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Interview no. 863

Billy Pat McKinney

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
ORAL HISTORY INSTITUTE

BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, 1994

INTERVIEWEE/ADDRESS: Billy Pat McKinney, Jr., Box 433, H.C. 65,
Black Gap Wildlife Management Area, Alpine, Tx. 79830

INTERVIEW BY: John R. Moore

DATE: August 20, 1994

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 1 hour, 50 minutes/English

SUMMARY: McKinney is a life-long resident of the Big Bend area. His ancestors arrived in the area in the 1870s. His great-great-grandfather, Thaddeus McKinney, came from Gonzales and Uvalde, Tx., to the Big Bend. McKinney Springs, on what formerly was the Combs Cattle Company, is named for Thaddeus McKinney. A great-uncle, Divine McKinney, discovered some of the first quicksilver deposits in the Terlingua area. His great-grandfather, Earl McKinney, was raised in the Marathon area. His grandfather, Pat C. McKinney, was a rancher and in the 1940s became a government mountain lion hunter, living in the Rosillos Mountains. Pat C. McKinney, as a government lion hunter, worked in cooperation with the National Park Service in the early years of the park, controlling predators in the park that preyed on neighboring ranchers' livestock. In the early years of the park, policy permitted predator control on park property. His father, Billy Pat McKinney, Sr., also was a cowboy, rancher and government hunter in the Big Bend area.

McKinney, Jr.'s expertise is in Big Bend wildlife. He has spent much of his life tracking, trapping, hunting and managing mountain lions and other predators, desert bighorn sheep, deer and bear in the Black Gap Wildlife Management Area and on state property in the recently established Big Bend State Ranch Natural Area at Lajitas, Tx.

He offers perspective on living in remote, isolated areas of the Big Bend. He relates second-hand knowledge of establishment of Big Bend National Park and Black Gap Wildlife Management Area. He describes the objectives and public uses of the Black Gap area. He discusses his relations with Mexican citizens and landowners, the National Park Service, sportsmen and the spin-off tourism generated by Big Bend National Park. He also offers

candid opinions on wildlife and land use and preservation. He expresses opinions on how and why former Big Bend residents sold their property for inclusion in the national park and on the feasibility of creation of an international park with Mexico.

He discusses his personal efforts to reintroduce desert bighorn sheep to the Big Bend area, and he offers insight into why the black bear is returning to the park. He provides an overview of Mexican landowners' attitudes regarding wildlife and how their actions are actually benefitting improvement of wildlife populations in the park and surrounding areas.

Big Bend National Park
Oral History Project

Bill Pat McKinney
By John R. Moore

August 20, 1994

M: Big Bend Oral History Project. Interview with Billy Pat McKinney of Black Gap, Texas. Interview by long distance telephone on August 20, 1994. Interview by John Moore, University of Texas at El Paso.

Mr. McKinney, I understand that your family are long-time residents of the Big Bend area. I wonder if you can explain to me how your family got to that part of Texas?

K: Yes, sir. We moved out here- when I say we, my family and ancestors- moved out here in the late 1800s with the Combs Cattle Company. They were quite a cattle operation out in this area and they had been a big operation in Uvalde, [Texas] and the Gonzales, [Texas] area.

M: Combs. Is that C-O-M-B-S?

K: Yes, sir. They're still a pretty good-sized cattle operation in the Marathon Basin, [Texas] area. They moved out here. One of the McKinney's was a foreman for that organization and they moved to this area in the late 1800s.

M: Was the Pitt-Combs Cattle Company operating in what is now Big Bend National Park?

K: Yes, sir. They operated over in the McKinney Springs, [Texas]

area. A man by the name of T.L. McKinney left his name on that spring. They weren't there a very long time before they moved their operation up to the Marathon area. But back in those days the markets were down along the Rio Grande toward Chihuahua City, so most people settled around the river instead of up in the grass country until the railroad service got well established. Then they moved up into the better grass country.

M: So American ranchers were selling their livestock in Mexico?

K: Yes. They sold a lot of their livestock in Mexico. Of course, some of it was sold to Fort Davis, [Texas] or Fort Stockton, [Texas]. They sold cattle to the government.

M: To the military posts?

K: To the military, yes, sir. But a lot of their markets were in Chihuahua City and some of the Mexican towns.

M: And again, that's because of lack of transportation initially?

