

**SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA — SPRING 2010**

Paula Benschhoff was born in Tampa but has lived in Sarasota since she was a young girl. She began working at Myakka River State Park in 1980 as a Park Ranger, and now 30 years later, holds the position Park Service Specialist. Paula has a deep love and appreciation for Florida's natural areas and is a strong advocate for land conservation. When she is not working on land management, Paula enjoys collecting oral histories from some of Sarasota's oldest residents. She is the author of the book Myakka, published by Pineapple Press in 2002.



Interview with: Paula Benschhoff
Date of Interview: April 9, 2010
Interviewer: Kaitlyn Bock
Subject of Interview: Myakka River State Park
Transcriber: Kaitlyn Bock

Bock: Can you introduce yourself?

Benschhoff: Sure. My name is Paula Jean Benschhoff. I am a park service specialist at Myakka River State Park.

Bock: Where were you born?

Benschhoff: Tampa, Florida. Oh, sorry... Let's try that again. I was born in Tampa, Florida.

Bock: And when did you first come to Sarasota?

Benschhoff: I came to Sarasota when I was in third grade. I went to second grade in Bradenton and third grade to Sarasota.

Bock: So you've lived in Sarasota ever since then?

Benschhoff: I've lived in Sarasota since the third grade except for the time that my husband was in the Navy, and then we were out of the state for about four years.

Bock: Is your family from Florida?

Benshoff: Yeah, both my parents were born in Florida and all of my grandparents were born in Florida.

Bock: So you're a native Floridian?

Benshoff: I would say that would make me a native Floridian.

Bock: Do you consider yourself a Floridian?

Benshoff: Definitely. In fact a lot of people are very... A lot of people are patriotic for being Americans; I think people from Florida are patriotic for being Floridians.

Bock: So, how long have you lived at Myakka?

Benshoff: My husband and I bought a piece of property and built a house in 1976. So, we've been living in Old Myakka since 1976. We lived in Sarasota prior to that.

Bock: Do you remember the first time you came to Myakka? Do you have any early memories?

Benshoff: You would think that someone growing up in Sarasota would have a lot of early memories of Myakka River State Park but for some reason we went to Oscar Scherer. So the first time I remember coming to Myakka River State Park was with my husband before we were married and we came and picnicked at the Myakka River back behind the log pavilion. That was also the first time that I saw an alligator in the wild—which just seems odd for someone born and raised in Florida for someone not to see alligators in the wild. But, you know, before they really cracked down on poachers in Florida you didn't see alligators common at all between say the 1950s and the late 1970s.

Bock: Was that scary when you first saw that?

Benshoff: No, I think it was really exciting to see an alligator in the wild. Of course I had seen them in many tourist attractions that I had gone to ever since I was a young child. But, it was exciting.

Bock: Were there any other surprises that came from visiting some of the natural parks around here?

Benshoff: When I first came to Myakka and we were picnicking at Clay Gully I thought it would be interesting to see what was back in the woods. So, I went off the main drive and walked about 50 feet back in the woods and saw a park ranger truck coming and ran back to the woods real fast because I thought we weren't allowed off the paved road. So I remember that as being very unusual. But, it is a different way of looking at things. I didn't know we were allowed to go exploring in the woods back then.

Bock: So, I guess you've been here for awhile. I know you said you don't have too many memories but would you say you've noticed any differences between the Sarasota community. How has it changed since you've been here?

Benshoff: Ok, so your question is about Sarasota rather than Myakka?

Bock: Yeah.

Benshoff: Okay. Wow, of course there has been major changes. The number of people! Oh, where do I start? It's just such a big change. Now I can remember interviewing people and asking them "How has it changed since you came back 20 years ago," and they would be lost for words because there is such a huge change that you have a hard time expressing it. We used to walk everywhere. I remember being a teenager and reading in the newspaper. They had this list of the crimes that had occurred, and there was so seldom to be any kind of a crime that if someone did something like steal, you'd go, "Oh that must be someone that came down from up north" because people from Florida didn't commit crimes (*chuckle*). That was our view point back then. And of course we walked to school. We walked everywhere. We spent our weekends walking to the beach, up and down the beach, and then walking to the mainland. We would probably walk eight hours a day.

Bock: What beach, was it Siesta Key?

Benshoff: Um, we would go—we would walk from South Gate, to Siesta Beach, down to Crescent Beach, and then back up to Siesta, and then all the way back to South Gate again.

Bock: So when did you first get involved with working at Myakka?

Benshoff: I started working at Myakka River State Park in 1980. Prior to that I had worked at the Division of Forestry, and so was familiar with the park through my job that way. I was a dispatcher, so I was aware when they were burning at Myakka River. The forest rangers would come out and help the park rangers burn and one of the forest rangers lived right across the street from Myakka River State Park, so he was kind of my intimate contact with the park. In fact, he is the one that suggested that I work here. And, he talked to the park manager, and I think it was his influence that got me the job here.

Bock: Why did you decide to work here?

Benshoff: Oh, it's a terrible reason. I should probably lie. Every time I talk to a reporter and I tell them, they're like, "Oh, you shouldn't tell us that. You should say, 'Ever since I was a child I dreamed of being a park ranger and it was finally something that I realized was my fondest dream.'" The truth is there was a time period in Sarasota that there was no gas and people had to line up to buy gas and so we kind of thought that eventually we'd be walking everywhere. So when this park... forest ranger suggested that I apply to Myakka River and I had already moved out to Old Myakka, I thought, "Gee, it would be very hard to get into the police department and go to work every day. It would be so much easier if it was close to home." So unfortunately, that I was my motivation for applying for the job.

Bock: But you had environmental interest beforehand?

Benshoff: I did, but it wasn't exactly declared, it was kind of assumed. If you grow up in the woods in Florida, you have these interests that you just take for granted because you spend your

day building forts, playing in the woods and swimming in the river. And you don't think of that as an environmental interest you just think of that as normal play.

Bock: Is this what you always expected, as far as a career?

Benshoff: Well, actually, when I applied for this job I was really afraid because I liked my job as a dispatcher at the police department and I had no idea what a forest ranger—excuse me—a PARK ranger did. I knew what a forest ranger did. So there was one female park ranger who was working here and I went and asked her, “Quick, quick... Tell me! I have an interview! What do you do here?” (*Laughs*) And so I had not a clue what park rangers did, and everything was a huge surprise to me. When I was interviewed I can remember they asked me “Why do you want to be a park ranger?” and that was hard to say because I didn't know what a park ranger did. So I thought about it for a minute and I said “Well, the truth is I really believe it is important to take care of our natural areas, and I hear that if you're a park ranger you can teach kids how important that is. That's something that is very important to me, so I think I would be very good at teaching kids to love the woods.” And that's the only part of my interview that I remember.

Bock: It must have won them over, though.

Benshoff: I always thought that, but later on I asked the park ranger and he didn't even remember that part.

Bock: So, let me get this straight—you started out as a park ranger and you're a naturalist now?

