

Interviewee: Curt Sauer (CS)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Curt recounts his first Colorado River trip in 1972 and the start of his Park Service career being at Rocky Mountain National Park until the mid-1970s.

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TM: Today is Friday, September 12th, 2020. This is our Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Curt Sauer. This is a Part 2 interview. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Curt. How are you today?

CS: Afternoon, Tom. I'm doing very well.

TM: Good. Curt, may we have your permission to record this interview over the phone?

CS: Sure.

TM: Thank you. We ended up Part 1, I was curious, 'cause it sounded like you were having such a good time at Cottonwood and you had to run away from university in the spring to start that seasonal job. And here it is, the summer's ending and the next college semester's starting. Did you quit the job, then, at Cottonwood to get back to school? How did that all work out?

CS: No, I finished my job at Cottonwood, which I believe was in September—April, May, June, July, August, September—late September. So college had already started. I think I mentioned in the last interview that the director and regional director had come by Phantom Ranch and arrived in a motorboat. And my recollection is that Tom Doerr was the boatman.

When I finished working, I had the opportunity to volunteer, Volunteer-in-Parks program, and was able to go on my first of many river trips. Not many compared to the boatmen, by any means, and boatwomen. So I finished—I don't know for sure what part of September it was—and joined Tom and a couple other people on a, I think it was a one-week patrol trip through the Grand Canyon on a J-rig. I think one of the other people was Ray, a ranger from Indian Gardens, who was also a seasonal and terminated about the same time I did.

TM: Do you remember Ray's last name?

CS: I don't remember Ray's last name.

TM: What do you remember about that river trip?

CS: Well, it was one of the finest recreational trips I've ever taken. It exposed me to the entire reach of the Grand Canyon on the Colorado River, which is absolutely stunning. What I remember most about it was in the J-rigs the outside pontoons sort of slope up in the front and there were straps on them so you

could ride the rapids by pretending you were riding a bucking bronco, and hold on. I was on the front of the pontoon when we went through Horn Rapid just down below Phantom Ranch.

TM: Horn Creek.

CS: Yep. There's lots of water and I'm holding on. They get through the rapid and I'm sort of getting closer and closer to the river level. We had hit a rock and punctured the pontoon. So I turn around and look at Tom. He's just laughing, "Well, how'd you like that ride?" So we motored over to the first beach to see if we could repair the pontoon and then finished the trip. I think that was THE trip that caused me to fall in love with the Grand Canyon. You can hike it or you can take a boat. The boat provides you with access to so many different side canyons that are just incredible. Turned out in my career, that I was able to be on the river many times in many different weather conditions. It's just an amazing place. Ribbon Falls was amazing to me, and that was average compared to some of the other places that we were able to see. So then I got in my car...

TM: Hang on a second. I want to kind of hang on this trip for just a minute. This is mid-September-ish?

CS: That's my recollection, yeah.

TM: Did you see anybody else down there?

CS: No, there were very few people down there then. Few other concession operations. I don't recall any private trips at the time. Could have been, I just don't recall them.

TM: Were you guys doing any cleanup of campsites or anything like that when you were there?

CS: Yeah. It was standard procedure on all river patrols. You'd pull into the different beaches that are utilized by private and commercial operations. For the most part they're pretty clean. Later on we did some patrol trips that were... We took trail crew with us and we worked on side canyon trails that were more readily accessible from the river than from either of the rims.

TM: So that hadn't started yet, the trail crew working on the river.

CS: In 1972, not to my knowledge.

TM: Anything else about that trip you can remember, except punching a hole in the boat there at Horn Creek?

CS: (laughs) No. Just, again, 22-year-old kid exposed to one of the greatest parks in our system. Pretty phenomenal.

TM: Did you guys go all the way out to the lake or were you taking out at Diamond Creek? Do you remember?

CS: I think we took out at Diamond Creek rather than go to Pierce Ferry.

TM: Do you know why that was?

CS: No. Cause that's where Tom said we were taking out. [both laugh]

TM: Okay, simple enough. And that boat—I'm assuming you had to take it all apart, tube after tube, kind of untie it one from the other and then roll it all up and put it all in some big stake truck. And then hump some big, giant aluminum frame up on the truck as well?

