

Jeff Williamson

April 13, 2012

Tucson, Arizona

Interviewed by Shela McFarlin

[Arizona Memory Project]

With support from the Cienega Watershed Partnership

Transcribed by Jardee Transcription, Tucson, Arizona

19:21 min:sec

SHELA MCFARLIN (SM): We're sitting outside here at the Nature Conservancy

building in Tucson, Arizona. You have been devoted to conservation issues in Arizona and Southeast Arizona. You've put 100,000 miles, at least, on your vehicle, and hours of time. What is it that draws you to commit your time and these resources?

JEFF WILLIAMSON (JW): I've always been fascinated by Southern Arizona. I spent a lot of time in my youth on my grandparents' farm in Yuma. We used to deliver livestock to the Willcox area. We'd come through the sky islands and go through the grasslands, et cetera, et cetera, and I always found it to be a breathtaking landscape. To be very honest with you, I've always preferred the desert over the forest, but that's just a personal prejudice.

I **became** very concerned as Tucson and Phoenix started to expand. My family also had property up in the Phoenix metropolitan area. We were near Baseline, which is now almost in the middle of the city, but it was all agriculture and citrus at that point in time. And I sort of watched, whether it was Yuma, whether it was Tucson, whether it was Phoenix—I even had family up in the parks in the Flagstaff area. That uncle was a physician, but he had horses and livestock and stuff, so I watched this sort of rural Arizona begin to disappear, and I got very, very concerned about that.

Now, the current down economy has slowed that down considerably, but I was here during the late 1940s, all the 1950s, into the 1960s, even when agriculture was going from family farms to corporate occupancies. And then [I] started wondering about, Do we have the water to support corporate farming, et cetera, et cetera? And I still work with the U. of A. and the folks at 4-H on what is 4-H for urban children, [unclear].

I grew up in a relatively rural setting, and I'm committed to those rural environments, and I've watched them disappear.

[~02:13]

SM: One of the [unclear] that we are devoting time to is the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, and that's near Sonoita, Arizona, so it's southeast of Tucson. Did you participate in getting that designated?

JW: Ya [yes], I was involved in the Phoenix metropolitan area. There's a company up there called DMB, who had an interest in the White Tank Mountains, et cetera, et cetera, and the old Caterpillar proving grounds. They wanted it for development purposes, and I was also involved with state trust lands at that point in time. And so I started talking to the BLM Phoenix office.

SM: Bureau of Land Management.

JW: Ya [yes], Bureau of Land Management with the Department of Agriculture, with State Trust Lands, with DMB, which was a development corporation, and thought a land exchange might be a good idea. A lot of other people agreed with that, and so I spent a little bit of time working on what was at that point in time a fairly major land exchange.

SM: Do you remember the first time you went out to what we now call Las Cienegas?

JW: (chuckles) Ya. It was probably 1952 or '3. I lived with my grandparents at that point in time. He was taking some livestock to Willcox and we went through that area. That was before I-10.

SM: Wow, before I-10. O.K., that must have been fun, coming from Yuma with livestock.

JW: Ya, it was fun. Obviously you didn't go in June or July.

SM: Yes! (laughter)

JW: And now you know what's interesting? Most of the livestock and stuff that's sold over in Eastern Arizona is done by the computer. People **don't** take their livestock to public sales anymore very much, and so on and so forth. Computer technology has taken over the role.

SM: Right now, you participate every year with the biological planning process, which talks about grazing and livestock and conservation and all kinds other issues on Las Cienegas. But it didn't start off as smooth. You tell a very good story about a couple of people who were involved in this very early on—Mike Siedmon [phonetic] and John Donaldson.

JW: John was a rancher, but he was originally out of the Connecticut area and stuff. He came to Arizona because he had some medical issues, and this was a recuperative environment at that point in time. And he played polo here, he was at the U. of A. A thoughtful, but aggressive rancher. He owned several properties in the region. He tried to manage those properties to retain as much of

the ecological value as he possibly could, before others thought that was inordinate.

There was another guy from New York, Mike Siedmon. He was an original Earth-firster. He was out of this area. He worked at animal shelters, and he was one of the founders of what they called the Grazing Clearinghouse. The Grazing Clearinghouse was a bunch of enviros who were focused on doing anything and everything they could to cause agencies to mitigate for agricultural impacts. They both had a real interest in Las Cienegas, and the creek itself, because it wasn't fenced at that point in time, et cetera, et cetera, and it had a lot of issues with ATVs were starting to be fun and important, and a lot of recreational uses on those landscapes.

