

In the oral history conducted by Harold K. Steen, Jack Ward Thomas tells us about issues and events while he was Forest Service Chief during the Clinton Administration. For thirty years he had been working as a scientist, advancing until arguably he was the most prominent in the agency. In 1993 he was named chief, an appointment he accepted with mixed feelings. This excerpt presents some of Thomas' views on wilderness and roadless areas, the subject of other articles in this issue. The full oral history is now available from the Forest History Society.

BACKCOUNTRY RECREATION— NOT ROADLESS AREAS

AN EXCERPT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH JACK WARD THOMAS
(MAY 10–12, 2001)

BASED ON AN INTERVIEW BY HAROLD K. STEEN WITH JACK WARD THOMAS

ROADLESS AREAS

HKS: I was reading this morning's paper, it's the May 11, 2001, *Missoulian*, about the judge blocks roadless rules, and here is this allegation that the Department of Justice threw the case.

JWT: They did simply by showing up and saying nothing. Obviously, the intent was to signal the judge that they no longer were pursuing the objective of upholding the action of the previous administration.

HKS: So that fits in? You're not at all surprised?

JWT: No.

HKS: But I can also see it's a process for Bush implementing a change without being open about it. I'm not being critical of it. It's a method of achieving a goal.

JWT: It is a method of achieving a goal. What happens if the incumbent president has done something that his opponent, who is elected, disagrees with? Is the new president morally bound to fight that case

through with the same vigor that his predecessor would have shown? Is it ethically right to "throw" the case? I don't know. I can see both sides of that. But rather than showing up and remaining silent, I think it would have been more honest to have just walked in and announced that the plaintiffs are correct in this matter, and we ask you to rule in their favor. Obey the law. Tell the truth. Don't skate. Don't slip. Don't slide. Just face matters forthrightly. This "tricky" stuff confuses the public and destroys their faith in both government and the judicial process.

HKS: I presume that the article is generally accurate in what happened, but that may not be the case either.

JWT: That may not be the case, but it is probably correct. Talking about roadless areas, the Forest Service was essentially through entering roadless areas in 1993. The writing was on the wall. We lost our road budget and finally got some of it back by one vote in the House. We were digging ourselves into a deeper and deeper hole on deficit timber sales and associated roading. But from the stories you read

about the recent court decision you would believe the bulldozers are at the edge of the wilderness revving their engines. Baloney! They are not going to enter any roadless areas. This has been a huge political game since its very beginning. That game is over for the time being. I mean, if the Forest Service prepared such an entry into roadless areas it would take many years before they could get through all the procedures, appeals, and legal actions. Then, if they decided to do it, they would be looking at dramatic levels of civil disobedience.

I think the entire movement by Chief Dombeck, whether it was his initiative or that of the Clinton administration, was aimed at getting roadless areas cleared off the agenda so they could get on with the new round of forest planning. This matter has been absorbing energy and time for twenty-five to thirty years now. Congress could solve the argument anytime they chose through legislation saying the national forests are in the multiple-use land base. But they don't want to do that, so the Forest Service is hung on the petard of flexibility for which it fought so long and hard. We fight for

flexibility. We say we want flexibility. Then that very flexibility eats us alive. So Congress can constantly step aside and say well, you know, that's the Forest Service inappropriately exercising its flexibility. They could step in at any moment and say we want a minimum of six billion board feet a year off the national forests. And this is going into wilderness, and the rest of this is not in any study areas or anything else, so it's released. They could solve the argument, but they won't do it. They simply would rather let the bureaucrats twist in the wind. The Forest Service, and I don't say this lightly, may have become more valuable as a political "whipping boy" than as a producer of goods and services.

HKS: So even the congressmen from Idaho, Montana, or Washington don't propose legislation that would do that, even there where it would be well received?

JWT: Oh, some propose, but weakly and with no real hope of significant change. To satisfy supporters, you merely have to look as if you are fighting the good fight.

HKS: I should say *here* where it would be well received.

JWT: There is a congressional custom for additions to wilderness areas. The only requirement is for unanimous congressional approval from the state or states involved. They could move anytime they wanted to, but they just prefer to let the bureaucracy take the heat.

