested in wildlife as a child or—?

RL:

My father bought—and he has two brothers—and each of them bought a parcel of property on a road that looked like it was in the country, but it was actually on the edges of the city limits with very few neighbors. And we had a creek that ran through the area and second-growth hardwood forests, and we were—that's where we were all the time, chasing butterflies and exploring and hiking.

DM:

Did you collect or were you an observer mostly?

RL:

I did a little bit of both, we had an insect collection. The kids across the street had a little clubhouse and so we would—got these books and learned how to capture and preserve butterflies and we were always looking for that latest and greatest thing to add to our collection. My father wasn't a hunter, and he didn't like the idea of me killing things. I went through, like most boys do in the country, of thinking that BB gun and a specimen in hand was the way to go, and he never approved, and I learned not to need that aspect of it to be fulfilled and did become a bird watcher eventually.

DM:

Were you a photographer?

RL:

I was for a while, not so much anymore. When I got out of the—when I was in the Army, I arranged to buy some photographic equipment, that's what everybody did, they bought a reel to reel recorder and some Nikon cameras because you could get them through the APO [**Army Post Office**] or whatever it is, sent to a military address and they were pretty cheap. Bought a Nikon camera and had a big system that was a big part of my life for a long time.

DM:

Okay, okay, well what you describe is so common it seems. Yeah, like you said, guys growing up with guns in their hand and then just turning toward more of a love for the observation of wildlife. But of course what I'm looking for are early influences that might have directed you toward U.S. Fish and Wildlife later. Can you think of others?

RL:

Well, I know that I would always read or look at picture books that had animals, and I was always intrigued by the diversity, and of course the African animals were of interest to a lot kids, you know, it's a mysterious—these gigantic animals that lived. But we didn't have those where I lived, and once you start looking closely, you're surprised at just how many different things you can see and how exciting they can be.

DM:

Does Toledo—Toledo probably had a zoo, did you—?

RL:

Yes, I did go to the Toledo Zoo. I still go occasionally when I go back there to visit, and that was always a highlight of the summer, to go there.

DM:

What about activities in California when you were in high school or college?

RL:

We didn't—we lived in the country in California. and I had a few friends who were all part of the same company that my father was with, Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Company, they opened a new glass, automotive glass, manufacturing plant in Manteca, and they brought in employees from all of their different plants from Ohio and Illinois and I think West Virginia. And so a few of those kids were my friends, I didn't have very many. I went through high school more like a ghost. I was just kind of coasting through. I wasn't enthused. The only thing I liked about school was Fridays because I didn't have to go to school the next day. And I didn't do well. I was—supposedly I had promise, but I wasn't motivated, and originally I was what we called college prep at the time, take the courses that get you ready to start college, and I took those until my senior year and I got bored, and my mother had passed away and my father was busy working, and no one told me that I couldn't drop all those classes, so I did.

DM:

Yeah, right, okay. I think you had indicated maybe in the information you sent that after you got out of high school you were kind of seeking for a while.

RL:

I did. I actually thought that not following my father's footsteps in factory work was what I wanted to do and so I went to junior college for one or two semesters but—

DM:

This was not—no this wasn't Sacramento, this was—

RL:

This was in San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, California, where I first started in. I was going to school and working the midnight shift at the factory. I did get a factory job because I wanted some money, and my father was able to get me hired, and it was a good job, but it was subject to the economic ups and downs of the auto industry at the time. I would get laid off periodically, and it wasn't—it just didn't have the stability that I wanted, and it didn't interest me, it was just a way to make some money.

DM:

Was it after that that you took the railroad job in northern California?

RL:

Well, one of the times when I got laid off, I just decided that I wanted to go back to Ohio because I missed all my family, my uncles and aunts and my cousins. And so I got laid off, and I took off and had a 1966 Chevy pickup and just loaded it up with a bunch of stuff and took Route 66 in the other direction. That's how we got out to California as we drove Route 66. At the time it was mostly two or four lane road, no highway. And went back and stayed there, lived with my grandparents. They bought my dad's house and they were living in it. I went back there and stayed with them a while, and I received word that the factory called me back to work, and it was, my father called me and he said, "You need to come back, keep your job," and, you know, I didn't want to disappoint him, but I just wasn't going to do that, and I turned it down. And then I had to make some other decisions.

DM:

Okay, well how is it that you came in to the railroad job?

RL:

I stayed in Ohio for a while, and I came back to California and some of my friends, after high school graduation, in California they got some jobs with—it was Western-Pacific railroad. I hung around with them and they had good jobs and they were kind of in these unusual places where they were working, and so I applied and got accepted, and they sent me to Quincy, California, which is in Plumas County, and it's up on the Feather River and you know, you can just imagine with those cool names, it was a cool place, and for a while I lived in a converted boxcar that the railroad provided. But it was coal heat and coal to heat your water and electricity about half the time. It was pretty neat for a while, but it was on a railroad spur track, so it was only like five feet from the main track even though it was in the mountains. I found a little cottage to rent at a resort town nearby and stayed there and started to meet some of the local people and develop my own network of friends there. I really liked it, and I could see myself advancing with the railroad, having a good living, and then one day I got a letter in the mail from

the Draft Board. I didn't want to go in to the Armed Services, but I didn't want to go to jail either. I felt that it was simply an obligation to go ahead and go.

DM:

Did you have any thoughts about Canada or anything like that like so many people?

RL:

It was—going to Canada and escaping the draft was in the news a lot, and it was a topic of discussion but I didn't see me trying to hide from that obligation, and I didn't want to live a life on the run. I wanted to live a life on the road, maybe, but not on the run.

DM:

Right, right, this was '67, does that sound about right?

RL:

1967 in the summer.

DM:

That's a very interesting time to go in to the—I guess, did you go over to Vietnam?

RL:

Being drafted in 1967 pretty much was almost a guarantee that you would see active duty in Vietnam. That's why the draft was so heavy. They needed a lot of troops over there and a lot of people were being killed, and so I knew it was going to happen. There was always a hope that maybe I'll get drafted, serve my two years, and don't go. And for a while that worked out pretty good. I went to basic training in the summer in El Paso, and it was hot!

DM:

At Fort Bliss?

RL:

At Fort Bliss, yeah, and there were a lot of people, most of, about half of the people in my basic were draftees, and the other half weren't. A lot of people that just weren't ready for that, they didn't—they couldn't cope very well with the regiment of that. I just went there with the idea that, I'm going to put in my time, and I'm not going to serve any bad time. I want to just do what I'm supposed to do, do it well, and get out.

DM:

Now that was basics, where did you go after that? Did you go into some specialized training?

RL:

I did not, which was kind of weird. Everyone went to—they called it AIT, Advanced Individual Training. I got orders to go to Fort Monroe, Virginia, which is an old Civil War fort surrounded by a moat [laugh] and they put me—there was a school bus driver for the dependent children that were on base. Part of that was because I had pretty decent scores, and this was kind of Command Headquarters and it was real top heavy in brass, I mean there were lots of 2 and 3, 1 and 2 and 3 star generals at this little tiny outpost, and so they wanted—they were picking who they thought were good people to serve there, even in the lowly positions, even though you had to do KP duty [**Kitchen Police**] and all that kind of stuff. And while I was there, I don't even remember how long I was there, it was a few months, and then I got orders along with a lot of other people to go to Vietnam and took leave, was able to go back to California, and when I got back there I realized that a lot of my other friends were in the same class so—

DM:

Okay, talking about drafted at the same time?

RL:

Some of us were drafted at the same time. In fact, some of us went through basic training together and then got sent over at different times

DM:

What time did you go over?

RL:

I went over in August of 1968. I was drafted in May of '67. No, let me think—I was drafted in August of '67 and went in May of '68 is when I went to Vietnam

DM:

So nine months later you were sent to Vietnam.

RL:

I was over there for a year, and I went again as an obligation. I wasn't really aware of a lot of news. I was aware of just what I see on television, read a little bit—I didn't read much in those days—didn't have a clue if I was coming back, but I went, and when I got there, it didn't take long to realize that, from my perspective, I didn't see the need for the entire activity. It was just this huge machine over in someone else's country and everyone over there living in fear, either from us or from the people who were, you know, responsible for the Civil War

DM:

Yeah, you came to this realization while you were there or was this after the fact?

RL:

While I was there.

DM:

Oh wow, yeah.

RL:

I didn't—I saw atrocities, not on massive scale, but small scale atrocities by our people just because they were bored or because they were scared and they would do stupid things.

DM:

Can you describe an example or two?

RL:

We were a combat engineer company and our job was first thing in the morning that we did was mine sweep the roads that we were building, so we had to send out—and we were very—it was very, we were very predictable. At first light we are in an armed convoy doing mine sweep.

Well, everybody in the region knows that so we were ambushed quite a bit, and it was typical guerilla warfare where we often time didn't see the enemy, but we were taking fire, and so many of the guys in the company, they would be frustrated, and on the way back or at the end of the day they would be driving and they would just open fire into villages and lob 40 grenades or sit in our perimeter, guarding our perimeter, and a mile and a half or two miles away just see some people working in a rice field and they would just fire off rounds from .50 machine guns just for, what they would call, shits and giggles. And I didn't see our leaders doing anything about that.

The worst case was coming back from a convoy, and this crazy kid, and I can't even remember his name, he just sprays his M16 out of his window and about an hour or so later a procession of villagers coming to our outpost and they're carrying a stretcher, and there was an old man in it, and it was a little boy holding onto the stretcher alongside of him and through our interpreter and from what I could glean from the conversation is that he was shot by our guy driving through that village, and this little boy was his grandson and we put him on a helicopter—he would have been going to Qui Nhon, and I remember our medic saying that, you know, "There's no way to know if that little boy will ever make it back to his village," you know, depending on what happens to his grandfather. Just stupid stuff like that, just horrible, how could—we think we're over there benefitting the country when our leaders allow those kinds of things to happen. So it was a big awakening for me, and I hate to say that my Vietnam experience was good for me because—to take some good out of something as horrible as what went on over there, it's kind of a—I don't know what you call it, a paradox or something. But it did, for the first time in my life it made me think about making my own choices. And I couldn't wait to get out.

DM:

Did you come across other people with the same thoughts as you? Did you talk with other people about this?

RL:

There were some, for sure, it was a little bit of everything over there. I mean just, it was the first time I just really stopped and looked at how other people acted and why they did—try to understand why they did things, and there were certainly other people who were very verbally opposed to the War. When you don't want to be over there and the conditions are horrible, it's pretty easy to jump on that bandwagon.

DM:

Right.

RL:

But mostly people didn't rock the boat too much. You just went on and did what you had to do to make it through, to count your days to get out of there, and that's what I did. And it's a long count, because we could say today that, we'd say Number 1, and we couldn't say 2 until tomorrow at this very same time. And it's worse than being a kid waiting for Christmas. It's longer because you're thinking about it for the entire time.

DM

How long were you over there?

RL:

I was there for one year.

DM:

So you would rotate out after a year? Is that generally the case?

RL:

For the Army, you would stay a year unless, you know, you were wounded or had disciplinary problems or something like that. If you were a Marine, they—Marine's stayed for thirteen months. And there's always those stories about the guys in their last week, you know, like volunteering, you know, a guy name Yost, you know, one of our convoys came under fire, and they needed somebody for backup and he was already pulled off of active duty there, he was going to leave the next week, and he jumped in a truck to go help and he didn't come back. So it happens all a lot. Timing—it's all about timing.

