

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of SRU
Fran Bires Interview
March 1, 2024
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
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MJ: It is 2:57p.m. on March 1st, 2024, and I am here with Fran Bires for Rock Voices [Oral History Project]. Hello.

FB: Hello. Hi, Megan.

MJ: So, first off, can I get some biographical information like your name, date of birth, education and stuff like that?

FB: Sure. Yeah. I go by Fran, but my full name is Francis M. Bires, and date of birth is October 5, 1957. I was born and raised in a town called Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. And what was the other thing?

MJ: Education.

FB: Education. Okay. So, I started my undergraduate degree at Penn State. Did two years at Penn State Beaver campus, and then my last two years at main campus. I have a B.S. degree in Parks and Recreation / Environmental Education.

And after that, I worked a little bit and then went back for my graduate program, master's degree, at a place called George Williams College outside of Chicago, and got a degree in Environmental Education Administration.

MJ: All right. And when you worked for the university, what buildings or areas did you work in?

FB: Well, I was, first of all, employed at the McKeever Environmental Learning Center, and that's in Sandy Lake, so it's off campus. And so my office was there. We had ten buildings there. So I, you know, we had a main office where the educators, the director worked, secretaries, and then there were some other buildings where we have lodging for kids, a dining hall, an auditorium and things like that. So mainly at McKeever. And then when I got involved with the Macoskey Center [for Sustainability Education & Research], I was in that building on Harmony Road.

MJ: All right. And what is the purpose of the McKeever Center?

FB: Good question. McKeever was a very unique facility. As a lot of people would say back in the day, it was state-of-the-art. It was very innovative. Now, that center was built in 1974, just when environmental education was really being talked about. It recently had been coined in terms of 'environmental education' in 1972 by the federal government.

So anyhow, McKeever was a place where people came and learned about taking better care of the Earth, when you really think about it. And our main objective was teaching kids. So we worked with kids among school groups from, oh my gosh, a lot of counties. I think I remember 18 counties in western Pennsylvania. We saw students--mostly elementary, middle school--coming to McKeever for field trips and our programs.

So that was basically what McKeever was all about. And then we started doing teacher workshops to train teachers so they could go back in the school and help kids become better stewards of the Earth.

MJ: And it was a sort of--I saw a few articles about it--it was sort of a summer camp type set up, right?

FB: Actually . . . actually, it was during the school year. So, what we did at McKeever was not just a field trip. It wasn't like, you know, kids going to Kennywood or something like that. This was an integral part of their science curriculum back at school. And so we worked--our programs were designed where we worked with the teachers prior to the kids coming to McKeever so they could prepare the kids. And then we gave the teachers follow-up activities to do back in school to build on that program. So we operated during the school year. I mean September, all the way through the holidays--Christmas, New Year's, take a break, and then school got back in session all the way through spring and 'til the end of the school year.

MJ: All right. What is your personal history with the McKeever Center? For starters, when did you start?

FB: Another good question. I interned there in 1981. And up until that point--I already had my B.S. degree at Penn State, and I worked around western Pennsylvania and a couple of different places. And like a lot of people, they just--they're still searching. They're trying to figure out what they're going to do with their life. And that's what happened to me. I didn't know what I wanted to do.

So I went back to grad school and--actually before grad school, I went to McKeever and that's where I met this professor from George Williams College who had written quite a few books in our field of environmental education. And when he gave that workshop that weekend, it was a Friday-Saturday-Sunday workshop, I knew right away what I wanted to do with my life. I knew right away, up until that point I didn't. From then on, I did. And that was--I interned there in 1981. So it's like, *wow, okay*. That was the beginning of my career. Then I was hired in 1983 there as an environmental educator, and I worked there 12 years as an environmental educator. And then I was fortunate enough to become director of the McKeever Center for the rest of my career. That's how I retired in 2016.

MJ: What year did you become director again?

FB: I think that was right around [pause] let's see here--must have been 2005? 2003? something like that--right in there. Megan, I'm sorry, I don't know off-hand the correct time.