Benshoff: I started out as a park ranger and very often... (*thinking*) Okay, I started out and I worked 15 years as a park ranger. At that time you could either be a park ranger or you could go into park management. There was nothing in between. So when the position on park services specialist came about, I was one of the very first people in the park to get that position. But whenever you speak in public and they say, “So are you a park ranger?” and you say, “Oh, I'm a park service specialist,” they always go “What is that?” and it would be so hard to explain what that was so I went to my park manager and said, “Can I just say I'm a park naturalist?” and he said, “Sure.” So then I'd go out and I'd speak and they'd say, “So are you a park ranger?” and I'd say, “No, I'm a park naturalist,” and they would say, “Oh good,” and I didn't have to explain so it worked.

Bock: So in your opinion, what is a park naturalist? What does that title mean?

Benshoff: You're asking what does my title park naturalist mean in my current position or in the long view?

Bock: Well, over the long view.

Benshoff: Okay. When I first asked to be called a park naturalist, it was because primarily what I do is work on land management, prescribed burns, exotic removal. I would do a lot of park programs, classes, working with the public, answering questions, identifying things. So it just kind of seemed natural to be called a park naturalist because it has to do with learning what is there, and passing that information on, and keeping what is there, there. It kind of made a big circle. These days I don't have the same job description so I would probably answer it different for my

specific position. However, the position hasn't really, technically, changed. I still have the same classification. The big difference is now we have two park service specialists and they divided the job into two different categories, one that focuses more on visitor service, interpretation, working with the public and one that focuses more on land management, prescribed fire, exotic control, a little bit of monitoring—not too much—but more the natural management than the people management.

Bock: Could you take me through a regular day for you?

(phone rings)

Benshoff: Sorry! Should we wait till after?

Bock: Oh, I think it will be okay... *(Laughs)*

Benshoff: *(speaking of her coworker talking on the phone)* They're talking about me.

Bock: I think they are talking about me!

Benshoff: Okay. So to answer, "What do I do on a typical day?" That is really difficult because there is such a wide variety. It's easier to just think of one day and then another day is so much different. Yesterday we conducted a prescribed burn. So we came in, made phone calls, got maps together, permits together, got the crew together, went out, discussed the plan and then we burned one of the zones. And then after we finished burning it, we put out all the fire, came back, cleaned up the equipment and went home. So that was a pretty easy day to describe. So today—what did I do today? This morning I came in, gave out some assignments to the park volunteer that works on land management. To where to go to control cogongrass, made some maps for him, helped with some herbicide mixture, prepared for a Leadership Sarasota class that was coming in, did a program, took them for a guided walk on the nature trail and then rushed back real quick to do an interview with you and go through old photographs. So basically these days I'm more geared toward land management. It could be something like going out and checking the burn map and seeing if something is ready to burn, being able to see if cogongrass is ready to bloom and we need to go out and pick the blossoms or herbicide it, or working on an invasive plant management plan... working on databases, to be able to better manage the data that we get from both fire and exotics. I think that's enough, but you get the idea.

Bock: You mentioned burns, what is that like?

Benshoff: Is your question What is it like to conduct a prescribed fire? Okay. I could give a technical answer or an emotional answer. But, I think, prescribed fire is probably one of the favorite duties that most park rangers have. Oh yeah, because there is a little bit of pyromania in all of us. It's a little bit exciting, I mean, even though we've done it hundreds of times and it's over and over again, every single burn is different. And it's sort of like a game. It's a strategy. You go out there and you make a plan. If you imagine you're playing a tournament or something at football or any of those kinds of things, you have a strategy for your game and you can win and you have to outwit your opponent and prescribed fire is kind of like that. You have to plan, how will I make the fire go so that it doesn't kill this pine tree but that it burns all before sunset? We have to figure out, is it too damp? Is it not going fast enough? Should we put it out and come back to-

morrow? Or should we go light real fast and get more lit so it can burn out before sunset? And watching fire behavior there is always something new to watch or how it goes together or can you manipulate the fire to do what you want? So I think it's very creative and its very strategy related. And there's a certain exhilaration you get anytime you're out burning. It can be extremely physically taxing so you have to have a lot of energy. Especially if it's 95 degrees out there, to go 8, 10, 12 hours on a burn—you need that boost of energy to keep you going that long.

Bock: Is there ever a chance that it could get out of control?

Benshoff: Anyone that prescribes fires assumes that eventually they will lose a fire because fire is not completely predictable. We go out knowing that we're going to be able to keep it under control but knowing there is always a possibility that something will go wrong. And we'll have to resort to plan B, plan C, or plan D.

Bock: In your experience, from the perspective of environmental education—something like prescribed fire would have different notions for someone that doesn't understand how it works. My question for you is Have you found that challenging? For someone that's working in conservation, the barrier between educating the public. Are people very receptive?

Benshoff: Things change, it's like there are cycles. Does the public understand prescribed fire? What happens is there's so much incoming new people all the time that there will be time periods in my career that there is no use explaining prescribed fires because they all know. And then, a year or two later, you have to start from the beginning because they don't have a clue. So, yes, it's very challenging. When you learn so much about prescribed fire and you teach so many people about it you kind of start thinking of the public as a hole. That they should all know by now. But it is really a new person and a new perspective. So yes, and especially the imports coming from so many different places where prescribed fire is not part of everyday management of natural areas. I need to also do a P.S. on why we like prescribed fires so much, besides being pyromaniacs. It is because of the tremendous response that comes. So that not only are we having fun out there, we know that we are doing it for a purpose and you come out the following fall and it's just covered with wildflowers. And over the years you see that change of things restored and things that were really out of control and mushy, just bad condition. And you go out now and you see what's happened from burning time after time after time and getting things restored back in shape. So it's being proud of something that you are accomplishing at the same time.

Bock: So what would you say, with your job as a whole, is the most rewarding part?

Benshoff: See, you should give me these questions ahead of time so I can think about them (*laughs*), especially “the most.”

Bock: Well, *a* rewarding part.

Benshoff: I think one of the things that I enjoy most of my job is having now the experience and the knowledge to be able to look and see what the land needs and having the power to get that for the land... so, feeling like I'm effective in actually accomplishing something that's important. Yeah, a sense of accomplishment and being able to see what you've done over the years.

Bock: What would you say are some of the challenging parts of your job?

Benshoff: It takes me awhile to think, I'm sorry! (*Laughs*)

Bock: Oh no, that's okay.

Benshoff: Okay, over the years people come and go in management, especially in the Tallahassee management areas. And so, as different regimes come and go, the politics change and the approach changes, and the way of doing things change. And so, having to adapt to those political things changes, when nothing has changed in the park label as far as what you need to accomplish. So trying to be able to deal with that and stay effective. And not be squashed by all the things that are keeping you from doing your job. And it's not complaining. For instance, for such a long time, every time it would get a little dry, the forest service would have a burn ban. And so we educate those people. We teach and really get them to understand why they don't need to do burn bans. Then the next thing you know the park service does a burn ban. And so, you know, every time you get over a hurdle and think, "Ah, I made it" then there is this other hurdle that you have to get across. So I think that's probably the most challenging.

Bock: In your opinion, what makes Myakka River State Park special?

