U.S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Region Five History Project

Interview with:	**Bob Gray**
Interviewed by:	**Susana Luzier**
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Transcribed by:	Christine Sinnott; August, 2004
Corrected by:	Susana Luzier

SUSANA LUZIER: This interview is taking place in McCloud, California. Today's date is August 5, 2004. It is approximately 12:00. We are sitting in the home of Bob Gray and his wife, Betty, at their lovely home. Bob Gray is spelled B-O-B - G-R-A-Y and Betty is spelled B-E-T-T-Y. My name is Susana Luzier, S-U-S-A-N-A - L-U-Z-I-E-R. And I will be conducting this interview.

LUZIER: I'd like to begin by asking you where you were born and when you were born.

BOB GRAY: I was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, May 12, 1922.

LUZIER: And what schools did you go to?

GRAY: I went to elementary school in Jackson, Tennessee and Memphis, Tennessee, and to high school in Memphis, Tennessee. But I graduated from Vidalia Louisiana High School in 1939. And then I went two years to college at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

LUZIER: And where did you grow up? Where did your family live?

GRAY: Well, I lived in North Carolina and Tennessee and Georgia and Louisiana with my parents until my father died when I was 12. And he died in Vidalia, Louisiana. My mother and I moved back to Memphis until my senior year in high school, and when I moved back to Louisiana, I lived with friends, where I graduated from high school and then went two years to college in Baton Rouge. I worked about two years for a levee Construction Company in Louisiana before moving

to California permanently in 1945. That's after I'd worked one season for the Forest Service in McCloud in 1942 as a lookout on Grizzly Peak.

LUZIER: When and where did you meet your wife Betty?

GRAY: I met Betty in McCloud in late 1945. We were married in 1948 in McCloud at a local Presbyterian church. We have three sons, one daughter, seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

LUZIER: Wow. How did you meet her?

GRAY: She lived in the corner house closest to the Forest Service, and I would just see her walking down the street occasionally, and took up a lot of nerve and talked to her. She responded favorably and we got acquainted.

LUZIER: How old are your children now?

GRAY: My children are 54, 52, 48 and 44. I believe, that's close.

LUZIER: So do they live around here?

GRAY: I have one that lives in Mount Shasta, one in Sacramento, one just moving to Golden, Colorado, and my daughter lives on the east coast in Virginia.

LUZIER: Well, that's interesting. What made you start working with the Forest Service?

GRAY: Well, I came to the Forest Service in 1942 because I was working in Louisiana and I just saw an ad in the Louisiana State University school paper that they wanted summer employees in the Forest Service, and I thought that sounds like a nice venture. So I hitch-hiked to California and wound up in Mount Shasta, and I was supposed to report to the forest supervisor, but about the time I was going in the door, a man came out the front door and said, "Where are you going, young man?"

I said, "I'm here to report to Mr. Davis about a job."

His question: "Well, can you play softball?"

I said, "Yes."

"Can you pitch?"

I said, "A little bit."

"You're supposed to come with me." So I went to the McCloud district of the Shasta National Forest.

LUZIER: Oh, that's great. So what did you do there?

GRAY: I worked one season as a lookout, and then in 1945 I became a full-time employee with the Forest Service in McCloud, as fire crew foreman and district dispatcher. Later I worked in Mount Shasta with Merv Adams and Ralph Bangsberg as the North Zone dispatcher and the assistant dispatcher on the Shasta Forest.

LUZIER: So you worked with some real interesting people.

GRAY: Oh, very, very. Wonderful people.

LUZIER: And where did you work?

GRAY: I worked in the supervisor's office in the dispatcher's office with Merv Adams and Ralph Bangsberg. And at that time, the Mount Shasta dispatcher's office was also the north California zone dispatching office.

LUZIER: So did you do seasonal work at the nurseries too?

GRAY: Yes, after the fire season I continued work at the nursery with Carl Lanquist and also with Doug Leisz, who started his career with the Forest Service about that same time. At that time, the dispatcher job that I had was not yearlong, so I worked at the nursery on occasion during the years at the dispatcher's office at Mount Shasta.

LUZIER: Is that a duck outside?

GRAY: No, that is a parakeet in the kitchen. [Laughs.]