MJ: No, it's okay. And while you were there, what different roles did you play? Like, what were your tasks in the different roles?

FB: So the one thing that was unique about McKeever: it was residential. So, it wasn't a 9 to 5 job. And things go on [laughs], you know, you're serving 100 kids and their teachers and parents breakfast, lunch, and dinner Monday through Friday. So you have the whole food service situation.

You have lodges, you have a maintenance crew, and of course, coordinating all that, which is a monumental task. Plus doing what a director should be doing in terms of, you know, *how do you market this place? How do you get more people here? How do you develop programs? How do you--so how do you grow the place?* And so, was it a challenge? Yes, without a doubt. But if you're in this field of environmental education, and you're passionate about it, it doesn't feel like a job. We all jumped in and we had such an incredible team at McKeever, and that makes it a lot easier.

MJ: What did you do in the summers? Did you go home or. . . .

FB: No, because we had summer camps. We had Nature Day Camps. We had specialty workshops for teachers. We did one of the few weeklong programs in the country that had to deal with grading lumber, it was called the Hardwood Lumber Grading Course. And people literally came from all over the United States *and* around the world to get trained on how to grade lumber, if you can believe that. I mean, it was pretty--it was a very unique program. And we had it at McKeever, and that was our, in fact, our longest running program from when the center opened all the way until it closed.

MJ: All right. And the next question is something I'm not super familiar with. So it says you were present for the transition in ownership of the McKeever Center from Clarion [University] to SRU [Slippery Rock University]. Any thoughts or recollections about that? And could you also sort of give me background on it?

FB: Sure, sure. So McKeever opened in 1974, okay. And they were administered at first by a consortium of universities. And so it was California University, Slippery Rock, IUP [Indiana University of Pennsylvania], Edinboro, Clarion, and it just didn't work out. There were too many, you know, too many people trying to do what they wanted to do or see done, and you just couldn't do it all. You just, you know, this person at one university wanted to accomplish this. And this person said, "No, we want to do this." So I think that lasted two years. And then Clarion was the university that was *selected* to take over McKeever *solely* as a university. And that lasted up until 1985. So from '70--you know, they were involved in '74, but '76, up until 1985, Clarion was the sole administrator at the Center.

MJ: So the consortium didn't last that long?

FB: It didn't last that long. It just didn't work. Too many--too many irons in the fire, too many people wanting to do what they wanted to do. And we had a great relationship with Clarion. But what happened was, they had a president, former President Thomas Bond, and [he] just didn't see McKeever fitting into what they wanted to do on campus. And so the writing was on the wall as

they say, and you could just tell that it was going to come to a close. And they no longer wanted to have McKeever—[to] be responsible for it.

Now, you mentioned earlier, do I have any recollections of this? It came to a point that there was a meeting in the president's office at Clarion--where they were gonna officially announced that they were done with McKeever. All right? And who was there was Thomas Bond, former President Thomas Bond; the director of the McKeever Center, Donna Besken; the dean of the college--I believe the College of Education in Clarion; and myself. And we had a member--*founding father* of the McKeever Center from the Sandy Creek Conservancy, Dr. Bill DeCourdes. And if it wasn't for the Sandy Creek Conservancy, McKeever would not have happened. It never would have existed. They were responsible along with Ivan McKeever, who developed the McKeever Center and built it. Okay.

What I recollect is Thomas Bond, the former president, saying, "You know what? We just--we just had enough of McKeever, it's too far away. And plus, all the members of the Sandy Creek Conservancy have passed away anyhow, they're all dead, right?" And Dr. DeCourdes was just an amazing person. He was brilliant. And he goes, "I'd like to clarify that because as you can see, I'm one of the founding fathers of the Sandy Creek Conservancy [and] I'm sitting at the table right here." So it was [laughs] kind of an awkward situation there. But I do remember that. And it was . . . I remember that very vividly.