DM:

And what about this idea of facing death? Or the imminent prospect of death. This was something new to you, I take it, before you headed over to Vietnam

RL:

For me, for the death, to be my death was new. I lived a pretty safe life. I had some death in my family. I lost my mother when I was fifteen, and that was probably a pivotal point, too. She had just given birth to my baby sister, she was five weeks old when my mother died, so we just had to pitch in and I can remember my dad complaining, one time. There were four of us and he figured, Well, somebody will pitch in when needed, and that's kind of what we did.

DM:

Yeah, okay. Where were you based in Vietnam?

RL:

It was a little Outpost called LZ Lowboy, which means landing, LZ means Landing Zone, so it wasn't a—it was just an engineering company that was there. We had a quarry and an asphalt plant and a perimeter, and we were on a small knoll that was about a mile from the South China Sea; we could see the ocean from here we were. And then we would radiate out from there depending on where the construction sites were.

DM:

The fire that you came under, was it always sniper fire from ambush as you were working or did anyone ever try to dislodge you from that position?

RL:

Mostly, we never had anybody push our perimeter. I thought that in many ways, the locals liked us there because without us, their road would be a mud puddle most of the time. So we built the roads that they could use in their day to day life during the day, and then they also used them at night to transport weapons and things like that. Our intelligence was not very sophisticated and I think it was just a matter of luck that we never got overrun because our guys where not very good at guard duty. They were asleep and drunk and high, and it didn't feel real safe.

DM:

Was it easy access to drugs?

RL:

Yes, drugs and booze. Booze was supplied, we could buy—I didn't really drink before I got drafted. I started drinking beer over there. It was hot; we had access to ice and cheap beer and we'd drive in these trucks back and forth and we'd come by our landing zone and we'd stop and

chug some beers all day long. And it got to—I don't have an addictive personality—I realized that I was really putting myself and others in danger and I didn't really enjoy it after a while of getting sick on it. I turned twenty-one when I was over there, and even though we had access to beer at any age. At twenty-one I just felt obligated, like I was, like in the states when you're going to go out and start drinking when you can legally, and that's when I went a little bit overboard and decided that I better back off and was able to do that, I'm really thankful that I don't have that need for alcohol. I drink beer and wine and bourbon now, but I can have one drink and be fulfilled. And I know that's sort of almost like a blessing.

DM:

How many people were in this unit? Was it a company or larger?

RL:

There were four or five companies with different skills; motor pool and the asphalt plant. We had the big trucks, is what we did. We were originally called the 70th Engineer Company (DT), which meant Dump Truck, so it was kind of a weird name, and then while I was there that unit was disbanded and swallowed up by the 19th Engineer Battalion. And we were just a remote outpost.

DM:

How far out would you radiate from that outpost to build roads?

RL:

Sometimes maybe a hundred miles in a day..

DM:

That is putting it out there pretty far.

RL:

Putting it out there without much support, and oftentimes if we would get a flat we would fix our own flats on the road, and I look back and some things were just stupid and I was lucky.

DM:

Could you call in Air Support or anything if you needed quick help?

RL:

There was only one vehicle that had a radio in it, and it was usually not with us. The 137th Engineer Company, just a few months before I was there, they were ambushed as a—their entire convoy was ambushed and most of them were killed. So those kinds of things certainly could happen. And some of them happened to my company after I left.

DM:

By the way, I've talked to some engineers from the Korean War, and they said, "Wow." One bulldozer driver said, "They were always taking pot shots at the bulldozer was just so easy because we're out there, we really didn't have much support," so what you're saying about Vietnam is the same thing

RL:

Same kind of thing.

DM:

Well it's an interesting time when this happens in your life, you know, age twenty to twenty-one is a formative time in a lot of guys' lives. But to be in Vietnam at that time, you must have come back somewhat different, do you think or not?

RL:

I came back different, but another reason I'm lucky, I didn't come back scarred. I didn't come back with an excuse for bad behavior. I used it as a motivation, and while I got through high school without reading a single book, I was just wanting to just absorb as much as I could once I got out. I knew what I wanted to do, I knew I wanted to be involved in natural resources, and in order to do that in a significant way I had to go to college, so I was highly motivated. I got out of the Army in August, and I think in October I was enrolled in junior college in Sacramento.

DM:

So there was motivational difference after the war as opposed to before, sounds like.

RL:

Absolutely, it was night and day.

DM:

And why natural resources? When did that come about? How did that pop in to your head?

RL:

It's just my love of the outdoors and the experiences I had with wildlife and wanting to know more, wanting to do what I could to conserve natural resources

DM:

Is there a particular time or event that you can point to where you can say, "This is when I made this decision" as far as it being a career and not just a recreational thing?

RL:

Probably thought about it almost every day while I was in Vietnam, what I wanted to do, trying to figure that out. A lot of times it's just what would make me happy? You know, how could I have a decent living and I knew I didn't want to go back to shift work in factory, no matter how much it paid. Not a pivotal moment, but this whole time it wasn't as bad as hanging from my thumbs, but it was like every day, you know, it's that one day closer to being back in America and then doing something for my future.

DM:

Sounds like a very healthy attitude for when you're over in Vietnam to say, "There is life after all of this is over." [laugh]

RL:

That's all I wanted was life after Vietnam.

DM:

So you got back, you went to college at—

RL:

American River College in Sacramento, and the reason I picked it is because—when I got drafted I had a girlfriend that—she was more of my girlfriend that I was her boyfriend, and she was in Sacramento, and I was visiting Sacramento quite a bit before I was drafted, and then when I'd come home from leave and I had a few friends there, and I liked that city. And I knew a couple of people at that junior college and said, "What the heck, let's go." It didn't seem like I really had a plan. I just loaded up my pickup truck and went there and found a place to stay and enrolled. And I was so lucky that this junior college had a very good academic program in biology, and I wanted to be a biology major and I had two wonderful guys, Mr. Heinrich and Mr. Moore in my introductory biology class, they did a team teaching, and I met some other people that were really interested in learning biology, and I just thrived there and became a part of that community, not like in high school where I was just kind of like, in the shadows, just kind of sneaking through to get out. I wanted to get in and I wanted to learn as much as I could. And some other people were like minded, and we did well. I became a teaching assistant for Mr. Swinehart who taught Natural History, and then I became his teaching assistant. And I cared for the live—they had wild animals that they used in their program, small mammals and a few birds—and I became their caretaker. We started up a conservation club there, but I didn't stay in college. I'd go for a few semesters and drop out.

DM:

And this was American River?

RL:

American River College in Sacramento, it's a junior college.

DM:

It's not—okay it wasn't part of Cal State then.

RL:

That came afterward. You get an associate's degree there and I knew I needed at least a bachelor's degree to qualify for the government jobs. I'd read some things about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and I thought, There couldn't be a better place for me to work. And so that was my goal. And I needed a bachelor's degree, so then I transferred, because I was in Sacramento I transferred to Sacramento State University and started there and went for a few semesters and had a very similar experiences. Got in with a good group of people and good instructors and took some great courses, and still I'd go for a while and drop out and go back to Ohio and different things. I wasn't ready to make the big commitment to go all the way through. It took me quite a while, I think I put the years in that letter. I can't remember all these years right now but—

DM:

I've got '69 to '76 at Cal State and then getting a bachelor's there and then coursework toward a master's. Yes, so '69 was actually when I started junior college, '69 to '70 or '71 and then transferred to Sacramento State. And one big motivational thing was a course I took in psychology. I never spoke in public before, and I remember in high school our congressman came and talked about how he loved to give speeches before big rooms, and when he was talking about that, it almost made my skin crawl because that was the last thing I wanted to do. So after this Army experience and being in college for a while, I had a interpersonal communication course in psychology where we actually had to talk and we had focus groups, that was a different term in those days. But we'd sit in small groups and you're graded on your participation, and everybody had to talk, and it sort of really sort of brought me out of my shell and realized that I could do those things and it was interesting to me. So then I was conflicted, do I want to study psychology or do I want to study biology? I stuck with my career objective, but it made me better at everything I do because I was learning to not be afraid to communicate.

DM:

Right, right, you said that you saw the U.S. Fish and Wildlife as an ideal opportunity, an ideal career path pretty early on, having spent the career there and retired from U.S. Fish and Wildlife, looking back, do you hold to that same perspective, that it's—

RL:

Yes I do, you know, it's the Major League Baseball of baseball, you know, it's the MMA [**Mixed-Martial Arts**] of Biology or UFC [**Ultimate Fighting Championship**] of Biology. It's the best, the biggest, and the most active branch, and it provided me with a future that I never even conceived of how good it could be and the wonderful experiences I have but it also, there were traumatic times during that time period too. As any career, every career has its up and downs.

DM:

It's just that some people let those hard times jade them to the extent that they lose their original love for—

RL:

It's so frustrating to me to hear my coworkers complain about how bad they have it when they have this great salary and they're working in a great place and they have all these cool toys and this freedom and authority, and they're bellyaching about it. I hated it.

DM:

[laugh] Well back to Cal State, when you were studying biology were you more interested in zoology than botany? Were you going toward mammalogy other than ornithology or did you have interests?

RL:

My big interest was birds. I was involved with the Sacramento Audubon Society. I led field trips and I led class field trips, and I did, in junior college, we went to some summer camps, children's summer camps, and taught Natural History there through them. It was just a little bit of everything but primarily birds. That was my bog interest, and I was, I took ornithology at Sacramento State by an old professor, Dr. M.D.F Udvardy, he was from , he was a—he escaped Europe during the war, during World War II, and made his way to Canada. He got his PhD from, I think, from Hungary, somewhere in Hungary and went and escaped to Canada and taught up there and made his way to California. He was the ornithology professor and he, I became his teaching assistant there as well, at Sacramento State and was getting ready to graduate, and I just went by his office and I saw something in the news about an interesting bird and I went by and asked him a question and, he had a heavy European accent, but he goes, "Robert, what's your plan?" and he says, "Are you going grad school?" I said, "Well I hadn't thought about it" and he goes, "Well you need to go to grad school and you need to be my student." So I said okay, so that's when I started grad school and found this grad school pretty easy because it was all related to what I wanted to do. So we figured out a little research project that I would work on a species called black terns and they were a species of concern in California and they nested in rice fields. It was kind of an interesting thing. I was in Vietnam for a while and surrounded by rice fields,

and now I'm in graduate school and I'm out tromping through rice fields. But it was fun that time. While I was in grad school, I had finished all my classes, I did all the fieldwork that I was going to do and I was in the process of putting all my data together and getting ready to start writing my thesis, and I got a job offer from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I don't need a master's degree.

DM:

Did you apply for this or did they seek you out?

RL:

During that time, there was an application process, a general application process, that you fill out with all of your experience, education, and then you submit it, and then the agencies would glean—you would be rated, you would be given a score, and then the agencies would have to go to those scores for a pool of applicants, and so I started getting calls and actually I think I had three job offers and had to pick one, and I'm glad I picked the one I wanted because it was to work in National Wildlife Refuges. So I knew that mostly everything I would be doing would be working with natural resources.

DM:

Right. By the way, I need to get Udvardy's, the spelling of that name, if you don't mind.

RL:

U-d-v-a-r-d-y.

DM:

Okay.