Benshoff: Okay, what makes Myakka River State Park special? You can look at that from two points of view. It's special because it's special to the people. When you go to many state parks it seems like, to me, that the state park is a place to go to and recreate—something to do today. Whereas, I've always felt that to the community, Myakka is more than that. I think that the community really takes possession and feels like it belongs to them. So I think that there is more of an attachment with local community than there is with other pieces of natural areas. Of course that could be my fantasy but that's how I see it. The second is that Myakka is large enough that it doesn't just protect a little piece of nature so people can see what nature looks like. It has, kind of, an ecosystem that works. It has all the pieces plus it has natural processes and those natural processes allow it to work. Without fire and flood and predation and larger carnivores and all that's going on. You're not just looking at what is there but you are looking at how it works. And so, therefore, it's a way of learning about the natural systems not from a book but from actually observing it. I think that there aren't too many natural areas in Florida that you can say that about.

Bock: What do you feel is your connection to the river? What is the community's connection to Myakka River?

Benshoff: The river is the mascot, or the icon for the watershed or the Myakka island. You've got this huge place that is natural area, and it's the river that represents it. So, it's like, one time someone told me—and they were talking about scrub jays—and I said, "Why is the scrub jay so important?" And he said, "It's not the scrub jay that's important. What is important is the scrub, and you use the scrub jay for people to fall in love with the scrub jay, and therefore they'll protect the scrub. Otherwise, they could care less about the scrub." So I think the Myakka River is in a sense the same way. If they fall in love with the river, then they'll want to protect the larger ecosystem which it is just a small part of.

Bock: Do you have a lot of memories of the river?

Benshoff: Do I have memories about the river? I always plan to have memories about the river. You know, when I would interview people I would say, “Oh, they have so many wonderful stories. I’m going to remember these stories and when I get old, I’m going to think about all these wonderful memories.” So yes I do, but I don’t consider them memories until after I retire and I’m an old lady, but that’s going to be a long time until I’m an old lady. So therefore, it’s hard to think of it that way. Yet, if you get together with a lot of rangers, then you start reminiscing. It’s like, “Do you remember the time that…” and there is always a neat story. Then someone would say “Oh yeah, but how about that time that you…” So yeah there are, but we would have to be talking about stories for me to come up with them right away.

Bock: What about wildlife encounters? You talked about the alligator, but what are some other interesting encounters that you’ve had? I’m sure you’ve had a lot. Any panthers?

Benshoff: All these years I’ve been here looking for a Florida panther and I’ve taken down so many reports from people who see them and I never ever have gotten to see a Florida panther in the wild. Perhaps I heard one, one time, but I’m not sure. Somebody called me up and said, “Paula, there is a man over here that says that he saw a Florida panther, can you come take the report?” and I said, “Okay, where did he think he saw it?” “In the picnic area” “Oh jeez, another one of those.” So I take my little form over there and I’m interviewing him and saying, “So you think you saw a Florida panther cross the picnic grounds?” and he said, “Yeah.” And I said, “Well, describe it to me.” And he did a good job and then I said, “And you know the difference between a bobcat and a panther?” and he did. So I said, “Why don’t you show me where you think you saw this panther.” And you don’t want to say (*sarcastically*), “Oh come on!”—but you’re thinking that. But you make your voice say (*very sweetly*) “Okay, show me where you saw the panther.” So we go over to the picnic area, and there is this area that we quit mowing. For the past 20 years we’ve let it grow back in the middle of the picnic area. So it’s like, 20-year old oaks and shrubs and wax myrtle and you can’t see into it. He said, “Okay, I saw it go right into there.” And I said, “Okay, right over there? We can go look.” And all the sudden this deer bounds out. And I hear, “*Reee-arr!*” (*cat growl*) It is kind of the sound that a house cat makes when it’s trying to catch a mouse and it misses and it’s angry, but it’s much, much louder (*Laughs*). So at that point I said, “Okay, maybe you did see a panther. I’m not going in there. We’ll go talk about it over there. Let’s go.” So because he gave such a good description, and he’d only seen it from like 20 to 30 feet away, maybe I heard a Florida panther, but that’s the closest I ever came to seeing one.

Bock: What’s your experience with birding? I know there is a lot of birding here. People like Owen, teaching visitors about birding.

Benshoff: When I first started working here, I had been here for 3 months and found out that part of a park ranger’s job was that they had to teach beginning birding class. So they gave us a little notebook to read and this is how you teach the class. And I found out I had the class the next day so I’m reading and reading, and I got a bird book. I go down the bridge and I try to identify the birds and I didn’t know a robin from a blue jay; I didn’t know a great blue heron from anything. And there was a man there and he is so nice and helpful and he was pointing things out. And, he said “You know what,” (and I wasn’t in uniform) “There is a birding class tomorrow. You should attend, I’m thinking about going myself.” Oh, no! (*Laughs*) Luckily, no one showed up for the birding class. So, you know, after that I crammed. I learned birds as fast

as I possibly could because of the horror of thinking of that man showing up for my birding class and having to teach it for me.

Bock: So is that an interest of yours now? Is birding an interest?

Benshoff: I don't see how you can work here without being interested in birds. So yes, but often I miss that bird that's interesting because I'm too often looking down at the ground at plants. So I would say that birds are interesting but I usually get way-laid at looking at the plants instead. More plant-oriented.

Bock: What about your experience with the invasive species here? Is there a big plan to eradicate them? Or is there not much you can do about it?

Benshoff: I think that invasive plants and animals are the scariest things that land managers have to contend with because you think you have it under control and some new invasive plant or animal comes in. And it's always going to be ongoing. I think it's really good that they're getting the word out now. I'm hearing it more in the media, talking about invasive plants and animals than I ever have, so that's hopeful. But it's something that you can't give up on and I think it's going to depend on how stubborn the future land managers are. As far as what we can accomplish and the scariest part is even if the land managers really do their job and never give up and work constantly and have money and can buy herbicide and do what needs to be controlled, that is not going to be enough. You have to somehow get the buy-in from the people who live around the parks. Because controlling it in one area and having it come in from around; that's another whole story, a whole battle that you have to fight. So, you have to be optimistic because if you weren't, then what would motivate you to go out there and try? But it is always scary; it's in the back of your mind. What if people give up after you leave?

Bock: How did the boars end up here?

Benshoff: The first pigs, of course, were brought back to Florida in the 1500's. Now whether the pigs that we have here are descendants from those pigs, I don't know. Probably, it is more likely that when Florida began to be settled in the 1800s that people would have livestock. If you think about it as a pioneer, you didn't have much spare time. So, if you learned that you could let the pigs run free in the woods and just harvest them whenever you needed them, then you didn't have to feed them, you didn't have to cage them, you wouldn't have to worry about if they get sick and die. So I would assume that most of our pigs came from that way. And, they've been here a long time and they're going to be here a long time. It is just like the invasive plants. It's something that land managers have to deal with. The more that's developed the less pigs that you're going to have. It is not that you want to hope that all the sides of the park are developed, but realistically you know that if you are ever going to get rid of pigs, that that is going to be the only way that it happens.

Bock: Do you ever end up camping overnight here? Have you ever spent any extended amount of time camping in Myakka?

