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Estella Leopold
April 30, 2022

Interview conducted by Vincent Santucci
Transcribed by Teresa Bergen
Edited by Molly Williams

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Narrator: Estella Leopold
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Date: April 30, 2022
Signed release form: Yes
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Transcript

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Leopold: —people working for the Park Service. And in fact, they led me around, held my hand and showed me rocks and said, “This is what you ought to be doing.” And I thought they were wonderful.

Santucci: Outstanding.

Leopold: [unclear] just very special.

Santucci: Well, thank you so much. I’m very excited to chat with you today. I have a short opening statement. Is it okay if I record our interview?

Leopold: Yeah, except we’re having a nice little social time here, breakfast. So I don't know how long this is going to take.

Santucci: Okay. It will take as long as you’d like. If you need to go, then that’s perfectly fine.

Leopold: Well, it won’t be really long then. I’ll just simply say your questions recalled for me a long bit of my experiences in my first work with the Park Service and the government. And I enjoyed all of it and I thought they were wonderful.

Santucci: Great.

Leopold: I appreciated it that I learned so much from the Park Service people. And from their experiences in the park, which they showed me.

Susan: Is it okay for them to record what you talk about?

Santucci: Of course. Okay. I have a short statement at the beginning just so the people that listen to this interview in the future will know who we’re talking to. So if you’re ready, I’ll go ahead and begin.

Leopold: I’m ready.

Santucci: Today is Saturday, April 30, 2022. My name is Vincent Santucci, the senior paleontologist for the National Park Service Paleontology Program. Today we are interviewing Dr. Estella Leopold, paleobotanist, paleoecologist and conservationist who is retired from the US Geological Survey. We hope to discuss some of her work in national park areas, such as Yellowstone. Dr. Leopold is participating in this interview by telephone from her home in

Washington. And I am participating from my home in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. So thank you very much.

Leopold: Thank you, everybody.

Santucci: So my first question's probably the easiest one. And that is when and where were you born, and where did you grow up?

Leopold: (laughs) I was born in Madison, Wisconsin, which is where my parents went. And I grew up there. And I then spent a lot of time with relatives in New Mexico and in Iowa.

Santucci: Were there any experiences when you were growing up that inspired your interest in science and the environment?

Leopold: Yes. Working with my father, Aldo Leopold, was enough inspiration to carry me a long ways. (laughs) Yes. He was a mighty inspiration.

Santucci: Inspiration for me, too. I taught at the Department of Parks and Resources Management at Slippery Rocky University. And one of the books that we had the students read was *Sand County Almanac*.

Leopold: Good. That's good. I hope you realize that the *Sand County Almanac* has now been, we've sold three million copies of it.

03:49

Santucci: Oh, wow.

Leopold: Meaning that and through the translations into several different languages. It's been a really a bestseller, no question.

Santucci: Well, I have to say that I'm the owner of three copies of it. (laughs) So I helped with that three million.

Leopold: Oh, good. Very good.

Santucci: I'm not surprised at all. It's a very important publication.

Leopold: Well, I think it's, I couldn't help but agree with you.

Santucci: So a couple of other questions. Where did you attend college or university? And what were your field—

Leopold: Well, I started out at Wisconsin because I lived there in Madison. Then I went to Berkeley for a while. And where else? Oh, then I went to Yale and got a PhD there.

Santucci: And were there any faculty members or mentors who helped to shape your career?

Leopold: Yes. Aside from my father himself, Paul B. Sears, a very great naturalist, was my mentor when I was at Yale. He was the superb and very important conservationist. Okay.

Santucci: And so your graduate research topic, what was that?

Leopold: I was working with palynology in the Connecticut valleys of south-central Connecticut. Working out the local history of the glaciers. And a lot of fun.

Santucci: Very good. And then when did you join the US Geological Survey?

Leopold: I think it had to be 1956.

Santucci: And were you involved in palynology when you started?

Leopold: Yeah, they hired me because I was a new palynologist that they thought they could use.

Santucci: And who did you work with early in your career? Did you work with J.D. Love?

6:11

Leopold: J.D. Love was a very important geologist/paleontologist. He just paved the way for some of us youngsters that were learning our way in the Geological Survey. Yeah. J.D. Love that was wonderful. Talk about Mr. [unclear] he knew all the rocks backwards and forwards and what was in them.

Santucci: And so how did you wind up going to Yellowstone? Did J.D. Love bring you there? Or was it independent?

Leopold: Oh, with J.D. Love. He was working.

Santucci: And can you share with us a little bit about the work that you did in Yellowstone?

Leopold: I can't remember the details. But basically we were looking at the Yellowstone Falls area. Analyzing the sediments that we collected there. I was collecting usually with Dave Love there. It was a lot of fun. Learned a lot.

Santucci: Are you familiar with the USGS E&R reports that document fossil occurrences?

Leopold: That's the only way we communicated back to the Survey. We wrote those reports. E&R. Yes.

Santucci: Yeah, we have copies of hopefully all of them, but certainly many of them, including those from Yellowstone.

Leopold: Yep. I'm sure you do.