RL:

It was Nicholas M. D. F. Udvardy, he had a big name, very old school, interesting.

DM:

So this score basically that you accumulated because of your college work, was it supplemented with points from Vietnam?

RL:

An interesting thing about that is as I was getting interviews with different agencies, and they were asking my scores, and I was talking to the personnel people, and the object of my scores came up and they said, and one of the women said, "Well weren't you in the military?" I go "Yeah." She says, "Well they didn't give you credit for your military service." And I wasn't—if you're honorably discharged you get five points. If you're honorably discharged and you have

any kind of disability you get ten points. So I wasn't a disability, but I got five extra points which put me over the top of everybody else, and they said, "Well we have to pick you"

DM:

[laugh] Well were there any points for overseas combat area?

RL:

No, there was—

DM:

Really? [laugh]

RL:

It was just that five points, so I think I had like, I had ninety points or ninety-one points and then with the other five points, the only people that could be hired before me under the rules at the time were disable veterans, and their really weren't any disabled veterans that were applying for these natural resource jobs. And so—

DM:

That clinched it

RL:

Yeah, it was a shoe in from there. And then that—when I had to make the big decision to turn down the first two job offers because they weren't exactly what I wanted, I was a little sketchy about that, but I'm glad I did wait.

DM:

So where did you end up?

RL:

Ended up in Florida. So I'm in California as a grad student, new hire with the government, they don't pay moving expenses, and I was married at the time but no children, and so we had to pack up with a U-Haul full of stuff and two vehicles, towing one vehicle and driving another, and my wife's brother helped. And we had to drive from Sacramento to Titusville, Florida, which is on the east coast, right near, adjacent to the Kennedy Space Center. And it was a—I couldn't wait to get there. It was just one of those really exciting opportunities and they hired me as an assistant refuge manager. What primarily—what they discovered once I got there is that they really needed me to function in a wildlife biologist role, and that's what I did. So it was Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. It's a 150,000 acres of the non-operational lands of the Kennedy Space Center. So during—The Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canaveral, it's adjacent to Cape

Canaveral, that's military, and then the NASA facility. It's this huge swathe of land that was swallowed up by the government, it was eminent domain, and they bought people out. They needed a huge area for safety reasons and security, but they only managed, operational areas were only about somewhere between 2-5% of that land was operational areas, the rest of it was wild, Florida wetlands and uplands and forests and brackish water and seventeen miles of undeveloped coastal beach, and it was throwing me in the briar patch. I was really excited about it. And I would just take on as much as I could and ended up working with the Kennedy Space Center doing environmental monitoring during the first shuttle flights and actually had an old mercury era of exploration, the mercury rockets, in the old stations where you see on TV and all these guys are sitting in front of these TV monitors with radios and stuff, and that had been abandoned, so they reactivated for the environmental monitoring people. So I had my own little cubby hole there, and when the shuttle went off we were able to open the door, and we could actually see it, it was about six or seven miles away, and I was never really interested in the space program, but it's hard not to be excited when that thing goes off.

DM:

I bet.

RL:

And the ground just rumbles and there's—and you learn so many things about what's going on—that big cloud of steam that comes out—well they dump about a million gallons of water on those engines when they fire in order to keep the concrete cool and everything, and that's what causes that, so when it combines with the rocket fuel exhaust, it converts the water and the exhaust stuff converts to hydrochloric acid, and so that cloud has a pH of 1. I never knew that. So that huge thing is a corrosive acid cloud. And so that was a big part of what we were monitoring the effects of that on the vegetation. And on the first launch, under the wind parameters, it carried that cloud over to Orlando, and that, it's not well known, but NASA painted a lot of cars in Orlando, sixty miles—or I don't remember how far it is away—but it actually spotted, acid spotted cars and killed a lot of vegetation. Mostly it just defoliated it, and it didn't actually kill the plants. but there was some defoliation.

DM:

And more at ground zero? I mean, could you tell this pretty easily?

RL:

Right, yes because we had crews that actually were on the ground that would run in front of this cloud and deploy captive plants, and then after the cloud went by then they would harvest them and analyze them to see what was going on. So there was a lot of behind the scenes sophisticated stuff that was there. We had remote cameras set up on different colonies of birds, we had cameras on osprey nests and bald eagle nests, and then in the estuaries where the big rookeries of

all the wading birds, they were nesting and what they did when that thing went off. And basically what it was it startled everybody and they got up and then they came right back.

DM:

I see, okay. Were there any short term or long term effects from the cloud?

RL:

The effects were pretty short lived. It killed some leaves and some plants, damaged vehicles and things like that, but—

DM:

But not wildlife so much?

RL:

We didn't detect anything along those lines, you know, and within a day or two it's going to rain in Florida, and that stuff is washed away

DM:

Right, right, was anyone testing the water?

RL:

They were testing a lot of different things. It was very sophisticated—we had these meetings and people, there are professors there from Rice University in Florida that got some of these contracts, and I got to meet all these really interesting people and many of them rocket scientists and astronauts that were involved in this program. So here I was, a brand new employee, had my silly little uniform on going to these meeting, and it was just really exciting.

DM:

That is. Where you there for the first shuttle?

RL:

The very first shuttle

DM:

Really? Wow.

RL:

The very first shuttle, the central fuel tank was painted white, and it takes, it costs, as I remember \$300,000 to paint that thing white and they never did it again. The first launch was—the whole structure was painted white, STS-1, Shuttle Transport System number 1. And then there's two

smaller rockets, the booster rockets, the solid rocket boosters are on the side of the shuttle, and as it—while it's still visible, you see those solid rocket boosters ejected out—well, they parachute back in to the ocean and they're retrieved. And so in order to retrieve them, NASA built a special ship, a solid rocket booster retrieval ship, I don't remember the name of the ship, but I was there early enough to work with some of the people on the actual design of that ship because once it picks them up it comes back in the coastal, the inner coastal waterway to the NASA facility, and it's a shallow channel, and the boat has, it's an ocean going ship so it has a big draft, and it's full of manatees in there. So when manatees, they concentrate, they rest in the channels in the deeper water, then they go out into the shallows to feed. Well, when they're in the channel and this big ship comes in, the manatees escape behavior is to sink to the bottom. And they were only about a foot or two free board between the keel of the ship and the bottom of the channel, so the potential there was to crush these manatees, so they developed special sonar properties and bio thrusters that would allow them to maneuver this ship at about 1-2 miles an hour and they needed a lot of controls to do that. That was designed just to protect manatees.

DM:

What about the time that you came in that the manatees where out feeding at a particular time and then down in the deep parts at a particular time, was it scheduled in such a way?

RL:

No, the knowledge level wasn't that sophisticated at the time. The whole idea was that by slowing this thing down that the animals will perceive and then get out of the way, but if they're going fast—boat collisions were the biggest mortality factor on manatees and still is. By allowing this boat to go slow, they could get out of the way. And in order to go slowly, they had to develop these thrusters on the side of the hull, so that they could tack a straight line.

DM:

Right, right.

RL:

So that was pretty cool.

DM:

Wow, how many launches were you there for?

RL:

I think three or four.

DM:

Okay.

RL:

I was gone and had transferred when the shuttle exploded on re-entry. That was the year after I left, a year or two after I left.

DM:

Yeah, okay. At this point you went to Georgia, is that right? You were at Piedmont at one time?

RL:

I was, it was—there's an interesting—from my perspective, another life transforming event that had caused me to go to Georgia. There were two things that, two duties that I had that I never anticipated when I went in to Wildlife Biologist. The first day I arrived and signed up, they gave me a wad of keys that wouldn't fit in my pocket, and a stainless steel Smith & Wesson 357 Magnum.

DM:

Oh really?

RL:

And so that, you know, and I kind of looked at it and they said, "Yeah, you have, you get a law enforcement commission when you work here, so everybody who does security." Whoa, that's weird, I thought. So having law enforcement authority was weird and unexpected, and the other thing was that we were, that was the time when the Fish and Wildlife Service was developing their wildfire and controlled fire programs, and we got involved in fighting wildfires while I was there. And we were novice. We took some training. We had a lot of equipment, and fire suppression was really important on the Kennedy Space Center because of the disruption of operations. And so when a fire started, it was balls out, everything you can do to get it out, and being, as an agency, inexperienced on that, and being the only people on the ground when these emergencies happen, we got into some bad situations and two of our employees were killed by a wildfire while I was, on my crew. It just—it was very upsetting, not the fact, just the fact that I was there. I was actually supposed to be on one of the machines that one of guys that was killed, but it was the arrogance of the agency putting us into those positions and then wanting to cover it up that just, and I became a malcontent. And many of us did, and we weren't getting any support to change that mentality. And so they said, "Well we got to find another place for you to be and the guy in Georgia said, "Sure, I'll take Rob." And that's how I ended up in Georgia. So I was four and a half years at Merritt Island, and then I went to Georgia.

DM:

And what was Georgia like?

RL:

Georgia was different in that it was the Piedmont Plateau, so it was rolling hills of Pine and Hardwood forest. And the primary objective there was for management of the red-cockaded woodpecker. And so they thrive in old-growth forests, so we had a long rotation harvest program, we were like a demonstration forest for endangered species.

DM:

This sounds like a great job.

RL:

Yeah, it was.

DM:

Yeah.

RL:

It really was, lots of flowing streams and lots of interesting things going on there. Only 35,000 acres, so it was kind of intimate compared to where I came from, and again I was functioning as a wildlife biologist doing, being able to set up a lot of monitoring programs and coordinate outside researchers that would come and go.

DM:

Still carrying a gun?

RL:

Still carrying a gun and doing a lot of—we had trespass problems and poaching problems and got to be on-call, and I did the same thing in Florida, and I kind of liked that aspect of it. It always really bugs me when, you know, people sneak onto land and defile it. So now I can do something about that.

DM:

Where people after the woodpecker specifically?

RL:

No, no, deer. Georgia is big deer country, deer poaching and turkey poaching. And so we got to do that, and we'd have to do night patrols and things. So I worked with local wardens and I worked with some of the special agents from the Fish and Wildlife Service, and they're non-uniform criminal investigators. They go to the same kinds of training that ATF [**Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives**] and Border Patrol. We have authority over many

of the laws that FBI enforces, so it was kind of broad authority, but we concentrated on natural resources.

DM:

Which you eventually got in to, you got in to this program, but not yet, is that right?

RL:

While I was in Georgia, I got to work with some of the special agents that were coming through doing special assignments, and they knew about me as a biologist, and I had a lot of sea turtle experience when I was in Florida. There were like a dozen endangered species on the Merritt Island Refuge, you know, alligators, bald eagles, four species of sea turtles, snakes, and different things. So they needed—they had an issue in Puerto Rico with some poaching of sea turtles. And they tried to send some agents over there to pose as researchers, and they couldn't handle the conditions, they were kind of primitive. And so they needed some intelligence, and they said, "Well, would you like to go to Puerto Rico?" And I said, "Where's my ticket?" So that's about the time when I decided to try to make a career change, I had done a few assignments with them prior to that where they needed biological expertise, but they needed someone that had already had law enforcement authority. And so I had both of those, so I went to North Carolina on a striped bass commercialization poaching and then I went up in to some witness protection in Minnesota, and so I got to learn and know some of these agents, and then this opportunity to go on a special assignment with them to Puerto Rico, and I already had my application in to make the conversion. I mean, just because I want to be a special agent doesn't mean—there's only 200 in a whole—in the world.