Benshoff: I would camp at Myakka with my son when he was living at home, but he is grown now. We used to fight fires all night long and that's not camping but we would be here for 24 hours. Prescribed fires that went into wild fires that went into prescribed fires. As a park ranger

you have night shifts, so we would be here until 11 or 12 at night almost every single night. Something would come up and we would be here later than that. One night, the drive was flooded and I got a flat tire on the drive. It was like, either walk home in the middle of the night in thigh-deep water or spend the night in the truck, or drive home on a flat tire and ruin the tire. So, I spent half the night here and then went home on the flat tire.

Bock: I know you addressed this in your book, but what would you say to those people who say they are too scared to camp at Myakka at night?

Benshoff: When I first started working at the park, I was afraid of everything. I didn't know how I was going to be a park ranger because I was afraid to walk in the palmettos because I just knew I was going to be bit by a rattlesnake. Whenever I was working what we call swing shift at night, I would hear noises. One time I went to Clay Gully picnic area and I got out to check the restroom and I heard this long moan and groan that had to have been a ghost, I thought then. I jumped in my car and drove away real fast. It was the plumbing, by the way. So because of that, when they sent me to ranger academy, I started listening to sounds. And you know, we had to stay there for two weeks and being afraid of every sound that I heard. So that motivated me that for my very first campfire program, I was going to find out what those sounds are and what is going to kill you if you stay overnight at Myakka River State Park. So, one of the things I did was a survey to all the park visitors coming in asking them what they are afraid of because I wanted to make sure that whatever they were afraid of, that I covered. And it turned out that they weren't afraid of nature at all, they were afraid that someone was going to come in and murder them in their sleep. They were afraid of people. So that made my job easier as a park ranger; when people wanted their fears to be allayed that I could reassure them better. So the question is, what do you tell people when they are afraid to camp at night? Going back to that... I tell them that if they are worried that an alligator is going to come in their tent and drag them out that that doesn't happen. I tell them that all the bad people do all their crimes in town and they are afraid of the woods so they don't come out here to do the crimes here, so they don't have to worry about people. So that is pretty much the way that I have handled it over the years, and I'm not afraid to be out at night anymore.

Bock: Have you heard any ghost stories from some of the visitors?

Benshoff: Oh ghost stories! Well we used to make up our own but hearing ghost stores... *(Thinking)* There is supposed to be a Sasquatch that lived down in the wilderness preserve area. It used to be against the park rules to go into the wilderness preserve, which is the area south of State Road 72 in which you find Myakka Lake. Rumors came that there was a Sasquatch man, or "skunk ape" that came down there and it was a very popular tale with the rangers, apparently. One of the rangers, who had been retired for many years, that I interviewed, told me that they used to have, every so often, a big hog-roast down here at the south picnic area. And they would invite anybody in Sarasota to come to these hog roasts and everyone would bring a covered dish, and the park rangers would give some sort of entertainment. So he said, one year they caught the Skunk Ape and they let him out on the leash to show the people. And of course, I was a new ranger and I was like, "You caught a Skunk Ape?" and he was like, "Yeah," and I'm like, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Tell me this again! You caught... I must have misunderstood you." And he says, "Yeah, we put a noose around his leg and we took him out there." And I said, "Okay, what am I missing here?" and he says "Okay, well it was really a park ranger." So apparently

they dressed a park ranger up like a Skunk Ape and dragged him out and introduced him as the Skunk Ape they had caught from down in the wilderness preserve.

Bock: Wait, what is a “Skunk Ape”? Is it half skunk, half ape?

Benshoff: Oh okay, I took for granted that you knew that or a Sasquatch. You don’t know either one of those?

Bock: Well, I know Bigfoot...

Benshoff: Bigfoot! That’s the same thing. Bigfoot, Sasquatch, and Skunk Ape are all the same thing. Just different colloquial names for different parts of the country. Okay, so that is the best I can do for ghost stories off the cuff there.

Bock: Yeah, I was just wondering because I know you have interviewed a lot of old-timers and asked about Myakka and...

Benshoff: I asked a few people and one of them told me a story of going down to Clay Gully. Back then, there was no North Park Drive so you could either come into the south end of the park by State Road 72, which then was Sugarbowl Road, or you come in the north end of the park and just go to Clay Gully. But you couldn’t drive through. And he was telling me that there was a skull and crossbones there because if you stole someone’s cattle or horses that the sentence was death. You didn’t even arrest them, you just went out and shot them. So they left this skull. It was like they had a dead horse and a dead person and they left the skulls there so that to warn other people not to be horse thieves, and there was supposed to be some story where the ghost of them was hanging around Clay Gully.

Bock: Okay, so just to bring this out to a broader scale, you mentioned that the community has always felt that Myakka was very much a part of the community... How would you say that, over the years that you’ve worked here, that the community’s use of Myakka has changed? Or has it changed?

Benshoff: Do you know the story of how the park first began?

Bock: No, I don’t.

Benshoff: I’ve been collecting interviews trying to find out how the park came to be and I found someone who gave me some writings from her father, and it was hand-scratched sort of writings and so I’ve sort of pieced together the story. What happened was a group of men came out camping one night and were sitting around the campfire. I always imagined that they’re down by the river someplace. And they said, “You know we call this the old home-grounds, because people would always go to the Myakka River.” And the Myakka River was where you would stop overnight on the way to either Pine Level or to Arcadia. So at that time, that’s where you went to camp, long before they even dreamed of state parks. And so they sat around saying, “You know, what we need to do is, we need to somehow preserve this. Don’t let it be developed.” So at that point they went out and they started trying to find a way to enact game laws and they formed a fish and wildlife association. That’s not what it was called but it was something like that. And they decided that they would pay a dollar dues and that’s how they would start earning money to

protect this area and maybe eventually buy the land. So things escalated and it was because of that ground-root, that first beginning that they were able to bring the CCC in here, the Civilian Conservation Corps. And the Park Service didn't come into being until the same time that this land was acquired. So I always felt that it was a community effort that led to the acquisition of this. Then, if you jump forward to the late 1980s, the land that was south of the park was going to be developed and they platted the subdivision and they were going to have a shopping center and they had the maps for it and the road names and everything was ready to go. And, a few people started a campaign, a letter-writing campaign to save the Myakka River, and Jon Thaxton was part of that and several other people in Sarasota County. And the response was so tremendous that I felt that it was that response that caused the State to decide to buy the property rather than develop it into a shopping center and a big community. So I kind of saw the parallel between how it was first acquired. As a park ranger you would stop by these family reunions and they would all invite you to sit down and have dinner and they would say, "We come here every year since grandpa was a little kid" and I think the last ten years, I'm not seeing that so much anymore. I think that more and more it's a place to go recreate and I'm not seeing those people that have such a strong bond, and they own the park and that it's theirs and that they would do whatever it took to protect it that they did back, let's say the '80s or early '90s. And it could simply be that I'm not a park ranger anymore and I don't have that much visitor contact. But that's my sense, that it's not as strong as when I was younger.

Bock: It seems like (and I haven't been here very long) that this is a place with so much history but nowadays that it's a place that attracts a lot of outsiders, snowbirds. People move around a lot more, and people have only lived in a place for a short period of time. I think that that often can affect their connection with the land and their desire to protect the land. Would you agree with that?

