

May 6, 2022

Grand Canyon History Tidbit by Kim Besom

Interpretation at Grand Canyon

In honor of **National Interpreter Appreciation Day** this week, and the reopening of the Visitor Center after more than two years, a tidbit about past Interpretation at Grand Canyon.



#00798: NATURALIST GUIDING A SMALL PARTY OF VISITORS ALONG THE RIM TRAIL NEAR KOLB STUDIO, CIRCA JULY 1932.

Originally, Interpreters were called Naturalists. In a 1995 interview with **Russell Grater**, a Naturalist at Grand Canyon in the early 1930's, Grater was asked about the kinds of programs they gave:

Grater: [We gave] two auto caravans tour a day. Morning and afternoon... The morning caravan was usually those that had a little more time than some of the rest of them. They'd be there for another day. The rest of them, when the morning was over, they'd seen the Canyon, and then many of them were on their way then, shortly after. But your caravans started from down at Headquarters. First stop was at Yavapai, and the next stop was out along the road at one point, when you're acquainting them with a little bit of the ground cover, the kind of forests or trees and things that were there, what kind of wildlife lives in this area and so forth. Then you go on out to Grandview

and there you'd give them some of the history of the area, the story of the region from the standpoint of the mining history.

Then you made one more stop at the Wayside [Tusayan] Museum, get the archaeological story, pick up a little more geology there, go on clear to the end of the drive, out to the Watchtower, and complete your story there and acquaint them with where they can go from there. The road ran out into Painted Desert in a hurry, and what they might see along the way, and especially the Little Colorado. Kind of summarize some of the things they've seen, answer questions and so forth.



#00173: NATURALIST POLLY PATRAW LEADING AN AUTO CARAVAN TOUR ON EAST RIM DRIVE, JUNE 1931.

In a 1981 interview, **Ernie Schulz**, former Assistant Chief Naturalist at Grand Canyon in 1946, and Chief Naturalist in the late 1950's, was asked about the most important message to pass on to visitors:

Schulz: Number one was the Yavapai talk.

Interviewer: Why was that important?

Schulz: Well, because that was the park story, the whole damn story, and that's a big story to tell. It lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. No illustrations, no nothing- just the canyon out there,

or if you were giving it indoors in inclement weather, you had some exhibits around you could point to make your point. How the canyon was formed, the story of life through the ages, the canyon as a barrier- you know, ecology and animal exploration, and the barriers, climatic and physical. We touched a little bit on ethnology, too. So, it was a tremendous story to tell in that time.

Schulz goes on to describe Yavapai programs:

Schulz: Those were the days when the Santa Fe train rolled into the village daily and before there was a visitor center in Grand Canyon National Park. There was only the Yavapai Overlook... and it contained modest wall exhibits. We had to set up folding chairs in the single museum room when weather was cold or out on the parapet when the weather was good. These folding chairs were for the audience when we gave the Yavapai talk. The parapet consisted of a set of small, tabletop-type cases with sighting tubes, which gave the visitor who cared to expend the effort a very impressive Grand Canyon story- how the canyon was formed, life through the ages, the canyon as a barrier, the climates, and life of Grand Canyon National Park today- as outlined by John C. Merriam and his blue-ribbon interpretive committee.

Even in 1946 things were a bit crude. Park naturalists shoveled snow paths to Yavapai... and yes, we even carried, and often through the snow, five-gallon cans of fuel oil to fill our oil-drum stoves to heat the Yavapai Overlook.



#09733A: NATURALIST GIVING A YAVAPAI MUSEUM INTERPRETIVE TALK,
NOVEMBER 1953.



#05823: NATURALIST RALPH REDBURN SHOWING THE YAVAPAI GEOLOGIC COLUMN, SEPTEMBER 1932.

And in a 1994 interview, **Kathy Williams**, a former interpreter on the North Rim spoke about the programs they offered in the 1970's:

Williams: We had an information desk that was in the lodge, we did that. We did evening programs at the campground. For a couple of the years that I was there, we also did evening programs in the auditorium at the lodge in the multipurpose room. We did nature walks starting from the little kiosk out in the parking lot by the lodge in a loop around by the point. We did geology talks either out on the deck or out at Bright Angel Point. We did geology talks out at Cape Royal. We had one or two summers where we got real crazy and tried doing all kinds of other stuff. Let's see, we did backpacking demonstrations on the patio out at the lodge a couple

of different summers, trying to help people be better prepared for hiking in the canyon. One summer we tried doing park management walks where we took people on a hike up the new sewer line and talked about where the water comes from and where it goes to and some other issues. We tried some orienteering programs teaching them to use a compass, I don't remember that those ever got a lot of people.