LUZIER: Oh [laughs.] The transcriber's going to get all that. You just worked with all these interesting people. You moved to Mount Shasta again as a fire management officer in 1950.

GRAY: Yeah, 1950 is when I moved to Mount Shasta as the assistant dispatcher to Merv Adams, and I worked there for a couple of years and I met lots of interesting people who really influenced my future in the Forest Service at the time. And from there I moved to Fall River Mills, with my first job as a fire control officer, and that was in 1954 and '55, at which time they combined the Shasta and Trinity National Forests, and I was asked to move to Weaverville by Paul Stathem, who was the supervisor at that time, and I lived in Weaverville from 1956 to 1960 as a district fire control officer, and my boss at that time was Horace Jones, the district ranger in Weaverville.

LUZIER: And then, let's see. You moved again to Mount Shasta?

GRAY: Yes, after four years in Weaverville I came back to Mount Shasta as the fire control officer — they changed the title to the fire management officer at that time, and I completed my career on the Mount Shasta ranger district over a period of eighteen years, until I retired at the end of 1976.

LUZIER: Do you know why they, do you have any idea why they combined the Shasta and Trinity? Do you remember the talk about that?

GRAY: Oh, yes, I remember the talk very well. It was supposed to be a consolidation of forests so they could economize on the cost of administering two forests. In other words, they would only have one supervisor for two forests, one fire management officer for two forests. But the first thing I noticed, instead of just having these people, they had several deputy supervisors and assistant fire management officers, and I'm not sure that the economics really were carried out.

LUZIER: So there were so many people you worked with. Can you name some of the people you worked with?

GRAY: I probably could give an unending list, but some that really come to mind, mainly, are Dutch Sullaway, who was my first ranger, Cactus Bryceson, who was a rough-and-tumble fire control officer in McCloud, from both of whom I learned very much about fire control. I had other people like Paul Friday, Bob McBride, and literally dozens of other people that I worked with over the years, all of whom contributed to my fun life of living with the Forest Service. They were great people. They knew their jobs well, and I had the pleasure of working with them in various capacities through my whole career, which spanned about 35 years with the Forest Service. I could go through a list of people.

LUZIER: Why don't you go through the list of a few of them, just so that people will, it will trigger their minds when they get to read the book, if we ever have a book out of it. Because I know that when people hear those names, it'll trigger their ears.

GRAY: Well, I know Ray Huber quite well, Norm Farrell, who was later the supervisor of the Shasta Forest, and Paul Stathem, who was my favorite supervisor, I believe. He was very generous with me, assuring me back when I had a control burn escape, and he said no one could have prevented it, and I appreciated that very much. I mentioned Merv Adams and Ralph Bangsberg, who meant a lot to me, and I have other people that I was acquainted with from my early years with the Forest Service, like Bob Marshall, Tom Blankenship, John Watt, Horace Jones, and Lee Belau.

LUZIER: What did Merv Adams do – what was his position when you came in?

GRAY: Merv was the zone dispatcher, and I was his assistant zone dispatcher. There were only two of us that ever worked. When we got in a bind we called across the street to one of the clerks to come help us — usually, Graycie Cox or one of the ladies that worked across the street. So we got along with pretty much a skeleton crew.

LUZIER: Bob Marshall, what was his position?

GRAY: Bob, I think at the time he had been in fire control, but he was assistant radio technician at the time, and he later became construction and maintenance foreman at Mount Shasta, so I've been acquainted – he's still around, by the way. And I got acquainted with Bud Pettigrew, Harley Ripley, Joe Noble, Jack Heinan, Ed Heilman . Just many, many people that are really wonderful people, and I have good memories of them.

LUZIER: Ed Heilman was the fire control officer.

GRAY: Ed Heilman was the, started on the Shasta as the fire control officer, or fire control assistant, at Trinity Center, and later finally became the fire management officer of the Shasta National Forest. He was a real excellent man. Everybody loved Ed and he's still a good friend of mine. There were other people like Jack Godden, Myron Nelson, Dave Johnson, Gil Davies, Frank Fry, and another one I'll always remember well is Bob McBride, who I worked for a short time in McCloud. He took over as district ranger after Dutch Sullaway died. Another close friend, Tom Adams, Douglas Leisz, who I mentioned before, Hal DeSosa, Russ Kahre, Sal Barr, Dick Berrien, Joe Cleves, many others. It's almost a never-ending list.

