

INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH LOSEY
BY MARK MADISON AND GEORGE GENTRY
MARCH 15, 2003

MR. GENTRY: Let's give some information to identify the tape. Give today's date and where we're at and that sort of thing. Today is March 15th.

MS. LOSEY: Today is March 15, 2003. We're in Melbourne, and have been to Pelican Island celebrating the Centennial.

MR. GENTRY: If you would, say your name slowly and spell it.

MS. LOSEY: Elizabeth Browne Losey. [Spells it out]

MR. GENTRY: Do I dare ask your date of birth?

MS. LOSEY: Oh sure! I'm proud of it. December 25, 1912.

MR. GENTRY: Where is your place of birth?

MS. LOSEY: East Orange, New Jersey.

MR. GENTRY: Education? Where did you go to school?

MS. LOSEY: Mount Holy Oak for two years, University of Michigan AB, and then the School of Natural Resources at University of Michigan with an MS.

MR. GENTRY: What is your work history, starting maybe even before the Service? Everything you did in the environmental or conservation field.

MS. LOSEY: My first job was with the Fish and Wildlife Service. It was offered to me by J. Clark Salyer, III. I was to go up the Seney National Wildlife Refuge as a female Waterfowl Research Biologist.

MR. MADISON: What year was that?

MS. LOSEY: 1947. It was at the San Antonio North American Wildlife Conference.

MR. GENTRY: Tell me a little bit about what you consider to be your area of expertise when you worked for the Service.

MS. LOSEY: Waterfowl management and marsh ecology. Then, I taught those subjects at the University of Michigan for several years on the graduate level.

MR. MADISON: When you joined the Service in 1947 were there other women waterfowl biologists?

MS. LOSEY: Not to my knowledge.

MR. MADISON: You were the first.

MS. LOSEY: Which makes it more outstanding that Mr. Salyer literally stuck his neck out when he asked me if I would do that. I was a fresh graduate with a Master's Degree and I had gone to our Michigan State Game Division. They knew me very well, and

knew my work. I was thinking that was where I'd get my job. And the reply was, "Yes, I know you are well qualified, and sure we'll find a place for you. You can go to conservation groups, you can write for periodicals, you can go to school groups." I told them, "That isn't what I am trained for. That isn't what I want. I am a waterfowl and marsh management person. I did my thesis on it." They said, 'Betty, we can't give you a job like that!' I asked why not. "Well, in the course of your work you'd be out in the field; it might be necessary to spend overnight wherever you are, and you would have a male associate." So that was that, but it's to my dying regret that I didn't say, 'Well oh goodie'! But I didn't, and I obviously didn't get the job. Then, two months later at San Antonio, J. Clark Salyer, III came up to me and asked me would I like to go up to the Seney Refuge as a Waterfowl Biologist.

MR. MADISON: How did Salyer know you, or know of you?

MS. LOSEY: Well, that's another good question. He also, was a graduate of the University of Michigan. But I didn't know him there. In fact, he graduated in Zoology. That was his field. So it had to be, I don't know what, it had to be either our university background or my good looks! I decided it was the university background! It had to be!

MR. MADISON: So what was it like when you first went up to Seney as a field biologist?

MS. LOSEY: It was absolutely wonderful, for a lot of reasons. C. S. Johnson was the Refuge Manager. And in my book, there's nobody that's ever equaled him. Of course I don't know all of the refuge managers but he was building the refuge. It was the old days when we didn't have a uniform. You didn't have a lot of protocol and red tape and directions. You did what you had to do, and he did it. He was from the Army. He had Army discipline and he knew how to handle a shovel. He did the work with the rest of us when it was necessary. I can see him now; he wore a slouch fedora hat and an old brown jacket that opened in the front, some kind of Army issue pants and then those boots that had the strap around the top of them. That was his uniform. My conditions there were a bit unusual. Where I stayed overnight on the Refuge; where I lived; was what we called the WPA shack. It was where they made the paychecks for the WPA crew. So there was nothing in it but one double iron bunk bed and an old wood burning stove; a trestle table with a bench. And when I say there was nothing else, I literally mean, there was *nothing else!* Fortunately, there were a lot of bushes behind the building. And I wasn't too far from the main garage, which did have a restroom. The Refuge Manager and his wife were kind enough so that once a week I went up there and took a bath.

MR. MADISON: So you didn't mind the primitive conditions up there?