DM:

Well, did military experience help with that?

RL:

I don't know if it did or not. I think just the idea that I could work under adverse conditions as the most important thing. And so being on road trips, whether it was in my Volkswagen van or being in Vietnam, they both had some, you know, I'm willing to put up with some stuff that other people weren't. And I took a thirty-day detail up there and posed as a sea turtle researcher, which wasn't really a stretch for me and gathered some intelligence, and while I was over there I was notified that I was selected to be in the next training class. So that was another pivotal moment and really exciting for me, and it was a two month school, and I knew I didn't—I could stay at the refuge where I was living. I lived on the Piedmont refuge and I could stay there while I went to training and come home on weekends.

DM:

I would have figured it was some central location.

RL:

Well it is, it just happens to be close to Piedmont Refuge.

DM:

How nice. Everything is just falling together.

RL:

It did, and I'm thankful for that.

DM:

Tell me about training.

RL:

It as an intense college, it was like being in college again. Lots of studying Constitutional law, search and seizure, probable cause, physical conditioning, firearms training, all that kind of stuff, and I just threw myself in to it. And I did really well, and I was the oldest guy in the class. So there, to be an agent, a federal agent, there's mandatory age restrictions, and you're required to retire, it's absurd really, you're required to retire at fifty-seven years old from that position. You could stay with the government in a different position, but you don't have to. You pay a little bit more in to your retirement system, and so they don't hire anybody over thirty-seven years old because they want twenty years out of them, at fifty-seven, you've got to go. I was already thirty-eight.

DM:

Oh. [laugh] But a real biologist.

RL:

A real biologist. I had some qualifications, and I developed some relationships with the training center there, and there's a little thing like if—they don't tell you—if you come in, if you're older than thirty-seven, you can stay longer than fifty-seven, you can stay until you get your twenty years in if you can pass the physical and they have a place for you. So they've figured all that out, and they decided to hire me anyway, but they made me take a two-grade pay deduction, go from a GS-9 to a GS-7, which I had two kids by then, and I wasn't crazy about it but, Ah, we'll make it work, you know? So I did that.

DM:

How long was that training program?

RL:

Two months, it was two months, and then my assignment was San Antonio.

DM:

Okay, and what would you be doing in San Antonio?

RL:

Well, I'd be a training agent working underneath a supervisory agent, Jim Stinebaugh, former Texas Game Warden, Former Border Patrol Officer turned Fish and Wildlife Agent, so he had a lot of state experience, federal experience. And he's a bit of an icon down there in the Hill Country. He arrested Dolph Briscoe, a famous person in Texas, poaching. And it was so politically incorrect to do that that he was forced to move, overnight, his family. It was a real interesting story about that.

DM:

Has it been written up?

RL:

He did a Texas Legacy interview, and I haven't seen a transcript, but it's a couple of hours of tape on that. And so he was my training officer down there in San Antonio, and I knew it was a temporary position when I went down there, stayed for a year and wanted to get back to California, but there was no openings in California, and someone said, "Well we want to reopen a station in Lubbock." It was open years ago by an old time game warden when our job was a little bit different. It was just field enforcement, no criminal investigations and things like that.

DM:

Who was that person?

RL:

Don Krieble.

DM:

How do you spell that?

RL:

K-r-i-e-b-l-e.

DM:

Okay.

RL:

And he was here, he was actually from like Ohio or Illinois, and he spent his whole career out here in Lubbock chasing duck hunters and dove hunters and doing duck banding in the summer

up in Canada. But they were called game agents at the time. It was a different function. He was still living in Lubbock, but the station had been closed for more than ten years.

DM:

That sounds like a game warden job that he had.

RL:

He was like a game warden.

DM:

Yeah.

RL:

Yeah, very much so.

DM:

Okay.

RL:

And it doesn't require college or anything like that.

DM:

Right, okay.

RL:

And it was, they were often times in uniform at the time.

DM:

Now tell me again about when he was here?

RL:

He was here in the seventies and eighties.

DM:

Okay.

RL:

Early—I'm sorry, in the sixties and seventies.

DM:

Sixties and seventies, but this had been vacated for some time and then the opportunity came up?

RL:

The reason they wanted to open it up was because a woman named Midge Erskine, from Midland, she was a wildlife rehabilitator, and she was a bit of a—she was a firecracker. And she and her—her husband was a petroleum engineer—but they were explorers in the Permian Basin. And people were bringing her oil birds on a regular basis, and so she took it upon herself to go out and—this was in the sixties—to find out why are all of these birds are oiled? And what she discovered, at that time, was that these huge basins, they're sinks, and the oil producers were using them to dispose of oil field waste. And oil, they were dumping this waste water and waste product in these basins. Oil floats on water, so when this stuff goes out there, all the oil comes to the surface. And there were these basins that were hundreds of acres in size that were lakes of oil. And birds don't know this is oil, it look like water when they land on it, they're doomed. They can't learn to avoid oil because the first lesson is fatal. They can't clean their feathers. So she brought this to the attention of the government. The States didn't want to do anything, it went to the feds, we got involved, and the regional director in Albuquerque said, "It's time for us to do something about this. We want somebody centrally located that can work this problem regularly."

DM:

That's where the initiative came from though, from Albuquerque. Who was that person?

RL:

Mike Spear, S-p-e-a-r, he's retired now. And so he said, "We'll open this." So they asked me when I was in San Antonio, "Would you move to Lubbock?" And so the cliché is that not only no, but hell no. They said, "Well go over there and look around, you know?" "Okay." So I came out here and looked around and went to the federal building, talked to some different people, other agencies that were here and met some of the local game wardens and looked at the pace of life and the quality of life and the cost of living, and I said—and the opportunity to open, to reopen a brand new station and make it how I want it—a one man station, just me. And the closest supervision is 350 miles away, and it started to look pretty good.

DM:

What about the primary project itself?

RL:

The primary responsibility was to gather data on how significant this threat was to migratory birds, and then figure out what we're going to do about it. So it wasn't a matter of just coming out and finding an oil spill and bust somebody over it. The idea was to—

DM:

This was big.

RL:

We want a solution, and it seemed like a really cool challenge.

DM:

Not only was it big, it was big business you were going against.

RL:

At the when time oil was down.

DM:

Yeah? Okay.

RL:

And you said I didn't need to bring anything, but I did bring one thing.

DM:

Good.

RL:

So it turns out that this was a thirty-two year journey, and it was really interesting, so I got the picture from 1955, and I remember that bird. It turned up in the forest one day in Toledo, and it was covered in oil, and it was roaming—it was a great blue heron—and it was roaming through the forest, you don't see great blue herons walking through the forest. And for all of us kids, it was like a dinosaur was loose out there. And my father came out, you know, and we went and told him, was like, "There's this giant bird," and he went out and took this picture. And, you know, this bird walked off somewhere and died, I don't know what happened to it. But the thing is that we were surrounded—this will all make sense eventually—we were surrounded by a railroad yard, so part of growing as a kid was getting across the tracks when those trains stopped on the road, that's a big adventure. But there was a lot of railroad facilities around there, and it turns out that through all this, opening the Lubbock Station, my very first prosecution was a railroad company that was killing great blue herons because they had this pile.

DM:

Golly, isn't that something?

RL:

So that was—but that's—

DM:

That was a sign of things to come, wasn't it? From 1995?

RL:

From 1955, and I didn't know it, and I had forgotten about this

DM:

Golly.

RL:

Until going through some old family albums, visiting my aunt, you know, somewhere, and I "Oh yeah, I remember that bird!" and so that was my first prosecution. And so that prosecution took a couple of years, it was a couple of years in the making because the problem was way bigger than we thought. It was highly politically charged, and the state of Texas was unwilling to cooperate. And that enforcement was all through the Railroad Commission of Texas. That's the primary agency I was working with, not the game wardens, they wouldn't touch it. Now some of them would help me gather evidence and show me places and take me around, but they weren't interested in any of the prosecutions.

DM:

Were there any that tried to thwart your efforts?

RL:

No.

DM:

Just not cooperating.

RL:

Right. From the higher levels, the local wardens, for the most part, there were a few wardens—I had a sixty county area in Texas that was my primary responsibility—and there were a few wardens out there that never would return a phone call, and they didn't want me in their county because they had this cushy little thing going, and they didn't want anybody making work or making waves.

DM:

Right, "What are the feds doing here?"

RL:

Oh yeah. There were others that were frustrated that they couldn't get things done, and they would like the opportunity. And my role was to be their scapegoat. You know, how we can get things done, they could blame it on me, because I'm going home at the end of the day. And that was very effective; I learned that lesson from Jim Stinebaugh in San Antonio. He said, "You may like some of these guys, you may not like some of them, but you got to work with them. They're your knowledge base and they're going to save your ass if you get in a jam some time," and all those things are true. This opportunity in Lubbock was this combination of science and enforcement that I couldn't even imagine would ever exist, and I get to be a part of it.

DM:

And a worthy cause.

RL:

I thought it was, I thought it was.

DM:

You thought? Do you still think—?

RL:

Well, oh I still do, I still do. I mean, but I was out here, I mean, I spent two years just looking at maps and finding where the oil fields are and talking to people and getting information and documenting, finding out some of the scientific literature, there was actually a little bit of it.

DM:

Sounds like it would require some aerial survey. Where you up in the air looking for oil pools and this kind of thing that wouldn't be on a map?

RL:

We used an aircraft a lot, when it was available to me, we'd get it over here, and we would go to places, if we had intelligence or we would just look and fly. And so that can be tedious, and you just realize how big this area is, I said, "There's got to be a better way."

DM:

Can you immediately distinguish a playa from an oil pool when you're well up in the air?

RL:

Yes, but I also thought there might be a better way. I was hearing about satellite imagery at the time, in the mid-eighties, late-eighties, so I come over here to Tech—which way is the Goddard Building?

DM:

The Range and Wildlife, yeah.

RL:

I had met some professors early on in my career here because I needed help identifying some things. It started out over in biology, I met Dr. Baker and Dr. Bradley and some of the museum people over there. Oh, and both Drs. Jones, both Clyde and Knox, and then eventually some Range and Wildlife people. And so I started asking questions and they said, "You need to talk to Ernie Fish." Did you know Ernie? He was Landscape Architecture.

DM:

I know of him

RL:

And he was the department chair for a while, very rigid person. And he teaches satellite imagery. So I walked over there, and I told him what I was doing, and he got this little twinkle in his eye. And there was no Google Earth at that time, and the only imagery that was available was military, it was classified, or Spot Company. It was a French company, and they had their own satellites up, and they were making it commercially available. He said, "We'll do a research project on this, and we'll test the different—because their satellites collect images at different spectra. And he said, "We'll find these things from space." [laugh]

DM:

Yeah, yeah. What year are we talking about here, by the way?

RL:

Probably about 1988.

DM:

Yeah.

RL:

I'm thinking '87 or '88. I could look that up. So he said, "I'll get a little grant, and I'll buy some of this stuff and then you can do that ground-truthing on it." So we did that—

DM:

He didn't ask you for some Federal money?