LUZIER: Yeah. Well, you sure can remember their names. That's wonderful. Now, I know they didn't have helicopters and air tankers for a long time when they fought fire. How did they fight fires to begin with?

GRAY: Okay, well here's kind of the way it was prior to the days of air tankers, helicopters and smoke jumpers. First, lots of hard work, using hand tools, using fire as a tool, using bulldozers, turning dirt over, throwing dirt with shovels, using water out of streams and hose lays, piling up burning material to make it burn up quicker, removing unburned fuel, building fire lines. It was just tough, hard work, and it really was a demanding job, but I will say that in those days we were quite successful, mainly because of quick detection because of lookouts, and very aggressive

initial action by the fire crews and anybody else who happened to be available in the office to dispatch to fires. They were all fireman when the fire whistle blew.

LUZIER: Now what about smoke jumping? Did you ever do that?

GRAY: I never did smoke jump. I tried to talk them into letting me make a jump for practice one time, and they asked me how old I was and I told them I was 50 and they said, "No way." So I never was a smoke jumper but I had many friends in the smoke jumping program, and our greatest delight was to try to get our ground crew to a fire before the jumpers ever got there. And we did on lots of occasions. It was a sense of accomplishment to have somebody there before the jumpers could get there. And the jumpers are very good, highly trained fireman, and they're still going strong. I have the deepest respect for the people in the jumping program.

LUZIER: Now, you've written a book called *Forest Fires and Wild Things* that was printed in 1985 by Naturegraph Publishers, Incorporated, Happy Camp, California, 96039. Would you tell us a bit about your book and how you came to write it?

GRAY: Well, I enjoyed my career with the Forest Service very much, and it happened that during the early years of my career, we kept very detailed diaries. And after retirement I told my wife there were a few things I want to do. I want to build a house and I want to write a book and a few other things, so I did write this book and I garnered all my stories from the notebooks and the diaries that I had made back in the '40s and '50s and '60s, and therefore was able to confirm dates, people, places and eventually leading up to different stories in the book. And one thing, during my first 25 years with the Forest Service, I was involved in all phases of forestry and forest management, before the Forest Service became more specialized with their people. I participated in timber sales, line running, tree marking, fuel management, and all kinds of related timber activities, including reforestation, converting brush fields into timber lands and then the actual planting. I also worked in engineering, building roads and buildings and maintenance of these

structures, particularly at the Mount Shasta nursery site. Among my other things, I learned to operate some fairly heavy and light equipment, bulldozers, graders and items like that, particularly during the construction of the Mount Shasta nursery. At the nursery, it was quite a project of planting seeds, preparing sites to plant the seeds, building sprinkler systems, and all that went with the nursery work. It was hard, backbreaking work, but very rewarding in the long run. I also mentioned that I was a dispatcher at one time before I got back into the field as a fire control officer. One of my favorite jobs during the off-season in the McCloud and Mount Shasta districts, I was in charge of snow surveys, and for about eighteen to 20 years, I took snow surveys during the winter months, and I enjoyed it very much. It was kind of a getaway from some of the other less fun-filled jobs. I also at Weaverville became a packer, never a real good one, but I had a lot of experience with mules and horses in Weaverville, because we had the wilderness area to pack some trail crews in. A couple of lookouts needed to be packed to jobs once a month or so, so I got very well acquainted with the mule situation while in Weaverville.

LUZIER: Did you ever put any of them in at Goldfield Campground?

GRAY: No, I don't think I ever was at that place.

LUZIER: You know, I got to help my dad build that little place for the mules.

GRAY: Is that right? Is that at the end of Coffee Creek?

LUZIER: No, it's down at Gold Fields Campground. That's where they kept the mules and we used to go and feed the mules. But I actually cut and peeled and helped put the poles up for that. They're still there.

GRAY: The corral poles?

LUZIER: Yeah. And that was back in '46, '47. Let's see. Did you have to move a lot?