Benshoff: Yes, definitely. You know, historically, people had their bond with the land because it was their ancestral landscape. And, it didn't mean—you didn't have to own it, but because you were from there, not only did you think of yourself as part of the land but it as part of you. And nowadays, what happens is wherever you live you weren't born, and where you were born you probably weren't raised, and it's such a very short charmed existence. I think people have a hard time bonding with a piece of land, or especially natural areas. And, I think that that's bad because there is nobody out there that's wanting to protect it nearly as strongly. I mean people want to protect natural areas but you have to have an affinity for one place because you know that saying about protecting your community. You want to save the world but you can't, you've got to save one little piece, and as long as so many people save each little piece than the whole world has a chance.

Bock: Like think globally, act locally?

Benshoff: Exactly, so I think it is something very important, I think it's happening. The last program I did a few minutes ago, that was the point I was trying to make is that everybody has to find that special thing that makes you bond with the land. I was talking to someone that I work with and she said, "You know why I got connected with Myakka? It was because I thought, that is where Tarzan lives! And I would like to live like Tarzan. So from that point on, Myakka was mine." And when I thought about... there is this little girl that I bring into the park all the time, and to her Myakka is a fairyland. She can show me where the fairies make their nest. She can

show me where they have their parties; she can show me where they take a swim. And it is her fairyland and it doesn't belong to anybody else. And, there are artists that I have been passing the last few days and they've been painting Myakka. And you know that they've been painting Myakka over and over and over again and I bet you that the parts that they paint don't belong to anybody else in the world but them. And so, the more different ways that people connect with Myakka, than the more likelihood that that feeling of wanting it to be forever will keep going.

Bock: It seems that especially with Florida ecosystems that it is not the same epic landscape like the big mountains in Yosemite; I think it is a different kind of beauty.

Benshoff: Definitely. There are a lot of people that come here and say, "Where are the mountains? God, this is ugly." So everybody has their own perception of beauty. And there are other times that people will come out and they will look at a place and say "Oh my god. This is the most beautiful!" and it just looks like the rest of the park does. So there are two different ways, and beauty is in the eye of the beholder and you just have to find ways to show that beauty to people. One time I had a group that I took out to the prairie and the prairie is really quite desolate at times because it's hot and it is summer, you sweat, it's flooded. You don't ever see wildlife because it stays hidden during the day. So it has a special beauty that a lot of people don't see. So we went and we talked about fire and we talked about wildflowers and this one person said to me, "You know when we went out, the prairie was ugly, and when we got back, it is one of the most beautiful things that I've ever seen. It is like, I saw it through your eyes, and all of the sudden it was a completely different place." So there is a reward in being able to sort of open up the blinders for people to be able to see what is really out there.

Bock: I think that happened to me to when I first came here. I was with a park ranger in Clearwater, the place that I'm from. It was a very similar experience where I didn't see what was so special about it. I don't know, it takes a second look.

Benshoff: Well, you know if I see mountains or I see North Florida it's like "Wow, this is so awesome," because it's different. And anyone that's going to different locations... They wanted to make this a National Park. The local citizens wrote to the National Park System. From what I understand, the story goes is the National Park System said, "Well, you don't have any geysers and you don't have any huge mountains or deep gullies. There is really nothing there so we're not really interested." So luckily the State Park system came to being the same year. So now of course, the National Park system has different goals. They now want to retain, just like the Florida Park Service, examples of original landscape. It doesn't have to be huge mountains. Those things are exciting but it is just as important to retain portions of what was the most common. Think about pine flatwoods. There is only a very small percent of pine flatwoods that were originally here. And it was because there was so much of it that they weren't saving it and now all of the sudden, they're realizing that there is so little left. Or passenger pigeons. There were just so many. You hear that the whole sky was filled with passenger pigeons for hours at a time. So, they didn't value them and they shot them and now there is not a single one. So I think that people are starting to realize that even something that is very common, you have to save parts of it in order to keep it intact.

Bock: So would you say that State Parks are successful in doing that, in maintaining Florida's heritage?

Benshoff: I think that to be successful, you arrive, and it's not like that. It's an ongoing process. I think that they are continuing to strive towards that, and that you'll never finish that. It's something that is actively happening. And what the end result will be. Will we be able to continue to burn as often as we need to? Will we be able to control the invasive plants? Will we be able to control the way that they dump water on us from developed areas to control a hydrology, to control things that are outside the lands of a State Park? You just have to do the best you can and not give up.

Bock: It seems like it is particularly important for a place like Florida's coast which is so developed as opposed to other areas in Florida. It is so important that we have a place like this that is so close to the coast as a model for...

Benshoff: Well, Okay. The coasts are important and it is harder and harder to keep things on the coast because it is so very, very expensive. But also, think on a broader scale. If you want to be able to have the assortment of animals that we have here, you need to have all the different kinds of communities and a way for them to move one place to another. If you have these islands of wilderness, then there are a lot of things that will go extinct because they can't exist that way. So you have to have a planning system in which you don't just save "coast" or you don't just save "scrub" or just save "wetlands" but you save *all* of that, and that you connect it so that things can move around. So it's not like saving a little piece, it's saving enough to make things work.

Bock: So keeping it in a way where it's still naturally functioning.

Benshoff: Right.

Bock: So what about the visitors here? Would you say that you get a lot of the same visitors that come over and over? Is it lots of locals or regulars that come here?

Benshoff: The type of visitors that we get here changes during different periods of the year. Once you get into the season—January, February, March—local people stay home because they don't want to have to contend with the crowds mostly. Either that or they come very, very early and leave right away. Then once the winter visitors go home, usually I always think April to October as the months with the highest visitation of people who live in Florida. And then, people who live in Florida know it gets hot and buggy so they quit coming like mid-May. They go to the north parks. In South Florida we don't get many people here in the summertime, traditionally. But, the northern Florida parks, that is their busiest season. Here at Myakka, we get Europeans or people from other countries, I think because it is cheaper in the middle of the summer. I guess they don't know how hot and buggy and wet it is. So it fluctuates. The people that are in the local area, you recognize them. You see them, they come all the time. They wait 'til later in the day. When the tourists are here they go earlier in the morning when it's going to be hot and they leave before it gets too wet or too buggy or the sun is too strong. So the answer to your question is all of the above. We get repeat people, and we get people over and over again who have never been here before. We get people that come to Florida every year and come here to Myakka. We have volunteers that have come back 20 years in a row to volunteer at Myakka River State Park.

Bock: What is the main attraction? Would it be the canopy walkway or the river?

Benshoff: Why do they come here? If there is one particular attraction that attracts more people, I would say it's the airboat tours. Mark Hember acquired the airboat tours in '84, '85, and it was doing fine. But, when he took over he started actually marketing and advertising and that was a big change in the type of visitation that we got here at Myakka River. So the one main thing would be the airboat tours. The people who live here locally, they often will say, "Every time that I get a visitor from up north that I will take them on the airboat tour." If you go to town and they see you in uniform, they will often tell me that, "Oh I come out to Myakka every time I get visitor because I take them out to go on the airboat tours." So that would be the most common thing. Although there are many other reasons to come here and a lot of other people come here that never take the airboat tour.

Bock: What is the airboat tour like?

