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

Interview with: **Donald ("Don") Smith**
Interviewed by: **Richard ("Dick") Pomeroy**
Location: **at Mr. Smith's home**
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[Begin CD Track 1.]

RICHARD POMEROY: This is Dick Pomeroy speaking, P-o-m-e-r-o-y, and I'm at the house of Don Smith, spelled S-m-i-t-h. Don's got an opening statement to proceed with. Don?

DONALD SMITH: Well, you did well, Dick. I'm proud of you. I did want to reflect a little bit on my thinking so that it would help you understand some of the answers to my questions [sic; some of my answers to the questions]. I spent thirty-seven wonderful career years in the Forest Service, although four of which [sic; them] were in the regular Navy during the Korean conflict. There's not a day that I wouldn't want to relive. About half my time was in management. I was a district ranger for six years and fourteen as supervisor on three forests. Several of us were in that category, [Richard] "Dick" [Filf?], myself and [Joseph] "Joe" [Harn?], and we called each other "the beached whales" because they didn't know what else to do with us. So I started as the only green thing on the Cleveland National Forest and ended up in Region Six on the Wenatchee [National Forest] as a senior forest supervisor in Region Six.

So with that introduction, knowing that I had a wonderful career, I'm pretty much the eternal optimist, so go ahead, Dick.

POMEROY: Yes. One of the things we'd like to hear something about is how have things changed during at least the last ten or twenty years of your career, particularly as it might relate to California but not necessarily exclusively?

SMITH: Well, I think early in our careers, the organization was primarily foresters with maybe just a few engineers, and so we did everything, but as time passed, we began to add specialists because in order to meet our own demands of the Service as well as the public, we had to deal more with environmental issues and concerns, and later on activism, so we began to add specialists to our organization, to the mix.

POMEROY: What problems did you have in melding together those specialists with your foresters, who had their own reputation? [unintelligible] anything?

SMITH: I don't know if I really had any problems with that. It was my job as a manager to work those things out. I was blessed having a good cadre of staff and specialists, so I don't know if I had any real problems working that out.

POMEROY: Any problems with finding some women to add to that interdisciplinary moves, and minorities? It seems to me we didn't have any minorities in the field of forestry [unintelligible] the other disciplines.

SMITH: Well, yes, it was hard to start out with, primarily because in the forestry schools there weren't very many women graduate foresters or minorities, and so it limited the pool of [sic; delete "of"] which we could solicit from. When I was ranger—happened to be on the Mt. Hood [National Forest, Oregon]—I did hire the first woman forester that worked full time as a junior forester. Her name was Annie [Heisler?], and she had a nice career. Ended up in I&E [Information and Education]. I had no problem with the women over time, the women that I worked with. Minorities were in the same situation, and as we began to get graduates—and I'm

talking about the professional series now in those things—they came to our outfit and worked out. It was just a matter of getting a pool created that we could select from.

POMEROY: Okay. Did you, when in Region Five and/or Region Six—were you involved at all in organizational development work?

SMITH: On the Cleveland, I worked on several taskforces that might relate to that. One was an academy study, and that dealt somewhat with organization, a forest consolidation study, but I don't know if I worked particularly on an OD type of task there.

[Extensive feedback noise, then a short interruption as a woman enters.]

POMEROY: Sorry for that interruption. It was too mikes, too close and not knowing exactly what to do about it. We were talking about organizational development, and I'd like to go on to fire. You've got quite a fire background, as I know it, Don. How has the fire business changed, in your view? In the area of specialty. It's the [largest specialty?] now in fire management, when it used to be we just kind of fought fire.

SMITH: Well, there are several things to talk about that. I guess the first one, which is when I was in the chief's office in fire management, I was there when Director [Merle Lauden?] changed the name of fire control to fire management, which he intended to be a significant change that we would manage things rather than control, i.e., the old CC [sic; CCC, Civilian Conservation Corps] and that kind of thing. There were things to manage, fires, and that was a significant change that was made. Merle was serious about that. So from there on, that sort of changed the direction with fire management people.