GRAY: Well, I spent my whole career on the Shasta or the Shasta-Trinity National Forest, so actually I only lived in McCloud, Mount Shasta, Fall River Mills, Weaverville, and on occasion

I'd be assigned to Redding for a short time. So unlike most people in the Forest Service, my roots were pretty much on the Shasta or Shasta-Trinity area, but I did work all over. I think I've been on fires in every forest in California and quite a few in Oregon and Washington.

LUZIER: Did you have to move your family when you went to Redding?

GRAY: I worked in Redding prior to being married, and all the rest of the time we moved or were moved by the Forest Service. Sometimes it amounted to them saying, see that stake-side truck over there? Why don't you take that and move yourself to Fall River Mills, which we did on occasion.

LUZIER: That's how they did it then.

GRAY: That's the way it was done in the '40s and '50s.

LUZIER: Just piled in the back of the truck. Let's see. Are there any other people that you'd like to tell us about that you used to work with that might not be with us now?

GRAY: Yeah…I have quite a few old-timer friends and coworkers that are gone that I did have the pleasure of working with. I mentioned Dutch Sullaway my first ranger, and Andy Anderson, who was killed on the Inaja Fire in the late '50s. Another friend, Sam Ready, was killed in a helicopter crash. And I knew people like Henry Earhart, who was an old fire control assistant (FCA) on the Mount Shasta, or as they called it, the Sacramento district, and he later became the regional investigator, and Merv Adams, who was a dispatcher and investigator for the Forest Service. So I had quite a few people that I remember very well. Most of them have passed away. There was Ralph Bansberg; he was a fire control officer. My friend and coworker, Horace Jones in Weaverville, who was a wonderful man, and he was probably one of my favorite rangers. But I had other good rangers like Fred Alberico, who is passed away. An old equipment operator in Fall River Mills was Ned McGrew and a friend, Ray Trygar in the supervisor's office. So then the local men that worked immediately with me in Mount Shasta, like Bob Benkosky and Bob Pratt,

were coworkers of mine. But all of these people I have very fond memories of and they are long-ago deceased, but I remember them well.

LUZIER: And so you've just been around in the country and in the forest a lot. Is there a tie to the land for you?

GRAY: Oh, very definitely so. In fact, I've been retired almost 25 years now, and I still am very close to the land, close to the Forest Service, and keep pretty close track of what's going on. I love the country, and the forests where I work and live, and am very concerned about the current management of the forest resources.

LUZIER: Do you feel that current technology and communication has affected the way your job would be done now?

GRAY: There's no doubt about that. Definite changes because of technological changes. Unfortunately I'm not really sure that all of the changes are for the better. I know things do change, but sometimes the wheel just makes a circle and you're back where you were thirty years ago.

LUZIER: What are you most proud of in relation to your Forest Service life?

GRAY: Well, I think the fact that I really did my best to do my job effectively, and at the same time have good working relations with coworkers and people on the outside of the Forest Service that I dealt with during my years in the Forest Service.

LUZIER: Have you written any other stories about your life in the Forest Service?

GRAY: Well, in addition to the book that you've mentioned, I have written a few stories and a few editorial-type comments to newspapers and to the Forest Service, plus a few short stories appearing in books that Gil Davies has written. Gil is another retired Forest Service man whom I'm sure many of you know. But I haven't written any other books other than the *Forest Fires and*

Wild Things, and when people ask me why, I just say, "Well, everything I know is in that 250 pages."

LUZIER: [Laughs.] Do you have any other thoughts or stories that you want to share? About how the Forest Service could manage the forests?

GRAY: Well, I just wish that the foresters could do their job without as much interference from the more radical-type groups that think they know more about managing forests than the trained foresters do.

LUZIER: Probably so. Do you have a resume? You've really given me a lot, though. We don't really need that.

GRAY: I don't really have a resume. Make up one if you would like.

LUZIER: [Laughs.] Do you have any photographs or documents that you'd like to share?

GRAY: Well, I don't know whether you'd want them or not. I have pictures that I've taken over the years scattered here and around, and it might take a while to round them up, but I have some rather interesting pictures of groups of people and classes that I've attended with really some rather old timers. Some of them from back in the '50s and '60s might bring back memories of people.