K: Yes. All the trails were out of Mexico this way since Mexico was settled so early in history.

M: You mentioned McKinney Springs that still bears your family name. Do you know which of your ancestors that was named for? The T.L., was he an uncle?

K: Well, he would have been a great-great-great-grandfather. His name was Thaddeus.

M: T-H-A-D-D-E-U-S? Something like that?

K: I think so.

M: And he had come from where, Mr. McKinney?

K: I think he was originally from Gonzales, Texas. I think he moved out here from Uvalde.

M: You mentioned the late 1880s. Do you know a specific year that they came?

K: No, sir. I think it was in the 1870s, but I don't recall the exact year.

M: Did your family live at McKinney Springs? Is that how it got the name?

K: I'm not sure about that. I think that they settled right in there with the Combs Cattle Company and probably bought a homestead around that spring or something. They lived there long enough to put their name there, but I don't think they lived there a real long time.

M: Were there other ranchers in that area or would the Combs Cattle Company have been among the first commercial ranchers?

K: Well, there was the G-4 Ranch. It's probably one of the most famous ranches down in the Big Bend area. I don't know exactly who had that ranch, but it was a huge ranch. It encompassed most of what is the Big Bend National Park now. They were here in the late 1800s. It was called the G-4 Ranch. I don't know exactly who owned it. I know that James Gillette ran it. He was a famous Texas Ranger in the Alpine, [Texas] area. He ran that ranch for years.

M: Could you trace if T.L. McKinney was your great-great-great grandfather? Trace more of your family connection to the area.

K: Okay. One of his sons was Divine McKinney, who is credited with some of the first quicksilver discoveries over in the Terlingua area. Him and another man- I don't recall who the man was- were partners on the Rainbow Mine which was a big strike before the Chisos Mining Company came in there. They had quite a dispute over the land on that thing. But he was credited with some of the first start of that quicksilver industry around Terlingua. There were a lot of us. It's hard to say who owns bogs and everything, but my grandfather is Pat C. McKinney. He grew up in the Marathon area. His father's name was Earl McKinney. That was another one of Payless's boys. He worked in the Marathon area as a rancher for quite a while for the Combs Cattle Company...my grandfather. Then he went to work for the government as a government lion hunter in the [19]40s.

M: This is Pat C.?

K: Yes, sir. That's my grandfather, Pat C. McKinney. He lived on the Rosillos Ranch...had quarters in north Rosillos, which is in the park now. Some of that new property had been acquired seven or eight years ago. He lived there and he died there. His job was to protect the hairgoats and sheep that were in the Christmas Mountain Range and the Rosillos Range from predatory animals.

M: And this was in the 1940s?

K: The [19]40s and [19]50s.

M: And the Park was established in 1944.

K: He worked with the Park Service back in those days. The Park Service allowed him to come into the Park and remove lions that were coming out of the Park and killing sheep or goats in the Rosillos Mountains or the Christmas Mountains. He had to be accompanied by a Ranger. It's unheard of nowadays, but in those days they did allow that.

M: That was the policy of the Park Service?

K: At that time. I don't know if that was a local policy or a national policy, but they did allow for him to come in there and take. He wasn't allowed in there to hunt at free will, but when he had a mountain lion that was coming across the boundary and killing sheep and goats and then going back, making it hard to catch him, they did allow him to go in there and remove him. He removed a few that way.

M: How did he determine, through tracking skills or whatever, that a particular lion was preying on livestock and going back into the park? Did he have to verify that to the...

K: Yes, he had to verify. See, those ranches butt up right against the fence line, right against the boundary. It would be just four strands of barbed wire fence or net wire. That's the only thing that is the boundary down there. Of course, a mountain lion knows nothing about a boundary. It doesn't mean anything to them. What I suspect is that a mountain lion would come into private property on a bed ground right there close, kill, and probably go back into the Park. It makes it sound that what the lion is doing is premeditated, but it's

not.

M: He's just working his range.

K: It's probably an area...that the best place for him to let during the day was over in the Park. Do you understand what I mean?

M: Just because of the natural lay of the land.

K: The natural lay of the land. Then he would come out every night and go into where these sheep were bedded down and- it's just natural for him to do that- and kill. After eating a little off of one or two he would go back into the Park, which makes him hard to catch. I suspect that was the situation because that would be the only way you would really tell when a lion was staying in the Park and killing over on private land. It wouldn't be in excess of twenty or thirty miles. It was probably more like two or three miles.