Benshoff: Back in the late '60s, Wally and Jim Fox built a paddle boat that would take people out on the Upper Myakka Lake. About that time, an invasive water weed called hydrilla came into the system. And as the lake filled up with it, they realized they could no longer take the paddle boat through the upper lake. So, this tour boat that held about 60 or 70 people, they couldn't take it out any more. So, they had the idea to convert it to an airboat. And they did so. They called the boat *The Gator Gal*. Well, when Mark Hember came in and bought the airboat tour and started promoting it, there were so many people coming in to take it. So he built another boat called the *Myakka Maiden*. So, now both of these go out on the upper lake and they do a tour around the upper lake and simply talk about the park and the lake. It lasts about an hour. Probably the most popular part of the tour is when the alligators are out. You know, going and finding alligators and getting up close to them so people can take pictures of them. Then the next to the most popular is the wading birds and going kind of close to them and letting them get photographs of the wading birds. You know, you didn't tell me how short or long to make sound bites. I've made them long, it might be difficult for editing.

Bock: Oh no, this is good. I'm going to cut myself out so...

Benshoff: I know but I could have made my answers shorter (*laughs*).

Bock: I guess we can start talking about your oral histories. How did you get started making oral histories?

Benshoff: When I was in school, I hated history. History to me was, you had to memorize a bunch of facts, take the test the next day and then forget it. There was nothing at all interesting about it. When I became a park ranger, one of the requirements of the job was, you had to go to Wekiwa State Park and go to Ranger Academy. Ranger Academy, back then, they would teach you in two weeks' time everything you need to know to be a park ranger. Not really (*laughs*). One of the classes was the history class. The speaker who did the program was a wonderful storyteller. When he got up there, he would tell a story that was so interesting and then the story ended with, "...and it became a State Park." And all the sudden I started realizing, history shouldn't be names and dates and facts. That history really is these stories, these wonderful, wonderful stories. There was nothing that I liked better as a young child then to be told stories. My grandmother was a wonderful storyteller. So, all of the sudden, history was something else. So I came back to Myakka River State Park and said, "I want to know ours! Where is our histo-

ry? Where is our stories?” And the rangers kind of said, “I don’t know. There isn’t any.” And I said, “Isn’t there anything written?” “I don’t know. There might be some stuff up in the loft.” So I went upstairs in the loft and there is piles of boxes of stuff. Just papers and boxes and old, old pieces of things. So I started going through the loft and seeing what I could come about. In there I found records of people who still work here. So I thought maybe I could call the old rangers and ask them and maybe they would know things. So, with that, I would call somebody up and I would interview them and I would ask them, “Well, who else do you think I should talk to?” And they would say, “Oh, you’ve got to talk to this guy. He has been around since...” And it was so fascinating to listen to their stories because it wasn’t history anymore. I started doing that on, like, lunch hours and on my days off. Eventually the park management let me do it on park time. As years went by, and these people started to die, but I still had their stories. And, these collections of stories, people started being interested in them. I had originally done it just because I thought it was interesting.

Bock: What do you think is it about these stories that are important?

Benshoff: Wow. Why are oral histories important? They’re our past. They’re our future and they’re what tie it all together. They’re what promote the love of the land and the love of the land is what will make the land persist. So, it’s like this big circle and it all goes together. I always feel like I have a responsibility to pass it on. I used to ask the rangers when they were retiring and I first started here. And they would tell me things like, “This used to be an old fish pond and now look. Now it’s covered with grass!” And they would tell me these stories. So now as it’s getting closer in time for me to retire, I feel this need to pass it on to the rangers that are here and to tell the stories that I’ve gotten from these guys that died 20 years ago, to the school kids that are coming now. It just feels like it’s a responsibility and it’s something that someday, like I said, I’m so glad I know this. It is something that someday they’ll say, “Wow, I’m so glad she told me this.”

Bock: What has it taught you? What has it taught you about the history of Sarasota?

Benshoff: The interviews that I’ve done gave me insight into seeing things that I wouldn’t have seen otherwise, understanding how things came to be, the ability to go for a walk and to identify the history of the land by what’s growing on it, the history of the land by what I can see. It just, it gave me so much insight to be able to see things that I couldn’t see, before I had that understanding. That sounds so vague I know, but there isn’t a day that I don’t by that I don’t use something that I’ve obtained either directly from them, or that I have obtained because I knew what they told me. You know, it’s all a continuation.

Bock: This might be a hard question, but what’s a particularly memorable interview that you had?

Benshoff: Sometimes it’s not just a particular interview, but it’s a little piece or portion. When you’re doing these interviews, at least me, I was listening, but sometimes I wasn’t hearing, and sometimes, I would not get to transcribe it for years, and in transcribing it, I would realize something that they said and then realize the significance of what they said and so there have been a few of those “wow” things. One of them, I was interviewing a lady—two ladies—who used to live here as little girls. Their father was the foreman of Meadowsweet Pastures and I didn’t even

get it when she told me that one of her most memorable things about living here was at night, she would be up in her bedroom, and she would hear the train passing by, and she would look out her window, and she would see the train going by on the train track. Now that story isn't particularly astounding until you go and stand where that house was and you look towards where the railroad track was and you see this forest of oak trees that used to be a prairie, and all the sudden, the realization of how things have changed over a lifetime is just day and night. So those kinds of things that would just really hit me. Another one, I interviewed a gentlemen whose father ran cattle in the park, and the park biologist at the time that I was interviewing him, and I didn't get it when he said it. He said, "You girls don't understand. It's like day and night; this is not the same place. It was so wet, I can't even begin to tell you how wet it was," and he just kind of kept stuttering and saying, "You just can't understand," and he pretty much gave up. Years later, I guess it was probably ten or fifteen years later, when we finally transcribed it, I started to put it together that looking at those aerials and things were so flooded that pine trees couldn't grow, things would get so dry that fires would burn constantly during the dry season. So it was simply by those few words that he said and the emphasis that he said them that made me make the connection of why is there prairie up Myakka River State Park—something that people had been trying to figure out for decades—why is there prairie instead of being pine flatwoods? And it's that wet and dry—so very, very wet that everything's faded, it's flooded until you can't even move around to very, very dry that you can't put out the fires. So that was another one of those kind of "wow" type things. So of course if I open up the interviews and say, "Oh, Oscar Mantigo, that was so neat, he was a CCC worker, let me tell you what he said," or you know I'm going through the interviews and come to someone and I say, "Oh let me tell you about him, he's the neatest man, he told me that the reason that his father got the job at Meadow Sweet Pasture, because there didn't used to be a school here, and the branch foreman at the time looked around and found that his family had eleven children, so his father got hired because there was eleven children in the family and that means that Manatee County allowed them to have a school here." So it's these little things that come up that were very exciting to look back on. And when people ask me a question about where did they get their water, and I always say, "Oh, the man that used to live down at Deep Hole told me! What they would do is they would go out and they would scoop up water and let it sit in a jar and all the sand would go to the bottom and they would drink the water off the top." So there is all these little stories that are just running around in there that just come out every time that I need them. So, it's kind of hard to say, "Oh what's your favorite one?" I'll tell you the worst one. Here is the worst one. Why would I tell the worst one? It's the most embarrassing interview. And it was that I'm from Florida, and I have a Florida accent, a Southern accent—until I went to school and the kids made fun of me—so I tried harder and harder to talk like a Northerner so that the kids wouldn't make fun of me. But when I go out and interview these people from East Sarasota who still have that Florida accent, I would find that when I kind of relax and go back into that little more Southern—it's not pretending, it's just there—so I would feel that I could get better responses and they would tell me better stories, so I wasn't really manipulating them, but you know, I knew what it took to get them talking. So one of these persons was telling me what it was like, stories about Mrs. Palmer and how she bought and drained the celery fields, so it was really interesting stories, but something that he said about black people and he was using the n-word and of course, Southerners, we were, of course, we were prejudiced back then. I mean, it was just the way you were brought up. Well, I wasn't by then, you know. So, I just kind of, I remember that I said something to agree with him that seemed to me horrendous. And I was so embarrassed that I was pretending to agree with him. And I was so embarrassed that I hid that