RL:

He didn't. [laugh]

DM:

Hey, you're Federal. [laugh]

RL:

No, he didn't ask for a dime but—so the funny thing about it is, so we did that, and we were able—so he would filter these images, you know, looking at it under different—he computerized it somehow. So we were able to come up with this matrix of different spectra—like with 90 percent accuracy—of distinguishing oil from water. Because they weren't colored photos, they were just gray, you know, black and white. And not only did we find active things, but we actually found old spills that had turned to asphalt that were covered by mesquite bushes, but they showed up on the satellite imagery, so that's how accurate it was.

DM:

Oh really?

RL:

So we put together a little paper on it and—

DM:

So this is actually better than aerial survey then?

RL:

Oh yeah, because you can see through and you can do a—your scale is so much greater. Well, he developed a relationship with this French company and ended up on their Board of Directors research directors or something pretty cool.

DM:

You called it "Spot"?

RL:

Spot, I think it was Spot.

DM:

It's not the same company that makes the little Spot that you carry on your belt is it?

RL:

Well those personal locators, very likely. I'm not sure. I know about personal locators. I've never had one but—I actually I did. The Service gave us one for a while. Could be, I don't know. That'd be good to find out.

DM:

But he got involved?

RL:

He got involved with them

DM::

[laugh] Good.

RL:

And it worked, and so that's what I did for a couple of years, just searched and counted dead bodies and collected dead bodies. I had chest freezers full of rotten, stinking dead masses of different kinds of species.

DM:

What species, what were the primary—?

RL:

Everything from warblers to deer.

DM:

Really? It wasn't just three or four bird species? It was huge.

RL:

No, it was hundreds of species—water fowl and raptors were the big—

DM:

But also mammals?

RL:

Also mammals.

DM:

Reptiles and amphibians?

RL:

Yes, everything. It was a huge killing field. And it was shortly after the movie *Fatal Attraction*, and we actually adopted that, as our, sort of our motto during this whole thing. These things are an attractive nuisance; that was another term that we used. In an arid land, where water's a premium, anything that looks like water, you got to have it because you are tired, you are

hungry, you are miserable, and you see the potential for rest and food and protection, and it's nothing but death.

DM:

Sounds like La Brea [**Tar Pits**].

RL:

It is La Brea, it's exactly the same thing. And then as soon as there's something in there, predators are attracted to it because it doesn't kill outright so these animals are struggling. "Well there's somebody that's already on their way out, let's go get an easy meal," and things would just pile on top of each other, and it was just biological magnification thing that was going on and—

DM:

Did you find coyotes and foxes and this in large numbers?

RL:

The foxes were always able to—I would find fox or coyote tracks a lot, they were a little more cautious in their approach and they could start from the edge and they soon find that it's not good whereas a bird lands in it, especially ducks in the winter—was a big deal. Flocks would come in, [onomatopoeia sound effect of duck landing in oil], they're done. So I'm collecting these things all over New Mexico and Texas and bringing in other agents, and other regions started looking in to the same thing in Kansas and Louisiana and all the oil producing areas then picked up on this thing and just carried it all over the US. California was big, we went out to California. There's some stuff from the sixties from out there, went out there and talked to a company that manufactures nets—because we needed a solution. So we—Bakersfield, California, there's a lot of oil down there. Found this little company, "Yeah we sell nets every once in a while" and the guy was really interested, you know. It was the feds and they're talking about maybe these other people are going to have to buy a product from us, you know. And his name is Ken Jones. Coastal Engineering was the name of his company in Bakersfield, and he sort of like, jumped on our bandwagon and would come to different, when we would have these public meetings come around and he found out who makes these—he used to just distribute the nets. He found out who made them, he bought the machines and shipped them to Bakersfield and started manufacturing them there because the oil industry that we were working with started using nets, and he started selling them, and I'm buying netting material from him right now to put out new facility at the wildlife center.

DM:

Oh really? Okay

RL:

Same guy. [laugh]

DM:

Now this netting, would it cover an entire oil pool?

RL:

So, here's the thing that we found out. Yes, the short answer is yes. That's an expensive thing on a big facility. You have to have the super-structure and then it snows, you know, and it's covered with tumble weeds, so that's problematic. While we're doing all this oil pit stuff, Midge Erskine, remember her from Midland? The wildlife rehabilitator that started this whole thing, she goes, "Rob, are you looking in those tanks?" I said "What tanks?" she said "At the Heater Treater, at the tank batteries?" and I said "No." She said, "Well you need to look in those tanks." So we discovered this phenomenon that we didn't know existed. So you produce oil out of pumps and you pump it all, all these different pump jacks and it goes to a tank battery and oftentimes at the tank battery, they'll have a Heater Treater, which heats the crude oil, separates the water and the oil—because it's a mixture that comes out of the ground—separates the oil, puts it into the tank battery. The water goes in to a sixteen-foot diameter tank, six feet tall, and to save \$300 they don't buy the top. And so I'm over six feet, but standing on the ground, you can't see in these tanks. So I started climbing in tanks and it was like we started all over again. So those—everybody said, "Well birds aren't going to go in those things." Well yes they do, because resources are at a premium. When you're a wild creature, it's like being on a college football team, you have to be a super athlete to survive. You have to be the best of the best, and you're always scrambling for warmth, food, cover, and there's a potential there. So what happens in these oil tanks, the first thing that happens is they become covered with insects. Grasshoppers, the whole surface is struggling grasshoppers in the summer time, it doesn't kill them right away. Well almost every bird eats grasshoppers. Birds of prey eat grasshoppers. Fly catchers eat grasshoppers. All these things are going in there, we're finding these tanks filled with barn owls, hawks—

DM:

Kestrels?

RL:

Kestrels. One tank near Sweetwater, one year I found a prairie falcon in it, the next year I found a peregrine falcon in it. So that's where the netting really took off. We brought this to the railroad commissions, we notified them and the industry, we have all these—so Mike Spear in Albuquerque, we had all these high level meetings. "How are we going to approach this?" and so his strategy was we go to the regulating agencies in the different states and we tell them that we have a problem we have to solve. And then we provide all these public meetings and symposia,

that we're going to put all this information out and work with them for voluntary compliance, and we're going to do this for, from the first time we go public with it, we're going to do it for a year without prosecution. Ah! [claps hands] A whole year, I just went through a year. I know how long a year is from Vietnam; I don't want to go through that again. But he says, "That's the way we've got to do this. We have to do this very carefully and slowly."

DM:

Was there voluntary compliance?

RL:

A lot.

DM:

Good, most?

RL:

No, but a lot. And that's where Mr. Jones starts selling a lot of nets because the cheapest fix over that thing was not to buy the solid fiberglass top, but was to put this net, and I forget what he used to sell it for, a hundred bucks or something, would be a net with a cable and you string the cable through the net and you just kind of like, set it on there and it works. Until someone cuts a whole to put a suction thing in it and then it's, and if it gets too high and brings the net down and the oil is above the net, and we had all these issues, but that was the short term solution on eliminating the mortality from those tanks.

DM:

Some of these oil pools have to be acres in size, how large do they get?

RL:

Some of them, in the early days, were well over a hundred acres in size

DM:

How could you possibly cover anything like that?

RL:

You can't, you can't. So we worked with them on some remediation and "stop throwing your garbage out the window" as one thing that they had to do because this is cheap disposal of garbage, you put it, and then other places, they would take a bulldozer out there and just create a big pit and just use that. Well they're not supposed to, but the railroad commission wasn't enforcing it because oil was \$17 a barrel at the time and we don't want to put an undue financial burden on the industry. So they weren't enforcing their own laws. I've got lots of tapes of

interviews with oil companies and railroad commission people, and there was a lot of interest at the time.

DM:

In your area, in that first year for voluntary compliance, what percentage would you say complied?

RL:

Oh man, I'd have to, I'd say at least half, I mean, yeah. The bigger the company, the more likely they were to comply. So I learned the difference between an independent and a major oil producer. A major oil producer markets their product under their name. An independent producer just sells to somebody else. So when their name was involved in the final product, they were more likely to respond.

DM:

It sounds like the best part of voluntary compliance is that is that after that year, that's that many fewer people you'll have to go after at least, you know, give them a chance to comply.

RL:

Well we get them on our side.

DM:

On your side, yeah, yeah.

RL:

We try to show them incentive to look good. "Yeah we were making mistakes in the past; we're going to fix this."

DM:

And what about the year to come, what about when prosecutions could begin?

RL:

So who's going to be first? It was a railroad company.

DM:

Really?

RL:

Yeah, it was—I'm going to sit here—that's weird, now I can't think of the name of the railroad company, a lot of these details—

DM:

Retirement is good for that; you don't have to think about [laugh]—

RL:

I've got all this data at home but—Union Pacific Railroad, Big Spring, Texas. The state game warden there was one of the guys that we worked together quite a bit. His name was Wayne Armstrong. He was a bit unconventional. He was a big guy and he didn't like to get very far from the truck, but I would work with him on all kinds of enforcement issues, you know, because I like getting off and, you know, going a couple of sections around, sneak up somebody from the back, and he's got the other escape route from his truck. But he started noticing in Big Spring—you drive into Big Spring, you go over a bridge before you drop down into Big Spring. And that bridge is Union Pacific Railroad. Well right off to the right, there's a bunch of tracks, they had a pit over there. So when these trains sit on these tracks, they are dripping diesel and oil all the time, and they had, almost like an irrigation system for oil and would funnel it all to these pits and there's this pit over there in the mesquite brush, and one day it overflowed and went under the road, and Wayne's driving across and he sees it coming down the creek, it's oil. So he gets out and he finds out where it's coming from and we can't see it from the road so we started making trips over there, documenting that, and actually talked to them about fixing it. They didn't fix it. So they were number one. It wasn't even an oil company. And everybody is going like, "Whew not me, I don't care who it is," but the brass, they're all liking the idea that we're not going after an oil company.

DM:

But there's an example anyhow to the oil companies.

RL:

Yep, yep, so it was a big deal.

DM:

How long a process?

RL:

Oh, it took a few months, and I mean they really weren't going to fight it, they couldn't fight it. I had videos of animals breathing through a sheen of oil. They're in a oil and the only, it's totally dead still and there's a carcass there and all of a sudden you'll see it's heart beat.

DM:

That's got to be tough, though, you know, I guess you become accustomed to seeing that, but that's a lot of suffering to have to witness.

RL:

It is a lot of suffering. And I would have to end up killing a lot of my evidence. Had to kill my evidence, nobody does that. [laugh]

DM:

Right, but after video taping.

RL:

We'd videotape it, yeah. So they were the first and they agreed to a settlement. Cleaning it up, pay a fine, donated some money to different places, and we got a lot of publicity over it, and so that resulted in a lot more compliance.

DM:

Now what kind of fine are you talking about on an incident like that?

RL:

I think they paid like a \$10,000 fine. They didn't care how much it was, they just wanted to get it over with, and they changed how the railroad companies do business on those things, so that was a big deal. So all those—a lot of those files, when I retired, I boxed them up and brought them over here. I didn't ask anybody permission.

DM:

And that's worth mentioning on the recording here too, that files documentation of this is here at the Southwest Collection.

RL:

Some early stuff from the sixties, some photos of the different places and—

DM:

Any additional information like that would be welcome as well.

RL:

I can't remember a lot of the details, but there's a lot of documentation now that will be available here that somebody could put that whole picture together from the very beginning. There's a lot of players, and there continues to be a lot of players. The agent that replaced me, he's still working on those cases right now.

DM:

What's his name?