CS: Yeah, and a couple motors.

TM: And a couple motors, okay. Alright.

CS: Didn't take all that long.

TM: And then what are you going to do? You don't have any school to go back to. You've had this amazing river trip. Then what happened?

CS: Well, I drove back up to Colorado. Saw the folks in Aurora. I had made some friends in college. I think in the last interview I forgot to mention that I had also gotten a job as a surveyor's assistant with the Forest Service out of Steamboat Springs, Colorado. I met a fellow there whose name I'm trying to recall right now. Tom...it'll come to me. So I went back up to Fort Collins and started school in January. About that time six of us decided that we didn't want to pay rent. So we bought nine acres of land up in Rist Canyon.

TM: Where's that?

CS: It's north and west of Fort Collins, up in the foothills. There's been a couple of different fires up there since then. Rist Canyon fire and now the Cameron fire this year. But we were six and eventually seven folks that decided we... One of the guys was a Volkswagen mechanic. Several of us were college students. This was '72, '73, '74. We decided we'd build a log cabin and until we got the cabin built, three of us were living in teepees and a couple other folks were living in... Actually, four of us were living in teepees and a couple other were living in camper trailers. The place was called Tokahe. We put a log cabin together that had been preassembled. I think it came from Montana. Came on a semi-truck and every log's end had a numbering system. So we basically built a Lincoln Log cabin, roofed it and planted a garden and had a bunch of parties.

TM: All this while you were going to school that spring.

CS: Yeah. Most of us had Volkswagen bugs so we had a little competition to see how far you could get downhill from our land without turning your motor on. So, I went to school. Used the university's gymnasium. Played a bunch of racquetball and handball, and used the steam room and showers to clean up 'cause there was no running water where we lived. We heated with wood, cooked with wood. We had an outdoor kitchen, even in the winter. One of the things I remember about that time was people would kind of look at me, like, "You smell of wood smoke." "I live up in the hills." I thought it was pretty cool. Most of them probably thought I was pretty weird.

TM: It sounds very communal, communal living sort of a thing.

CS: Yeah. We were accused of having a hippie commune.

TM: How long was your hair?

CS: [laughs] It was down to my shoulders after a couple years. In fact, that's another funny story. So that's what I did. I went back to school, lived in a teepee, built a log cabin, thought I was living a good life. I think in 1974, not sure what happened in 1973, it might have been '73, ended up getting a job at Rocky Mountain National Park courtesy of Larry Van Slyke.

TM: Did you then go to school in the fall of...let's see. Alright, so it wouldn't have been the fall of '72 because that didn't work out. Back to school in the spring of '73, so the fall of '73 were you still in school then?

CS: I think in the fall of '73 I was living in Fort Collins. Yeah. I think I was going to school. Finally ended up graduating in December of '74. It was a time of going to school and having odd jobs and whatnot. Some place in there, probably the spring of '73, I moved my teepee down to the farm where Tom Nygren was surveying. Nygren, Tom Nygren. And his dad, Bill Nygren. He was an engineer and he ended up going to work for Coors. I don't know if it was the spring of '73 or spring of '74, some place in there, his dad needed some help on the farm. So I dropped out of school and moved my teepee down to the farm and learned what the farmer's life was about. So, worked on the farm, and then, I don't know, '73/'74, ended up going to work in Wild Basin at Rocky Mountain National Park.

TM: So in the meantime, let's catch up with Larry a little bit. He kind of got you the job there at Grand Canyon. But he didn't quit school, he kept at it. Had he already graduated then by December '74?

CS: Yeah. I think he graduated in '72/'73, some place in there, and ended up getting a permanent job at Rocky Mountain as a park ranger, not a park technician. When you talk to him you can ask him if that's correct. So yeah, he and I were seeing each other occasionally. He was living in Fort Collins, I was living up Rist Canyon.

TM: Did he offer you a seasonal position at ROMO [Rocky Mountain National Park]? How did that work out?

CS: Yep, seasonal position. I think I started in June. Ended on the 89th day, 'cause if you were hired for more than 90 days the Park Service had to pay you vacation pay. Seasonals at that time were known as the 90-day wonders 'cause you ended up working the 89 days so the Park Service didn't have to pay you vacation time. That's how short the Park Service was on money. Still is.