MS. LOSEY: I made up my mind that no matter what they threw at me, I was not going to murmur, and I didn't. Because I felt this way; they had opened the door a crack, my foot was in it and I was going to go in the rest of the way. But I had to laugh because at Christmas, I get a note from C.S. and he said, "We've got a Christmas present for you! When you come back, you'll see it". But no, he sent me a picture of them hauling an outhouse on the dredge to install at the back of my building. That was my Christmas present. A beautiful outhouse!

MR. MADISON: That was probably one of the best Christmas presents you ever had!

MS. LOSEY: Absolutely! Highly appreciated!

MR. MADISON: Did any of the employees have a hard time adjusting to working with a woman?

MS. LOSEY: None of the males. The fellows took me just as equal. They took me as an equal. We got along beautifully. And also, I was supervising one or two of them, for example, when we did the aquatic inventory. He didn't know the aquatic plants, which of course, I did. So I was teaching him. He took the instruction beautifully. The only problem I had actually was with the wives. They were not always too happy to know that I was out in the field all day; not overnight, but all day with their husbands. I can remember that we'd be doing an inventory of the impoundment, it would be 4:30 or so and I'd say, "Well gee, we're almost done; do want to stay a little bit later so we can finish this one impoundment?" They'd say, "Sure!" We would and then we'd put the canoe on top of the vehicle and drive threw the streets of Germfack at about eight o'clock at night. That was the cause of some of the problems. But basically everybody with whom I worked was just marvelous. And I had the support of Mr. Johnson. And really, the man who gave me my assignment was Richard Griffith who was Manager of Habitat Management out of Washington. He was just marvelous. He came out to the Refuge two or three times and would check to see what I was doing and how I was making out. He was great. And then of course, I was there when Mr. J. Clark Salyer came on one of his annual inspection trips. We kind of shuttered and shivered a little bit, but we managed to survive!

MR. MADISON: So what were you studying up there?

MS. LOSEY: My main assignment was the relation of Beaver to waterfowl management. So I set up various test areas and really worked hard at it. I am proud to say that it resulted in a publication, which was printed in the Journal of Wildlife Management and at the next meeting of the North American Wildlife Conference it received Honorable Mention. So my main satisfaction was the fact that Mr. Salyer must have felt he was justified. That gave me a lot of satisfaction.

MR. MADISON: That's a great story! How long were you up at Seney?

MS. LOSEY: As an employee of the Fish and Wildlife Service, I was only there for three years. But then, I got a grant from the University of Michigan to continue my work up there on Duck brood behavior. So I was there two more years. And that paper also was published in the Journal. Then, the time came when they were going to assign me to Lower Souris, which is paradise for a person that likes ducks. And Merle Hammond was there as well. But in the meantime, romance had crept in and I had to make a decision. So I reluctantly took the romance, although I am very happy I did. But then, they contacted me; and that's where that letter comes in. They asked me if I would take a temporary job out of the Ann Arbor office and work there and produce a layman's version of, oh what was the name, Wilford Banco, who did the Trumpeter Swan story. They thought maybe it should be reduced a little bit for more popular consumption. So I worked all winter on that. So that must be what that letter was referring to, because we didn't have Trumpeter Swans then, at Seney. Of course, now we do. There is a wonderful population. We've been very successful with that. So then, it's kind of like a full cycle. I was away from that work. I went into another hobby; well, more that a hobby, I went into the fur trade history of Canada; the Hudson Bay Company. We spent a lot of time, and published a book on that. But then my husband died. I still lived in Germfask, which is only five miles from the Refuge, so I went back to the Refuge just like a full circle. Now I'm so happy. I work three or four days a week and I do research or, we produced that booklet, and we're working on grassland ecology; Sharptails and so on. Tracy just told me this morning; 'I've got a job for you when you get back'. It's to

work up a mailing list for our celebration on May 24th. So I don't think I'll run out of work.

MR. MADISON: That is a great story; you coming back there.

MR. LOSEY: Oh, I love it, and it's keeping me young. It really is. I wake up in the morning and I can hardly wait to get there.

MR. MADISON: Let's go back to the couple of years you worked at Seney. We don't actually have great records for this period. What was the typical workday like as a waterfowl biologist? What did you do?