So in '85 Slippery Rock University took ownership--not ownership, but administration responsibilities of the McKeever Center. But it wasn't--during the year 1985 there was a lot of talk about who wanted McKeever. And a lot of agencies wanted McKeever. Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, Pennsylvania Game Commission, the Pennsylvania Bureau of State Parks. So there was a lot of folks, a lot of organizations that wanted McKeever. In the end, because we had such a focus on education, Slippery Rock University won out. And they [SRU] had an undergraduate and a graduate program in Environment Education.

MJ: All right. And this isn't on the paper, but I just sort of thought of it, how did operation of McKeever change when it went from Clarion to Slippery Rock? Was there a change?

FB: Actually, there was not much of a change, and I'll tell you why. Day-to-day operations . . . the staff of both Clarion and Slippery Rock were tremendous to work with. And the staff, I mean, the people who were in the purchasing department, the tech support people, the people in food service, the people in facilities, all the people that I needed, we needed to work with to keep things moving along, those people were just gems. I can't say enough about them, both at Clarion and Slippery Rock. And of course, having a degree and programs here at the university helped because we were seeing interns and student teachers at McKeever from SRU, and that was wonderful.

MJ: All right, next question: what were some of your best and worst moments educating at the McKeever Center?

FB: Oh wow [laughs]. Well, the best moments were working with the kids: the student teachers and the interns, I would say. A student teacher comes to McKeever, an intern comes to

McKeever after the situation I was in, you graduate from university [or] college somewhere in United States. You don't know what to do. We were advertising for internships and people would come, again, from all over the United States to intern at McKeever. And to watch their growth, and to watch them develop into an educator--a fine educator--was very rewarding. And those were just awesome experiences. And to watch a team come together, you're talking about getting anywhere between eight and fifteen individuals living together, working together all day for two months is--that's a challenge. People come from different walks of life, and you have to develop into a team. And those were just--that was just really, really cool.

The worst thing about what happened to me at McKeever was when we had the fire of the auditorium in 1995.

MJ: I hadn't heard about that.

FB: I was home; and that was a very special building. If I recall there were either nine or eleven fire departments there, and the building just went up. It was totally gone. And that's where--it was a 205-seat, tiered auditorium. We had all of our props and educational materials in there. It was a very sad day that we lost that building. So that wasn't, you know, a very good day.

And another time was many, many years ago. We had a couple of students that--we had a windstorm, and we had a couple of branches come down and fall on kids, and one kid broke his back. Another kid was severely injured. They recovered fully, thank goodness. Teachers were very supportive. Parents were very supportive. It was just one of those things that happened. And you feel responsible, you know, you do. But . . . so other than that I mean, not a lot of bad times, to be honest with you, at McKeever.

MJ: That's pretty cool. So how did you come upon the Macoskey Center job?

FB: Well, Thomas Reynolds was the director there for years. And before I took that position, I was very aware of the Macoskey Center. I knew Robert Macoskey, who was a professor in the Philosophy Department. What a wonderful person. Talk about, you know, foresight. Talk about spot on in terms of what we need to do on this planet.

And so Thomas left and the university just wanted to have an interim person there. And so for some reason [laughs] they selected me. So I was wearing two hats at that time, you know, splitting my time between the McKeever Center and the Macoskey Center. And that's going back [to] what I said about the staff and how important that is, and what a team we had. I felt okay leaving the McKeever Center. I didn't have to be there, you know, because I knew things were okay. So I'd come down here [Macoskey Center], get things rolling down here, and go back and forth.

MJ: Being director at the Macoskey Center, was there much of a difference between that and McKeever, or was it similar?

FB: It [pause] definitely a huge difference. Same ideas in terms of what we're after on this planet: sustainability, looking at people's relationship with the planet. We didn't have chickens, we didn't have live animals at McKeever, and Macoskey Center did. They--the building was an amazing

energy-efficient building designed with that in mind. We didn't have that at McKeever. And so the Macoskey Center was more of a demonstration facility where people would come and learn, *okay, this is the correct way of using materials, repurposing, recycling; the building itself, the land*, you know, things like that.