TM: Yeah. Still is.

CS: So, went to Rocky Mountain. George Wagner was the district ranger at the time. George was a throwback to the old-time rangers. Interestingly, later in my career in 1983, I ended up in Stehekin at the North Cascades complex. North Cascades National Park has North Cascades National Park and then it has Ross Lake and Stehekin National Recreation Areas. I didn't know it at the time, but George had been a ranger at Stehekin before he came to Rocky Mountain. So I ran into George's reputation when I ended up getting to Stehekin. Anyway, George was the east district ranger and Larry was the backcountry subdistrict ranger.

TM: Okay, so Larry got to climb Long's Peak and do some fun mountain stuff. George is east district ranger. So some forest country. I'm trying to place that land. Is it Nederland? What's the name of the town there on the...

CS: The name of the town where?

TM: East side of Rocky Mountain National Park, on the Denver side.

CS: Estes Park.

TM: Estes Park. Thank you very much.

CS: Yeah, so George was the district ranger. He had a couple of subdistricts, front country subdistrict, backcountry subdistrict, I think, and Larry was the backcountry subdistrict ranger. About 16 of us worked for Larry as the backcountry rangers. We were known as the Rocky Mountain boys, as opposed to the Yosemite mafia. Little competition between the rangers at Rocky and Yosemite which was all in jest, but of course we always had to do better. We always had to climb more routes. We had to rescue more people. Of course Yosemite had the advantage 'cause they had a lot more climbers. Anyway, worked in Wild Basin. So we could correlate that. I worked in Wild Basin the first year...

TM: Where's that in relation to the summit of Long's Peak?

CS: Its south of it. Wild Basin was the most southeast ranger station in Rocky Mountain National Park.

TM: Okay. Is there a route up Long's Peak from Wild Basin? Can you come up Long's Peak on that southeast side?

CS: You couldn't at that time, or let me say nobody did it that I know of. But it sure could be done. At the time, if you wanted to go to Long's Peak you went back out to the main road, went north, and took the Long's Peak cutoff.

TM: And this is '74. Help me out here—is it called the east face of Long's Peak? It's this amazing climb of incredible granite that people like Layton Kor were out there climbing on?

CS: Mm-hmm. That's east face. The Diamond.

TM: The Diamond. Thank you.

CS: I think in the last interview I told you the first time I went up with Larry. I think I might have said I went up the east face. I didn't go up the east face. I went up the north face, which is a very simple route with a cable. If I said the east face I'd have been telling you stories. Larry and Charlie Rogan summited the east face I think a couple different times; maybe just once. That was well beyond my climbing skills.

TM: It was. Okay. I was going to say, "Did you ever climb that?"

CS: No. I think one of the reasons that Larry hired me, on one of the times I was visiting him at Long's Peak I went out on my own hiking. I went up to, I think it's called Chasm View. That's the east face, just on the south side of it. I think it's the East. Just on the north side of the east face you can actually drape

your legs over the drop-off and watch people climb, which is what I was doing very ignorantly. I heard people shouting for help. A climber had fallen so I took off and ran back to the ranger station—I don't know what that was four and a half miles, something like that—and reported in to Larry. They assembled a rescue crew and I volunteered to help carry supplies and equipment. I think at that time Larry decided that "Yeah. We're going to hire you."

TM: [laughs] He's tough enough.

CS: Yeah. He knows what he's doing. So I worked in Wild Basin and was on search and rescue team. At that point in time rangers were wildland firefighters. So we fought fire, we did daily patrols, did trail work, and responded to rescues.

TM: It must have been a beautiful time of year going through June, July, August. The aspens would have been changing at the end of your 90 days.

CS: And the elk were bugling. So I think that was my first year at Rocky.

TM: I'm going to back off a minute here. Were your folks—I mean, they must have been happy that you graduated. Were they kind of settling into the fact that you were becoming a park ranger?

CS: Yeah. I think they were. Still a seasonal job. I think they were settling into it. I think Dad was quite happy, 'cause of his love of the outdoors being a bush pilot and all. Actually, now that I think about it, it must have been 1973. In '74 Larry moved me to Fern Lake Patrol Cabin up in the eastern half of the park, center part. Yeah, I think that was it.