RL:

Russell Carter, he told me recently that all the oil companies are now buying the solid tops on their, on the waste water tanks, that they're not messing with it anymore. There's another interesting thing in that the Federal Court of Appeals just last month ruled that—I should start that over. The law that we used to get compliance and to try to eliminate this hazard is the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, 1910. I have the date a little bit wrong but early 1900s. And it's a—there's a term I need to think about, can we pause that for a second?

DM:

Mhmm, sure.

DM:

Okay.

RL:

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act is a strict liability statute, meaning that you don't have to know you're breaking this law for you to be guilty of it. And so an oil company couldn't claim, "Well, we didn't know we were killing birds." That wasn't a defense. Well just last month, or a month before, there was a Court of Appeals has now ruled that this strict liability standard is unconstitutional and that we may not have that leverage for that enforcement in the future.

DM:

Quite a step back.

RL:

It is a step back, and we don't really know how it's going to play out because it's not just oil pollution that, this is all kinds of things, different kinds of pollution, and different kinds of poaching. "I didn't know that was a Whooping Crane I shot." That's already a—within the last decade or couple of decades on the Endangered Species Act, if you kill an endangered species, you have to know you were killing an endangered species. If you thought it was something else, it's not a violation of the Endangered Species Act. So there's a lot of little chipping away of the enforcement possibilities, which makes natural resource future look pretty bleak in my opinion—being able to enforce the laws.

DM:

So your successor is having to deal this that now.

RL:

So I don't think the agency has figured out exactly how they're going to address it. It's always been known that the Fish and Wildlife Service doesn't want to challenge any appellate court

decisions on the Migratory Bird Treaty Act because it opens up the whole act for reinterpretation. So up until this point, they haven't really appealed those decisions. They would have to go to the Supreme Court.

DM:

All of this enforcement began—that first provisional year was when? And then the—

RL:

I think 1988.

DM:

'88. So '88 to the present, how much compliance is there?

RL:

I think it's astounding how much there is. It's very high. Russell told me that they go into some big Oil Fields and look for days and they don't find much anymore. So—

DM:

You want to venture a guess at a percentage of compliance?

RL:

Oh, 90 percent.

DM:

Wow, okay, okay.

RL:

It's really high.

DM:

Well this is effective then, has been effective to this point.

RL:

It has been effective. Now with this, all this, with the new fracking and secondary recovery, there's a lot of activity now, and the regulating agencies can't really keep up with it, but we do see some people getting sloppy at their, when they're drilling, so they have mud pits that they recycled drilling mud in when they're drilling an oil well or reworking it. Sometimes that mud gets contaminated with oil, and they're supposed to clean it up immediately, but with so much drilling going on some of those things are slipping through the cracks. So we're continuing—agents all across the country are working on this issue, and we'll see what the future holds.

DM:

This has been primary to your operations but not the only thing. You have also, what, animal trafficking or whatever term you would use to, you know, animals illegally held.

RL:

Yes, smuggling, pollution, and poaching are the three primary things I did. The pollution was primarily oil. Lots of other things, I did a lot of contaminates work, so chemical contaminants, misuse of pesticides, many cases out here where people have some issue with wildlife, and their solution is to poison it along with everything else out there, so using carbamates and aldicarbs, these different families of pesticides that people have discovered are very effective poisons.

DM:

How did they disperse it?

RL:

Sometimes they would use artificial bait, and they would sprinkle the pesticide on it, and it's so powerful that coyotes can take a bite, and they don't take two steps, and they're dead. And then that becomes a carcass that becomes available for scavenging by other animals.

DM:

Does it pass on? Does the poison pass on to the scavenger?

RL:

Yes, up in northeast New Mexico we discovered a rancher that, a cow died, and so he injected it with carbofuran with a hypodermic need, all over the carcass, basically poisoned the meat. And working with our forensics laboratory, we were able to reconstruct a case where a coyote ate some of the meat. The coyote died. A bald eagle scavenged the coyote, and they always go for the soft parts, they go for the gut and the throat. The bald eagle ate the stomach contents and the organs of the coyote and it died just a few feet away. And a magpie, a black billed magpie scavenged the crop of the eagle and it died. And they were all right there in a line.

DM:

Is there a photograph of that?

RL:

No, not individually, but they were there. I wasn't the lead agent on that, and I have a few photographs, but we actually recovered, during one of the injections into the cow, the hypodermic needle stuck a bone and it pulled the needle off the syringe and we found the needle in the carcass, and it still had carbofuran in the barrel of the needle. And we were able to do a

chemical analysis and prove that. And he was doing this throughout the Cimarron River area and really putting a lot of contaminants all over that area. Some of the locals weren't too happy.

DM:

Is it coyotes that they're usually after?

RL:

Usually.

DM:

Why?

RL:

Oftentimes when people have something that's dear to them they don't want to share it. And sometimes that's a crop, sometimes it's some livestock, sometimes it's just space. So there's this whole idea—I have pictures of coyotes hanging on, a whole row of coyotes hanging on barbed wire fence. I have pictures of eagles hanging on barbed wire fences. Just because, sometimes it's just because. It's because what they learned, it's what they know. They think it's an easy solution.

DM:

Is it a trophy sometimes or like, "Hey, I killed this?"

RL:

Sometimes, the trophy aspect is when you see coyotes hanging from a fence. You want to brag about the fact that you killed coyotes for some reason, but had lots of cases like that. Sometimes we'll get a call that's like, "Well, these vultures just fell dead in our backyard." Well, we were able to find the poisoning field not too far away. Lots of different—one guy was just wanting to kill everything that wasn't commercially valuable to him, and his poison ended up killing feral hogs, he was poisoning hogs and just a couple bites of this treated corn and everything that fed on the hogs was dying too. And his place was covered with dead animals and bait piles. I was able to find the bait piles. He was using canned meat and flies are of course attracted and the flies would get on the meat and die almost instantly, so there were these black blobs that were visible through the brush, and the black blob, the black was covered with dead flies, and that's the only way we could find the bait piles, that's how effective, killing everything from flies to feral hogs. So we would find opossums and skunks and rabbits and birds and just everything all over.

DM:

Are there people who are trying to intentionally kill Canada geese because they get in to their sorghum, grain sorghum, that kind of thing?

RL:

Sure, that happens too. And there are legitimate concerns and legitimate solutions to help private land owners solve certain kinds of depredation events, and sometimes harassment and sometimes actual collecting permits and killing permits are appropriate, especially in the case of Canada geese and snow geese for instance. They've extended the hunting seasons on them, certain time of the season where there's no bag limit on snow geese—there's so many of them. When people do—when broadcast poison, they get a lot of non-target mortality.

DM:

What about sandhill crane, do you see a lot of people killing sandhill cranes?

RL:

Yeah, I did a few sandhill cranes. Sometimes it was just hunters getting carried away and killing more. I've had a few; I don't think I had anybody poisoning sandhill cranes on purpose. Sandhill cranes sometimes die from aflatoxin poison in peanut fields. It grows in the peanut. When you have certain moisture levels and they have a freeze and thaw cycle and then they eat the peanut and it kills them.

DM:

So you find some dead sandhill cranes, and you have a—someone does an autopsy on these to determine if it's natural?

RL:

There were a lot of forensic analysis opportunities available to us as agents, and I made DNA cases twenty-five years ago on gut piles, we were able to pinpoint a gut pile to a—that was on Lake Meredith National Recreational Area in a non-hunting zone, and a deer that was harvested and we were able to do a DNA match. I did a DNA match on big horn sheep case out of southern Colorado.

DM:

Any of these ever lead to a prosecution?

RL:

Oh yes, yeah. I didn't lose very many cases, but I would choose what I go forward with. It wasn't important for me to prove guilt, it was important for me to know the truth. And so if somebody wasn't guilty or I couldn't prove it I didn't bring charges against them. I wanted the very best cases.

DM:

Have you seen any circumstances of playa lakes contaminated with fertilizer or any kind of residue from agriculture and that having an adverse effect on wildlife?

RL:

Nothing that I saw as criminal action that I could do. I worked with a lot of professors here at Tech and other places that did a lot of research on playa basins, and one of the things that came out of the oil work was the Playa Lake joint Venture, and it was a combination of university, federal, state agencies, non-government agencies, and concerned citizens that formed this coalition to really study the playa lake issues for water quality and as it relates to waterfowl. And I was a member of that for a while, and that was started, the catalyst behind funding that was Phillips Petroleum Company. And Phillips Petroleum Refinery in Borger, Texas, was a big part of the investigation that we did. The situation on that refinery was the worst I saw in all the work that I did. And I made many covert trips up there, sometimes at night, some of them out of the—kind of more remote, and gathered a lot of evidence against them and what they were doing and how they were polluting their own land and polluting the Canadian River Basin over there and everything like that. And we decided to cut that investigation off, and Win Bishop, State Game Warden out of Borger, and I made one last trip to the refinery, and we decided that this time that we don't care if they see us or not, so we just went openly into the refinery and collected several garbage bags full of dead birds. And while we were leaving, several employees got interested in—we were in his marked vehicle, they knew who we were, they knew Win because he had arrested some of them before, so they felt very possessive about us being there, and they resented our presence, and so one of them had a crew cab long bed pickup truck, and he blocked the road and it was shift change time, so cars started to pile up on this one little road that he'd blocked. Then the crowd started to get rowdy, and they had their prey trapped, is kind of—and they surrounded us and started to harass us. Win was in uniform. I don't have a uniform, and so we gave a command to the crowd, we told them who we were just in case they didn't know, [laugh] and gave them an order to disperse. Simultaneously we're on the radio trying to get the sheriff's office to respond. We don't have radio communication; it's not working very well. Win said, "What do we do?" I said, "Back to back." And I said, "Win, if they charge us, and I kill two people with every bullet that I have, we're not going to make it out of here alive." There were hundreds of people. So they kind of kept their distance, he racked his shotgun, and I un-holstered my gun, and finally the news spread all throughout the whole community and the sheriff did show up, he got through there in his car. I remember really, very clearly. He got out of his car, he took his hat off, and scratched the top of his head, almost like a stereotypical, "Well what do I do now?" because nobody was listening to him. Finally some supervisors came over from the refinery and told everybody to leave, and they asked me if I'd come back and talk to them in their office and what was going on. I was happy to get out of there without anybody getting hurt. I went in and visited with them for a while, and on the drive home I just became really angry at the way that they treated law enforcement officers and the fact that they were putting a lot of

people in jeopardy and that we were able to intercept some conversation that was going on over the radio at the time with their workers, and they were actually getting orders, “Don’t let them out, don’t let them go.” Well under federal law, that’s assault on a federal officer, they didn’t touch me, but they prohibited my free movement. So I brought to the attention of the FBI, and they initiated an investigation and basically told me, “Well you didn’t get hurt so we’re not going to do anything about it.” And that upset me because it sets a bad example for the future. So I opened a—I filed a—got a lawyer and opened an individual civil case against them and sued Phillips Petroleum Company. So while this is going on, Phillips Petroleum Company is scrambling like “How do we make this work?” So they found out about the joint venture, the playa lakes joint venture and they said, “We want to be the corporate sponsor.” And I thought, Well that’s great, they should be. This is a great thing, because I know less is going to happen to them in the court system. So they came with employees, they put employees on the committee. They would host the meetings and provide food and became corporate sponsors of the playa lake joint venture. And from natural resources community aspect, that joint venture was a big deal out here in West Texas, and it extended in to New Mexico, Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. So that’s a big Joint Venture, multi-state thing.

