

TRANSCRIPT**INTERVIEWEE:** Sheridan Lorenz**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd**DATE:** August 22, 2021**LOCATION:** Aspen, Colorado, remotely recorded**TRANSCRIBER:** Trint, David Todd**SOURCE MEDIA:** MP3 audio file**REEL:** 4065**FILE:**RedCockadedWoodpecker_Lorenz_Sheridan_Colorado_22August2021_Reel4065_NoiseFiltere
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David Todd [00:00:03] Well, good afternoon, David Todd here with Sheridan Lorenz. And with Ms. Lorenz's permission, our plan here is to, to record this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a nonprofit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press and for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is based at the University of Texas at Austin. And you would have all equal rights to use the recording as well. And I just wanted to lay that out before we went any further, make sure that that's OK with you.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:00:54] Yes, absolutely

David Todd [00:00:56] Great. Well, today is Sunday, August 22nd, 2021. It's about a quarter of 6:00, Central Time. My name is David Todd. I'm representing the Conservation History Association of Texas and I'm in Austin. We are conducting a remote interview with Sheridan Lorenz. She has done many things. But I think one of the aspects of her life that we'll be focusing on here is that she initiated and drove the Cook's Branch Conservancy, which manages a long-term habitat preservation project and a field laboratory in East Texas, near Montgomery, west of Conroe, on behalf of the Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation. The Conservancy is a pretty extraordinary thing. It's received a Leopold Award, which is Texas' highest recognition for habitat management and wildlife conservation on private lands. And one of the signature efforts of the Conservancy sort of overlaps with this oral history project, and that is that the Conservancy has been deeply involved in the restoration of the red-cockaded woodpecker.

David Todd [00:02:14] So today, we'll talk a little bit about her life and career and especially focus on her work with the Cook's Branch Conservancy and its restoration of the red-cockaded woodpecker on its land.

David Todd [00:02:28] So with that little introduction, I'd like to just ask you, were there any early events or influences in your childhood that might have introduced you to an interest and concern for nature?

Sheridan Lorenz [00:02:45] Well, I'll just have to say that our childhood was, well, we were filled with the activities outdoors. My parents both have a deep appreciation for the natural world. My father was a geologist. We spent a lot of time identifying rocks and minerals and hearing about geologic history. My mother had a fascination with, mostly, the beauty of nature. I think she spent a lot of time, you know, commenting on, remarking on, the beauty of nature. They both were interested in astronomy. And it just was a very full, full family life of enjoying the out-of-doors, hiking in the mountains, and fishing in the Gulf and in mountain

streams. And we just had the awareness that the natural world was important. It was, it was a big part of our lives. So that was my early childhood.

David Todd [00:03:46] Well, I think that in some of your remarks that you were kind to write down, you mentioned that some of the very early photographs that were taken from space had quite an impact on you. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Sheridan Lorenz [00:04:05] Well, that's interesting. And that is funny that I wrote that to you because I had kind of forgotten until I collected my thoughts about where this beginning of this epiphany about the need to protect, I guess, the largest sense, the Earth, had been part of my childhood. But we had first of all, we had acquired Cook's Branch, the property, when I was 14 years old. And so we had started to spend a lot of weekends there. We lived in Houston, but we'd make that commute there for the weekend. And, you know, the deep woods, even though they're awfully, it was already somewhat degraded with ranching and timbering, there were still major parts that were still fully wooded. And that degree of just wilderness right at our fingertips was always kind of, not just magical, but it was already becoming a little bit more rare. And, that's just one thing can put that aside, but yes, it's true.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:05:08] Then when I was, I guess I was an exchange student to Sweden, and I remember with my Swedish family watching the men walk on the moon and then later we saw, on television, of course, and then later we saw everybody was shown the photographs of this little tiny blue planet. And you know, it was just that moment, and I think a lot of people shared this feeling (I know the astronauts did) that you, one, I became aware that this is our home. And I think especially now it, it strikes me even more so, in light of what we are doing right now to our planet, that I realized that that was for me, and I think it was for many people, a brand new awareness of the absolute fragility of the Earth and how small it is. And mostly that it really is our home.