TM: What was the difference between Wild Basin and Fern Lake?

CS: Wild Basin you could drive to and park and you go hiking. Fern Lake you go in through Moraine Park to the trailhead, and then you hiked in about four miles to the Fern Lake Patrol Cabin. Actually there used to be a Fern Lake Lodge there in the early 60s. I can't quite recall, I don't know if it was Judy Collins or Joni Mitchell, one of those two, her parents ran the Fern Lake Lodge. Who was that other gal? Somebody else of that era, some other female performer, her parents ran Paradise Lodge. 'Pave Paradise, put up the parking lot.' Anyway, Fern Lake Lodge burned down years before I got there. So I had to hike in to Fern Lake and had a quaint little log cabin. Log cabins seem to be a trend here.

TM: They do. [laughs]

CS: And you just patrolled. We had a campground there. Same old stuff. Checked on campers, made sure they were okay, made sure they had a permit, made sure they had a fishing license.

TM: So, Curt, I'm curious. At Cottonwood—of course it's a lot more than four miles from anywhere. You had mules to get your 10 days' worth of supplies in there. At Fern, did you have any livestock or pack stock to help you get your gear in there for the tour of duty you were on?

CS: My recollection is, in 1974 we did not have any pack stock. But sometime in that '74 through '76 era, a superintendent by the name of Roger Contor, decided that he was going to introduce horses to the backcountry program. He brought a fellow in, '74/'75, some place in there, a fellow by the name of Eddie Techick. How to spell his last name, I'd just be guessing. But he was a horse trainer. He was a

horse whisperer from Idaho. Arco, Idaho. I don't know how many horses we had, 16 maybe. So my recollection in '74 is everything was packed in on your back. But trail crew might have had a couple horses that might have brought supplies in. I don't clearly recall. But sometime '74 through '76, they had a bunch of horses brought in and the backcountry rangers were taught to pack horses which is not a whole lot different from packing mules. Mules are more surefooted.

So '74 was an interesting year. Actually, I was going to mention this, and then probably make Larry laugh if he ever listens to these interviews. Larry and I were good friends. At the time when we met, back in Sterling at Northeastern Junior College, I was dating a gal by the name of Gail who was my high school sweetheart. From freshman year, she and I went on a different route. Dated off and on but she ended up going to Denver University, I think. Larry met her and he was enough of a gentleman after I'd broken up with her—or I think she probably broke up with me, to be more accurate—he called me up one time. He said, "Curt, would it be okay with you if I dated Gail?" I said, "Sure. Gail and I are done." I always thought that was pretty amazing for a fellow to ask if it was okay to take his previous girlfriend and make sure it wasn't going to harm your friendship. So he started dating Gail and by 1974 they were living together at his ranger station on Mill Creek. Think they might have been married, I'm not sure. Back in the 70s, it didn't always happen that way.

So, Gail was going to go away. She was going to go back to, I think, the University of Michigan for her master's degree in weaving. And I had to go in the backcountry to Fern Lake. Larry said, "Well, I'll see if it's okay with his supervisor, who at the time was Darrel Wilson, I think. I got word from Larry on August 27th, I think it was, in the morning, that I had to stay in backcountry. I couldn't come out for an evening with Larry and Gail before she took off. This'll get a little emotional. So about four o'clock in the afternoon I got a call from dispatch. The message was, "You are to return to the Fern Lake trailhead immediately." I thought to myself, "Larry's fixed it." So I'm trundling down the trail happy as a loon.

TM: That's a four-mile trail.