DM:

Amazing to be able to make something positive out of it, out of a negative event.

RL:

Out of something negative, yep.

DM:

Incredible.

RL:

Yep, so I found what I thought was the best ambulance chasing lawyer, attorney firm in Dallas that I could find and he said, “Hell yeah I’ll take this case,” so we did a bunch of depositions and it was a hassle for me because I had to do this outside of work, and he said, “Well, Judge Robinson,” she was a Federal Judge that would hear this case in Amarillo, her husband was in a World War II prisoner of war camp and everything, and they said, “She’s not going to be sympathetic, you guys weren’t hurt,” so they lost interest in it. And they said, “Well how about”—Win Bishop was the state game warden, he went in with me on this thing and they offered us like, split \$15,000, and I said “Hell, yeah I just want this over with,” and so I took my share and bought my son a used pickup truck [laugh] I ended up with about \$5,000. But it really got their attention and they came on real strong as a partner.

DM:

Good, good.

RL:

But, fifteen, twelve years after I retire, thirteen years after I retire, Russell Carter gets information that there's more oil death going on up at Phillips Oil Petroleum again. And it turns out it was in the same spot that I investigated before, and the same spot that they said they would clean up, and so he initiated another prosecution just two years ago, and it was the same US attorney still up in Amarillo, but she was getting ready to retire, she wasn't interested in really pursuing it, so we looked for some alternative things to offer the US attorney's office, to offer them to get out of this thing, and so one of the things that we said was that, well they need to, this thing needs to be publicized, they need to come up with a solution, publicize a solution and then make some kind of donation, and the best place they could donate was the only non-government agency out here in West Texas that's really doing something to conserve natural resources and that's the South Plains Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. So they agreed to pay a—make a donation of \$200,000 dollars. I asked for a million, knowing that it was—it would never fly.

DM:

A negotiation.

RL:

The US attorney said, “No we’re not going to do that,” but that “Yeah, yeah let’s do that,” so they did, and the center got a check and that’s what’s enabling them to go in to the next phase of their operations over there.

DM:

So again, something negative becoming something very positive.

RL:

Becoming something positive, and it's just this matrix of energy by different people and different things and finding solutions, and it's very satisfying, and it's kind of amazing that there's still aspects of all these efforts that are going forward in positive directions.

DM:

How many years were you here as special agent?

RL:

Sixteen.

DM:

How do you maintain your anonymity? I mean, your plain clothes, but people get to know who you are, it's inevitable.

RL:

Yes, and so I did not attempt to be anonymous in my local West Texas community. I covered what I described as the Panhandle to the Permian Basin, that was my area where I was assigned. So I didn't attempt to do any, like, covert work within there, although sometimes it just happened. And I did some covert work, but in my local community I didn't try to be anonymous, but because I'm a federal agency, I would go on assignment different places and I went everywhere from like I said, from Alaska to Puerto Rico and most places in between and it—but covert work is exciting. A lot of agents like to do it. We have a special branch that does nothing but covert work sets up businesses and things like that, but I would—I had a little faux business right here in town. I was in the Yellow Pages, and I had a—doing business as licensed by the City of Lubbock and I was Schatz Adhesives. So I took the name Schatz because it's an old family name, my ancestors are from Germany, and so I just picked that because it was familiar with me. So you don't want to deviate too far from the truth and—

DM:

It's S-c-h-

RL:

S-c-h-a-t-z.

DM:

Okay.

RL:

And the business cards—

DM:

What was the adhesives? Where did that come from?

RL:

Well, so the story is that my father was a chemist, and he patented some of the adhesives that are used in the non-lick postage stamps. And he also consulted on the adhesives that were used for the—to hold the ceramic heat shield tiles on the space shuttle, and when he died, the business went away, but I live on the royalties [laugh].

DM:

Oh really, oh wow [laugh]. You need a commission on every postage stamp [laugh].

RL:

You know, and I don't know, you know, I'm not a chemist, you know. I'm just a trust fund kid.

DM:

So you're business here was Schatz Adhesives?

RL:

Schatz Adhesives and that was his company, and yeah it's still doing business. I even got, from the city, I got some notices I had pay taxes on my—what do you call it? Your inventory and your vehicles, and they said "You must have a computer or something," and I said, "This is not a business." You know, I had letters back and forth, like, I don't really, yeah there's a business name there, but we don't do business anymore, and they finally went away. But I'd have, you know, a checking account and checks, and so I could set up hunts if someone in a different part of the country is working on a hunt and they needed a client to go in to find out what these outfitters are doing, I'd be there client, and I'd pay them with a check and—

DM:

They'd get a check from Schatz Adhesives?

RL:

Yeah, right.

DM:

Yeah, okay is that typical for special agent to set up kind of a front?

RL:

That's one way of doing it,

DM:

Yeah, yeah, that's interesting.

RL:

Nowadays you have to be a little more sophisticated. It's easier—if someone's really going to dig into your—but we have guys that have, just like any agency that does covert work, you have sham businesses. Mine never existed, but sometimes you actually have to have a store front. And some of our guys did store front stuff, and I got to help them, ending up some of their cases—you know, for instance, we had a store front in Alaska with the certain of the Natives up there were poaching walrus, killing them by the hundreds just for their tusks and their os penis, which is a penis bone. Some of our guys filmed some of those slaughters with AR-15s and Ak-47s, just shooting into herds of walruses and cutting their heads off and throwing their meat in the ocean and different things like that.

DM:

Were you often called out of your area to go participate in this kind of thing?

RL:

Sure.

DM:

So if they needed some special agents in an area, they would call, you were on call?

RL:

Yes, and if I needed help I would call them.

DM:

Were you ever—besides this circumstance up in the Panhandle, were there ever any personal threats against you? Or any concerns about some kind of retaliation, personal retaliation against you?

RL:

I never—so I was aware of the potential danger. A lot of times I'm working alone, and I'm working hunters, and they all have loaded guns, that's one thing to worry about. My attitude enforcement was to be as soft-handed as I could be, and I would strive for, ah what's the term? I would strive to have people underestimate me and basically to discount my presence. And then it would usually backfire on them. So I didn't, I wasn't, I didn't use a—

DM:

Aggressive.

RL:

I wasn't a macho, aggressive—

DM:

In your face kind of thing.

RL:

Underestimated, I would strive to be underestimated. And that worked for me and I was able to avoid conflict. I did have an investigation in Crosby County with two brothers and a father. Rural family, bullies, and they had befriended the local state game warden over there, and they had befriended a lot of people that they used as a cover, or a ruse, for all their bad behavior. They would try to show their innocence by association, but I knew who they were. I knew that he was doing some poisoning; I knew he was doing some poaching, killing hawks and stuff. He raised

fighting roosters. He was always in the back of my mind. I was always going to look for something. And I'd snoop around there every once in a while, and then I got a call from the US attorney here, Dick Baker, and he said, you know—should I mention the name? It's public record.

DM:

Oh yeah, yeah.

RL:

"You know Randy Hadderton?" I go, "Yeah, I know Randy. I've known him for a while". And he says, "Well, we're fixing to serve a warrant, a drug warrant on him. We need your help, we need to get him out of his compound. We need to get him out of his house. We don't want to storm this place, it's rural. He's heavily armed, and he's a bully, can you get him out?" I said, "Sure, where do you want him? When do you want him?" Because I knew all I had to do was ask him for a favor, and he'd try to help me because it would ingratiate him with a law enforcement officer. So we staged at a house there outside of Crosbyton, and they said "Well we need him at this rest area, so that would be the best place that we could converge on him quickly." So I called Randy up, I said "Randy, we've got a deer that's poached out here. I got to get it in the back of my truck and I can't lift it. You're the closest guy." "Yeah, be right there." So he drives up, and they arrest him, and then we served a warrant on his property and found a lot of stolen farm equipment, poison. His daughter comes home from high school, she's driving a stolen pickup truck, and searched and searched and searched and finally found his stash. He was actually growing marijuana, commercial, compaction, and packing thing over there at his place, and he had a lot of it, so we made that arrest, and they also served a warrant on his brother Frank next door, and they didn't come up with anything, and so it was over, and I said this was a good opportunity for me to look for some poison now, so two days later I went back and I come in from the north. As you come into, like from Crosbyton, you go south, you come off the cap, and you could see. I could see his ranch down there and there was a plume of smoke, a real narrow plume of smoke that went straight up in the air, like 300 feet, and it was just the weirdest thing because there was no wind, and I knew what was going on but I drove down there and I got about a half mile from this place and this plume of smoke just collapsed in slow motion like a feather, and I could smell it. It was pot, and so he had a—

DM:

He expected someone was going to come along after it.

RL:

So the brother they didn't have enough probable cause to do a warrant, that's where the majority of the dope was, and he was burning it. So I called the task force up and boom, they converged on the place, and we drove in there. So there's this big hole in the ground, and there's smoke

coming out of it, and the local narc Aubrey Stark, he walks over and he goes, "Hey Frank." There's Frank down on the bottom with a pitchfork and he was stirring the contraband and trying to destroy it, and we ended up getting—I'm getting to this threat, personal threat. So we ended up getting a warrant. His wife is in the house, they couldn't get the warrant until the next day, it started to get dark, so they stationed officers outside of his house to make sure that no more evidence was destroyed or taken off the property. During the night, his wife gets so—this is really sad, I mean, she attempted suicide. I mean she was so stressed out over this. Did the warrant the next day and found more, found, they were able to—well exigent circumstances allowed them to gather the evidence that was in the pit, but then going around to the ranch they had, the next day, he had deer feeders, and inside the corn in the deer feeders was where all his, the rest of his stash was, so then the brother was arrested. And Randy, because of his dope—the reason they had warrant out on him is that he sold, somebody snitched him out, so he had the dope, he had the stolen property, the stolen farm equipment, and he went to jail and he ended up giving them—so here's the bad part. They ended up giving him twelve years, or seven years, and they tacked on under Operation Triggerlock, committing a federal felony in possession of a firearm, they tacked on five years. And they said when they arrested him, he had a gun on him, and he had a gun in the car, so he's coming to help me, and he's carrying this gun, just in case, if these poachers are still around or whatever, you know, like Rob needs help. So he gets this extra five years, and he's blaming it on me. So I didn't really know what's going to happen, but I went to him, I visited—well I visited his attorney. I said, "Look, you know, you're blaming this five years on me, I'll meet with Randy, let's have a meeting, and he's involved in the fighting cock business, he could give me some important information. US attorneys said that they'll knock that five years off if he cooperates," and Randy said no, he wouldn't do it.

DM:
Really?

RL:
Yeah.

DM:
Okay.

RL:
So a few months later I'm served with papers, he's suing me for false arrest, for entrapment. So I didn't know what to expect. So the US Attorney Office defended me, and Judge Cummings threw the case out because it wasn't entrapment, I just got him out of his house, so there wasn't a scene with his kids and everything else. So Randy got out about, I don't know, four or five years ago, six, eight, ten years ago, I don't know, I never heard from him.

DM:

Never heard anything?

RL:

No, never heard anything from him. He got divorced, his wife divorced him over it.

DM:

What about his brother?