David Todd [00:06:11] Yes. So one of the things that you, you mentioned, and I think that it sounds like it was formative for you, was that you participated in Girl Scouts and summer camp through the Scouts program. What sort of impact do you think that had on you?

Sheridan Lorenz [00:06:32] That was actually really a big deal for me. And it's funny because a lot about Girl Scouts kind of went right by me, so like the homemaking badge. But, but the camp experience was perfect for me because it was all outdoors and it was stargazing at night and it was making things out of like crafts, out of the parts of things in the woods. And, you know, it was just, we were totally immersed in the out-of-doors. And, but also the Girl Scouts do this, it's their mission to foster stewardship and to talk about taking care of things. It's really a lot of what a lot of discussion is about. I was, I also appreciated that my mother didn't believe in sending us to those camps that were sort of like pre-sorority camps. And she really insisted that we go to kind of a more democratic camp where just about everybody got to go.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:07:40] And, and so I, I ended up going to something called "Pre Round-up". And that was when you kind of had to apply by your spending two weeks at a sort of a vetting-type camp. And then you were chosen to go to Farragut, Idaho and camp out with 10,000 other girls from all over the world. And so we took the train and I was about 15 years old and we got to Farragut, Idaho. And I remember just, you know, we were not only just totally immersed in nature, but the, the sky was remarkable. And the stargazing was just, it was just a very memorable experience feeling, that I was kind of really part of nature and it was a great experience. And I think scouting does, Girl Scouts, do make a special point of

bringing nature to young girls and sort of providing the format for understanding nature more, and also the, as I said, the mission to steward the earth.

David Todd [00:08:52] You know, it seems to me from what little I know of you and mostly through this, your written notes, is that you are a life-long learner. And I was struck that you, you mentioned that in 1990, long after you had left college, you took a course in environmental geography at UT. And, and I gather that course had a pretty striking impact on you.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:09:22] Yeah, it was, it was true. It was a, it was a real turning point. As I told you in the notes, at the very moment we were hearing lectures about extinctions and then the changing, the impact of man on the Earth, which essentially what was the course, at that moment, we received, I mean, within that semester, I suppose, we received the letter from Texas Parks and Wildlife. They had done a survey for, to investigate the, the population of red-cockaded woodpecker, which they were, it was about to be listed as endangered. And they wrote us and said that we had the highest concentration of red-cockaded woodpecker sites, nest sites, than on any private lands in Texas. And, you know, I had just finished this course, or I was just in the middle of it, and, not only that, this professor was a real bird-lover. He was English. So therefore, the bird, bird-watching, birding life is a big, big deal. And he would get really emotionally and passionately talk about our impact on the Earth. And really I felt compelled to go and do my part. And there it was right there, laid out right before me. So that that was a, that was a turning point.

David Todd [00:10:44] That's so interesting. When you read something or learn something in class (I guess this is with Robin Doughty?).

Sheridan Lorenz [00:10:52] How did you know that?

David Todd [00:10:55] I, I don't know, I interviewed him once. He, I think, must have taken sort of a general lesson, and then it became a very personal lesson for you.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:11:09] Well, you know, again, unless you already have something in you that that would speak to you, you might not be that moved by it. I'm sure I could have looked around that classroom and seen a lot of people who, it just was going right by them. But to have already grown up with going to Cook's Branch since I was 14, at this point it was, and also realizing we have a certain, now, responsibility and we identified with the land and the, and also the need. It's just kind of like, yeah, I mean, it, it influenced me maybe more than it might have influenced other people. But I think without my formative years being the kind they were and the influences of my parents and so forth, I'm not sure it would have spoken to me as much.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:11:56] The other thing is that some of the readings for that class, as well as for most of my own reading. Like, I don't think I even knew about "Sand County Almanac" until, I might have, but I was reading it for that class. But, you know, so yeah, there were changes that were going on maybe that were that were sort of precursors to this big moment, thinking, "I've got to take care of that bird."