The next thing that occurred while I was still working was the change from fire boss and that jargon to incident commander and that organization. [Transcriber's note: He refers to the changes that accompanied FIRESCOPE (**FI**refighting **RES**ources of **C**alifornia **O**rganized for

Potential **E**mergencies).] That was really another significant breakthrough, probably following Merle's idea there, where instead of just working as an entity or other groups that worked as an entity, the idea of the incident commander or the incident situation was to weld various firefighting, fire management groups together, where it was as simple a thing as making sure we all had the same kind of hose to couple and used the same radio frequencies. It sounds rather basic, but that didn't really exist before, and the incident commander situation [sic; incident command system] set that up, which in the long run or as time passed, there were a number of Forest Service and other incident command groups that were sent to [the Gulf Coast following Hurricane] Katrina, during that disaster, which was not really a forest fire at all.

So that was a significant change, and a very positive one, and it led us to do some things on the Cleveland Forest. For example, we had a fire cache, and CDF [California Division of Forestry] had a fire cache, and we decided that we only needed one, and not as much as the two together, and that was the kind of thing that the incident command did. We also mixed in, in what we called our overhead, that it didn't matter whether you had a Forest Service uniform or a CDF or a City of Los Angeles or whatever, it was what you were qualified to do and worked as part of a team. So that was another—that was significant.

And I guess the third thing that occurred was the beginning of the strategy that in certain places fire could be burn as a tool and we didn't have to stomp every one of them out as soon as it started. The Forest Service used this strategy in wilderness areas, where fire was allowed to burn and grow until it reached a point where it could get completely out of hand. And at the same time, these suppression strategies in those types of areas, the wilderness, we had to [soft hand?], where we had to get, for instance, chief's approval to use tractors and regional forester

approval to use power saws and that kind of thing, which I think worked well with the wilderness environment.

So that's [sic; those are] some of the things that I detected. When I was not in a line capacity or while I was in a line capacity, fire was my backup, and I served as fire boss, line boss, taught fire management topics at [the National Fire Training Center in] Marana [Arizona] and enjoyed working on the Cleveland and the Wenatchee, which were both classified as high-incident fire forests.

POMEROY: You're known pretty much, when you were working particularly [unintelligible], as a person who worked very well with people and get them to do things. [unintelligible] very desirable [unintelligible] your standpoint. What worked for you? How did you go about doing that and working with people and minorities and interdisciplinary groups and [unintelligible]?

SMITH: I'll give you a simple answer. It was [unintelligible] mode, management by walking around. The hierarchy was always looked to either with great respect or great fear, and when management got down with the folks, they appreciated—I'll give you a couple of examples. When I was on the Cleveland Forest, I went out with the forest engineer and had lunch with the road crew. That never happened before to them, and they were taken back [sic; aback] and said, "Hey, this is wonderful." Well,—

POMEROY: You were the forest supervisor.

SMITH: I was the forest supervisor. The road crew was also some of the key people in our service organization, so that was great.

I had a public works crew when I was ranger, city kids that came out to work—I said as I was a ranger. I went out with them on the job, and I drank from the same canteen that they did,

and, you know, they said, "Well, he isn't all that bad. I hope he doesn't have whooping cough" or something like this. [Chuckles.]

But the other thing I did, as it proved to be valuable in my management style—the last forest I was on, the Wenatchee, I did away with the forest secretary. The forest secretary [at] most places that I had been sort of protected the forest supervisor from anybody, the public, the people, the stuff. So I did away with the position and had the forest receptionist take care of my phone calls. Well, it was really a smart deal on my part because she knew more about what was going on in the forest and could answer questions than maybe if the call had come to me. All my typing and stuff went to the resource section, and I would either go down and get it or they would bring it to me. Now, before, the secretary did that so there was that buffer. So those folks said, "Hey, this is great. We're working together, and you kind of appreciate what we're doing."

