

## **TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEWEE:** Sheridan Lorenz

**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd

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**David Todd** [00:00:03] Yes, I think we are recording, and it is Tuesday, August, 24th, 2021. It's 6:00 Central Time, 5:00 Mountain Time, in the afternoon. And my name is David Todd. I'm representing the Conservation History Association of Texas.

**David Todd** [00:00:22] We are fortunate to be conducting an oral history interview with Sheridan Lorenz about the Cook's Branch Conservancy and her work, with her family, in restoring the habitat there and potentially helping recover the red-cockaded woodpecker. And we are resuming an interview that we started on August 22nd, 2021.

**David Todd** [00:00:48] And if I remember right, we left off, Ms. Lorenz was describing the Cook's Branch tract and how our family came to own it. And then some of the history going back to the early 20th century. And I thought that maybe just as a first question we could ask: what your dad's intentions were at the outset, since he set this aside from development from really the very beginning. And what was he thinking and what were some of the first steps in helping to conserve that land and restore it?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:01:26] Well, first of all, why separate this land for, you know, to not be part of what was going to be phase two of the Woodlands, and the reason is because, because it was for family use. I mean, it had lakes on it. It had Cook's Branch, the very for which it's named - a little, a little branch that originates just north of our property. It's very, very clean water and spring-fed. And it made a nice lake. And so we dammed it. And then a few other places where there were dams that we then ended up with several lakes. And, it also had a few dwellings on it. Nothing fancy, but it, we did acquire the Kurth property, which is still part of Cook's Branch, but it's a little bit separate. It wasn't part of our first well, you know, the first acquisition. But then he added, when Mr. Kurth died, we acquired that land. It was adjacent to ours and it actually had the nicest lake.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:02:30] So that was for our use. And we went there almost every weekend in winter and in the fall. And we started having family Thanksgivings there - we'd spend the whole week there with the whole family or most of that long weekend. So that was, that was the reason.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:02:49] As for why it developed somewhat into a preserve, ultimately a conservancy, it didn't start that way. It was for recreation, but it just so happened that my father, and my mother, too, that they really loved the older trees and they didn't want to cut them. Prior to that, it had been a timber operation. We did actually sort of inherit a timberman. His name was Joe Cliff Moke, and he stayed on as the manager of the property, but changes instead. And by the way, it had been owned by, at that point, it was purchased along with Mitchell Energy and Development Company. As I said, it was going to be phase two of the

Woodlands. When we took it on as our private land, we still kept the timber man, that man Joe Cliff Moke, who had been the timber specialist or managed the timber operation for Mitchell Energy. So he stayed on for the private land and for ours, which became ours. And my father asked him not to cut the old trees.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:04:00] That's exactly why we ended up with the red-cockaded woodpecker, because that was purchased in 1964. Well, at that point the trees were only about 45 years old. There'd been a major, major clear cut in 1919, in the whole region really. And as they built Texas really with that lumber. And so my father, you know, in 1964 said, "Don't cut anymore. Let's, let's let the old forest come back."

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:04:31] And so the older trees were kept intact, and which meant by 1989 when we were notified that we had this high concentration of red-cockaded woodpeckers, at this point they were whatever, 60 years old or something there. But at the point we're 60 years old is the reason, and 60 is like a little bit of a loose number. I'm sure some are 59 years old, so we're 62 years old when they tend to develop red heart, and not every single one does develop the red heart. But that's the reason why the RCW was able to penetrate those, that, those trees to make a nest.

**David Todd** [00:05:09] Well, so this, this makes me think of a question: many landowners are frightened if they're told by the state or the federal government that they have endangered species on their property.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:05:22] Oh absolutely.

**David Todd** [00:05:22] And the restrictions about development and so on. What was your family's reaction to that news?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:05:30] For all, for those of us that could see the future coming at us, that there would be a point where an endangered species could actually be a way to preserve the land, possibly get federal help for that or whatever. But certainly wildlife exemption laws were not intact yet. But you could sort of see that that was going to happen once there was a federal Endangered Species Act. Well, sure enough, you're absolutely right. Joe Cliff Moke had been a timber man. I mean. I think a lot of people that were raised with ranching and timbering and the kinds - his son, for example, took on the job with him and his degree was in feed science from, from Texas A&M University. Clearly, the idea of preservation of the forest for the purpose of some little woodpecker didn't fit in their idea of what, what should happen with, or what they were trained at, or what they would continue to have employment with. So sure enough, he, they, they were actually saying to my father, behind my back, because I was saying, "We've got to preserve this land, and we've got to save this little bird, and we have to save all the habitat that goes with it, because, you know, it was all one thing."