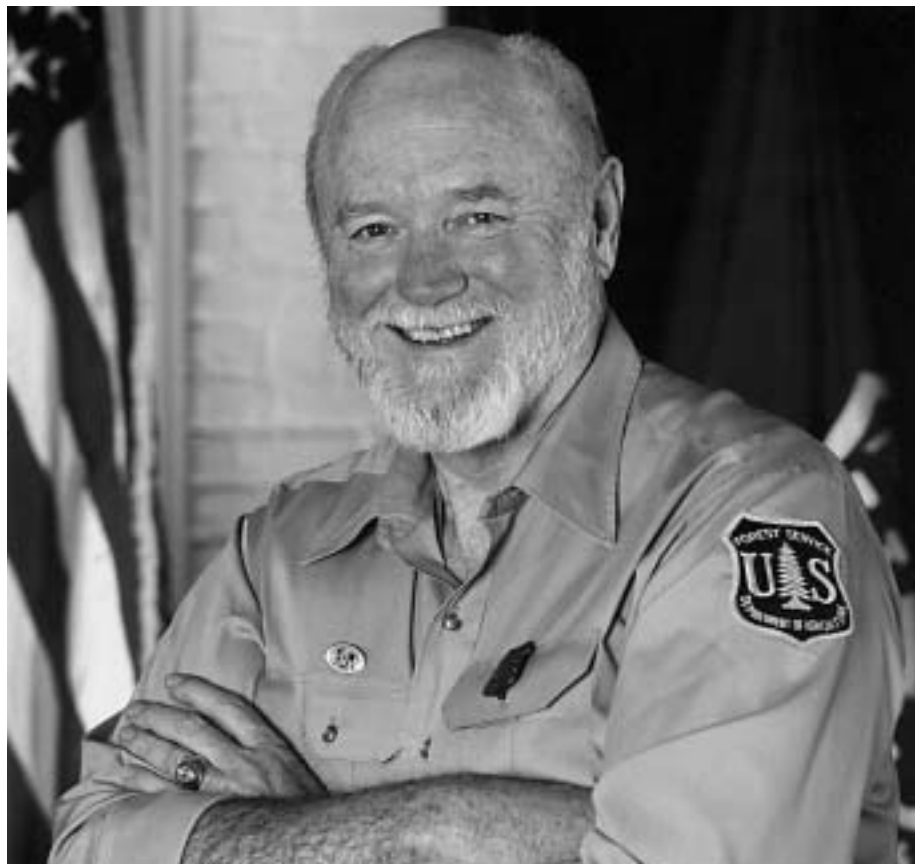
WILDERNESS MANAGEMENT

HKS: I walked on the Missoula campus and looked at the administration building. There's a wilderness institute in there. Now is that an academic organization?

JWT: No, it's the U.S. government. It's the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Institute and it is a joint venture between the BLM, Forest Service, Park Service, and the university. I challenged George Frampton, under-secretary of the Interior, at a meeting of wilderness buffs to join the Forest Service in making that institute a reality. He accepted, and it happened.

HKS: Is it a think tank?

JWT: No, it's a research unit.



Jack Ward Thomas as Chief of the U.S. Forest Service.

HKS: It just happens to be in that building, that's where physical space was, I suppose. It's not next to the president's office for some other reason?

JWT: No, that just happened to be able to fit a space that the university had leased to the Forest Service on a long-term basis. Right next door to it is the Forest Service's Wildlife Sciences Laboratory. As I mentioned earlier, that was one of the things that I did when I appeared before the Wilderness Society. I pledged that we were going to pay more attention to wilderness. Then I came up with the great idea that we were going to place the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness under one manager as opposed to its being managed as a sideline by several national forests. It would be a core management unit in and of itself. I was new in the job at the time, and I didn't understand that I needed to kiss all the right rings. Essentially the guides association shot me down. Senator Craig from Idaho inserted a line in the budget that said no money could be used to execute that decision. I thought it was a really dumb thing for the guides to do. But it was my fault as I should have talked

to them first. That was my fault. I simply thought that it was such a great idea that nobody at all could possibly oppose it. And boy, was I wrong.

HKS: Dale thought the Forest Service was too rigid on its interpretation of the Wilderness Act. An example he gave was that packers who operate in the summer, it makes a lot of sense to have a cache in there for certain basic things. The Wilderness Act says a man is a visitor who will not remain, and they were "remaining" there. Do you feel that's a generalization that has some merit, that the Forest Service ought to be more flexible in making wilderness accessible?