Well, those are some examples. I'm not trying to blow my horn, but management by walking around really worked. You'd get out to a ranger district and visit projects with the crews and things; they really felt like what they were doing is [sic; was] important. So management by walking around is a pretty good tip.

POMEROY: Where do you think that may not be working so much in today's Forest Service, the most recent past? I know people that have said they've never even seen the forest supervisor, [unintelligible].

SMITH: That's contrary to my management style, so I say it's a detriment. I don't care how busy you are, you can't neglect what's important to get the job done, and the people get the job done. I mean, I didn't get anything done, but they did. And I think there's [sic; there are] so many diversions now, political and organizational, that management people can justify their presence in the office all the time, but at the same time, they take vacations and things keep

going, so I think the contact with the troops on the ground—of course, that goes back to the philosophy of the Forest Service when I worked, is [sic; which was that] the ranger district is the key organization in the Forest Service, and all other units, including the chief, regional office, forest supervisors are all there to support the district and help them get it done. And I think there were a number of studies that proved that out, that the Forest Service had a marvelous record of decision making made at the ground level, and things worked out. I mean, you probably are aware of some of these write-ups that we had. They were very good. That wouldn't hold water today.

POMEROY: And why?

SMITH: Because they've lost sight of maybe the mission of the outfit or the value of the people or getting all tangled up in this political, environmental web. It's just different today. And I say that with a really lack of experience, because I don't get back there very often. We used to have, after I retired—in fact, I started it when I did retire, is a brown-bagger's lunch for retirees. That existed for a number of years, and it quit, and so the retirees today are not kept up to date on things, and maybe sour grapes, but really don't care anymore about what's going on. That's sour grapes, and I shouldn't say that, but it's part of the truth.

POMEROY: So the Forest Service has changed, and maybe not to the better.

SMITH: I believe that, yes.

POMEROY: What kind of training—you know, you got to a lot of steps; you've done a lot of different things [unintelligible]. What kind of training and from whom? Where does that stand out in your mind [unintelligible]?

SMITH: Well, I graduated from Oregon State [University] with a bachelor of forest management, and looking back on it, I was a highly trained technician in forestry. And I say that

because we didn't get much of the liberal arts as other schools like [University of California at] Berkeley or Syracuse [University] or other people that I talked to [sic; ...we didn't get as much of the liberal arts as students did in other schools like [University of California at] Berkeley or Syracuse [University], as I learned from other people that I talked to. ??] One of the immediate results of that, [sic; that was that] after several years the region started putting on courses of public speaking. They sent us to public speaking courses or speech courses in order to help us communicate better. So that was one thing.

I was blessed to get in on fire workshops and things and ended up being an instructor in that kind of stuff, so in fire I had plenty of training. I went through courses at Marana, and in my assignment in the chief's office was working with [Edward? Edwin?] [Heilman?] at the Marana headquarters in Arizona on fire subjects, and I either taught or helped him, whatever, there. That was a technical [Part D?].

Region Six had what they called—if I can—it's—we took a month off of our regular duties—intensive semester that [Charles] "Chuck" [DeRitter?] put on. The objective of that was to just broaden our minds to what was going on in the world beside [sic; besides] what was going on at forestry. It was really an eye opener. We went to old folks' homes, for example, that were going to be shut down because the halls were six inches too narrow, and all kinds of things. We went up to Prudhoe Bay and Valdez [Alaska] and looked through both ends of the pipeline and got a picture of what was going—and so that was a real mind-broadening thing.

I had been to the chief's office, so I didn't need to go to the Washington area to see how the chief's office worked, but my assignment there for two years in fire management in the chief's office actually gave me—it was as much training as anything, to see how the outfit worked at the center, the heart of things.

I don't know, there were other sessions I worked on. I was also given assignments to do a chore, as I mentioned, for example, the fire academy study in California, but those assignments were also learning assignments on how to figure out what the objective was and then work with people to reach a conclusion of what to do.