CS: Yeah. I get out, I don't know, six o'clock at night, something like that. I walk up. "Hey, what's going on?" I'm happy and Larry's got this look on his face. Said, "What's wrong?" He said, "Your dad was killed in a plane crash today." I said, "You've got to be kidding me." At that time he was a Learjet instructor. Gail was in the back of their Volkswagen bug and she couldn't talk. She was so distraught 'cause Dad had died. So we got in the car and we drove down to Aurora. My brother was there, my sister was there, and my mom was there. And Larry and Gail were there. And that was the family. I think Rick's future wife Lynn might have been there, too. So we drove from Estes to Aurora. Think the only thing I said was, "Learjets don't crash." Larry had become very good friends with my father. They were both pilots. Larry had flown in United Airlines simulators with my dad. I think Larry was just as upset as I was. So that was '74 and that's why I knew I was in Fern Lake and not Wild Basin. I'll spare you the details of the crash site, but it was outside of Greeley. Greeley was also the place—forget the name of the uniform, was Gregory's. Gregory's Uniforms was in Greeley. I needed a formal park ranger uniform for the funeral. I decided that I would do that. Larry sent another ranger back up to Fern Lake to get my Stetson and I went to Greeley and ordered a Class A uniform, which backcountry rangers did not wear. Then Larry and I went to that funeral in our Class A's. All of my dad's friends, who were retired military, well, not all of them, but a couple of them, said, "So what's this uniform?" I said, "It's a national park ranger uniform." "Oh, well, we've heard of the National Parks. That's nice." When Dad and I were out doing stuff in the backcountry, Newfoundland, and Canada, and all the places we went, we never went to a national park. But he had come up to Fern Lake Patrol Cabin the week before so that he could go fishing and spend a weekend with his son. So that was my first summer at Fern Lake. Yeah, that's interesting.

TM: If you don't mind me asking, what happened in the crash?

CS: Well, according to the investigation the nose trim mechanism had stuck in the down position. And the black box recording you can hear my dad saying "Give me my ship. Help me pull back." They went in at a 30-degree angle. That was in '74, yeah, '74. So after that, a week or two later, we had another search and rescue operation. Three of us got in a helicopter to go find somebody. One of the guys was sitting next to me. I don't remember his name. He noticed that I was squeezing the air frame in front of me. He said, "It's okay. We're not going down." So that was a pretty traumatic time. Lost my dad, lost my best friend. And I think it had a great effect on Larry, too.

TM: And Gail as well. It sounded like all three. I mean, Gail would have known your dad and your mom through you, to start with. It sounded like he was an inspiration to a bunch of young people.

CS: Yeah, even back in Spain. Yeah, Gail loved him. Gail was basically... When we dated sophomore, junior, senior years she was adopted into the family, even if Curt wasn't going to date her. Yeah, she was over at the house all the time. She had a second mom and a second dad. I think she was an only child, so my brother Ricky was like her second brother or something. But yeah, she was part of the family and she was devastated.

I think that after that I went back to Fern Lake Patrol Cabin. Mom came up for a four- or five-day visit. Repaired all the macramé chairs, the old pine chairs that had been macraméd. I was told they had been part of the Fern Lake Lodge that had not burned. So she re-macraméd all of those. Then in the fall of '74 I went back to school until December.

TM: Oh that's right, you were going to graduate in December. What was your degree in?

CS: Ecology, Forestry and Outdoor Recreation. Which, about two and a half years into the whole program, I figured out that the outdoor recreation program was one drafting class... Well, it wasn't a drafting class, it was a planning class. "Okay, you got five acres with a city park and you need to figure out how many swimming pools and basketball courts you can put in and have enough parking for everybody." And I'm thinking to myself, "This is the wrong major." But if I'd of changed majors it would have taken another year to get a degree, so I stayed in it. Actually, one of our classes—I can't remember the professor's name. He had a contract with Beaver Meadows ski area in Colorado to do an environmental impact statement. So that was our class assignment as a senior. Broke into groups and it was my first exposure to doing environmental impact statements.

TM: And the National Environmental Policy Act had passed in, I think it's 1972? Is that right?

CS: Mm-hmm.

TM: So this would have been all new ground.

CS: Totally new. The analysis that we did was so superfluous, as I look back on it. This is ridiculous. But, that was my first exposure and there was a lot of environmental impact statements in the career, so it's a good place to start.

TM: And for Beaver Mountain... Was that Vail, the Beaver Creek folks?

CS: Yeah, Beaver Creek. There you go. Beaver Creek. So that was '74. Now that I think about it, I think that the Wild Basin gig would have been after I was at Fern Lake and I was there for two years, two summers. Also during that time, I think it might have been '74/'75, some place in there, I got hired as a winter seasonal for about three weeks to be a ski patrol ranger in Wild Basin. The reason it was three weeks is because after I started and fixed up Cabin 16, which is not much larger than a woodshed, and at that time skied two miles in 'cause of the snow. They didn't plow the road all the way into Wild Basin. Larry called me in and said, "You're going to meet with George, George Wagner, district ranger." "Okay, why?" He said, "Well, we don't have any money for this position." I met with George. He said, "I really want to thank you for taking the job, but we've looked at the budget and we don't have any money for a winter patrol ranger." I said, "Okay, that's fine. I'll volunteer." "What?" [laughs] So I volunteered for the winter of '74 as a backcountry patrol ranger on cross-country skis.

