

INTERVIEW WITH R. DAVID PURINTON
BY DOROTHE NORTON, AUGUST 12, 2002
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MS. NORTON: Can you tell me your birthplace and date?

MR. PURINTON: Shakopee, Minnesota. March 16, 1941.

MS. NORTON: What were your parents' names?

MR. PURINTON: Ralph and Carol Purinton.

MS. NORTON: What were their jobs and education?

MR. PURINTON: My father was a stonemason and bricklayer. My mother was a dental hygienist. She graduated from university way back when. For many years she didn't work, but later in life she did.

MS. NORTON: Where did you spend your early years, and what did you do?

MR. PURINTON: I grew up in Belle Plaine, Minnesota just west of Minneapolis here, about thirty miles. I grew up on a farm that was right on the Minnesota River, just north of town. We had eighty acres. While it was a farm, about half of it was tillable. We didn't farm. My dad, as I said, was a stonemason and bricklayer. Relatives would come in and plant corn and soybeans and so on. That's where we grew up, right on the river.

MS. NORTON: What jobs, if any, did you have as a child?

MR. PURINTON: I think the earliest job I can recall was that I would spend a month with a cousin of mine who was a dairy farmer. During my time there I was involved in assisting in bailing hay and threshing oats and those sorts of things. I also gathered eggs. At the end of that month I would receive the pay of a dollar a day.

MS. NORTON: Did you hunt or fish?

MR. PURINTON: Oh that's all I did as a kid, was basically hunt and fish. Of course, living on the river, all I had to do was walk out of the backdoor with a .22 in hand, or traps or whatever. While we didn't have a lot of money, I never felt poor because I had all of this stuff right in front of me.

MS. NORTON: What high school did you go to?

MR. PURINTON: For the first eleven years of my education I went to Belle Plaine. Then as a senior we moved to Rochester, Minnesota. My parents moved there where my Dad was employed by the state as a mason. My Mom worked as a dental hygienist.

MS. NORTON: When did you graduate from high school?

MR. PURINTON: I graduated from high school in 1959.

MS. NORTON: What university did you attend then?

MR. PURINTON: The University of Minnesota. I majored in Fishery and Wildlife Management.

MS. NORTON: What years did you go there?

MR. PURINTON: I started in junior college in Rochester, actually. I eventually graduated in 1965 from the University of Minnesota with a bachelor's degree.

MS. NORTON: Did you go on for a master's or Ph. D.?

MR. PURINTON: No, I did not. I was in a situation where I was one of those people who was in the right place at the right time. It just so happened that Region 3, in 1965, decided that they wanted to experiment with a program in which they would hire someone right out of college, and see if they could make that person into an agent. As luck would have it, I was hired right out of college and began my career as an agent with the Service.

MS. NORTON: That's very good. So you did not serve any time in the armed services?

MR. PURINTON: That's correct.

MS. NORTON: Who most influenced your education and your career tract?

MR. PURINTON: The need to succeed and the need to have a job. I was behind the eight ball. We were married with two children. I knew that I wanted a career in wildlife in some fashion. As luck would have it, I ended up in law enforcement. I do have one distinct recollection that may have nothing to do with anything. But as a kid, my Dad and I used to do a lot of Pheasant hunting together. One fall we were joined by a dentist from Minneapolis who was a long-time friend of my fathers. He brought with him a fellow whose name I can't remember. This fellow was a deputy game agent at the time. He may have been a state warden, I am not sure. But he had a badge. And I remember that he would take four or five cobs of corn and throw them in the air, and with his shotgun he could hit every one of them before they hit the ground. I was at a very young,

impressionable age. I remember the guy's badge and how he could handle that shotgun. That may have had something to do with my career, who knows?

MS. NORTON: How, when and where did you meet your wife?

MR. PURINTON: I met her, as I bowed before her. In our senior year of high school she was Queen of Homecoming. I was a member of the football team. That's how we met. We married in Rochester, Minnesota June 23, 1963.

MS. NORTON: Can you tell me your children and their names?

MR. PURINTON: The oldest is Paige, the second oldest is Penny, and the youngest is John.