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:06:40] And they were saying to him, "Don't let those nature people on there." And so that was the culture that I kind of and my siblings sort of bumped into. And had to sort of bump heads with, because they literally did a few times locked the nature people out. Because early on I was holding some sort of group conversations, little meetings with Texas Nature Conservancy and some people from Nacogdoches. Stephen F. Austin was doing a lot of work at that time in wildlife management. And so we were having meetings and it was a somewhat hostile environment with the, with the ranch management because that's what they knew. They had cattle. When I start talking about removing the cattle, that's what they're trained at and then timbering. You got to timber less, not too much timber over here, you've

got to timber there, you know. So really. Yes, that was some, some, I'm sure families do worry that, for example, when the neighbor of ours bought the land north of us and I told you I think yesterday, or maybe I started to tell you that, I think I started to tell you, but that's when we got cut off, with the Ringr. When they bought that land, they didn't cut all the pine trees and I notified Parks and Wildlife because I'd been working with them. And this is much later. This is in more like 1994. But what Parks and Wildlife wrote the new landowner and said, "If any of your trees that you cut appear at the mill with the woodpecker nest in it, you will be fined ten thousand dollars."

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:08:18] So there was that culture, definitely, that you didn't want people to know that you had this endangered species, or you weren't going to be able to timber your land. And we did finally convince my father that not to worry about all that. There would be wildlife exemption laws. He was really hung up on the idea that we had an agricultural exemption and we'd be paying way too much in taxes for that land if we didn't get a wildlife exemption. He didn't believe that was necessarily going to happen.

**David Todd** [00:08:45] Yeah, so. So you talked a little bit about some of the restrictions that the Endangered Species Act kind of imposed on folks trying to deal with an endangered species. I'm curious, too, about this issue that your dad was, you know, rightfully, understandably concerned about, and that's his ad valorem taxes, and the 1-b-1 agricultural appraisal. Can you talk a little bit about that and what his concern was that if he quit having cows out there or cutting timber, that he might lose this very valuable tax exemption?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:09:22] Well, I'll just tell you, it was an ongoing discussion. And, and he likes to argue and, and I do too. So we didn't have any trouble with that, you know. I mean, it was fun. You know, I'd say you don't understand. It's going to be, we're going to be glad some day. This could actually save this land. And we're not going to be able to inherit someday a great big ranch that's not doing anything special - family recreation. So actually, I didn't have the foresight. I'm telling the story as if I really knew this, but I just had this sense: this is what's coming. In fact, I was very optimistic, because it didn't come fast enough. But he did ultimately allow it.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:10:04] You know, it's really funny because I started to tell you the story yesterday, the day before yesterday, when we were on the phone, on Ringr. So, we'd been arguing about this kind of thing for a long time. And, and, in 1994, when he was forced to sell all the acreage around Cook's Branch because the, the energy company made the decision and even ... Dad put in place another CEO because he was stepping back a little bit. He thought he was going to do. And the new CEO just said, "We have to sell off the land. We're an energy company. We're not a land development company. And the Woodlands is one thing, but, you know, we're not going to do that again because we need to be more of a pure mission with the energy development." So Dad kind of agreed that they needed to probably do that.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:10:54] And so when I wrote, called up Melissa Parker. She was with Parks and Wildlife. We were good friends. And she had been out to Cook's Branch quite a few times while we walked around the woods and talked about the preservation of this habitat. And so this has been going on for years because, as I said, I got enlightened about it 1989 or '90. And this is '94, when Mr. Mayer bought the land north of us. And I called her because I heard these, you know, the buzz saws is out there.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:11:25] And I went, climbed over the barbed wire fence, or crawled through it, and just sat on this tree stump and it was just shocking to me. It was just a sea of

tree stumps. And you could hear the animals sort of scratching around trying to figure out where to go. And it was just this. I mean, I just, you know, sap was pouring out of these trees. It just seemed like just a disaster.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:11:46] So I called up Melissa and I said, "Come out here and see what they're doing." Because I knew that there were woodpeckers on their land too. There had to be. And so she wrote a letter to the owner. And I told you that a minute ago, that she said, "We, we understand a lot of trees have been cut. And in case you've cut any with this endangered species, you will be fined at the mill."