TM: Sorry, I'm going to jump in here. So as a volunteer, would the Park Service provide you with per diem, some sort of food, or did you have to provide your food yourself?

CS: You know, we'd have to look at the records. My recollection is we got per diem. I think it was \$10 a day. Something like that.

TM: Did you have a sense that in the sort of "If you cook for me, I'll cook for you" kind of thing, that this would turn in some dividends down the road? Or were you just saying, "I love this so much. This is what I want to do"?

CS: Obviously I'm going to take the high road on this.

TM: [laughs] Or both roads.

CS: [laughs] I knew at that time that I wanted to work for the Park Service. At the same time, all I knew was I love what I'm doing. I've got this little cabin, I get to go skiing. It just came naturally.

TM: Can you tell me a little bit more about George Wagner? Was he tall? Was he short? Was he heavyset? Was he skinny? What do you remember about him?

CS: He was a tall man, broad in the shoulders, narrow at the hips. Bushy mustache, soft-spoken. We went on patrol one time. It must have been around '76 'cause we were riding horses and we were packing a horse that had a jackhammer loaded on it. We rode up to a place where one of the backcountry campgrounds needed an outhouse and there wasn't any place to dig a hole 'cause everything was rock. So we dug a hole in the rocks with a jackhammer for the outhouse. Now how that outhouse was expected to drain I'm not real sure. But, we finished that job and rode back out. Then there was another rescue, which I wanted to respond to immediately and George's attitude was "Nope. We're up here. Everybody else can take care of the rescue. We have an outhouse to put in." So we finished the job and the rescue was still going on when we got out. By the time we got to the rescue site, it was probably ten o'clock at night and all we did was support the activities that was going on. One time we were walking down the streets of Estes Park. We're all walking down in our ranger uniforms with our Stetsons on. Oh, I forgot to tell you about my haircut. We'll get to that in a minute. We're walking down the street and there's this fellow with some long hair leaning against the wall. Says to George, "I can get one of them hats, can I be a ranger, too?" Which I think was a popular song at the time, something about cowboys and their outfits. George just sort of looked at him and said, "Son, you're not man

enough to wear this hat." I have a file, my Uncle George file. He could not get used to women being in a ranger uniform. He was the type of fellow that if you disagreed with him, he would take you to task.

TM: How old was he in 1974?

CS: I'd just be guessing. I was 24, so he was probably—I don't know—40?

TM: So he would have been born in '34-ish. He wouldn't have served in World War II, but almost. And he would have seen the revolution of the 60s and 70s as something very strange.

CS: Yeah. I don't recall exactly when he was in Stehekin, but it was an isolated community. Yeah, he was probably third-generation Park Service. Which is one of the things that I've always been amazed about. I was trained by third- and fourth-generation Park Service people. When you think about it, Park Service started in 1916. By the time I got to the outfit in 1972, that's 50 years. So second- and third-generation folks, and then fourth-generation, Larry, are the ones that trained me. Second- and third-generation people were, as George once said in a memo, "Where were all you Johnny-come-latelies when we were fighting the good fight when we had to use our brains instead of our testosterone?" [laughs]

TM: What would have made George think that the fight was over?

CS: I don't think he thought that the fight was over. I think that he thought that the fight was being fought with testosterone rather than your brain.

TM: Okay. I'm curious now in 2020, using what you know now, looking back at George then, do you have a sense of where he was coming from?

CS: I think that George was totally committed to the Park Service ideals as he knew them. And the interpretation of the ideals changes every generation.