Williams also talked about one memorable program she gave:

Williams: One of the things they thought would be really neat to do was star walks. Most of us felt really uncomfortable at it. I don't know anything about the stars. But we learned it. But the very first one that I had to do I didn't feel that comfortable... and I got down to the lodge and one of the guys who worked as a bellhop came out and said, "Guess what! There's an astronaut going on your walk!"... I can't remember his name, but I remember just being in a deep panic. But it turned out to be one of the neatest interpretive programs I've ever done. I fessed up right at the beginning to everybody, "I really don't know that much about the stars but if there's anyone who does, please share." We got out there to the point and I told some legends and he then told about using the stars for navigation and contributed to the program. It was really neat. He made some statement about that the stars don't look any different from the other side of the moon. You could hear this sort of 'huh' [from the audience]... He and his wife had been there many years earlier for their honeymoon and had come back for their anniversary. Before my program was over- they left early- and then I was able to tell the rest of the group who he was, why he knew that the stars didn't look any different from the other side of the moon. Probably my most memorable story.



#08271: POSTCARD SHOWING AN INTERPRETIVE RANGER ON THE NORTH RIM AT BRIGHT ANGEL POINT.

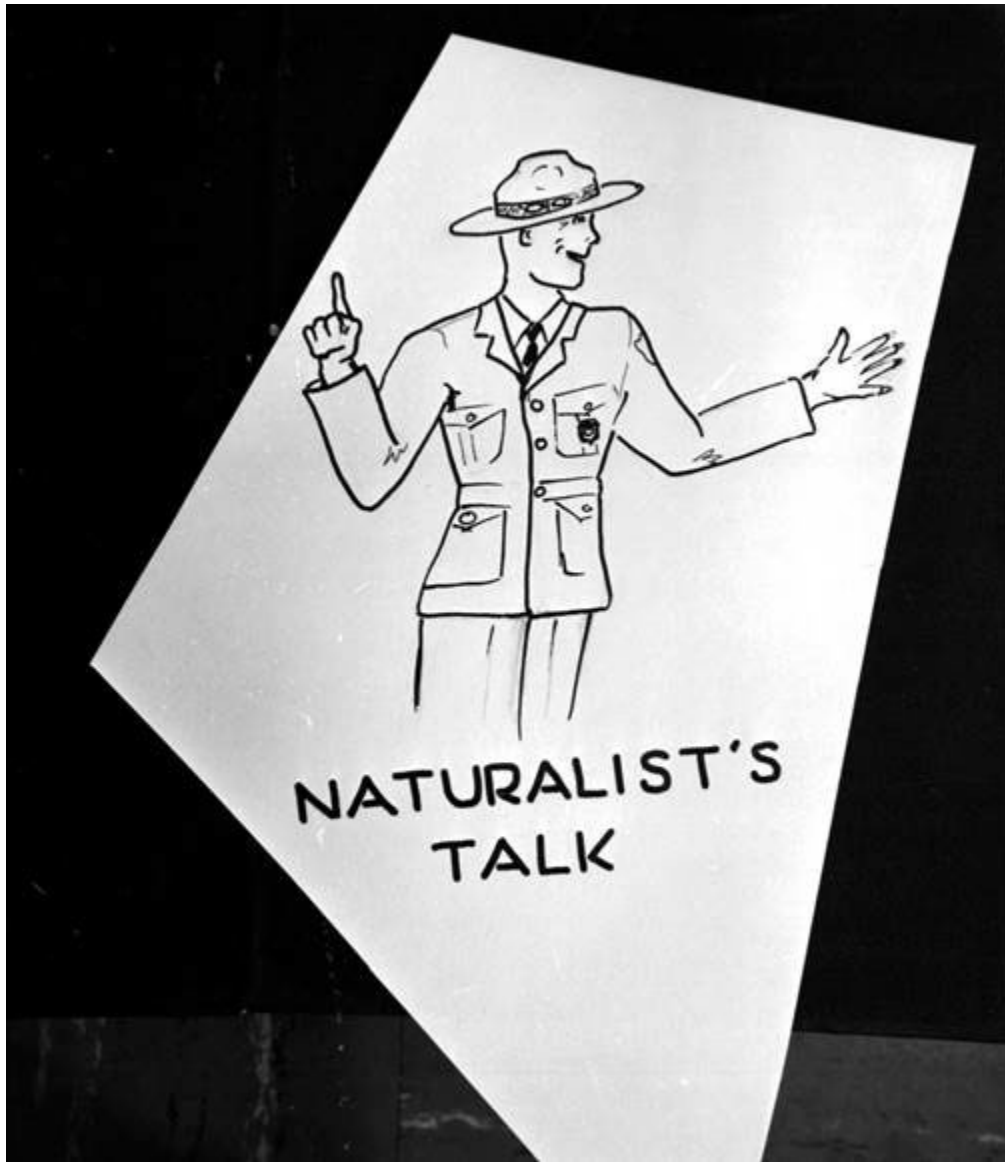


#04472: NATURALIST EVENING LECTURE, NORTH RIM, UNKNOWN DATE.

Russell Grater was asked what he had learned about talking to visitors:

Grater: One of the first things you learn as a naturalist: Don't be "highfalutin" as they say. Don't try to put things into terms that they won't understand. You're telling a story as a naturalist, a story of how this was done and how it works and so forth. It must be in simple language. Don't talk down to them but make it so that you're sure that your message and your story is clear.

That's right, have fun but don't be highfalutin.



#11804: CAMPFIRE BULLETIN BOARD, NORTH RIM, 1959.