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:12:11] And so the, the new CEO who had been trying to cut the, make this deal and sell this land, walked into my father's office, just threw some folder on his desk, this right here and said, "One of your one of your kids is trying to stop this sale." And my father said, "Well, that must be Sheridan." So, he, in other words, we've been going back and forth, things like this for a long time. And in the end, and I think I mentioned this in the note I wrote to a while back, as far as asking those questions, in the end, we did get more exemptions. We got federal assistance with prescribed burning and, or federal assistance with other things related to preservation and some with the control burning, as well as the Aldo Leopold Award, which is the highest award for stewardship in Texas.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:12:59] And so he finally saw the light like, OK, you know, maybe you've been on the right track. And I think he was proud of it after a while. But there's a lot more, I guess, good PR, if you want to call it that, although he wasn't usually moved by that. But certainly that it was, started to be recognized that we had done something a little more special with the land and, and that would ultimately be for the public good.

**David Todd** [00:13:22] Well, I'm curious about that, because it seems like there are lots of programs, you know, through USDA - the EQIP and WHIP - and these sort of incentive programs. And then there are the rewards programs to recognize good deeds. And could you talk a little bit about what sort of impact that might have had on the thinking of your father or of your siblings when they were trying to say, "Hey, is this a good thing to do?" Did it matter what other people thought? Or, you know, y'all are a smart bunch of people. You know, we can figure this out without others encouraging us or blessing us.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:14:01] Yeah. We didn't need that. You're right. But it is, it is something when, you know, on the wall, when you walk in there, we have the Land Steward Award from Texas Parks and Wildlife. We have another one from Lone Star stewardship or whatever. I mean, you know, the fact that you've sort of set an example in the area and you're trying hard to, spending your own money actually, trying to do something that protects nature.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:14:23] But don't forget this whole family, they're all pretty serious naturalists. So it wasn't as if... none of us thought it was cool to have cattle. Few of us ride horses. You know, the things that had been set up to do with this land, all of us got far more pleasure out of a walk in the woods, or to spot a special bird, or to go fishing even. But we really weren't ranch types.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:14:47] And my mother, specifically, was not a ranch type. She was from the North and she just didn't get this whole Texas thing anyway. And, and she and the architecture of, a lot of the building that took place there, she was involved with the architecture and, and she, she just appreciated that it was a place to be in nature.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:15:11] So anyway, yes, we didn't rely on those awards or the recognition at all, it wasn't that big of a deal. But I will say that when, you know, even, even, even, I guess even myself, when I see the one award that goes to, for, for preservation or whatever, it's like, well, that's nice. You know, I mean, we put them, we put them on the wall there so people recognize and remember, like, yeah, we got there!

**David Todd** [00:15:41] Something else that really strikes me is that there are, you know, the majority of folks who own land are trying to make some sort of income off it. And usually it's, it's a break-even or worse kind of proposition. But what were their discussions in your family? Do you mind mentioning, like, we're going to give up the herd? You know, that's, that is regular income have go to market. Or, we're going to quit cutting trees. And that, again, is income that helps offset taxes, and utilities, and so on. Was that a, you know, a hurdle to clear?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:16:22] No, that was not a discussion, because I don't think we really were necessarily making a lot of money off the cattle and, at all, I mean, maybe. And we, we actually did better selling the axis deer to YO Ranch in Kerrville, selling them because they, they hunt them.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:16:46] And as far as the timbering goes, we, with the ag exemption, we were required to timber. And I believe I used to hear two out of five years, but don't ... Take that off the record, because I can't be sure of that. It's been so long ago that we quit being required. And my father was concerned about just losing the ag exemption and therefore there was the amount we were making cutting the trees was probably not such a big deal, as much as getting that ag exemption for cutting trees and selling them. And also same with the cattle. That's what's more of the issue. But the income from those activities, by themselves, was not an issue.