MS. NORTON: What are they doing now?

MR. PURINTON: Paige and her husband live in Thousand Oaks, California where he is a research scientist for the Amgen Corporation. Penny is a housewife living in Albany, California. Her husband has a master's degree in engineering and he is involved with some part of sales in the computer industry. I am not sure exactly what. My son John is part owner of a company in San Jose, California. The company designs parking lots, and deals with the construction of huge parking lots.

MS. NORTON: Now we'll go on to your career. You've kind of already said why you wanted to work for the Service. So what was your first professional position?

MR. PURINTON: My first professional position, if you want to call it that, was as a U. S. Game Management trainee. I was stationed in Minneapolis, Minnesota. That session began immediately upon being hired in June of 1965.

MS. NORTON: What were the pay and benefits like?

MR. PURINTON: I began as a GS-5 and I don't remember what the pay was. But to me it seemed like an awful lot at the time.

MS. NORTON: What did you do in this position?

MR. PURINTON: Well basically I had my butt kicked by a bunch of tough old agents here in Region 3. There was a bit of resentment. Someone right out of college walking into a career with trained professional agents, most of who were former state wardens, and most of who had served in World War II. Needless to say, I had a very interesting first year working with some of these characters.

MS. NORTON: Where did you go from there?

MR. PURINTON: From there my first posted duty was Grand Island, Nebraska. I moved there in late 1966. It was about a year after I began in Minneapolis. We were at Grand Island for about two and a half or three years. Then I was asked to transfer to southern Illinois, which I did. We were there for about another three years. After that I was asked to go to Washington, D. C. as a trainee if you will, to kind of earmark to begin a program where agents from the field would go to Washington, D.C. and spend about a two-year period to gain their "Washington Office experience". The plan was that if at some point in time a field vacancy arose then you would return to the field. I then I went to Hutchinson, Kansas as a Senior Resident Agent. Then I went to Sacramento, California as an ASAC. Then Anchorage, Alaska as Agent in Charge. At the tail end of my career, I transferred by to Minnesota where I concluded my career in the AIC position here in Minneapolis.

MS. NORTON: Did you socialize with people that you worked with?

MR. PURINTON: Oh, a great deal!

MS. NORTON: How did your career affect your family?

MR. PURINTON: I think very positively. We did a lot of moving and a lot of traveling around. There were seven or eight different duty stations but we always looked at every one and took the positive things from it. I don't care where we were stationed; there was always something good about that location.

MS. NORTON: And why did you leave the Service?

MR. PURINTON: Because I had thirty-two years and I was eligible to retire. I just felt that it was the right time to do so.

MS. NORTON: What kind of training did you receive for your jobs? You were a trainee, but what kind of training did they give you?

MR. PURINTON: That's an excellent question, and it shows how Law Enforcement has evolved, just in the last thirty years or so. When I initially came aboard as a US Game Management Trainee in Minneapolis the Service didn't have a program for new agents such as myself. What I received was kind of on the job training. I would receive whatever training I got from whatever agent I was working with. I can remember my early pistol qualification was shooting as a hubcap in a ditch with Vic Blasovic's pistol. After that he qualified me to handle a pistol. This demonstrates that in this period of thirty years or so there really wasn't a cohesive training program such as we have today. When an agent is hired the first thing they do is to go to Glencoe and go through sixteen or

twenty-five weeks of intensive training. Then they had a duty station where they are under close supervision of an SRA and so on. So things have changed much for the better, needless to say.

MS. NORTON: What were your day-to-day duties?

MR. PURINTON: The kind of depends on when and where you were. I served as a field agent way back when. There was a high emphasis on waterfowl enforcement; the Lacey Act, Black Bass Act cases, things of that nature. Basically, it was enforcement of federal law, assisting state officers in enforcing some of the state laws, and pretty much basic duty that all agents go through.

MS. NORTON: What kind of hours did you work every day?

MR. PURINTON: It varied a lot. During the hunting season you would typically be out before daylight and get home well after dark. This would go on throughout much of the fall and in the spring as well. The hours were long and hard, but always looked forward to it. The hours didn't seem to really affect what you could or couldn't do. You just did it. There was always much more to do that you could ever get to.