David Todd [00:12:20] Oh, well, you mentioned "Sand County Almanac". Could you tell us just about a book or two that have been important for you in how you have learned about the natural world, and the need to conserve it?

Sheridan Lorenz [00:12:35] Well, I had taken, actually a course years before that, in also, environment at University of Colorado, my undergraduate degree, and we read, required reading was Rachel Carson, "Silent Spring." Well, that's, that was the awakening for, I think, so many people - the impact we're having, eggshell thinning and so forth, with DDT. And that was one thing. And then you start realizing. Well, anyway, so then on my own, though, when I got interested in Cook's Branch, specifically in that neck of the woods, I read the book by, I think Daniel Lay and Jim Pruett, Truett, excuse me, "The Land of Bears and Honey", which is specifically about that land, that, that East Texas Pineywoods land, and that, again, the impact of timbering and the loss of so much of what that habitat had been in pre-settlement conditions. So that was that was a big influence on me. Also, just so beautifully written. Same thing with "Sand County Almanac", although sometimes that I get in the weeds on that one. But and I just love, kind of even more recently, more of the I guess the, the focus on children are not really I guess it's called the "Last Child in the Wilderness". Another one is "A Walk in the Woods". Another one is "Walking", by Henry David Thoreau. All of those are, you know, influenced me, have influenced me a lot.

David Todd [00:14:11] Well, you know, it's interesting that you mentioned the "Last Child on the Woods", because I understood that not only have you sort of educated yourself, but you've worked to educate others. I think that I heard that you were involved with a group that maybe you started called the "Children's Alliance for the Protection of the Environment".

Sheridan Lorenz [00:14:30] Yeah. How did you hear that? That's interesting.

David Todd [00:14:33] Oh, your niece tells me lots of things.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:14:37] Well, what happened? I'll tell you it verbatim. I mean, not that I love being recorded telling the story, so I guess you can delete a little bit if you think it gets a little too in the woods, in the weeds.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:14:48] No, so what happened is when I started that program, which I was considering going into the master's program for environmental geography at UT and a few circumstances just happened all at once. My children started a new school where a lot of the mothers were volunteering a lot. My husband was sort of recruited to Houston for two years because his mother was ill. And so I was more or less single parenting and also had just started my kids at school that number one did not have a robust environmental department, or thinking, or whatever. And also, I thought, well, maybe they're at school, they're just little and maybe I'll throw my energy into that rather than being gone all day long studying and, you know, the typical graduate school bondage. And so but as frustrated with the volunteerism that was laid out for me was, "Do you want to serve lunch?" Well, not really.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:15:45] And so I offered to develop an environmental awareness, more or less, program. And I found, I met a woman who was starting a program called Children's Alliance for the Protection of the Environment. And I thought that would be useful for me to use their sort of workbook to work with these kids. It was going to be a program during chapel. This was a little Episcopal, private school, and it's going to be during the chapel, but ultimately ended up being an after-school program. And it was at first just called, "Children's Alliance for the Protection of the Environment". But eventually there were some circumstances that made me think it would be better if we just simply were the St. Andrew's environmental program. So that's what happened.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:16:35] I had to develop my, the program myself because actually there wasn't a workbook, in fact. And so it started with each age group had an age-appropriate activity. Like the first graders did a, we did a butterfly garden. And then the second and third graders, we started some recycling program, all the way up to, I guess the fourth graders - we did the Songbird Park and songbirds, songbird sounds and all of that. And then the middle school, we did water-testing. We were out there on Shoal Creek. So we did water-testing and reporting what we were finding. We also did, did field trips to places like Barton Springs to talk about the impact on the aquifer from construction upstream. So anyway, we just, we just applied it to different areas. It was a lot of fun.

David Todd [00:17:29] Well, it sounds like it's the kind of legacy that, that, you know, we'd all like to give to younger people.

David Todd [00:17:40] This might be a good segue to just talk about this piece of land that your family bought and I think you've thought a lot about in regards to the kind of legacy that, that your family will leave with that land in how it's restored. Can you talk a little about this tract of land and how would you describe it to somebody who had never been fortunate to visit it?