TM: I mean, it's interesting. I just think there's a lot of dedicated employees today still working for the Park Service, and yet there's probably no one leaning against a wall that would say to a park ranger walking by in a Class A, "Where do I get one of those hats? Where do I become a ranger?" So it seems as though—I mean, the whole country was in an upheaval then. I don't mean to be defending George, mind you, [laughs] but I'm just trying to understand where he was coming from. And you being the next generation, would not have been as near distraught to see, I think, a woman in a Park Service uniform, or to see anyone with long hair. Because that was what you grew up with.

CS: Right. That was the 60s and the 70s, and women weren't... Although, when you think about it, there were 16 backcountry rangers in Rocky Mountain National Park. At least in '74 none of them were female. The females were in park ranger uniforms and they ran dispatch and they ran the backcountry permit office. There might have been one or two males working in the backcountry permit office, but by far and away they were females. And the administrative officer, whose name I don't recall but Larry would, wore a Park Service uniform. It was a skirt. So the females in 50s and 60s weren't allowed to wear slacks or trousers. That was just the norm. Now that we look back at it it's like, "Well, that's a bunch of bullshit." But it wasn't. If you look at the airline stewardesses at the time and all the different uniforms that they wore, and you visit the various Park Service historical museums and you look at the outfits, the "uniforms" that the women were expected to wear, it's a throwback.

TM: Very much so. Yeah, you see those pictures. It's like, wow. There are airline stewardess dresses.

CS: There are airline stewardess hats.

TM: Right. The little cap, the little kind of—yes, that's right. So George Wagner would have been the district ranger. He would have had the subdistricts under him, and there wasn't a single female working in those positions. That would have been his choice.

CS: Yeah, I'm not sure if the backcountry permit office... I would assume that that was part of the backcountry subdistrict. But yeah, there were females working it and there were female dispatchers. But that's what females did then. [laughs] That's okay, but the rangers need to be out on patrol 'cause they can carry heavy weight and they can ride horses. Although, I think it was probably Dave Essex who was the chief ranger at the time started a program. Backcountry rangers would run into backcountry campers, and backcountry campers would tell them, "Well, the permit people in the office said that it was okay that I did this, and it was okay that I did that." So we were instructed once a week—and there were 16 of us—we would take a backcountry permit person with us on patrol. And we were required every two weeks—whatever it was—to work in the backcountry permit office so that we could listen to all the bullshit that the visitors were giving them. It really increased our understanding of what they were putting up with. We knew that the people in the backcountry permit office were giving these visitors the correct information, and what they were telling us in the field was a bunch of lies. So once a week or so we would have a patrol where we were supposed to take a backcountry permit person with us. It just turned out to be one of the best communication devices 'cause we knew that when somebody fed us a story that didn't make any sense that all we had to do was read the name of the person that issued the permit and, "Well, she was just out here with me two weeks ago. That's not true." So we'd call on the radio to the backcountry permit office and say, "You tell so-and-so this?" "No. Didn't." "Okay. Ticket." Which at the time was ludicrous. Illegal camping was \$25. Dog in the backcountry was \$25. Well, I can take my dog in the backcountry and get a ticket and pay \$25, still cheaper than putting it in the pound.

TM: That was a pretty good call on Dave's part.

CS: Yeah. Excellent choice. Excellent choice. Yeah, he was a leader. Still is. So those were the Rocky Mountain years.

TM: And you had a story about your hair.

CS: [laughs] Yeah. Assuming that '74 was Fern Lake. '75 and '76, I don't know, some place in there living in a teepee, following what I thought was the old Indian ways, grew my hair long. Actually, it might have been '74 when I got the job at Fern Lake. So I showed up—yeah, it was '74—I left Tokahe in my Volkswagen bug on a snowy June day, drove up to Estes Park and showed up for work with my hair down—wasn't to my shoulders at the time. It's probably just quite long. Larry said, "Uh, you're going to need to cut your hair." "Oh, okay." So I went home and the gal I was dating at the time cut my hair. I went back to work, Larry said, "I don't know about this. Let's go see George." I walked in and George is like, "Why is he here?" [both laugh] Larry says, "Okay. We'll take care of this." I got my hair cut five times that day. And it was no longer than—what's Campbell's name, the artist?

TM: I'm drawing a blank.

CS: The only time I've had my hair cut five times in the same day.

TM: I can imagine you might have been ready for a shave after that, sort of the Yul Brynner look.