interview and never transcribed it. And recently, within the last year, I came across it. And I replayed it. And this one statement that I had made that I had been so embarrassed for all these years, it turned out that it was nothing! I just said, “Yeah black people can be like that.” So anyhow, I remember being so embarrassed because I wasn’t truthful. I don’t know where I’m going with that. But anyhow, so there were some things that were embarrassing and they shouldn’t have been. And you can scratch that whole story because it didn’t come across well. I didn’t express myself well. The main thing is that I was embarrassed for what, 20 or 25 years? And then when I listened to it, it was nothing! (*Laughs*)

Bock: I bet that since you’re interviewing all these people from this older generation where social stereotypes were different than they are today...

Benshoff: Of course! When you think about, Are you prejudiced? What do you think about black people? Oh, you can’t say “nigger.” But, I grew up with—I can remember my father taking me aside when I was maybe three, four, years old and saying, “Honey, you’ve got to quit calling the maid nigger.” And I said “Why? That’s what she is, what else can I call her?” So, you know, it was a different time back then. And I remember begging my mother to say, “Can I sit in the back of the bus?” “No, only the Negroes can sit in the back of the bus.” Why? Here’s one—I must have been four, and my grandfather came in and I had a quarter in my mouth and he said “You get that money out of your mouth! What are you doing with that? For all you know, a nigger had that in their hand!” And I spit that quarter out. So, you know, we grew up and that’s just the way things were. Now, I don’t know. Black, white, everyone is pretty much the same. But in Florida back in those years. I don’t think anyone would question being prejudiced. It was just a way of life. So therefore, in interviewing these people who have come through that, not through just their childhood but on into adulthood and old age, they have not had the experience of going to school with mixed races like I have. So, it’s just a different outlook. And you can’t fault them for it because how else could they be?

Bock: Have you ever interviewed someone who was directly affected by the civil rights movement?

Benshoff: Well, everyone was affected by it. It is the reaction to it that matters. Okay, here’s a couple. Black people weren’t allowed in the State Park. If they wanted to go picnicking, they had to go across the street in what we call Youth Camp campground. If they wanted to go fishing, they could only fish in a certain location. Everything was very segregated. In fact, if I wanted to drink out of a water fountain... I would be very thirsty and not drink out of a water fountain because I couldn’t read the sign to which one was the colored sign and which one was the white sign. I mean, it was very engrained. I interviewed this one black fisherman and he was just wonderful. He was here all the time. I got him to take me out fishing. So, I was writing a newspaper article about it and he was teaching me how to fish. And we started talking about how he was in the Army. And as we discussed what role did you play, I realized after awhile just from the conversation that he was an officer’s slave. I mean, he did whatever the officer said and helped him dress. And I was almost embarrassed for it. Yet, he didn’t think anything about it. He wasn’t embarrassed. It was just the job that he did. So, you come across it in interviews but you don’t come across it with people who were scandalized by it. That’s it. Because people of our generation have learned to be scandalized by particular behaviors, whereas the people I was interviewing it was just a part of life.

Bock: So how many of these oral histories do you think you've done?

Benshoff: How many have I interviewed? Um, I have no idea. Let me do some research sometime and then I'll answer it for you. Because I have boxes of tape that I haven't transcribed and a list of those that I have. And I have a book this thick, some of them. I don't know. I need to organize before I die. It's important (*laughs*). It would be a shame if I got hit by a truck because nobody would know where to find them.

Bock: And you have all these photos!

Benshoff: I know! My park ranger, you know they do these yearly evaluations. And he said, "You really do need to start working more on cultural history and getting things organized." I know. I'll try, I'll try.

Bock: So it seems, just from talking to you, that you have these two very distinct passions which is for the environment and history of the area. So, do you think that they're tied to each other?

Benshoff: They're the same. They're actually the same. The Florida Park Service—we're here to manage natural and cultural resources. And I probably shouldn't admit this. They could probably fire me for it but I think, for the most part, that if the money we spent on cultural resources could be spent on natural resources, we would be more productive for it. I'm not a cultural resources-oriented person. But, when cultural resources tie in and add to the management of the land, then it is important to me. So history for the sake of history, it's just people that come and go. But history and people and how it's tied to the land, to me that's important.

Bock: How would you like to see the land managed in the future? Particularly Myakka and the river, what do you envision for the future?

Benshoff: Myakka River State Park was one of Florida's first parks and it was acquired during a time that there were different viewpoints on how to manage a natural area. Things like, catching the fish that people didn't want to eat and throwing them away and killing them so that when they went fishing they'd have a better experience. Putting out all the lightning fires so that we could keep things. Help Mother Nature by putting out the lightning fires. Then, I think in like the '70s and '80s, it has changed and the attitude... Instead of trying to fight Mother Nature or do something better than Mother Nature or compete with Mother Nature, all the sudden it was how to learn from nature. And therefore put things the way it would be, had people not changed it. So I think we're on the right pathway. I'm sure that rangers 30 years ago thought they were on the right pathway so that things could change. To continue with restoring things back the way they should be. Over the past 30 years, because of the park manager that was here when I first came here, we've made such changes. We've done so much restoration. But the more restoration we do, the more I can see still needs to be done. So my hope for the future is that people continue to work really hard because you can't just sort of do it. You have to fight day and night in order to get those gains that we've gotten this far. If every 10 years they could get just as far, I guess that's what I would hope, is that people can continue to work as hard at it as we have.

Bock: I also wanted to ask you about your book, before I forget. What was the motive to start writing a book about Myakka?

Benshoff: Well, when I used to do the interviews, people were always saying, “Oh, you should write a book. You should write about all these things that you’re learning.” And I’m not a highly educated person. I only have high school education. So I really didn’t see that that was a possibility. The next thing, besides wanting to share the information, I decided that I would take a journalism course, maybe learn how to write since I had never been to college. And that journalism course, it was held at a newspaper, the *Venice Gondolier*. And the editor said, “I think I would like some stories about Myakka.” So that’s when I started writing a newspaper column and I think that’s when I learned to write, because I was a terrible writer. Anything that you do a lot, you have to get a little bit better at it, especially when people keep telling you how bad you are. Then you get better. I had a park manager who was very critical. I mean he tore my articles apart. And it was wonderful because I learned so much from him. That’s how I started developing writing skills. So then one day I get a call from an acquaintance of mine who said, “Pineapple Press has asked me to write a book about Myakka. Would you like to co-author it with me?” And I said, “Wow. Wow. I can’t believe somebody would ask me that.” So I felt very, very privileged about that. So we worked on it together. And she was very, very busy. She had a young child and had other commitments and a year went by. And basically we would meet and plan to write something. And we would get back together and I would have written what I was supposed to but she hadn’t written what she was supposed to. So basically, she was so overwhelmed that she just dropped the project in my lap and said that if you wanted to, continue on with it. And so I did. Everything seems to be luck for me. It was luck that I got this job. It was luck that I got to write this book. It was luck that I got to work with Robert Dye. I just feel like I’m a very lucky person.