Sheridan Lorenz [00:18:11] Well, I think the first thing that comes to mind is that it would be described so much differently now than the way we might have described it 40 years ago, partly because of the restoration effort, partly because of the absolute black-and-white transition from cattle ranching and timbering and agriculture exemptions to wildlife focus.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:18:40] But also, I would probably describe it now more in the context of it's kind of a relic of the past. I mean, it's beginning to be I mean, it's a little bit dramatic. But if you look all around us, years ago when we would drive there, put it this way, from North Houston, about from the airport, it was just solid, dense forest, kind of, you know, almost scary at night, until we'd get there. And that was another 40 minutes away. Now, if, my husband's commented that he had gone on a friend's plane and they were going over Cook's Branch, he said, "It's amazing. It was just like this one little island of green and non-stop development". And of course, we can see that on GPS, maps and so forth. And it's just now the description would be more the contrast of what's happened around us.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:19:36] But otherwise, I'll just describe it for what it is botanically. And, you know, it's an upland forest and it's mostly pines and some hardwoods. And there's, there are other woods, but it's also a whole, whole dense series of forest that, it's not, it's not, you know, not pastures and so forth. And it's you know, we've acquired some land around us now. It's over 6000 acres. And it's, I think one thing I like best about is the gate getting in to enter is so understated. It looks like just an old, just an old forgotten whatever and everything. A lot of other people, rather, have these big stone entries with all this fancy stuff. And this just looks like a little funky, you know, country place. But once you're in and you drive down that long road, or ride your bike, or walk in a long road to even get to some of the openings it's quite a, you know, it's just that you just feel it's just wilderness. And wilderness is definitely now rare.

David Todd [00:20:51] That's really interesting. I like the way you put it that, describing it is as different from what it once was, in part because of what's within your fence and behind that funky gate, but also because of the whole context changing, you know, the, the land around it being developed.

David Todd [00:21:13] So do you know much about the, the history of the tract before 1964 when your family purchased it?

Sheridan Lorenz [00:21:20] Yeah, well, it had been a timber operation many years ago. I think I told you that there was a big clearcut, not just our area, but the whole area, in 1919. And there'd been, first of all, that whole area was, there was a large migration of Scottish and Irish timber people who came I think at pretty much the turn of the century when building America was, you know, a big building phase - a lot of Victorian homes and so forth. And they were, I'm in Galveston a lot, and I see these Victorian homes, and I look and I think, I wonder which one is built with wood from our pine trees, from our land. But, so that was going on for years.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:22:10] There was a long period of time ... the sharecropper family, that, that you might have heard of. The Sunday House, which we have there, and people think it's like the Sunday House that they have in Fredericksburg. But it's not that. It's, it's a man named, his last name was, "Sunday". And the Sunday family lived in the, the sharecropper house, which we have restored to just one of our cabins, basically. But yeah. But anyway, that was the use of the land there.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:22:37] There weren't, except for the Kurth property. Now, we did know the Kurth family. My father got to know Joe Kurth, the man that and that's Jason. I mean, it's part of the property now. But at first, the first phase, it wasn't. So the Kurth property was acquired a little bit later.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:22:54] Our personal history is that was intended to be part of phase two for The Woodlands when my father was purchasing the land for the Woodlands, that was intended. He, being sort of the visionary that he was, he thought that one day the commute would be that far. And I remember thinking, you're crazy, because I was about 14 or 15 when I was hearing about it and we're driving there and took us an hour from Houston to get there. It never occurred to me that there, sure enough, would be a lot of people commuting some day from that very area to go to work in Houston. But anyhow, he, that was to be phase two. And then at a certain point, he just, and there was a lot of acreage around us as well. And then at some point he sort of pulled away part of it to become Cook's Branch and then sold off the rest around us, unfortunately.

David Todd [00:23:45] Were you aware much of the decisions that he was making, and the process that he was approaching it, and I mean, how he decided to pull this out of development? It seems like a really critical call that he made.

Sheridan Lorenz [00:23:58] I think it was more because of Cook's Branch itself - that the hydrology there made it possible to have lakes.