CS: [laughs] Larry was a very patient man, and I'm sure he can tell you the story based on his perspective. So, got my haircut five times and was allowed to go to work.

TM: So in the spring of—if I get this right—in the spring of '74, you're volunteering to work for per diem. Did that change then? Did you get a seasonal position for the summer of '75?

CS: Yeah. '75 and '76 I think I was at Wild Basin.

TM: As a seasonal?

CS: Yep. As a seasonal.

TM: Would you volunteer, then, through the winter?

CS: No, I think in '75 I went back to Tokahe and just sort of hung out. In the fall of '76, I was coming back from backcountry patrol, riding on a horse. I had applied for a job as a winter seasonal position at Grand Canyon on the South Rim in law enforcement. One of the dispatchers at Rocky Mountain was named Judy Kuncl. She had been married to a fellow by the name of Ernie Kuncl, who I don't think I ever met in '72 when I was down there. She told me that they were looking for winter seasonal positions on the South Rim, so I applied for that. So I'm riding down the trail about a quarter mile away from the ranger station and here comes this fellow hiking up the trail. Stopped and said, "How you doing?" He said, "Good. How are you doing." I said, "I'm doing pretty well. What's up?" He said, "My name's Ernie Kuncl. I'm thinking about hiring you and I thought I'd come up here and find out who you were." [laughs] So I dismounted and we had a little conversation. I ended up getting hired as a South Rim patrol ranger starting in October. That began my three-year, '76, '77, '78, my three-year career being a permanent seasonal. So I went down and worked for Ernie, and worked until April.

TM: Hey, Curt, I'm going to step in here going, we've been talking about an hour and ten minutes. And I've got a ton of questions about Ernie Kuncl. [laughs] I know that we're not going to get very far into Grand Canyon here. Maybe this is a good place to put up a little period and I could ask you, is there anything else you want to talk about Rocky Mountain National Park before you tell me all about Ernie Kuncl and Ernie sweeps you away to Grand Canyon?

CS: Well, there's so many things that went on at Rocky Mountain. You know, you fall in love with the Grand Canyon '72, then go to work for surveying for Forest Service and BLM. And then you're a part of the Rocky Mountain crew, Rocky Mountain boys, who had a great work ethic. You got paid 8 hours a day and probably worked 16 hours a day. And none of us complained because that's what rangers do. We had great leadership with Larry and Charlie Logan, and Essex, George. Just another part of the Park Service family.

TM: Do you think Larry had a hand in telling Ernie that maybe he wanted to come walk up and take a look at you?

CS: Hmm, that's possible. Maybe, maybe not. Larry never said anything about it. Ernie never said anything about it. Just great people at Rocky Mountain. Here's another tidbit and I'll finish this up. Talking about women in the Park Service, one of the gals at Rocky was named Laurie Cameron. Actually she was one of the first backcountry rangers. But to paint the picture how women were treated different then, and maybe still, the rule was that you couldn't have a person of the opposite sex staying in your ranger quarters. Well, Laurie happened to stay in some ranger's quarters, male quarters, overnight and Dave Essex found out about it. So Laurie was going to get fired 'cause she stayed in the quarters. I found out about it and asked Larry permission to go talk to the chief ranger, Dave Essex. I said to Dave, "So hold on a minute. You're going to fire Laurie? Why don't you fire the male ranger?" He looked at me and said, "You know, hadn't thought about that." This male ranger that invited her to stay; and Laurie ended up not being fired. So women were treated differently. Still are, actually, aren't they? But Dave had enough moxie to say, "Okay, this isn't right. We're not going to fire either one of them."

TM: How old was Dave Essex?

CS: Oh, 50? I don't know. I just saw him two years ago at a memorial service for one of our rangers, and he still looked 50. So I'm not sure how old he was then. But he was a wise...still is a wise man.

TM: He clearly had a different vision than George Wagner.

CS: Yeah. He ended up firing George Wagner. [laughs] So anyway, that's the Rocky Mountain story.

TM: Okay. Well, maybe with that, we'll pick this up with Ernie in Grand Canyon. I guess with that, let's go ahead and wrap up this Part 2 Grand Canyon Oral History with Curt Sauer. September 12th, 2020. My name is Tom Martin. And Curt, thank you so very, very much.

CS: You're welcome.