LUZIER: What about old movies? Do you have any old movies? They're looking for those too, Bob.

GRAY: Movies?

LUZIER: Yeah, you know, they used to have those old-time movies that you can put on the screen.

GRAY: Oh, yeah. I remember in my early years as a fire control officer I used to show Forest Service to schools all around with primarily the fire prevention theme, things like that. And I remember lots of the old Forest Service movies, but I don't really have any of them myself.

LUZIER: Well, maybe if you hear of any, you might let us know, because they are interested in those.

GRAY: One that I recall was called "Rainbow Valley." And one of my good friends, Vaughn Gofeldt, who lives in Redding was the star of this movie, and he's still in Redding. I was talking to him about that movie a few months ago, and he got a big kick out of talking about it. It was a very interesting, very beautiful movie about working with the Forest Service, probably in the early '50s.

LUZIER: And then they're looking for home movies, too.

GRAY: I don't have any of those.

LUZIER: If you know of anybody who has those . . . and if you had it to do all over, would you change things that you had done?

GRAY: I don't really think very much. I'd probably think – hindsight is better than foresight, and it might be that I would have done things a little bit different because I learned the hard way when I made a mistake or two. And I have made a few mistakes in my career.

LUZIER: It looks like you were pretty willing to admit when you did, though.

GRAY: Well, if you have a fire running loose, it's hard to deny it. An escaped controlled burn.

LUZIER: You didn't have too many of those, and they probably weren't your fault. So do you think things have changed very much?

GRAY: Well, I would say in my early years with the Forest Service, it was a very non-political organization and it was kind of a step-child of the Department of Agriculture. Since then I think it has become more and more political and far more technical in the way things are done than in the olden days when you did things on the spur of the moment and brute strength and awkwardness.

LUZIER: What kind of strings?

GRAY: Brute strength and awkwardness.

LUZIER: I have never heard that word.

GRAY: You haven't?

LUZIER: No. B-R-UT-E? And then strength, S-T-R-E-N-G-T-H?

GRAY: Yes.

LUZIER: I'll be darned. That's a new word for me.

GRAY: Oh, I thought everybody had heard of brute strength and awkwardness.

LUZIER: Oh, just so the transcriber knows what it is. [Laughs.] Deleted brackets around transcriber.

GRAY: [Laughs.]

LUZIER: Oh, that's a good one. I understand that you had certain ideas about the role of women in firefighting. Could you explain that?

GRAY: Well, I don't think I'll explain it, but I'll confess I've not accepted women in wild land firefighting service very gracefully.

LUZIER: There's probably a reason. I mean…

GRAY: I'd rather not go into that.

LUZIER: But you know, you kind of explained that a little bit to me earlier, about how – you might want to explain it that way. I thought that was very interesting, you know, having three boys and a girl.

GRAY: OK, well, since you've dug this out of me.

LUZIER: You don't have to feel you need to but I thought that was a very good example.

GRAY: My wife and I have discussed ladies as firemen, and I said, you know, Betty, I have three very athletic sons and really a very athletic daughter, but you know, if I wanted someone by my side fighting a fire, I'd pick one of my sons, probably over my wife and daughter together.

LUZIER: [Laughs.] I thought that it was cute, Bob. Did you feel a sense of accomplishment in your work with the Forest Service, and can you elaborate on that?

GRAY: Well, I would feel that I've accomplished most of the things that I wanted to do in the Forest Service as an individual, and I feel that everyone in the Forest Service really strove to do the best they can. I sometimes feel that we as a group, 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 years ago, had more freedom to do things pretty much as we saw fit as they do now. In other words, our hands were not tied in decision-making, as they seem to be in the current situation.

LUZIER: I think you've done a really good job responding to the questions, Bob.

GRAY: Well, thank you very much.

LUZIER: And I thank you very much, and I'm sure that the forest thanks you too.

GRAY: I appreciate you inviting me to participate.

LUZIER: Thank you very much.

[End .wav file II. Begin .wav file III.]

LUZIER: Bob, I understand there are some more articles, more stories that you have written. Can you elaborate on that?