M: At close range. Do you know how your grandfather got involved in lion hunting for the government? Was this for the federal government or the state government?

K: The federal government. At that time it was the U.S. Biological Survey and later on it became what it is now the Animal Damage Control. It used to be under the Department of the Interior just like the Big Bend National Park. Now, it's under the Department of Agriculture. It's been moved over. When he was working, they were working under the same...the Department of Interior.

He had ranched all of his life. The McKinneys' had

brought hounds out with them. They've always had hunting dogs and it was just natural for him to protect his livestock and the livestock of the people that they ranched for. He'd hunt mountain lions for sport, too, so he'd already built up a pretty good reputation as a lion hunter. During the [19]30s and [19]40s... . It's hard to make a living out in this country unless you either work for the government or the State or as a rancher.

M: The Depression was still affecting a lot of people.

K: The Depression. Well, it's always been a depressed area. We never have recovered from the Depression. (chuckles) I think where he got started in government service was when he worked for the Hoof and Mouth disease thing as a river rider. They stationed men along the river. This was in the early [19]40s-when Hoof and Mouth disease broke out in Mexico. They stationed men all along the river from Brownsville, [Texas] to California, I guess. Their job was to turn Mexican cattle back to Mexico or to destroy those cattle. My grandfather was with that program until it ceased. I think that's when he got a taste of government work and then went right into the government lion hunting. He always had a little ranching interest on the side, too. He kept a few cattle and some country at least.

M: When was your grandfather a river rider? Would that be in the late [19]30s, early [19]40s?

K: It was early [19]40s. That program, I think, lasted about

five years. He was stationed at Lajitas, [Texas]. Then he was at Johnson's Farm, which is in the park.

M: That's just east of Castolon, [Texas]?

K: Yes, sir, east of Castolon. Then he was at Pole Canyon, which is...if you're on the Black Gap, just a little ways west of the mouth of the Maravillas where the mouth of the Maravillas Creek that drains the Marathon area comes into the river. What they would do is ride. One day they would ten miles east or north or south, however the river ran. They'd ride up river ten miles and meet the guy that was riding down river that day ten miles. They would meet and then turn and go back to their camp. The next day they would ride the other direction. This way the whole river was covered every day. My grandmother and my father would haul groceries to them and it was quite a deal. There were a lot of men involved in that out here.

M: I wonder if your grandfather would have known Guy Lee at Marathon?

K: Yes, he certainly would have. They were good friends.

M: I interviewed him back on my last trip down there in March, I guess.

K: I'm glad you did because Guy's dead now.

M: Yes. He died less than a month and a half, I guess, after I talked with him.

K: Yeah, my grandfather knew him well. The Lees' were involved in that river riding. Nearly everybody that didn't have

enough cattle that tied them down went to work on that program because it was about all there was. A lot of men were returning from the war and, you know, kind of got in on the last of it, but it was a job.

M: Plus, I guess, it was a good occupation for a cowboy or somebody who had leanings that way.

K: Yeah, they'd already had their horses and stuff. I don't remember my daddy saying or my grandfather saying, but I suspect they got paid a little bit for horse and mule feed. I know that when he was working for the government he got thirty dollars extra a month to feed his horses and his hounds. I suspect when he was a river rider he got something. They probably got a little bit of mileage on their pickups. It was a little cash money, but it was a far cry... .

M: It was a boom to their economy, anyway.

K: Yes, sir, because the livestock business was a once a year pay day deal. You'd have to make the best you could until you sold calves or sold wool or lambs or whatever, but you had to wait until you had something marketable to sell. There were a lot of times where there was a long period between that, so the steady paycheck was something that was pretty good to a lot of people in this area.

M: Your grandfather being there in the area at the time Big Bend National Park and then the State Park that preceded it, do you recall your grandfather ever voicing any opinions or observations about what was occurring with the park idea?