RL:

I visited his brother in County Jail, and he was so wasted and out of it that they didn't do much to him. And then I encountered Randy's brother, a good friend of mine with a ranch out in Kent County, leases his grazing out to the other Hadderton brother, there was three brothers, only two of them were arrested. And so here was this good friend of mine with a ranch, and he's got the Hadderton brother around there and I mean, I talk to him, and just like, nobody—

DM:

There's no lingering threat out there?

RL:

Doesn't appear to be at this time, but he served a lot of time, he served it mostly in Big Spring, his federal time. But it was a mess.

DM:

Okay, okay, miss that stuff?

RL:

There was a case or two that came up shortly after I retired, but I was ready for a change. The structure, the scheduling, the details, I wanted to have a little more freedom. And so I chose, I had an opportunity to retire early. Because I did firefighting and law enforcement under the refuges, I made an application to get that to count toward my law enforcement career, my twenty years. And so I didn't have to wait until I was fifty-eight, I went early, I don't even remember how old I was, but too damn young by most standards to get a payment, a pension at that age. But it was available to me, and I was debt free and I worked to get debt free, so that my reduction, I mean it's a great pension, I have health benefits, I'm thankful everyday for it and I've discovered new and interesting things to do.

DM:

Okay, 2003 is what I have down for your retirement.

RL:

It would have been January in 2003

DM:

2003, what are the main things that have occupied your mind since, and your interests, since retirement?

RL:

Well, the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center takes up most of my time. I don't do wildlife rehabilitation, but I serve as a—I serve on their Board of Directors. I'm married to the founder, and so there's some servitude there expected.

DM:

Carol Mitchell Lee?

RL:

Carol Mitchell, right. We met through our shared interests and we were both going through divorces at the same time, and then after that period our relationship developed and we ended up being together for quite some time and then ended up just eleven or twelve years ago getting married. We decided well, we'd like to do that, and so I help them with the science part of wildlife rehabilitation. The frustrating thing is that most of the people involved with that organization are there for emotional reasons, and they could give a heck less about the science. And there are things they could do to benefit their patients, but they're not willing to do that. They anthropomorphize the situation and put their feelings in what the animal wants rather than what they really need in order to be released and survive and thrive in the wild. So that's frustrating, and then because of this money that came from Phillips Petroleum and some other local philanthropic foundations that provide us money to build this, to remodel the three-story barn on the property, it's been there since Carol bought the property, it was built about thirty-five years ago, it was a barn built by a veterinarian, Pat Allen, and he raised homing pigeons in this barn, three-story barn. Had a dirt floor, one 15 amp circuit, and no plumbing, and we always saw the potential for it to be the hub of activities up there, but the cost prevented that, so we're finally able to do that, and we just spent the last year just now finishing, this week, finishing the construction and ready to move in and have an open house in November. And so Carol's dream was to do that, and she accepted the fact that she would never see it in her lifetime, but now she is so—

DM:

That's just wonderful.

RL:

It's a nice story.

DM:

Now that's going to be, that would be a good—after this event—would be a good time to sit down with you and Carol and talk a little bit more about South Plains Wildlife Rehab and get a recap, although we have an interview with her, it's probably fifteen or sixteen years old. So to talk about that succeeding fifteen or sixteen years would be very nice.

RL:

It's easy for me to stay involved with that organization because there really isn't anybody else out here outside of the academic community and they just talk among themselves. But we go out into the community with this message of a reasonable approach to the conservation of natural resources. We rehabilitate animals, sure, but we do a lot of public education, and we put on at least 100 programs a year.

DM:

There's a lot of outreach I know.

RL:

And I hope that that can continue. We have a master plan on what to do and we're working at finding Carol's replacement. We're going to have to—

DM:

You've been working on that for a while, right?

RL:

We have been, she's retired twice before, she wants to do it again. She liked it so much she wants to do it again, but she just can't seem to get away from it. But she's over seventy now, and she doesn't want to keep involved with the minutia it takes to keep the organization together. And it's like any system; it takes a lot of energy to keep it from turning to chaos.

DM:

Right, I'm sure. Let me ask you about one more thing this morning. The Tech Animal Care and Use Committee, are you still on that committee?

RL:

I am.

DM:

Okay. Can you tell me about that?

RL:

That's another, takes, one of the two or three things that take a lot of my time that are interesting to me, but knowing a lot of the professors in biology and natural resources management, they do research on animals, and if you're going to be an accredited university, you have to have a committee that reviews all vertebrate research to ensure that no animals are mistreated in the performance of this research. Or if they are, that you do it with alleviation of pain and distress, or everything is evaluated.

DM:

But it's a vertebrate?

RL:

Vertebrate.

DM:

Okay, interesting

RL:

Only vertebrates. The lowest level organism are small fishes, and it goes, it includes all of them and amphibians, I should, salamander research and some frog research. And then all the way up through many bird species, all of the livestock, so all of the agricultural stuff, and there's dog and cat research here now and a lot of wildlife research. So that's anything from kit foxes to, there's jaguars. I mean a lot of Tech researchers are into other countries. So all those things have to be evaluated, and to be accredited you have to have this committee to review it, and every committee is required to have a non-affiliated member from the community because in the past they've had disinterested members of that committee, and so they asked me if I wanted to be on it after I retired, and they weren't forthcoming on how much time it would really take me, how much demand there would be, but that committee is, in my opinion, it's the most functioning committee I've ever been in in my entire life. I mean, we get business done; everybody's really concerned that it's done right, and we facilitate researchers doing research, but we ensure that the animal's welfare is considered every single time.

DM:

Okay. Do you face malcontents on campus that say, "No, leave me alone, I don't want to—" or people who are not in conformity with the regulations.

RL:

You mean like some of the principle investigators? People doing the research?

DM:

Yeah.

RL:

Yes, yeah, some are more bristly than others when we make suggestions on how they could better consider the welfare of the animals, but I do see that attitude evolving in that our job is not to prohibit them or prevent them from doing research, but it's to facilitate that and to make sure it happens in a good ethical way. I'm proud to serve on the committee, and I'm proud of the response from the university and the freedom that the President's Office gives that committee. They don't tell us what to do, and we're reasonable in the demands that we make, and we will have—this coming year, we will have the accreditation inspection coming up again soon and so we're preparing for that.

DM:

That makes everybody very nice

RL:

It does.

DM:

Let's you do your job.

RL:

And I've seen a remarkable evolution of some of the facilities on campus and especially the Equestrian Center that was donated by the Griffins, Rip Griffin, Griffith or Griffin? Griffin.

DM:

Rip Griffin.

RL:

They donated, they had this personal, basically a rodeo arena, and they donated it to the university, and it, for several years, it was just kind of held together by bailing wire, and they have a new director and she is just making the place professional, and it looks like a university setting now, and it's really neat to see that. So we get to look at all the different facilities, we meet once a month. In between meetings we're evaluating these proposals and making suggestions, and my job is to give the non-academic perspective on what the public might think about things and with the science background I can understand what they're talking about and

make some suggestions about some things that I think might be better done a different way or some other considerations.

DM:

Who are some of the key members of that committee?

RL:

Dr. Phil Smith is from the Institute of—the TIEHH Institute, the Institute for Environmental Contaminants and Environmental Health and Human Safety out at the old Reese Center. He's the chairman. Mark Wallace was the previous chairman; they have a rock star veterinarian in Tiffanie Brooks. We now have two veterinarians on the main campus, and there's another veterinarian, Dr. Bracke over at the Health Sciences Center. So these veterinarians, they have to—there's a lot of medical research, biomedical research, being done now so their patients are everything from mice to the horse mascot. And it's amazing the things they can do, their understanding of all these different physiologies of all these different animals.

DM:

Oh gosh, that just sounds like an interesting group to meet with, even if you weren't tackling big issues, you know, just to talk.

RL:

It is; it's very mentally stimulating, and I have to go and I do a lot of researching looking up techniques and finding out. It keeps me current on a lot of topics, and I enjoy it. I have to be careful that I don't just go along and agree with everybody, but they're all great to work with, and we don't really have any issues. Because of my investigator background, they've asked me to—they've had issues with non-compliance, and if there is a serious issue, they don't mind dumping it on me. Because I don't mind talking to them because that professional professor to professor thing is tricky sometimes, whether it be you department chair or one of your colleagues, and it's nice that I don't have that intimate connection, and I can try to find out what happened, and we've been able to resolve them pretty successfully.

DM:

Mhmm, you're kind of a neutral party there.

RL

Try to be, somewhat, and do a case report on it. But oftentimes there's sensitive issues that come up—disagreements on how animals should be treated and we've been able to work through all those. We'll find out how cheery everybody is at this year's Christmas party.

DM:

[laugh] How many years on that committee now, have you been on that committee?

RL:

The other day someone said I might be the longest serving member on that committee.

DM:

I was about to ask if there were people who had come in new.

RL:

Yeah, and I'm not sure that's the case but it's probably been five years or so.

DM:

Okay.

RL:

I don't really know what year I started.

DM:

Okay, well what else can we add this morning? Anything occur to you? Gaps?

RL:

Well there is one other, you asked me what are the things that keep me busy, the Wildlife Center, the university, and two other things. I'm in the process of converting a cargo van to a mini mobile home for my road trips, to make my road trips shorter footprint on the road, and—

DM:

I've got to talk to you about that because I'm thinking the same thing, but anyway, we'll talk about that after the recording.

RL:

And the other thing is disc golf, so I started playing disc golf sometime in the eighties, we were at a big meeting with a lot of other agents, and guys were talking about restoring cars and different things, and we're all having this discussion and they said "Rob, what's your hobby?" And I actually had to hesitate at that point and I said, "I don't have one at this point in my life" because I was busy with career and going through a divorce and a lot of different things, and it was just all family orientated, and I said, "I got to do something," and I thought back in my colleges days of throwing Frisbees and how fun it was, and I learned that there was a disc golf course in Lubbock.

DM:

Down in Mackenzie Park?

RL:

In Mackenzie Park—well initially it was in Mahon Park, over by Chicago and Nineteenth street and those players moved it over to Mackenzie, and I started meeting those players and started playing and really took to it, and I'm actively involved in it today. We designed a new course, we go to tournaments, and they have—it's a big community worldwide, and there's world championships every year, and there's age protected divisions, and I started playing in the fifty and over division, and my playing partner here, he and I won the World Double's Championship in our division three times, and then in 2007, was the year I turned sixty, so I get to play the sixty year old division, and I went to Milwaukee and I won the World Championship in the singles. My plan is to go back when I turn seventy in 2017, go back and win it in another age division so.

DM:

That's amazing. And that's a little travel too, getting about to win a world championship.

RL:

Little travel, yes, a lot of travel to tournaments, and we host tournaments here in Lubbock. We play twice a week, we play just in our local community, we played many tournaments during the week, and we're having a big one coming up. We work with the city, the City Parks & Recreation tolerates us. They gave us a portion of Mae Simmons Park to develop a course, the players paid for it, we built it, we maintain it. We don't ask the city for money, and they don't give it to us.

DM:

[laugh] Well that is cooperation.

RL:

We're managing the forest over there, we trim trees, we reduce fire hazard, we do erosion control, and a pick up litter, and it's really neat, separate community, and a lot of people that I wouldn't otherwise know.

DM:

And for you it's another great reason to get outdoors, isn't it?

RL:

Yes, it sure is. That's where I was last night. We finished in the dark.

DM:

Okay [laugh] anything else to add?

RL:

No, that's about it.

[End of Recording]

