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Interviewee: Gene Reetz

Interviewer: Tom Martin

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TM: Today is May 5th, 2022. It's a nice spring Thursday here in Flagstaff, Arizona. This is a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Gene Reetz. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Gene. How are you today?

GR: Fine, thank you. How are you, Tom?

TM: Great. We are conducting this oral history over the telephone. Gene is in Denver, Colorado, and I'm in Flagstaff. Gene, may we have your permission to record this oral history over the telephone?

GR: Yes, you do.

TM: Great. Thank you. Gene, what year were you born, and where did you grow up?

GR: I was born in 1942 in Elne in Southern France, actually in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountains.

TM: What were your parents doing there?

GR: Well, there's kind of a long history. Both my parents were born in Berlin; my father from a very traditional Lutheran family, my mother from a very Orthodox Jewish family. And when they were teenagers, they actually both joined the underground resistance movement against the Nazis, again, while in Berlin. And that's actually how they met, through that resistance.

TM: Would that have been in the mid '30s, '35, '36-ish?

GR: Yes. Then my father was actually arrested for some of his activities, and I forgot the exact year, but he was in prison for something like six months. And this was before the Nazis had complete control of the judiciary, so as soon as he got out of jail, he fled to Paris. And there he set up a newspaper called *Freies Deutschland* (*Free Germany*) to get word back to the Germans that, hey, this is happening. You need to wake up and take action. Then he was able to get my mother out who was still living in Berlin under sort of a false pretext, and they were both living in Paris at the time. Then the Nazis invaded France, and when they did that, the French arrested all the Germans, including my father. And so he was put in a, basically, in a stadium with all other Germans that were living in Paris at the time. But because of his resistance and underground activities, he was known to the French Premier at the time, Leonard Blum [*Transcriptionist note: read Léon Blum*], and so he was released from that stadium. And then he joined the French army, free

French army, but they surrendered pretty quickly. And then as the Nazis moved into Paris, since my father was fairly well known, he fled immediately south. My mother fled a little later, and it was, as you could well imagine, it was complete chaos. People were fleeing Paris, and my mother hitched a ride and hitchhiked, rode on trucks, etc. and so miraculously they met up in Southern France. And for a while, Southern France was a so-called free zone under the Vichy government, which was actually a puppet government of the Nazis, and that's where my parents were living at the time. Then in 1942, the Nazis invaded Southern France, as well, so it was no longer a free zone. But while it was a free zone, the Nazis had given the Vichy government a list of so-called war criminals, and my father was on that list, so they even when it was still a free zone, they lived under false papers and had all kinds of incredible experiences. It's somewhat miraculous that they survived, but I think it was a combination of incredible luck and street smarts. But anyway, I was born in this little village in Southern France in 1942, and that's the year that the Nazis invaded Southern France, as well. And one of the things that my parents always impressed upon me, I guess two things, one is how fragile democracy is, and secondly how if you see some sort of injustice, whatever it is, you need to speak up because both of them told me that most Germans did not support the Nazis but never spoke out.

TM: Interesting.

GR: And so, speaking out in terms of any kind of injustice, social, environmental, whatever, it's really critical to speak out. And that's something that they really ingrained in me, as well as sort of the fragile nature of democracy. [*Crosstalk*]

TM: What happened when— Well, I'm going to explore this a little bit, if you don't mind. What happened when the Nazis came into Southern France? What did your parents do?

GR: Well, since my father was kind of well-known to the Nazis, he could not go out during daylight, so he went out at night and burned wood for charcoal and sold that. My mother, her parents were tailors, and so she rented a sewing machine and did some sewing for farmers, and they bartered that for food. But again, they had incredible experiences. One example is that shortly after I was born, they got either a telegram or a postcard, I don't recall which, which said in French "The doctor recommends a change in climate." They interpreted that to be, you better move. And so, my father said, okay, we'll leave first thing in the morning, and my mother said, no we're going to leave right now. And so, they just bundled me up, and they didn't have any suitcases, took a few things in a blanket and left the village that day. And later they found out that later that evening, two truckloads of SS troops came to that village specifically to arrest my father. And had they waited until my father wanted to leave, which was the next day, I'm sure he would be shot on sight.