And what was so interesting is there was almost nothing in Mike's education or background, and John's education and background, that gave them a point of common interest, except they both had an abiding love for effectively functioning nature. And they would spend time together, thinking that the point of being together was to fight over the other one's perspective. And what they did during that period of time is discover that they had a shared interest, and were looking to achieve compatible outcomes that they both wanted to contribute to and they thought were important. What everyone thought was going to grow into a major war, grew into a lasting and important friendship, and it was all around the love of nature.

SM: And both those individuals have passed on now, but they have left a real legacy of how we work together.

[~06:58]

JW: Yes. John took over the Empire when the land exchange went through and BLM picked up the property. BLM was trying to create a resource management plan for this new parcel of property that it had, and it put together a whole host of meetings of diverse interests surrounding the ranch, the area, and stuff. And Mike and John showed up. Mike showed up, I guess he was concerned about the effective functioning of Cienega Creek. John showed up because he needed to graze the allotments—he held the allotments. Everybody thought that they were going to go to war, and it grew into a love fest.

SM: You made an interesting statement that we really shouldn't try to change nature, but that we need to engage in it, and we need to support nature. What do you mean by that?

JW: Humans have evolved in a way that there's a presumption often that the ecology, nature, et cetera, et cetera, are in service to **us**, and that we have the right to interact with those services in ways that might exhaust them, or might diminish their values, et cetera, et cetera. We are simply—and I've felt this since I was a small child working on farms—we are wholly dependent upon natural systems functioning in quality ways that support not only **our** well-being, but the well-being of the rest of the natural community. As a culture and as a society, we haven't necessarily taken that to heart, and we have not made a commitment to do that. I've seen actually, over the last two or three decades, [seen] even the commodity-based industries—forestry, mining, BLM, agri-business, et cetera, et cetera—there is a change going on out there. People understand that there are

limitations. And also, the other thing **I'm** witnessing is not only do they understand that the system has limited capacity, but to extend that capacity, protect that capacity, what we need to do is change our attitudes, our behaviors, and our practices—not nature—but rather the way we engage it. And my **own** feeling is that we—and I feel this very strongly—we have a trust responsibility to emerging and future generations to at least give everyone an equal opportunity to a quality of life that we've enjoyed. And I think the agencies, if I'd said that in the sixties or seventies, they'd have laughed me out of the room. But I've actually watched those cultures start to evolve.

Having said that, I will say I have a concern. And that concern is climate. I think that if you look at all the real information, the data that is available on climate, I think what we've done with carbon and emissions, et cetera, I think there **are** discernible changes in life cycles of watersheds, water availability, quality of land characteristics and stuff. I'm very, very concerned that we take the sort of underlying evolution. We're used to nature evolving over time and at a pace where we can respond to that change. I think it's exaggerated, and I think it has the potential to be a true shift in terms of the capacity of the system to support the kinds of life cycles that we're living. And I think there's a couple of things we can do about that. We can take the science seriously; we can try to learn from what the system is doing; we need to monitor. We really need to be very adaptive. And yet our culture doesn't tolerate adaptation very much. And so we need to be creative in our monitoring, adaptive in our approach to interacting with landscapes, so on and so forth. And we need to change the process, the

commodity-based living, the commercial lifestyles, the short-term immediate gains taking priority.

And the other thing that you have to at some point in time address is just the sheer numbers of people that live on these landscapes and consume [aggressively? ~11:21]. How do you create value systems around living in ways that conserve?

SM: Now part of the answer has got to be—this is happening in **our** lifetime—and we have begun to work with young people (JW: Yes.) and we really believe in working with young people to sustain their interests and their values on the land. What do you think we need to be doing?

JW: I think we're starting to do it. I think a lot of the work that Richard Louv has done with his *Last Child In the Woods* and others. I think what we need to do is create reward systems that acknowledge people that make choices that steward natural systems—create reward systems around doing **that**, as opposed to reward systems around.... Right now, yesterday, I was reading something from the Department of Agriculture. Up in the state of Washington, they have a model program where they're working with several schools that are growing community-based food for those that cannot afford quality diets and stuff, and I think you're starting to see more and more of that.

SM: In Tucson there is a big [unclear ~12:29].

JW: Yes, there is. With the Forest Service running programs now, BLM is running programs now, the Department of Agriculture is running programs now, 4-H is

redesigned. How do you stimulate urban food programs stewarded by young people? So there's a lot of that going on, and I think that's [hope?].