So even though their missions were very similar, how we got to do that were very different. Now one thing that I did when I got there is we were--and they'd been trying to do this is trying to get school kids there. And so we finally started to figure that out and it continues on, thank goodness. It's kind of nice to see that, [pause] that student come there.

And so one of the big hurdles was you have college students, university students in classes. And those are so rigid at times. There's not a lot of time where you could train them and then get them out of their classes to work with kids for four or five hours at a time. So that was a huge challenge. But it's still going on today.

MJ: And the Environmental Education Department, that isn't at Slip[pery Rock University] currently, is it?

FB: Well, it's in the Parks and Recreation Department. And so they still have that program. And that's a B.S. as well as an M.S., I'm pretty sure.

MJ: Okay, I must have mixed something up. I'm glad it's still going. Let's see, any other impressions of the Macoskey Center you want to share?

FB: Well, again, I remember, you know, Bob Macoskey

MJ: What was he like?

FB: Oh, just wonderful, just brilliant. One of those other guys that just had ideas that are just off the wall and *yeah, yeah, that's sounds . . .*, you know. So it was great to--I didn't know him that much, but I met him a few times, did a couple of workshops with him on sustainability and permaculture. So take that away, and people like that, they just--you call them mentors. There are a lot of people in my life that I had people like that, and you don't forget them because they had an impact on your life. And so I think that's one of the biggest things I take away is just his vision and what he tried to do there with the Macoskey Center.

And when you know a person like that, same with Ivan McKeever. I knew Ivan McKeever really well. So when these people share what they had in mind with you, you become responsible, you go, *You know what? I can't let this person down! I've got to follow through and do whatever I can to make that dream of theirs happen*. If you know what I mean there.

MJ: I never thought of it that way, but now that I think about it, that's kind of beautiful [laughs].

FB: I mean, yeah, it's just, you know. So anyhow. . . .

MJ: Yeah. Are there activities or committees you were involved in, like other environmental education type things.

FB: Well, we did Earth Day here through the Macoskey Center, we had celebrations for kids, and for university students, and all kind of activities. We did the same thing at McKeever.

So in terms of other committees, things like that, [I] didn't do *much* of that. Because it's different when you're not on campus. You're off campus, especially before I got involved at the Macoskey Center, being at McKeever, we had our hands full. I mean, you know, with the residential program that runs year-round, it just takes a lot. So I'm kind of glad that I didn't have to serve on a lot of other committees and things like that.

MJ: All right. And what would you consider your accomplishments at SRU, McKeever, and Macoskey?

FB: SRU, okay, and McKeever, and Macoskey. Well, start let's start with McKeever. We grew the facility, which was nice. We made it not only known regionally but throughout the state, but also internationally. We hosted three international conferences at McKeever and we had educators from Japan, China, United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, all over the world that would come to McKeever for these conferences. And likewise, because of the programs we did at McKeever, we trained a lot of people.

I remember [clears throat] a couple, Mariko and Atsushi Takamido from Japan. They came for one year. One year they took out of their lives, they rented a house near McKeever and came to work every day for one year to learn about what we do at McKeever. We would host educators from Australia for a month at a time, from the U.K. So wow, that's--I thought that was really cool.

Now the Macoskey Center, just moving that vision forward and trying to [pause] think about what this place is about and trying to move it in that direction. Again, and there were some restrictions there mainly because university students' schedules and class schedules, you're pretty locked into that. And how do you get around that? So that was always a challenge.

MJ: Alright, could you slide me the pen, please?

FB: Sure.

MJ: Thanks. I'm just going to make a note of something. Now, people who influenced you or were significant while you were at both McKeever and Macoskey?

FB: Oh, sure. Well, at McKeever, the person who hired me was the former director, and his name is Richard Touvell. I still talk to Dick regularly, and this is 35, almost 40 years later. He went on to become a director of the Chippewa Nature Center in Midland, Michigan. Even then we would compare notes and talk about programs, and successes, and frustrations, and things like that. But he was, to this day, a dear friend and someone who I respected and looked up to.