MS. NORTON: What kind of tools and instruments did you use?

MR. PURINTON: The basic equipment would have been a Grumman sport boat, binoculars, telescope, tape recording machines, shotguns, pistols, unmarked cars, all kinds of hip boots and waders. There was rain gear and gear for cold weather. As agents we were always well equipped. We never had to complain about not having the tools to do the job.

MS. NORTON: Did you witness any new Service inventions or innovations?

MR. PURINTON: I think the biggest innovation that I could see directly had to do with the method in which new agents were recruited and then trained and then instructed on the job. It was not uncommon, if we were going to hire, say, a class of twenty agents, there'd be over one thousand qualified people apply. You would cull those down to maybe fifty that you would give personal interviews to. Then, of those fifty you would select twenty and then at that point they would commence this training program. We were able to attract the very best.

MS. NORTON: Did you work with any animals?

MR. PURINTON: Well, yes and no. Largely no, but as a field agent I always had a Labrador with me; my own, personal dog which over the years and one in particular, may

lots of cases for me by finding birds that hunters had discarded or hidden under the mud or whatever. But for the most part we did not use animals other than a Labrador.

MS. NORTON: What support did you receive locally, regionally, federally?

MR. PURINTON: Here again, it varies from station to station. Generally, we would work closely with any refuges that were in the vicinity of where we were stationed. There was not a whole lot of support in terms that there would be one regional office for seven, eight or ten states, for example. The support you would receive there would be administrative such as processing vouchers and purchasing equipment and things of that nature. To a large degree, an agent in a one-man station, you were kind of on your own and you handled a lot of the minor stuff. You worked closely with the refuges and sometimes with the hatchery people and of course with state officers.

MS. NORTON: How was the Service perceived by people outside of our agency?

MR. PURINTON: In some places they loved it. And in some places they hated it.

MS. NORTON: How were agency, community relations?

MR. PURINTON: I think I would have to say that the Service generally had good community relations. That's anywhere from Alaska to Florida.

MS. NORTON: What projects were you involved in?

MR. PURINTON: There were lots of different projects including everything from working a particular club for baiting or over bagging, to in-depth, covert investigations to actually doing battle with Indians, for example on the Klamath River. We referred to this as the Salmon War in the 1970s. Most of these things had to do with investigations of one sort or another, or with protection of a particular resource such as King Salmon on their spawning migration.

MS. NORTON: What were the major issues you had to deal with?

MR. PURINTON: Here again, it depends on what duty station you were at, what part of the country you were in. I would say that one of the issues that I found very interesting was the relationship between Alaska natives, the Service, the State of Alaska and the whole issue of subsistence hunting and fishing and what rights the natives had or didn't have. Things up there were so different from anything you would experience in the lower 48, that I found it very refreshing, yet very challenging.

MS. NORTON: How were those issues resolved?

MR. PURINTON: Generally, in favor of the natives. Almost day in and day out, the government has a very difficult time trying to deal with these folks in a manner that is perhaps equitable and fair. The natives, under the Marine Mammal Protection Act for example, can take basically any marine mammal they want, any time of the year day or night. The limitations that apply to all other citizens don't apply to them. I think that will probably cover that end of it.

MS. NORTON: What was your most pressing issue?