**David Todd** [00:17:29] So I take it that maybe one of the really valuable things about having cattle, having axis deer, having a timber operation, was the ag exemption.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:17:42] Exactly. Yeah.

**David Todd** [00:17:42] Was there a lot of discussion when the wildlife exemption came into being and y'all were sort of liberated from having to have these animals and having to have these lumber operations?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:17:52] The funny thing is we were able to keep a part of that ag exemption because we were selling axis deer and we need to sell them because they have no business being on that property. They're not native. So actually, we didn't lose as much as we thought in terms of ag exemption. And the wildlife exemption - it's kind of funny that you'd think there'd been a big fanfare when all of a sudden we qualified for it. But honestly, it might be, I don't know, it just sort of slipped in there. I can't even think about having it. I mean, I suppose I thought, "Oh, great, we finally have it." But I can't remember the moment like where we were, or what, what year was it? Just in fact, I don't even know. But that doesn't, you know, you forget things. It might be I just forgot how I felt about it.

**David Todd** [00:18:36] OK. Well, let me ask you something else, that just again, sort of exploring this position that a private landowner has and you're trying to do the right thing by this creature and by the ecosystem. And in your case, you had to reintroduce fire. And I imagine that any landowner, you don't have sovereign immunity. People can sue you if the fire escapes and the smoke, you know, clouds travel on the road and somebody has a collision.

You know, there are a lot of very real liability problems. Was, was that an issue? Was that a discussion among yourself?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:19:14] It was a discussion. And we used outside contractors to do it and they have their own insurance and so forth. And we can't do it in-house. We can't do it ourselves.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:19:23] And but you still have to worry about the liability or damaging anything. But we've been so far very successful. A few fires have gotten a little bit bigger than we had intended, but they didn't go into somebody else's land.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:19:37] I would say a bigger subject with us, is our dams and flooding possibilities, if they go out downstream. And that's something Sarah's been more involved with. So I almost don't want to speak on it. But I know that it's something I never thought about during my kind of tenure. And then more recently, there has been a lot of talk about securing the dams where we are certainly won't go out, you know, because it would be a problem downstream.

**David Todd** [00:20:08] Here's another issue that I think might be a factor for a private landowner, is that most of us, I think your, your family has a lot of STEM education among you. But it's ... this is a really technical field that you're getting into, trying to deal with an endangered species that has all very special kinds of requirements. Can you talk a little bit about what it took to find, you know, consultants, contractors, technical assistance?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:20:39] Yes, I remember that very, very well. The other things that I've somehow start to forget. No, I know very well, because when I realized what was sort of upon us, like this was not really my background. I mean, I had developed a passion for things like this, but I didn't know the technical work involved, the requirements. And so we had a session, a meeting, a full-day meeting at Cook's Branch. And this wasn't about, I'm going to say, gosh, maybe 1992. I mean, at the point I got more involved with Parks and Wildlife because they helped me organize who would be at the meeting. And I remember a couple of people came from Stephen F. Austin, from Nacogdoches, because their program there was quite developed.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:21:32] And at that meeting, one name just kept coming up over and over again, here's who you need and what they recommended. Well, Ike McWhorter, by the way, was the manager and the consultant and the ecological expert for Sandy Lands Preserve, which was in Silsbee, I think it's Silsbee, maybe just a town right nearby Silsbee. And it was about 3000 acres. And they had longleaf pine. And I had visited there around that time. And I don't know if I recommended Ross Carey, or if it was at this main meeting, but, but they were all there at the meeting. Ross as well. I mean, excuse me, Ike McWhorter as well. And they said the consultant that you need is Ross Carey, and he has a company called Raven Ecological Services.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:22:20] We called him and he provided literally all the technical guidance from there on, as well as doing the work. I mean, his crowd does the work. They come out and they do surveys. We've had multiple surveys. We've had identification of, you know, all the different forb species, forest floor. Just basically they are the people we've depended on.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:22:44] And actually, it's interesting that Sarah came along in about 2008 as an intern. She was in high school and then in college, then in graduate school in geography at Texas State. And so she would come for weekends and perform as kind of an intern with Ross and actually his wife, Dawn. And that's when she really developed her, her knowledge. And it was great because when she really did take over the job as the director, she came to it with a whole lot more experience and knowledge than I had at the time. You know, we needed to go into that next phase and she was the one to do it.