JWT: I do. A similar issue emerged on Max Peterson's watch related to snow pack surveys. They wanted to use helicopters to do the job and Max said no. I overruled the regional forester in the Southwest when he prepared to issue a special permit to allow bulldozers to dig water tanks in the Gila Wilderness. There's a tight line that you walk in dealing with wilderness. I sometimes think we hew too tightly to that line. Another example from my watch; there was a Boy Scout troop hiking

USDA FOREST SERVICE PHOTO

on the Gila Wilderness and one—an Eagle Scout—got lost. The Forest Service authorized a helicopter search. They flew up and down the canyons, back and forth, and finally found the kid. He had set up his tent. They radioed back and requested permission to land. They had been hovering at thirty feet. The dispatcher asked about his condition. The search crew replied that he looked okay. They were told to drop him a note and tell him to stay where he is and that a trail crew will find him in the morning. The next morning he was not there. The trail crew either got an incorrect location or the kid left. Now the young man is out for a second night and we were looking for him again, and the request came to reauthorize a helicopter search. By now this whole episode is being talked about as the government idiocy *du jour* on the Rush Limbaugh show.

I called John Twiss, who took care of wilderness matters in the Washington Office. I said, “John, we authorized that helicopter search, and this time, whoever is in the helicopter is the incident commander. They have the authority to make a decision on the spot to pick that kid up or not.” John, a man that I very much admire, started to argue with me. I said, “John, what part of my instructions do you not understand? From now on if we authorize a helicopter search, whoever is in that helicopter is the incident commander and has authority to make decisions on whether or not to land in the wilderness. And he damn well better err on the side of safety.” Think of the ridiculousness of that incident. The helicopter has been flying for several hours, two or three hundred feet off the ground, and then it was hovering thirty feet off the ground, and the pilot has to have permission to drop another thirty feet, land, and check this kid out. Some restrictions can become ridiculous in short order. We don’t have adequate money to maintain trails. What would be wrong with announcing that, say, between June 1 and June 4 we’re going to be clearing a specific section of the trail here? A two-person crew can clear many more miles of trail per day with a chainsaw. If you’re offended by the sound, we can have more people work all summer long to do the same job. I think wilderness restrictions are too rigid. Money, too frequently, doesn’t come into the argument. Some of these absolute purity arguments are quasi-religious in



PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK WARD THOMAS

Jack Ward Thomas at a hunting club in New York State, October 1995.

nature. We’re trying to apply pragmatic, practical sense to a “religious” discussion, and it simply doesn’t fit very well.

HKS: I think maybe it was Keith Arnold who told me the story about someone who fell and was injured, had a broken leg. The ranger refused to authorize a helicopter lift, and it took three days to pack him out with great discomfort, you can understand that. Keith couldn’t understand how someone could make that kind of a decision. It could have been life threatening. I suppose shock could set in. But the ranger’s decision was it’s a wilderness area and you pack him out the old way.

JWT: If the guy had died or lost his leg the real wilderness aficionados would have said that’s the risk you take when you go in the wilderness. If you don’t want to take that kind of risk, don’t go. I might even say that cold sober while I was in good shape. But if I broke my leg—or one of my kids were hurt—I might want to reconsider my position. My old wilder-

ness partner, Will Brown, broke his arm in the Bob Marshall Wilderness when his horse rolled with him. It took him four days to get out, and he was not about to allow anybody to airlift him out; that would have been a violation of his deepest held principles.

HKS: This probably has happened to some extent anyway, but Bob Marshall himself when he was head of Forest Service recreation in the late ’30s proposed a hierarchy of wilderness. The really pristine isolated remote areas. Then he had larger areas where you could hear the sound of trucks on the highway, for example. You’re not going to legislate trucks off the highway. If you’re up on the rocks and there is a highway down in the valley bottom the sound of trucks are going to get up there. He had, I think, three categories of wilderness. Obviously that’s not what the act talks about. Does something like that from a management point of view make a lot of sense, or is that just opening a can of worms?

MORE ON ROADLESS AREAS

JWT: I think it does open a can of worms. But I think it makes a lot of sense, too. One of those categories that we keep discussing is “backcountry.” Most of the roadless areas will remain roadless. We will, in the end, have to call them something besides “roadless.” We will have to have some management objectives beyond excluding roads. In fact, the “roadless” regulations that were just challenged in court merely talked about roads—or, really, the absence of roads. At least in initial stages it might be possible to log in roadless areas provided it was done with a helicopter. We will ultimately have some classification of roadless areas as “backcountry” or something else that is not the “pure” wilderness. That will occur either de facto, or it will be a matter of regulation.