I took over from [Daniel] "Dan" Abraham a technical training project, where we were short of technicians in fire and engineering, timber fire and engineering in Region Six, and we went to a bunch of junior colleges and have them set up basic engineering timber management sessions to train technicians that we needed badly to go right into our workforce. And that was an interesting assignment.

I guess I was a ranger on the Columbia Gorge [Ranger District of the Mt. Hood National Forest], and so I was the closest ranger to the regional office, and that's why I got tapped for a lot of things, [unintelligible].

So I had a lot of experiences in the Forest Service, in not only training but assignments that helped me develop ideas and things.

POMEROY: One area that's related to fire management is law enforcement. Did you get involved in the beginning of the law enforcement?

SMITH: Yes, yes, I did.

POMEROY: [unintelligible]. What kind of problems did you see, or what good came out of it that you'd like to share with us?

SMITH: It's an interesting question, because while I was working at Marana, this law enforcement situation came up. There were two sides. One side was the administrators, the managers, who said this is something we can handle, and the other side was the law enforcement, the strong arm people that, you know, we got to work kind of like policemen, and this was the

administrators versus the law guys. And, in fact, we had a session at Marana that dealt with this. Well, the end result was that the law enforcement program won out, and as a result, the forest began to get one, and then several law enforcement officers on the forests. As I mentioned—I think I mentioned that, as things happened, as a manager I had to accept them and then make them work.

And there were then two kinds of law enforcement officers that developed. The ones that I liked and worked with and was blessed with was the one [sic; were the ones] that had a soft hand on the law. In other words, they didn't go out with what we call black leathered, strapped pistols and clubs and all that stuff and just sit on somebody; they went out and worked it over [sic; worked it out]. And we had some tough issues: marijuana, motorcyclists and all that kind of stuff that went on.

Some of the LEOs, we called them, law enforcement officers, had a different idea how they should operate, and they just overreacted in kind of a police style and ran over things, and so—I don't know how that finally got worked out. I was blessed on the three forests to have a soft hand of the law enforcement officer. While on the road, the head enforcement officer was on the Siskiyou, but he helped us a lot, and those guys were just marvelous, the way they gave us advice and handled things, like a motorcycle group wanting to come on the forest to have an activity or camp over a weekend. Well, you know, they are entitled to that kind of use as much as anybody if they behave themselves, so the soft hand of the law would say, "Hey, we'll work with you. Take care, and it's what we expect of you," and it worked out.

The other time, we'd get neighbors coming in, other LEOs coming in, [who would] put on their black leathered pistols and all that and stand around with their arms folded and, "Make a

mistake, guys, and you're outta here." And that wasn't our objective as the Forest Service. So that was an interesting thing that happened. It worked different ways around the region.

POMEROY: Let's turn to the environmental arena for a little while. Do you remember a protest group [unintelligible] block roads and picket the regional offices [unintelligible]? Were you ever involved in—not in picketing [unintelligible], but did the office ever get picketed, or do you have [unintelligible] in terms of how to respond to this kind of public concern with management of the Forest Service?

SMITH: Well, yes, I was involved in that. In fact, I was surprised that there weren't some really serious outbreaks between, say, loggers and environmentalists, that somebody didn't really get hurt. I have been out on the ground with my law enforcement guy where the people were protesting a timber sale and laying [sic; lying] on an entry road to a timber sale, laying [sic; lying] on the road with the Ellensburg loggers. They were a bunch of really tough rednecks, revving up the Cat [Caterpillar] to go on through. So that's how some of those situations arose, and they worked out.

The other thing that was going on that relates to this: On all three forests, in my fourteen years, the number one job was to complete the forest plan. It had different names, but it was the forest plan. In my last year on the Wenatchee, I finally published a forest draft, and I did it without the sanction of the regional office because I knew it had to be done and [sic; in order to] get out of the endless review. The reason that we didn't get many out was we were continually having those things either appealed or revised, and our own outfit was part of the problem by trying to dot every "i" and cross every "t." Part of it was really to hesitate of [sic; wonder about?] really what the environmental community would do to our plans.