**David Todd** [00:23:35] And then I also, I was, I was interested that you had had this fellow that was helping you early on, Joe,

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:23:46] Joe Cliff Moke.

**David Todd** [00:23:48] Cliff Moke. I'm sorry. And I think at one point you said that you shifted from having a traditional ranch manager, timber manager, Joe, to a habitat manager, and that that really released you to focus on bird and ecosystem. Can you talk about these internal staff?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:24:11] Yeah. Let me tell you about that. It's kind of interesting because what happened is that once I started really being there more often, and I'm talking about paying attention, bringing the Nature Conservancy. You know, I live in Austin, so I'd meet Ike McWhorter. I'd meet Ross Carey, whoever out there. I guess Ross hadn't even started quite yet when Joe retired. Joe had a very bad accident and had to retire and he passed the management on. I don't think anyone even questioned it. This kind of how my dad operated, like, "OK, well, your son can do it. It's easy. No big deal. Just run the ranch kind of thing."

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:24:45] And I started being there a little bit more often. And that's when they were saying, "Don't let those nature people come on." That was really as much the son, as the father. But, you know, it's understandable. That was their culture. I mean this was all new to them to worry about. Don't cut trees, you know.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:25:03] So, but ultimately, it was not going to work because we needed a welcoming presence when the, the so-called "nature people" came on. We needed them to implement programs that we were asked to do. We needed a manager that was more than welcoming, but really would say, "Yeah, give me the list, I'll get it done."

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:25:23] So what happened is I was designing cabins and the lodge. You haven't been there, but the lodge, there were cabins. I worked with an architect on the lodge, but then I just did the cabins myself. And so during that time period, and this was 1999, '98. And so some time had elapsed. I mean, we still had the son, and his name was Glenn, and Glenn Moke was again. At this point we didn't have cattle. We'd already removed them, I believe. I'm not quite certain, but I think we had. But, but Glenn had resisted just so many different things we needed to do that, I, I, you know, I persuaded my father to let him go.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:26:14] And at that same time, when I was designing these cabins, I had been helping my mother. My mother and father lived in the Woodlands part-time. And so I was helping with the re-landscaping her, her house, her garden. And I just asked around. I said, is there, is somebody recommend somebody local that does landscape work? And, and they recommended Kathy Hutson.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:26:37] So I met Kathy. She came around to help me with my mother's house. And I told her that I was designing these cabins that were going to be built out there, Cook's Branch. And she said, this has been my lifelong dream would be to run like a preserve like that. And because of her personality, she, and she didn't have training, either in native species or events, but because she is highly educable.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:27:03] But the interesting thing is she had her degree was in conducting from Baylor. She's a musician and particularly choir. And why that was so important, I didn't know for years why it would be. But that's what that job required. You had to deal with ten Mitchell family members. Their children, my father, who'd say, "No, we're not going to do that anymore. Don't burn anymore, whatever he might say." And then, and then me, actually, because I was building these things and I'm somewhat demanding when I'm doing architecture. So I'd say, "Wait. Tell them to stop. I'll be out there." And get in the car. I don't like those windows, or whatever it would be.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:27:43] And Kathy was sort of managing all this at once. On top of that, though, she's very bright. And so she, really, after working with Ross Carey and all of them, she learned the ropes and she'd walk in the forest with them. And you, like you say, some of the stuff is highly technical and it's somewhat complex, but really a lot of it's very straightforward. And she also enjoyed it so much. And she's an absolute naturalist herself and loves nature and the out-of-doors. And it's really her religion.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:28:08] So she would see, for example, the guy climbing up the tree to go and check the woodpecker nest and, and you know, get to know him and enjoy it. She just enjoyed the entire job and it made her good at it.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:28:21] And so we hired her officially in, I think, either 1999 or 2000 and she's had the job ever since. She's now on the verge of retirement, which she kind of doesn't want to do. So she'll probably do it sort of part-time. But, I will say that she never gets enough credit in my mind, because there's so many other people who have played a part in terms of the technical expertise, or the guidance, or the consultation. But her ability to keep ... well, and don't forget, we've all given lots and lots of retreats there, particularly me because I got involved with the actually the architecture of the Mitchell, the Institute for Fundamental Physics and Astronomy at A&M, and through that got to be friends with all the physicists. And then when we would give workshops for, international workshops, actually, we give them at Cook's Branch because that's just 45 minutes away. And Cathy is also a master at hospitality and she has it down. So, you know, as far as we'd hire a caterer for the like the week they'd be there, but she would organize all that. She seems like a, kind of like an event planner. So we lucked out on that.