MS. LOSEY: Well, I had no hours. I mean, as a biologist you do not keep office hours. So I'd be up at the crack of dawn and carry my packsack and my plotting scope and my binoculars and my camera. And I'd take off and go to any one of these four areas that I had set up for my studies. Then of course, I conducted the waterfowl survey. I was the only one there to do anything. I mean, I had to do everything. We were planting emergents along the edges of the dikes because they needed to be stabilized. See, the Refuge was just being developed back then so we needed to plant the emergents to prevent erosion. I took the aquatic inventory surveys. Oh, and then I surveyed Sharptail dancing grounds. That was fun! Get up as early as daylight and then go out and stop and listen. When you could hear a call, you'd make a beeline for it. That's how you discovered them. I think I discovered oh, about fourteen lecks [?], and of course mapped them. My hours were from daylight; I usually or normally would come in about eleven or twelve o'clock and write up some notes or identify some aquatic plants or something. Then I'd go out again about three and come back at dark; seven days a week. Then if we had any "VIP" visitors, I was the one elected to take them around. But it was...

MR. MADISON: Why were you elected to take them around?

MS. LOSEY: Well, on Sunday there was nobody there. I was living there and I volunteered. I also went and spoke about the history of the Refuge to Rotary Clubs and Women's Clubs. Of course then, I dressed all up really pretty and I drove the company Hudson. It was an old fashioned Hudson; four doored, long job. And I drove that to these various events! Of course, I took a marvelous collection of slides, which I have given to the Refuge. But they are of great value now because they show what it was like back in the 1930's and 1940's.

MR. MADISON: You mentioned how you dressed to go to the Rotary. How did you dress every day? You didn't have a uniform then.

MS. LOSEY: No, nobody had a uniform. I had a pretty sharp outfit. It was white slacks and a tangerine blouse and a white jacket. Of course, I had a nice tan; so it looked all right.

MR. MADISON: What about in the field?

MS. LOSEY: Oh, the field? Well, usually ninety percent of the time I was in hip boots and even when I got out of them I kept the straps on so that they'd be handy. I wore 'suntans'. You call them khakis and a khaki shirt. That was it. I lived in that. I don't think I even wore a cap. Maybe I did. I hate hats, never wear them!

MR. MADISON: Okay, we've got one last question for you; this is George's question. He asked it in the last interview and thought that it was such a good question that I would

steal it! In your career, what was your favorite place to be, or favorite experience in the outdoors?

MS. LOSEY: You mean in my career as a wildlife worker?

MR. MADISON: Yeah.

MS. LOSEY: Well, my favorite place was Seney Refuge. Number one; back in those days we had ducks there. Not ducks like Souris, but we had nesting waterfowl. You could drive during the nesting or brood season along the dikes and you'd be seeing broods of ducklings which unfortunately you're not seeing now. It's very disturbing to me because the area is drying up. It's changing so. But my favorite place was Seney, and my favorite work place was right in the middle of a march listening to the birds and finding waterfowl nests and ducklings. That was it. I loved it! It was my, other than marriage days, which were wonderful; and our experience with the fur trade was exhilarating. Actually, that picture in the back page of the booklet exemplifies my happiest day.

MR. MADISON: Let me show this to you George. It's a striking picture of a very young female biologist.

MR. GENTRY: I do have one question though, maybe.

MS. LOSEY: Yes?

MR. GENTRY: Is there any comparison between the tools that you had to do research with in those days, compared to now?

MS. LOSEY: Oh yes. To begin with, the office, for example was one large room with two desks strictly Army issue. They were you know, the metal type thing. C.S. sat at one, the clerk Leo Vanwalt sat at the other. I think they had two telephones. They might have had only one. It was the kind that you hold like this. There was a mimeograph machine, the kind with this thing. [Demonstrating turning a handle]

MR. GENTRY: No, we don't know what that is. What is a mimeograph machine?

MS. LOSEY: Well, it's a rotary, and when you use it you get yourself smeared with ink because you can't do it without!

MR. MADISON: What about the tools you used as a waterfowl biologist?

MR. LOSEY: Basically it was my spotting scope, my binoculars. We didn't...the word computer? Nobody had that. I remember maybe some years after when I was out of the field they had a meeting of waterfowl people up in Duluth, Minnesota. They invited me to attend, and I went. I sat there and that's when I began to know the progress that had been made in the techniques. These younger biologists were speaking up and telling what they were doing. Many of them were trained at Delta incidentally. I remember the one that impressed me the most; they were injecting dye into the eggs of the ducks so that as they hatched they could follow them and so forth. I thought that was just fantastic. But I remember that I had guts enough, I guess, to get up and say that these techniques are fine, we need them, they are extending our knowledge, "but don't forget, the bricks of waterfowl biology are the life histories." You've got to know your different ducks. You can't talk ducks. You have to talk species, and you have to know their life history. So, I

know that's fundamental and you build on top of that, but just don't overlook it. I got up and made my little speech.

MR. MADISON: Thank you so much!

MS. LOSEY: You've very welcome!