HKS: It’s pretty typical. I’m not sure what it represents, the administrative mind or forestry’s mindset but we call things by what they’re not. We have non-economic, non-commercial, roadless. We don’t say what they are, we say what they aren’t.

JWT: Non-game wildlife is another example.

HKS: Because we don’t have a label for them that works in our model somehow. It’s probably significant, the subtle interpretations that we make because of the vocabulary that’s assigned to them.

JWT: Wildlife biologists used to use the term “wildlife” to include all wildlife. Then we discussed “game” and “non-game” wildlife. Historically most budgets that supported agency biologists concerned game. When new thinking led to attention to all wildlife, we were faced with developing resources to deal with that expanded mission. The original focus on “game” came from the fact that resources—i.e., money—came from license fees paid by sportsmen.

HKS: But you’re suggesting that roadless areas ought to be named something other than roadless?

JWT: Yes.

HKS: They are something.

JWT: They are “something,” and that something has to do with a management purpose. They are backcountry, backcountry recreation, watershed areas—something—but not just roadless. The other thing about “roadless” is that it has always sounded a bit goofy to me. Are we going to make roadless areas? No. God made roadless areas. We make or create road areas. That entire issue harkens back to the first round of forest planning. The Forest Service was pushed by the Reagan administration for higher and higher levels of timber cutting. The only way that could be done was to make the definition of a suitable area for timber production so that it allowed inclusion of vast areas that we would likely never log and haven’t yet—which is proof that many of these should never have been declared suitable for timber harvest. That, in turn, caused us to go too hard and too fast with logging on the areas that were actually suitable for timber production. We get to the end of logging on those areas, and there was nowhere to go except into these more marginal “roadless” areas. So, on paper it looks like a lot of land with significant capability of producing timber was held off-limits to logging when that land was never really suitable for timber production in the first place.

HKS: High development costs for one thing.

JWT: Oh, development costs relative to potential yield are huge. Road standards, of course, have increased over time due to increasing environmental concerns, and the more stringent the road standards are, the more expensive the roads become. Besides that, this required building roads into really tough country. So road costs per unit were increasing at the same time the timber production per unit of land was decreasing. It simply didn’t make ecological, economic, or political sense to build roads into many, if not most, such areas. It was over starting in the early 1990s and almost completely over by 1993 due to Congress balking over the budget requests for roads. The Forest Service’s road building era was drawing to a close. And so we have “roadless” areas—wilderness, not backcountry recreation. “Roadless” implies nothing positive. These areas are simply just roadless. That is merely zoning. Something is going to happen to force an additional classification. I really believe

that. For example, in spite of its title under the Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act, we no longer practice “multiple use” anymore in the original meaning. We zone. We zone wilderness. We zone roadless areas. We zone national recreational areas. We zone national monuments. We zone wild and scenic rivers. The only thing that we haven’t zoned is the timberland. Probably a lot of this argument would cease if we zoned it all. I’d like to tell you I invented that idea, but I think Marion Clawson gets the credit. He believed that to have any stability in production of timber from the federal lands, some of the more productive lands would have to be zoned for the primary purpose of timber production.

HKS: Then basically this roadless ruckus, headlines day after day, the players are pretending to have something to talk about when really the backcountry people have what they want, no matter what judges say in most cases.

JWT: And not so much because of their actions, but largely because of pure economics. Entry into most roadless areas simply makes no sense—economically, ecologically, aesthetically, nor politically.

HKS: But they’re still lamenting.

JWT: Oh yes.

HKS: That’s part of the posturing of the organization that goes on.

JWT: I don’t doubt that they really believe in their mission and the righteousness thereof. They don’t like economic arguments applied to matters of the spirit. But the issue has been largely solved because the economics don’t pencil out. Then you can add on top of that social judgments and politics and religion and other factors, such as civil disobedience, as likely and pure pragmatism. Basically, roadless area considerations have been dictated by economics. □

Harold K. Steen is former President of the Forest History Society and is now Senior Fellow at the Pinchot Institute for Conservation.

Copies of the oral history with Jack Ward Thomas are available for \$21.00 per copy. Contact the Forest History Society at 919-682-9319.