[~12:47]

SM: What do you think nonprofits like Cienega Watershed Partnership need to be doing?

JW: I think they need to be doing more of what they're already trying to do. I think in the last twenty years you've seen multiple stakeholder groups emerge with different interests represented at the table. It used to be you would go to meetings, and there'd be a lot of people there who think just like you do, and have your own shared concerns. I've seen that community and those groups diversify. They listen better than they used to. They try to understand others' perspectives and experiences, and I think we need much, much, much more of that kind of.... The stakeholder group [unclear ~13:31] about today, the Northern Jaguar Project—O.K.?—it started out as being a single-species program. O.K., it's now very concerned about all the animals that are dependent upon those ecologies. It's very concerned about connectivity and fragmentation. It's very concerned that you in effect are trying to put together healthy ecologies that support a quality of life across sector, spectrum, and jurisdiction. And I think we need to do more of that, and I think the agencies get that.

SM: O.K., great! You sound very hopeful. What do you think in a hundred years, will you, your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren, if they come, will they find a resemblance then to what we really value and see out there today on Las Cienegas, or in the Cienega watershed as a whole?

[~14:24]

JW: I **am** hopeful. I think the real question becomes one of if the economy recovers, O.K., can we create value systems that value open space, and effectively function ecological systems? And if we attach incentives to people living in and supporting those kinds of things, as opposed to, “I’m gonna do another subdivision right now.” My view is that we **can** learn from the experiences that we’ve had. And we know that that sort of rapid growth moves forward in unsustainable ways, creates **risk** for quality of life. I’m hoping that when we recover from this economy, we move on to stewarding ecologies that are healthy and robust across generations.

I think one of our challenges—I’ve talked about what I think what some of our successes have been—I think some of our challenges have to do with one of the last things I just talked about, the sort of underlying value systems. We have regulatory agencies and universities across—whether it’s at the municipal level, at the county or the state level, at the federal level, et cetera—that were designed around producing opportunities for people to consume. And sustainability has not been a big issue for a long period of time. I think what we need to do right now is work with all those information bodies and bureaucracies and regulatory systems in ways that we create real incentives for them to be innovative and creative, and changing the underlying values so the society is willing to live differently because it adds value in new and effective ways.

I mean, driving here today, I was listening to some stuff on one of the public radio stations about air quality. And there’s a huge debate going on right

now about the Congress is concerned that the state and state agencies are not managing air quality in ways that truly understand the health implications of it. And they haven't regulated their own state environments, and aren't enforcing those environments. They're being forced into being much more aggressive. And what they're hoping is that the community would arrive at, It's in our best interest to manage our affairs in ways that respect the effect of our air quality on New Mexico, so on and so forth. I think that really needs to be encouraged across jurisdictions.

The other thing I think needs to be done is the underlying economy. O.K., we've produced an economy that doesn't truly do true cost-benefit analysis across the life cycle of product development use, commercialization, et cetera, et cetera. So I think we need to change the metrics on **that** as well. I need to know what the implications are for me owning and driving the truck I drive. I can't figure that out. If I look at the cost of the road system, if I look at the subsidies that go to the parts and assembly of the vehicle, if I look at its maintenance, I make probably uninformed and maybe destructive choices, because I don't **truly** understand the implication for that lifestyle choice I made.

If you look at water in Southern Arizona, that needs to be a shared concern. And whether you're in the housing industry, or subdivisions, you're in golf courses, you're in agri-business, O.K., we all need there to be ways to live sustainably, with a quality water system that supports us now and into the future. And yet we don't account for the plans and operations that make that possible. So

I think we need to be better informed, more honest with each other and ourselves, making better choices.

SM: I appreciate, again.... This is April 13, Friday the thirteenth, 2012, Shela McFarlin interviewing Jeff Williamson.

JW: Another thing just quickly, I agree with what you just said, and the thing that was so amazing about a process that you helped [plead? ~18:53] over on Las Cienegas, was you take people as different in background, attitude, and beliefs as John Donaldson and Mike Siedmon, and cause them to come together in ways that shared many of these values. I learned a lot from both of them—and from you!

SM: And I miss them! I used to see John Donaldson, no matter how early I was out there, he was there, he was on his horse—always. So I miss them both.

JW: Ya, me too.

SM: Thanks, Jeff.

JW: Thank **you**.

[END OF INTERVIEW]