Santucci: Very important resource for us. You've worked in a number of national parks. Isn't it nice to work in such beautiful areas?

Leopold: Oh, it certainly was.

Santucci: I recently interviewed Cathy Whitlock and she talked—

Leopold: Oh, one of my prize students! She is a winner. Absolutely marvelous young woman.

Santucci: I'll tell her you said that. She really spoke highly of you and is indebted to you for probably helping to shape her career.

Leopold: Oh, she was an incredibly bright, marvelous, charming and excellent researcher who did a lot of work in Europe, and also a lot of work here in the West. She loved the Rocky Mountains. Love the Rocky, present tense, still work [the way?] there.

8:46

Santucci: Yeah. And she picked up a lot of your work in developing a lot of the Quaternary paleoecology of Yellowstone.

Leopold: Yeah. Then she built on what little we had done, yes.

Santucci: And the other thing that we're very interested in is the book that you wrote with Herb Meyer, *Saving Time*, regarding the conservation efforts for Florissant Fossil Beds.

Leopold: The title is *Saved in Time*.

Santucci: *Saved in Time*.

Leopold: It was published, I think by the Park Service.

Santucci: And what inspired that book? It's an incredibly important book in terms of paleontological resource conservation.

Leopold: Oh, we were just trying to tell the story of what happened to save those fossils. And we had the help of the marvelous lawyer, [Victor] Yannacone, who helped us get into the courts and save by trial some of these issues, which were tending to destroy the fossils. They were planning on having summer homes built on top of the fossil beds and we were working, darn it, to stop all that nonsense and save them because they were of scientific value that was incredibly important. So that--

Santucci: I received—oh, go ahead. Go right ahead.

Leopold: Yep.

Santucci: So I receive email inquiries from young law students that are interested in the topic of law and policy related to fossils. And your book is the first thing that I refer to them in terms of an exceptional story talking about conservation and preservation of a fossil locality.

Leopold: Oh, well, good. I'm glad somebody's looking at it.

Santucci: And so are your records and archives held by the US Geological Survey in Denver?

Leopold: The main records are in the Washington, DC office where the basic locality information is kept on file. We called them D numbers, D for Denver because we prepared the sediments in Denver. And we sent them the report. So they have all my reports.

Santucci: Excellent.

Leopold: In D.C.

Santucci: Very good. And I guess, I wanted to ask is there anything you'd like to share that I haven't asked you as a question?

11:51

Leopold: (laughs) I just want to tell you that it was a lot of fun. Working with all these wonderful people and learning about what was going on in the Park Service. It was really fun.

Santucci: Yeah. Early in my career I was stationed in Wyoming and I was able to call and speak several times with J.D. Love about his work in Yellowstone. And really enjoyed and benefited from those conversations.

Leopold: Yes. And you probably heard of the important work of Luna B. Leopold.

Santucci: Oh, absolutely.

Leopold: And his work, which was also conservation-oriented.

Santucci: Yes. A lot for you to be proud of with you and your family, for sure.

Leopold: Yeah.

Santucci: So I just wanted to end by reading you one quote. You're probably familiar with it, but I just wanted to hear your reaction to the quote because it's one of my favorites. And I'll read it slowly. It states, "Our appreciation for the crane grows with the slow unraveling of earth history. His tribe we now know stems out of the remote Eocene. The other members of the fauna in which he originated are long since entombed within these hills. When we hear his call, we hear no mere bird; we hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past of the incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men." Aldo Leopold.

Leopold: So this is one of my favorite paragraphs from Aldo Leopold. I think it was charmingly written and marvelous.

Santucci: Yeah, the way—go ahead. Yeah, that's from "Marshland Elegy" in the *Sand County Almanac*.

Leopold: Yes.

Santucci: Yeah, that's my favorite. Very inspiring.

Leopold: Oh, yeah. That was great. And you know, it was the evening before Aldo Leopold passed away with his heart attack and so forth, he and his wife, my mother and I, were sitting out in the marsh on a Leopold bench listening to the goose music, as he called it, out there in the Wisconsin valleys of the Wisconsin River. And it was a wonderful time.

Santucci: Yeah, it must have been. It's historic, the life of you and your family.

Leopold: It was fun.

Santucci: And I just want to thank you on behalf of us and the National Park Service, all the wonderful things that you've contributed to us that better appreciate and understand our resources and allow us to better protect them.

Leopold: Well, I certainly was impressed with the Park Service and the way people carried themselves and the ideas they were pursuing. They were all idealistic and wonderful, they young people. So thank you very much for this interview. I appreciate your—

Santucci: Thank you again.

Leopold: And certainly congratulate you on your time in developing further the same ideas.

Santucci: Well, thank you. And thanks to Susan for helping to arrange this.

Leopold: Thank you, Susan.

Susan: You're welcome.

Santucci: Enjoy your breakfast.

Leopold: Thank you.

Santucci: Have a great day.

Susan: Thanks. Bye.

Santucci: Thank you. Bye-bye.

Leopold: [to Susan] Nice man.

Santucci: Bye.

16:07

[END OF INTERVIEW]