MR. PURINTON: Gee, Dorothy, I guess the one that I took maybe more personally than any others was the unlawful spring hunting of migratory birds by natives in Alaska. There's a long history in Alaska of the FWS not enforcing the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. That began about the time of Alaska statehood in about 1959 or 1960 when Alaska became a State. The FWS at that time put the natives on notice. From now on they were citizens of the United States just like everybody else. This spring goose and duck hunting is going to stop. The first spring that the agents in Alaska attempted to enforce the federal laws prohibiting the take of birds in Alaska, there was a huge hoorah that erupted over the fact that certain agents had cited various natives for unlawful take of migratory birds. It very quickly turned very political and very anti-Service. There was a Senator in Alaska at the time who essentially shut off all funding to Interior until such time when the FWS would cease and desist enforcing the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. In fact, during my tour in Alaska I traveled to a lot of the villages and many of the elder people remembered very clearly the tumultuous times that occurred during this period. I have heard the story from the natives' side and now they kind of laugh about it although it's still near and dear to him. For example, Harry Pinkum was in Barrow, Alaska and he wrote up a native for having two or three Scoter. He saw the guy walking down the street and he said, 'hey, you can't do that'. And he gave him a ticket. When that happened, the natives banded together and they said that if that one fellow was going to be arrested, Harry would have to arrest all of them. They all showed up at his office holding one scoter. And he said, "Okay, if that's how you want to do it, we're going to move over to the movie theater." He took about fifty of the natives over there and processed them and individually issued them each a citation. They talk about that to this day. Some of the other incidents that occurred in regards to that program were kind of nasty. Another one involved Ray Trembley, who is still alive in Alaska. He was an agent/pilot. He and another agent went out on the YK Delta, that's the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in western Alaska to enforce the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. They observed a group of hunters in a camp actively shooting geese. Two of the agents landed in a Super Cub and approached the camp to attempt to apprehend them. The folks got on dogsleds and took off. Shots were exchanged. The natives shot at our agents and the agents returned fire. I know that at least one of the native's dogs was hit and killed. The agents were apparently about to communicate with Trembley, who was up in the air at the time. The agents were trying to apprehend these natives and Ray came over and accessed the area. He could see from the air that the agents were following the trail of the natives that were fleeing in front of

them. The natives has stopped and hidden behind a sharp bend in a creek. It looked to Ray that the agents were walking in to what could well have been an ambush. The natives were hunkered down with their weapons. So he wagged the wings directly overhead and kind of dove at these natives that were in the brush. They shot at this airplane and in fact hit it with shotgun pellets. It didn't hurt him. Eventually, the FBI was involved and all kinds of people were interviewed and citations given. But that was the last enforcement that was done in regards to migratory birds in Alaska; until such time, and I take a lot of pride in this; that in the early 1990s we had attended enough meetings and given enough warnings and talked to enough people to where we had finally reached an accord. There were certain species of geese of which the numbers were really, really down, such as the Aleutian Canada Goose and Brandt populations were way down. White fronted goose populations were way down. There had been a kind of understanding that while the natives would go out and they could still hunt ducks in the spring, they would not take any of these species. Well, Mark Webb, an agent who worked for me made one of the first cases since the late 1950s and early 1960s by apprehending three hunters with something ninety-six Brandt, out on the west coast. That was the first case that had been made under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in that long, long period of time. We worked hard on that. The Service is still real goosey about how it deals with natives and how they enforce various laws. But I think we definitely made some progress.

MS. NORTON: Who were your supervisors?

MR. PURINTON: Again, it depends on when and where you were. My initial supervisor was a fellow named Flick Davis who was in Minneapolis when I was initially hired. Then there was a long line of supervisors, many of which you have probably interviewed.

MS. NORTON: Who were the individuals who shaped your career?

MR. PURINTON: I think Flick Davis, Gus Bondy, Blasovic, Harry Jensen; probably the crew that I initially broke in under had has much affect at anyone.

MS. NORTON: Who were some of the people that you knew outside of the Service?

MR. PURINTON: I knew a lot of people. I am not sure how to respond to that?

MS. NORTON: Okay. What Presidents, Secretaries of the Interior and Directors of FWS did you serve under?

MR. PURINTON: From Nixon, all the way to the present I guess; and many different Directors of the Service. I am trying to remember who was the first one, oh golly, I don't remember. Greenwalt came on the scene in the 1960's as I recall, or early 1970s. I worked all the way through John Turner and the current Director.

MS. NORTON: How did changes in the administration affect your work?

MR. PURINTON: The various administrations really didn't have a whole lot of affect on what we did on a day-to-day basis. Some years there was more money than in other years. In some administrations, Law Enforcement would fair better than in others. For the most part, we really didn't feel much in the field. I guess as an over all observation; because I have seen it both ways, I think one of the worst things that the Service ever did was to implement the Senior Executive Service. I can remember in the old days when Regional Directors were truly regional directors and most of them were conservationists. Most of them had the resource close to their vest. But when SES came into being and members of the executive service were grossly politicized at that point. They no longer would stand up to anyone who was anybody in the administration. They would pretty well jump through whatever hoops they were asked to jump through. I think that that did not help the Service in terms of what its program and policies were.