And so that was discouraging, and it began to get worse and worse as time passed, to the point where it is today. Essentially timber management in the western regions are [sic; is] shut down. Not much is coming out. The irony that I don't think is getting explained is that 25 percent of the receipts from timber sales or any receipts we take in goes back to the county in which it was harvested and goes for roads and schools. When you're selling 200 million board feet or 300 million board feet on a forest, and the value is around three hundred dollars a thousand, we were pumping, twenty, thirty million back into Jackson County, for example. And right now they're screaming for money for road and schools, and they're not harvesting a thing. So that's one effect of the environmental thing.

The other and maybe it doesn't mean as much, but I was trained as a professional to manage timber, in a professional manner, in our Douglas fir, because the seedlings are intolerant to shade. The experts in the research and all that said the best way is to have small clear-cuts so that the seedlings can come in in light and grow, as opposed to being planted in a shelter-wood situation, where there's shade. They just won't grow. So if you want to really manage for Douglas fir, which is a prime lumber producer, why, you're going to do it in that manner. So that was another effect of the environmental community, because clear-cuts on the west side didn't look good, and it took a while for them to come back. The people don't realize that the [Tillemont Burn?] was once a huge burn area, and when I was a kid in Portland, in grade school, we collected pennies to plant that thing, and now they think it's a wilderness again, some people.

And tied with this is the community support that we had for the Forest Service, which, when we backed away from doing a complete management job, we lost a lot of community support, because the communities dried up. They had to find some other way to exist or go.

I kind of went around in a circle there, but that environmental issue is really important.

POMEROY: And dynamic.

SMITH: And dynamic. And some organizations did understand, and we could work with them, and others—there's absolutely no way that they would ever yield to any kind of action except their own selfish [unintelligible].

POMEROY: Did you have any connection, particularly in Region Five, with the Job Corps program? Did that serve as a good place for training and development of Forest Service personnel?

SMITH: I didn't have an experience with them in Region Five, but I did in Region Six, on the Mt. Hood. We provided jobs for them, particularly trail jobs that involved campouts for the young people. They did good work. It was a good program. Some people came out of it and worked for us or went into other professions, but it worked for me.

POMEROY: Did any Forest Service personnel that you know of get detailed there to help in the early days?

SMITH: Um—

POMEROY: Because I know some of the Job Corps centers in '65 and '66, when they were just opening up, had a real dearth of experienced people to get something done with young people.

SMITH: Actually, I was just about a final candidate to take a Job Corps position, and my wife had a miscarriage, and I called the forest supervisor and said, "Hey, it's enough of a trauma, and I just have to back off." So I did. But, you know, through the projects working on our district, we had our people work with them, and some of those people went to Job Corps—Frank Baker, for one. You might have known her. We had several people go into Job Corps positions from district positions. They wanted to go. We didn't push them.

POMEROY: And some of them stayed in the Job Corps, too.

SMITH: Yes.

POMEROY: For the remainder of their careers.

SMITH: Yes.

POMEROY: Okay. Anything else that comes to mind that maybe we haven't touched on?

SMITH: Aw, gee, no. I'll repeat again: I had a wonderful career. I had fun all the time and worked with a lot of neat people. When we have these different reunions, it's fighting the old fires or telling the old jokes on things that happened. It was a great time, and I really feel bad that—well, I know that the Service today isn't having those kinds of experiences, and I think it's too bad, because—maybe times will change again or the pendulum will swing back and forth, but there's a lot being missed today, and in the development of our natural resources, too. But I'm confident, as time passes, things will swing back and forth. That's the way our country's built, so—

POMEROY: You're pretty affirmative about now and the future.

SMITH: Yes, sure. I'm not a doomsday guy. I told you I'm an optimist. I'm an eternal optimist. That's the way I am.

POMEROY: Okay. Well, then, that kind of concludes the interview, and thank you very much.

SMITH: Okie doke. Did you get the kind of flavor you wanted?

POMEROY: Sure.

[End of interview.]