Ivan McKeever, without a doubt, he was another person that was just amazing. Had vision. Didn't want to hear, "No, we can't do it" [laughs].

MJ: He was one of the founders, right? Or was he *the* founder.

FB: He was the founder. He was the person that developed the Sandy Creek Conservancy in 1959 as a nonprofit 501(c)3 and charged them with coming up with funding and property and going through with that. I wasn't on board at that time, but they were all alive and at McKeever when I was there. And so, Ivan was [a] very, very special guy.

G. Warren Smith, former [Slippery Rock University] president. He was just a great guy. He was a president that--and I know being a president of a university, you have a lot of responsibilities. You have academia that you have to deal with, all these different programs, all these different departments, all these, you know, whatever. But he was one that really had a passion for the outdoors [clears throat]. We had him up a number of times doing programs on some aspect of the environment because he was so well-traveled and so--he was an ecologist as well. So he was just so into this. So it was really, really nice getting to know G. Warren.

MJ: All right. What about people from a little closer to now? Like I said, the Macoskey Center. Do you know the woman who directs it now?

FB: Sami [Samantha] Laurence? Definitely. She's awesome. Sami actually got started as an intern at McKeever, and worked there and . . . dear friend, colleague. She's definitely an amazing educator. Went through McKeever; we hired her part time, and then she asked about the program at the university here. I said, "You gotta go for it. You gotta do it." So she went through the master's program, got that degree, and of course, then was hired as the director of the Macoskey Center. Great fit. Great person.

MJ: All right. And what have former McKeever interns gone on to do besides direct the Macoskey Center?

FB: Oh boy. . . .

MJ: What kinds of things?

FB: Yeah, so many of them have gone on to do some amazing things: work for NASA, work for the federal government in all kinds of capacities: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, state parks, state forests, teachers--many teachers because a lot of the student teachers that we got at McKeever were not only in Environmental Education, they were elementary or middle school teachers. It's just amazing that what those folks went on to do in their lives.

And not only that, kids. Kids have gone through the program, it had such a profound impact on their lives. I'm talking a lot of kids became Ph.D. folks in ecology, the environment, seriously. My wife taught at Hermitage School District and brought kids for thirty years to McKeever. And so a lot of her students went on and did amazing things. The only reason I know [is] because she's my wife, and you hear about these stories, these tremendous stories, these kids coming back and doing some pretty cool things.

MJ: Yeah. Next question is major events or activities? While you were, again, both at McKeever and Macoskey. You've mentioned the Earth Day celebrations and the auditorium fire. So other things like that?

FB: Okay. Well, McKeever . . . major things that we have done. [Pause] Tom--there was a governor, he was a former governor--Thomas Ridge. You know, in situations like McKeever, it was very political. I mean, we were a separate line item on the governor's budget and part of our budget came from him, the governor, not all [of it].

But he fell in love with McKeever for some reason and used it a lot, which I thought was really cool. That did wonders for us in terms of other people, *look at this facility and say, "Wow, I never really thought of it; I never knew about McKeever."* And so things like that happened. He would unveil different initiatives while he was governor, at McKeever, teleconferencing. Just, you know, TVs and all this stuff. But what came out of that was an awareness that people didn't have. They didn't know anything about McKeever. And so one of the things that I took away from that was getting people there who had no idea McKeever existed and go, "Oh my gosh, what a place." And then they would turn around and tell more people and more people. And all of a sudden, we were seeing other groups, and this group, that school, and it was getting used a lot toward the end of my career there, which ended in 2016.

MJ: All right. And then other memorable events or memories you'd like to share. And for me, their place.

FB: Well, the other thing that we--and again, it's not my program, but I fell onto it because the Macoskey Center was there. You know, we did Earth Day celebrations for university students, but there was also a day for the community where vendors would come in, music. And it's a day where you're just kind of celebrating how special this planet is. And to continue that--to work--to continue to do that when I was there and keep on growing that was, it's just it's a really cool thing.