**David Todd** [00:29:36] Well let's see, you've talked a little bit about the way your family, with its in-house staff, and the consultants, and the government, and the old manager, and the new manager have, have worked on this land. And I was hoping that maybe you could explain who you're doing this for. I mean in a sense of course you're doing it for the red-cockaded woodpecker. But it sounds like y'all have a real educational component and you know, have been doing outreach, trying to, as I understand it, persuade and teach other landowners to try to follow suit. Is that true?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:30:18] Well, we really, there really, especially I think at the time of the Aldo Leopold award you were really asked to try to connect with other people who could or might do this kind of work or persuade other landowners within your region, or maybe even



beyond, the importance of preservation and protection of a habitat. The other factor is that our habitat, no matter how it seems large, but nothing for really maintaining a real ecosystem. I mean, we need, we need partners in adjacent lands. Sarah is the one to talk to about that, but because that's where I sort of backed off. I mean, I love it. I just haven't done my part in that way. I kind of went on, as I tend to do, to the next project. But I definitely, I know it's crazy.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:31:08] Well, I got so involved with that physics crowd and we were giving these retreats all of a sudden. Now there's an astronomy retreat just coming up right now. And so I spend half my time going back and forth. Wait a minute, Delta variant, are we sure we want to do it? I mean, there's always something like that - still related to Cook's Branch - but I kind of have not been as involved with the landowner contact, but Sarah has. And she's done an excellent job with that.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:31:32] Because of her, we have been able to acquire the Mayer land, the very land that I told you that I tried to stop the sale to. Yeah. The one that we said if his trees ended up at the mill, we'd get a fine. In fact, I met him. I guess she she contacted him because he was going to sell it. And there's a chance it's going to be turned into a sand, sand mining, sand mine. Sand is so in demand right now, amazingly. And she negotiated a price that we decided we could live with and we acquired the 847 acres that will now protect the hydrology of Cook's Branch, which is incredibly important. And he just liked Sarah and what we were trying to do and he wanted to go along with it and he put up with a lower price and, and he was a delightful man. Absolutely delightful. Eight-five or something. But in the middle of one of the negotiations we are all having lunch and he said, "Are you the one that tried to stop that sale?" So that just came back to haunt me. But anyway. Yeah, but we did acquire that.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:32:41] She's also been effective at, we think, she's contacted the county commissioners with the idea of preventing a highway that was slated to go right through the middle of Cook's Branch. It's, it's actually been on the map. And this one particular commissioner came to the land. He brought the others. And now there's this wonderful sort of, I guess, group that think, well, this is someday really a park. This is actually this is open space. And so there's going to be so little of it. You can see the rampant development. And so her ability to contact them and bring them on the land and see what we're doing was very, very important.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:33:27] So, but she's also made connections with the adjacent landowners, and we did acquire a couple of other smaller pieces of properties.

**David Todd** [00:33:38] Well, you know, you mentioned this just in passing, and I think it's something to maybe explore a little bit more.

**David Todd** [00:33:46] You know, it's a, it's a vast piece of land, but as you said, it's, it's, it's probably not large enough by itself to manage the red-cockaded woodpecker, and it's probably really not large enough to sustain the hydrology of the area, or the recreational needs of the area.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:34:08] Yes.