GRAY: Yeah, I had forgotten about *The New Pioneer*, 1997 edition, is a publication of the Historical Society of Siskiyou County, and my wife and a friend of mine, Dennis Berryman and I were the coeditors of this Siskiyou Pioneer for that year, and I have several stories in that book regarding the U.S. Forest Service, particularly the McCloud Ranger District, some 50 years ago. And I go into some details about the activities on the district and how it was more of a custodial type district at that time, and probably the main activities were in fire suppression, although we did have a few small timber sales during those years up in the late '40s and early '50s. And then also I have some stories in this about the Mount Shasta nursery in a more detailed way of telling what went on at the nursery as far as seed collecting, seed sowing, harvesting the seedlings and

shipping them out to different forests for planting in the springtime. And I think maybe this would be of interest to people. Also, back about several years ago, four years ago to be exact, three years ago, I wrote a letter to the chief of the Forest Service in Washington, D.C. Kind of expressing what happened in the last 50 years with the Forest Service, which we were blamed for the conditions of the forests at this time for being too efficient in putting out fires. Well, I don't entirely agree with that concept, so I have a letter in the FSX newsletter of May 1903.

LUZIER: 2003, probably.

GRAY: And it gives my biased opinion – yeah, that was 2003 – and it had my opinion as to why the fires nowadays, a bigger percentage of them are getting to be major catastrophic fires. So I think that might be of interest to some people.

LUZIER: Okay. And Betty found another article in *Wildfire*, the October/November issue of 2000, where you did observations and suggestions.

GRAY: Oh, yeah. This is another publication that I sent a letter to the editor and they said it was too long so they would make an editorial out of it, and it was observations and suggestions regarding large fires, and it was written by me. I have a couple of page spread in it, and it quoted me very accurately and presented my observations.

LUZIER: What are some of your observations?

GRAY: Well, some of my observations, let's see. Since the mid-'70s, the percentage of large fires has double or triple based on number of starts. And I also have some more observations about air tankers and helicopter drops. We should use them aggressively in early stages of a fire at the head and on the hot flanks of the fires. Use it where they're intended to be used, to give those on the hand crews a safer and easier place to work, because I feel that our air tankers are being used indiscriminately and they get more satisfactory telling how many gallons they drop on a fire than how many feet of fire line they control with the drops. So just a few things like that, and also it

seems like bulldozers are not being used effectively anymore, mainly because they cause erosion and destroy the forest. Well, those erosion spots and destruction to the forest can be remedied after the fires over, so we should be using the bulldozers more than we do.

LUZIER: Now is there any of those little short stories that you'd like to read that were in that book, Bob? You know, that you thought might be really effective to read.

GRAY: Oh, in *The New Pioneer*? Let me see if I can find that. Well, there's an interesting story about the McCloud Ranger Station and compound living, which I am very familiar with in the late '40s and early '50s.

LUZIER: Maybe that would be interesting to read that.

GRAY: Okay, I'll read this short story. "Compound Living at the McCloud Ranger Station." Three houses, an office, a barracks and two warehouses comprise the McCloud Ranger Station Station in the late '30s, '40s and early '50s. During these years, the district ranger, fire control assistant and district dispatcher were required to live on the compound, and during fire season sometimes had to be home 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Fortunately, all of us got along very well as families and friends as well as coworkers. The office was a small building with a front porch, a vestibule that you entered, and two rooms that served as the ranger's office and the dispatcher office, which also served as the fire control assistant's office. It sat close to where the present large office is located. Later it was relocated at the back of the compound, and not until the late '50s and '60s that the need for more office space began. After Dutch Sullaway retired in about 1952, the district began to change from a custodial district to one of great lumber production, recreation-type conversion projects. The demand for Forest Service timber grew to the point that the McCloud district became one of the most important timber producers in California. The next two decades saw new office buildings, residences made into offices and an influx of foresters,

engineers, soil scientists, archeologists, geologists, and other specialists with activities going in all directions. And so ended an era in the history of the McCloud Ranger District."

LUZIER: That's very interesting. Well, thank you. Well, I'm glad that people will know about this book, too. And I know it's out of print, and I know you're trying to get it back in print. Maybe people could pick it up at the library. Siskiyou County Historical Society Museum. Thank you very much, Bob. I've really enjoyed it.

GRAY: Glad you thought of that little addendum.

[End of interview.]