MJ: All right. Now, another question I just wrote in for us. I read a lot of articles about McKeever in the past five years, so could you--I've also heard a lot about it possibly opening back up and then it never it seems to happen. [Laughs]. But I--you know, obviously I hope it comes back, but how has McKeever fared since you left?

FB: Okay. When McKeever closed and separated their ties with Slippery Rock University, it was just sitting there. Vacant for almost four and a half years. And we were all worried what was going to happen to the facility and McKeever. In the state, if there were state property or buildings within two years--after two years if nothing happens, no one, no other state agency picks it up it goes out for a bid, public bid. And most likely what would have happened if that did happen, it would have been clear cut. And the only reason I'm saying this, because I know a lot of loggers who came to me and said, "Fran, if I get the bid, this is what we're going to do." It's a very special piece of property, and there's one person that really saved the day, and that is State Senator Michelle Brooks out of the 50th District. She single-handedly saved McKeever from that happening.

MJ: How did she do that?

FB: Perseverance. Knowing how special McKeever was, the passion she has for what McKeever was and what it meant to her. And [pause] she again, single-handedly made that not happen. So

not only that, she took it to the point where *we have to save the property and the programs, if possible, at McKeever*. So we worked and worked. I worked with her over a couple of years. And finally, the other person that really needs to be recognized is the Secretary of DCNR, Department of Conservation Natural Resources, Cindy Dunn. She didn't have to do this. They decided that this property was too valuable as a natural resource to let go. And so she decided that we're [DCNR] taking it over, so it's now preserved forever.

McKeever property is now a part of the Clear Creek State Forest, called the McKeever Tract. Okay? Forever--nothing's going to happen to it. The hemlock stand we have in the ravine at McKeever is the largest hemlock stand in Mercer County. It's a class A trout stream; very valuable invertebrates that live there. Flowers, wildflowers, trees, etc., very special natural place.

So it's protected. And that was one of my main goals, was [to] make sure that is protected, working with Senator Brooks. So now, what's going to happen is in the end there are going to be six full time foresters working out of the auditorium that burned down. They are going to rebuild it. In terms of--now the shell is still there, but there has to be a lot of work done. Almost \$2.3 million alone to make that building to the point where you could have staff working in there. And that's going to happen.

People are impatient. [Laughs]. I know they are. We all are. It's going to take time. We are having a trailhead dedication on May 3rd, 2024, who are going to dedicate the new trails that are at McKeever that connect the McKeever Center with Goddard State Park. So it's happening. It's just taking time. So it's good news.

MJ: Mm-hm. I'm glad it's still happening. Now how would you like to be remembered by the different centers?

FB: How--[laughs] that's a tough question.

MJ: Yeah.

FB: Yeah, [laughs] that's a tough question. Well, just as [pause] someone who's passionate about the environment, someone who's passionate with working with people and seeing what we could do to fix the situation we're in. Not much more than that.

You know, we obviously have some issues at hand here with climate change and our use of energy and materials and how could we all work in our lives, our places of work, at home to have less of an impact on this planet. So if I got that across to people in both facilities, I'm happy.

MJ: All right. And last question, any words of wisdom for community members?

FB: For community members?

MJ: At McKeever and Macoskey.

FB: Such as . . . ?

MJ: Like the kids, the interns, the teachers, maybe the people who are there now, sort of refurbishing it.

FB: [Pause] I would say for both facilities, the Macoskey Center and the McKeeever Center: don't lose sight of how this place has got here, and the purpose of them, and the people who were involved in getting them here. And that would be Dr. Robert Macoskey and Ivan McKeeever, who was a state conservationist for twenty-three years with the state of Pennsylvania. So a lot of times people lose sight of history and how things got to be what they are, and I would hope that your people that once we're gone, they'll remember those kinds of things.

And DCNR is going to be doing a lobby dedicated to the McKeeever Center, Ivan McKeeever in the Sandy Creek Conservancy. Because they also realized they don't want to lose the history of how the Center got along all those years to where we are.

MJ: That's all I have for questions. Thank you so much.

FB: You're welcome.