MS. NORTON: What was the high point in your career?

MR. PURINTON: Probably our tour in Alaska. Jane and I, having lived from one end of the United States to the other found everything about Alaska fresh and invigorating and new. Everything was different. We met many people there who to this day we are in touch with; sometimes on an almost daily basis. That would clearly be the high point of our career. I think I also have to add that we were delighted to return to Minnesota for the last two years.

MS. NORTON: What was the low point in your career?

MR. PURINTON: Well, I really didn't have many low points. There was a time or two where I had applied for a job that I wanted and for whatever reason didn't get it. But I would say that 99% of the time, I was positive rather than negative. I didn't really have any real low points.

MS. NORTON: Is there anything that you have ever wished that you had done differently while you were working?

MR. PURINTON: Don't think so, nope.

MS. NORTON: What was your most dangerous or frightening experience?

MR. PURINTON: Probably the trauma that went on with the Indians on the Klamath River in the late 1970s. There were many instances of gunfire. There were lots of arrests made. There were agents who were assaulted, high spend chases. Because the Klamath River was a shallow, rapid river you were always in danger any time you took a jet boat

up the river at night. In fact, I was in a boat that hit a rock and sunk. My knee was split open. Another agent developed problems with their spine. Another agent in the boat broke his kneecap. That was probably as much trouble as one would want at one point in time. That would have been the Klamath River War, as we called it.

MS. NORTON: What about your most humorous experience?

MR. PURINTON: I'll have to think about that for a little bit.

MS. NORTON: What would you like to tell others about your career in the Service?

MR. PURINTON: I think I would like to tell them that I always felt very fortunate and very lucky that I worked for the organization that I did. There was seldom a day that I didn't look forward to going to work. There were times that I really felt privileged that I would be paid for doing something that I would have done for nothing.

MS. NORTON: What were some of the changes that you observed in the Service?

MR. PURINTON: I have already described the Law Enforcement and how they went from shooting at hubcaps in a ditch to going through the academy. I think for the most part, the Service is probably in many ways like it used to be. I have send fads, if you will, come and go. At certain times, under certain Directors, maybe the Endangered Species Act would be something that everybody wanted to do. It kind of ebbed and flowed but I think for the most part it was a fairly stable program.

MS. NORTON: Did you witness any changes in the personnel as far as the types of people that were hired?

MR. PURINTON: No, I don't think so. I think that in this day and age we are hiring people as agents that are probably much better qualified than they were when I first came aboard. I can tell you that in this day and age, someone with the amount of experience that I had at the time I was hired, wouldn't have a chance of being hired today.

MS. NORTON: What are your thoughts on the future?

MR. PURINTON: Golly, I hope that the Service will have the courage and integrity to withstand the political whims of people such as Trent Lott who wants to extend the duck season for his friends in Mississippi. I hope that it will have the courage to do what's right rather than what's politically feasible at the time.

MS. NORTON: Where do you see the Service heading in the next decade, up or down?

MR. PURINTON: With the uncertainty that prevails in this day and age, with the war on terrorism and so on, I would guess that if the Service can just maintain it's status quo, we'll be doing okay.

MS. NORTON: Do you have any photos or documents, or anything that you'd like to donate or share and have copies made to go into the Archives?

MR. PURINTON: I do have some things, but I am not sure what would be most appropriate. We can discuss this.

MS. NORTON: Well, if you find something that you think might be interesting, you can let me know. Who else do you think we should interview?

MR. PURINTON: Probably anyone you can get to. I think everyone has a story to tell, one way or another about the Service. Just whoever you can find who is willing to sit down with you.

MS. NORTON: Well Dave, that's all the questions I have for you. Thank you for your time and also thank you for the lunch! You were very nice to do that.

MR. PURINTON: It's good to see you and get together again Dorothe, and I appreciate your taking the time to come on out!