K: Well, he was like everybody else on the outside. A lot of people down there sold that land willingly and wanted to sell it and were glad to get out of business, especially down in the Tornillo Flat, [Texas]. A lot of that old country had been just burned up...used up. It wasn't raining, especially in the [19]50s- of course, that was after the Park was established- but they weren't making a good living on it. It was tough. Those people sold willingly and there were no hard feelings over that. The hard feelings came when Mr. Homer Wilson was moved forcefully out of the mountains. Homer Wilson was everybody's friend. He was an educated man. He was a very fine rancher. He owned some of the real productive country up in Chisos Mountains. He was making it pay and he didn't want to sell. It left a bitter taste in everybody's mouth that he was forced off of that place. That's where a lot of the sentiments about the Big Bend National Park begin...right there.

M: It's interesting, Mr. McKinney. I've interviewed Homer Wilson's daughter. Her name is Clothier now, Patricia Wilson Clothier. She didn't mention to me that they were actually forced off. At least I didn't understand that. He was one of the few holdouts to your understanding?

K: My understanding- and I don't know that this is positively true. This is just what's been handed down and told. You might find that this is not right. It doesn't matter if it was right or wrong. This is what's perceived.

- M: It's still what everybody believes or many believe.
- K: What everybody understands of the story that was told is that Mr. Wilson was forced off...that the sheriff came down and told him that he'd have to leave. Then he went to Uvalde. And the story around here is that he didn't last very long after he got out of these mountains. He passed on. You know, he was very bitter about being taken out of the mountains. I never knew Mr. Wilson. I never knew any of his kin folks. I never heard anything, but those are the stories that have always been around here and, not just my family, it's been several families.
- M: Nonetheless, there is a perception, as you say, that not everybody was totally willing.
- K: And, like I said, that kind of got it started. A lot of people don't realize that most of those people sold out willingly. They were glad to get rid of it.
- M: A number people I've interviewed, including Julia Nail Moss and some others, confirm that. They say that their family was struggling, trying to recoup during the Depression in any way. Livestock prices were down and, as you say, the land was not producing very well because of drought.
- K: It was tough. The State went in there about the right time to buy up a lot of that country. Of the stories I've heard, they were offering from one to three dollars an acre. That would have been a good way to get out. Even if you wanted to get out of business it was probably hard to sell that country.

M: There were no other prospective buyers?

K: No, because everybody was in the same shape that you were in. The land had no value but the grass on it. Really what you were buying was grass and if your country was used up, then there was no value to it. The land nowadays has value for its wildlife and for its scenic beauty because there's a lot of rich people that are into buying land. At that time rich people bought land in other places. It wasn't in the Big Bend area.

M: In more urban developments, or whatever. Your grandfather, I assume, Pat C., was born in that area. What about your father?

K: My father was born in Marathon, Texas. He became a pilot at a very young age. He started to fly when he was thirteen years old. There was a man who came in there and put in a little flying service, a man that was just back from World War II. My father wasn't old enough to go World War II. He just missed it by about a year. He would have been old enough to have been drafted. There was a man that came out of the war, I don't know, thirty or forty, something like that. He had learned to fly. I don't know. Mr. Casparis might have had something to do with that, too. He was kind of a famous pilot around Alpine. My father started trying to fly when he was around thirteen years old. I think he was probably flying when he was sixteen or seventeen with Mr. George Hargess. I mean, Bill Hargess. George Hargess was his daddy. Then Bill

Hargess went over to Fort Stockton and started a crop dusting service and my father followed him over there and became a crop duster with him. They flew chartered flights into Mexico and they also had an Eagle Club put together. They hunted eagles out of airplanes for ranchers. This was prior to the law changing.

M: Because eagles were also predators on livestock?

K: Oh, yes, sir. They would kill young lambs and kids. You've got to realize that back in those days, livestock was king and anything and everything nearly will kill a young sheep or a young kid goat. They're very easy to kill and anything that's a predator will kill them. Back in those days the rule of thumb was to try to sterilize the country for miles around. You didn't go for the offending animal; you tried to wipe them out, annihilate them, eradicate them. It sounds evil nowadays, but that's the way it was. Nobody questioned it; it was just the way everybody tried to make the maximum amount they could out of their livestock. So in doing that they provided a service to the ranchers in the area.

They flew quite a big area...a lot of the Trans-Pecos. They had Supercubs, which is a small, two-seat airplane with shotguns mounted on the struts. They'd done a lot of eagle hunting and a lot of coyote hunting. It was a way of life until sometime in the [19]60s. Well in the late [19]50s, I think, is when my father quit. He went to work for the United States Border Patrol.