Bock: Do you see yourself continuing to work here for a while? Even past retirement, do you think you’ll live here for awhile?

Benshoff: I live just outside the north park and as long as I can afford the taxes I will continue to live there. Who knows what will happen in the future? The state has what they call a “drop program,” where when you get to be a certain age, you have to decide whether to retire or not to retire. And I reached that age two years ago and had to make that decision. So I did, and that means that I will be here for another three years. So that’s kind of... my career is set in front of me. When I’m no longer working at the Park, I’ll be doing something with natural areas. I don’t know if it’ll be here at Myakka. I’m sure since I live so close that I’ll be here a lot. But I think that I will feel like it’s time to turn it over to someone else. Somebody who is as passionate about it as I am, I think sometimes tends to overwhelm other people. And I think that sometimes I’m in the limelight so much that other people don’t get a chance. I don’t plan to hang around and be a part of Myakka as far as the Park goes. It’ll be somebody else’s turn to shine and accomplish and be proud and be interviewed by and have their picture taken for every time they need a spokesperson for the newspaper.

Bock: When I talked to Belinda Perry, she mentioned that you’re very well known around the area, and that when people think of Myakka, they think of you. What does that mean to you to be a representative for Myakka?

Benshoff: I’m thinking of all these different emotions. What does it mean to be a representative of Myakka River State Park? On the top of the list is privileged. The opportunity, and at the same time an obligation. When someone asks me something and I don’t know the answer, it’s like,

“Oh, darn. I’ve got to learn that right away.” And I go out right away and I find the answer. And the knowledge comes from the curiosity. I very often will wonder about... I pick these subjects and learn everything I can about them. Anything from, okay, I’ve got to lay tile. So learn how to lay tile and learn everything I can about laying tile. And then, oak trees. How many kinds of oak trees do we have? So go out and identify every single kind of oak tree and then find out when they flower, when they bloom. So it’s like, over 30 years having those intense interests over and over again. I gained this amount of knowledge that gives me the reputation that, “Oh, ask Paula. She knows the answer to everything.” I don’t. It’s just simply that they’re asking the questions that I already asked but now I know the answers. I’ve had that opportunity to have that same curiosity. But, there is always a question that throws me. Today, it was, “How many stories high is the canopy walkway tower?” And I’m like, I never thought in stories before. I haven’t any idea. And I said, “Where are you from?” and she said Minnesota. Okay, there’s the answer. Floridians don’t think in stories. You only have two. You have the ground story and upstairs. After that, it’s taller.

Bock: (*Laughs*) You’re lucky if you even have upstairs!

Benshoff: Or kids’ programs. I love doing question-and-answer things with kids because they come up with such off-the-wall questions. And they always throw something like “How many teeth does an alligator have?” I’ll have to go back and look that one up! So, liking that question and answer—I get the curiosity from having the question myself, answering questions from all these other people that have all these other sets of curiosity.

Bock: I think it’s significant that you are a woman in the... well, I guess you were in the park ranger position, which most people assume that men do. A man’s kind of job. So, what has your experience been in this position as a woman?

Benshoff: I used to work for the Division of Forestry. And in order to work there as a dispatcher you had to live there. So when we built our house in Old Myakka, I lost my job. So I had to find another job. The forest ranger that I told you that lived across from Myakka, we said, well maybe I could get a job at the park because I live right here. So one day he came back to me and said, “Okay, I checked it out and the Park Service is hiring women but he’ll go to jail before he’ll hire a woman.” And he said, “Well, you could probably pursue that.” And I said, “Are you kidding? I’m not going to go work for someone who doesn’t want me to work there.” So I went to work at the police department. A couple years later, he calls me up and says, “Guess what? We’ve got a new park manager and he is hiring women.” So I came in and one woman was working here already. She had been here for less than a year. He hired me. So two females at one park was unusual. I went to Ranger Academy and there was something like 40 men and five women, and five women was a lot, back then. And they were thinking that oh, times are changing. We’ve got five women here! And of course each one of those women were the only female park ranger at their park. And all of them said that it was very hard to work there, that the men gave them such a hard time. But I didn’t have that experience. The men here were so supportive and so helpful. Too helpful, because they’re always trying to do things for me and show me how to do things. One time I’m sharpening a blade and someone comes in and says, “You’re not doing that right. Let me show you.” And he shows me. And so I’m doing it his way and he leaves. And another man comes in and says, “Oh no, honey. Let me show you how to do that.” So I do it his way. He leaves. Another one comes in... (*Laughs*) So basically, the experience that I had at Myakka was

different than the experience that other women had, because everyone bent over backwards to teach me things that I didn't know. I learned plumbing and I drove a tractor. I learned how to pour cement. Back then, maintenance was a big part of being a park ranger. Now we farm out a lot of stuff. But I had taken the position of someone who was the mechanic. So I felt like, okay, I've got to learn how to service vehicles and I didn't know how to put gas in vehicles. So it's been challenging and that's one of the reasons that I've learned so much. Because, I felt like I have to compete with men and I don't want them to feel like I'm competing but I don't want them to have to carry me either.

Bock: Yeah, especially with so much outdoor work.

Benshoff: And Myakka seemed to get a reputation. I don't think it was on purpose. It just so happens when you hire the person that seems the most qualified for the job, or most enthusiastic, or whatever it is that those people who are hiring are looking for—it kept being women. So they started referring to Myakka as Robert's harem. Eventually we had as many females as we did males. And that just doesn't happen in State Parks. Myakka has been unique in the amount of females. In fact, if you look at the burn team, it's an all-female burn team. Often we go out and burn and look around and say, "Hey! All females this time." And we get this class who comes down, these burners who are from all over the United States. And they come to burn with us and of course they're all men. And then they go out with our burn team and they look around and we're all females. Typically burners come from rural areas, chewing tobacco. "Hey honey, let me show you how it's done!" kind of a thing. So we kind of laugh behind their backs, looking at their faces when they're surprised to see the all-girl burn team.

Bock: That's fantastic! (*Laughs*) So I guess we can wrap this up now. My last question, and you've kind of approached this but maybe you could describe it in any conclusionary type of way but, What would you say is Myakka River State Park's legacy?

Benshoff: I'm going to have these arguments in my head here for a minute, okay? Myakka is the river. Myakka is the prairie. Where else do you find prairie in Florida in really good shape? Very few. Myakka is the vast tract of wilderness that is left. Myakka is being connected to other pieces and putting it all together in a whole. And a way of keeping something that feels at least like wilderness. That's it.

Bock: Okay.