**David Todd** [00:34:08] And I was just curious if you can talk about the, the context of Cook's Branch, you know, in the larger landscape and what it means to you and your family, that you have this little oasis, a very large oasis, but, you know, it's small in context.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:34:27] It's small in that, in that you can't really sustain all those populations forever. You can prop them up a little bit, but you can't really, at that size, six and a half thousand acres, it's just, you just, we can control that. But we can't, you know, we can't impact the, we can't do anything about the impacts around us that we're, whether you're talking about air quality or water quality. I mean, it'll, it'll trickle into, onto Cook's Branch as well as and affect those populations. I think we can have an ongoing effort to help sustain some of the population, many of the native populations. But it won't, it'll be difficult. And, and it would be great is if somehow the county would say, oh, this is a good idea. Let's just, you know, help them out and have add a bunch of land to it, because it doesn't have to be absolutely contiguous, by the way.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:35:31] As a matter of fact, one of the reasons that theoretically, I heard anyway, that we had the RCW on the property was not just that those old trees had been saved. It's because Sam Houston National Forest, which is 100,000 acres, I believe. That sounds crazy, but I think it is, and then Jones Forest, which is down near the Woodlands, and that was 3000 acres. The idea is that there's more genetic diversity that was made possible because of the migratory, I mean, the nature of those populations communicating.

**David Todd** [00:36:10] OK. Well, I guess thinking about this tract of land in the larger context, in terms of acres, but I guess there's also just the place that this piece of land plays in time. And you, you began the story back in 1919, the last clearcut. Your dad buys it in '64. Restoration starts in the '90s, I guess. What do you foresee in the years to come? What are some of the future opportunities and challenges?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:36:48] Well, I mean, since we were able to establish it as one of the land conservation programs of our foundation, the land conservation part, the overall sustainability mission of our foundation, it, it does change the story in that we are literally required by the IRS to continue the kind of management we're doing, which is, as I call it, sort of loosely, you know, a donation to the general region to have protected that, so forth. And if we should change, like if tomorrow, we turned it into a big wedding venue, and were giving big concerts every weekend or something like that, and making money hand over fist with that, which we wouldn't anyway, that they would take that designation away. We wouldn't be able to be, you know, part of the, couldn't be a non-profit activity.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:37:54] So that's also a mixed bag because it's expensive to manage land like this. As much as my whole family objects to hunting, to turn all of the hunting season into a nonstop weekend hosting the hunters, we could probably support Cook's Branch, the needs with that. But I think we'll had this issue with the IRS. If we can't I mean, that's a whole other story. But I think if you could show that was the activity you did in order to support the non-profit work, maybe.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:38:30] But the point is, is that because you say, what do I see going forward? I mean, we've done this, now what? I think what, as far as I see, it is now part of a legacy, part of the foundation, that now has its own script on what we need to do. And we'll just continue doing it. And it will be, probably, at some point, more and more open to the public.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:38:58] We've talked about a lot. I mean, we have so many ideas. And then they go back and forth. And there's so many of us making decisions that I can't, you know, you never know what we'll end up doing exactly. But I do think the idea of becoming more of an educational center of some sort, where people can see, like I say, something like

this, let's, you know, it's a relic of the past, and more so right now than the 40 years of ranching. Now, all of a sudden, you're starting to see what...

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:39:25] I think I told you about a book that really moved me. It was called "The Land of Bears and Honey", by two naturalists in the Angelina State Forest. It was sort of their area. And they talk about what it had been like. And I'm not saying it's really like that now. We don't have bears, but, but, but it's closer now than when we had cattle grazing on bahía grass and coastal bermuda. It's far closer, when you see that little bluestem and the ground-nesting birds that live there. You know, that's what used to be. So that, to me, is really rewarding. And so I think we can also think of, in the future, what like I said a minute ago, what it may be is simply is closest, as you can even, you know, see what used to be in that region, because it's everywhere else, it's a parking lots and it's going away and it's HEBs and Targets. And it's just, I mean, it's heartbreaking.

**David Todd** [00:40:27] That's so interesting. It's a little bit like Back to the Future: that, that your future may be a return to 1918.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:40:34] That would be awesome.

**David Todd** [00:40:36] Yeah, well, this has been really interesting. You've been so kind with your time. Could I ask just one more question?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:40:45] Yeah.

**David Todd** [00:40:46] All right. Do you have anything to add?

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:40:54] Oh, do I have anything to add? Well, no, but I like that you're doing this book. I hope you edit out whatever I said that is redundant or stupid. I rely on Sarah to be the smart one. She's very eloquent, but also she's really trained. And mine usually is more about the feelings of it and the passion I have. But sometimes the types of things I say, I'm sorry, oops, you fooled that.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:41:14] But I would just say, I don't really have anything to add except that, you know, this is an odd thing to say. I just took a bike ride earlier, and it was this gorgeous blue-sky day here, not a cloud in the sky and incredible temperature, and it's just beautiful in the mountains. And, on a, on a rainy day when we're here, if I need to exercise, I have an elliptical trainer. And I came back from the bike ride and I just said to my husband, the difference in watching news about Afghanistan, when I'm on that stupid elliptical trainer, as opposed to this wonderful bike ride, you know, descending a thousand feet in elevation from where we are at 8500 up to 12,000, and that just the joy of that, kind of, all of it, compared with the news. And I'd say that's what Cook's Branch, I wish everybody had something like that, you know, because so many people are just enmeshed, including myself, and so much that's hard right now. And I think, I, I enter the gate at Cook's Branch, in a car, which I shouldn't even be in. But anyway, and drive that long three mile road just to get to the lodge. And it's just, it's, it never ceases to amaze me. I mean, every time it's just like this is a forest and it's really wilderness right here in the middle of this development. And so that's what I think, you know, that I will have to add. I guess what I'd add is that everyone needs something like that, in their own way. And if we can share that, eventually, even just as an example, you know, that's it, it's, it's not just what you do for nature. I just think that human beings just desperately need more of that.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:43:17] So now I'm going to go watch the Afghanistan news.

**David Todd** [00:43:21] Oh, no! Get on your bike, but let's get to

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:43:25] No, it's true that I have to literally make myself not, you know, sometimes the first thing, my opening page on my computer is New York Times, and right now it's just so - I go looking for the good stories. But anyway, back to that. I don't want this to be part of this, this, this interview. It actually sounds kind of ridiculous, but I just do think that nature is so healing. And to the extent that we can share it.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:43:50] You know, we gave those retreats, those workshops for the physics group. And they, my father had established the collaboration with Cambridge University on purpose because he wanted to bring some notoriety to the Mitchell Institute at A&M - not notoriety, but the shared, you know, like bring up the reputation, bring up visibility.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:44:12] So ultimately, we started hosting Stephen Hawking at Cook's Branch. And Stephen absolutely loved it. And it was weird because I knew other the places where he'd had workshops, you know, really cool, cool places in Herefordshire and stuff. But, when the doctors, he'd gone for 10 years there, for two weeks. One time, he asked if he could stay an extra week and all this and. He even got stuck there for an extra two weeks, I think it was, when there was the volcano in Iceland, because they couldn't land in London. And anyway, but when the doctors told me he couldn't fly anymore at Transatlantic, unless he was on a medical jet, which was not affordable by this Cambridge collaboration funding, he said, "Well, if I die going down, I'm here, I'm going to Cook's Branch.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:45:00] And the reason was because he could do work there, he said, that he couldn't do anywhere else, just the way it was set up in nature. But also we didn't ever tell a soul he was there. There was no press and he, just the privacy of it. And we all became really fond of him. And Cathy, who I told you is the manager there, she used to take him out shopping for cowboy hats and stuff. Anyway, but, but he had that same reaction to a lot of Cambridge University - it was very formal and also very, very urban, actually, still a small university town, sort of. But it's that and he, he just and he loved the idea that this was Texas. But a lot like what he loved was just the, again, you could hear all the birds, you know. So anyway, well, that's all I have to say. And I'll let you go and I enjoyed it.

**David Todd** [00:45:51] All right. Well, I love the picture of the sanctuary, whether it's for birds or Stephen Hawking. You've done a good thing.

**David Todd** [00:46:00] Hey, and thank you very much for doing this recording. It's very sweet of you and very glad.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:46:07] Well, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed meeting you, too, David. So good luck and can't wait to see your book.

**David Todd** [00:46:11] Me too!

**David Todd** [00:46:12] Thank you so much.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:46:14] OK, bye bye.

**Sheridan Lorenz** [00:46:15] Bye.