TM: Right.

GR: What they would have done with my mother and a little baby, I have no idea.

TM: Where did they go?

GR: Another little village, Ventrirol, which is— They were basically living in all these very remote villages in Southern France. And my father at the time was also working with Maquis, which was the French Resistance.

TM: Did they do that all throughout the rest of the war for the next three years?

GR: The war ended, and after the war ended, the occupation forces asked my father if he wanted to go back to Germany and help set up newspapers since he had set up this *Freies Deutschland*. Both my parents said there's no way that they wanted to live in Germany, and so we actually came to United States in 1948 and moved to Elgin, Illinois, and that's where I started elementary school, even though I couldn't speak any English.

TM: You, well, you would have been four years old.

GR: Right.

TM: So, I'm assuming that your capturing of the language would have happened pretty easily for such a—

GR: Yeah.

TM: —such a small person. Usually that's pretty easy to do.

GR: Yeah. And I, uh—

TM: So, did you speak French and German when you came over? Were your parents—

GR: I just spoke French. I didn't speak any German. And as it turns out, when my parents would want to talk about something that they didn't want me to understand, they would speak German. But I never learned any German, but I quickly picked up certain phrases. And sort of sadly, when I was a teenager, my parents would try to get me to, sort of, maintain my French, and as a teenager, I didn't want to do that. I absolutely rebelled. But you know, I didn't want to, sort of, stand out, and now I really very much regret it as I got older that I didn't do a better job of maintaining my French. But I could still understand most things and get along but by no means am I proficient.

TM: Right. Right. Well, that's cool. So, is that where you grew up then was Elgin, Illinois?

GR: Well, Elgin, and then we moved to Denver in the mid-1950s, and so I actually sort of grew up in Denver, went to high school here, then went to Colorado State University as an undergraduate. And during the years that I was going up to CSU, I worked all summers for the Denver Water Department. And I realized now it was sort of a training program because every summer I did something differently, everything from stream flow gauging in the mountains to measuring water pressure around the city, etc., so four different kind of stints and it sort of, water supply engineering and that really kind of cemented my interest in water. And so, after I graduated from CSU, I was trying to decide did I want to go into sort of water law, because that really fascinated me, or more in the area of science, and I decided that my personality is probably more suited to the science than water law. Although at times I keep thinking, you know, you think back on your past. Had you gone down a different path, what would have happened? [Crosstalk]

TM: Gene, so I'm looking at the timeline here. You might have been 12, I guess, or 13 when you moved to Denver.

GR: Yes.

TM: Were you old enough to appreciate that was a big shift just from landscape, for politics, for seasons. I'm not sure there's, you know, a lot of mountains there in Illinois.

GR: No, but even growing up in Illinois, we, the family did a lot of camping. We didn't have any money, so we did a lot of family camping, and so, always spent a fair bit of time outdoors, which in some respects is quite remarkable because my parents both, kind of, grew up in the big city. And the outdoors was not something that you did for fun and—

TM: Yeah.

GR: But again, we didn't have much money. We didn't have any money, so a lot of family camping. Those camping trips kind of impressed upon me, kind of, just how beautiful and relaxing nature is. So, we went on camping trips in Wisconsin and state parks in Illinois but—

TM: Nice.

GR: —no, the landscape of Colorado was absolutely mind boggling. I remember we moved here actually in late winter, early spring, and we had the Chinook winds that would come down over the mountain. And it could be, like, freezing in the morning, and the Chinooks would come in, and you have temperatures in the '50s and '60s later on. So, that was a remarkable change from the more brutal winters of Illinois.

TM: And what were your— What was your father doing? I'm assuming your mother was raising you and—

GR: Actually, she was working as well.

TM: Okay. What were they doing?

GR: My father, this is really, I guess, an unfortunate thing in life. His goal when he was a student was actually to teach in a university, and he was interested political economy. But when we moved here, he had all kinds of, just for the family to survive, various menial jobs, everything from selling furniture to life insurance and things that he really wasn't suited at, but he did it for the family to survive. I guess just to, kind of, follow up on that thread, when I finally started going to university and was basically on my own, he went back to school and got a master's degree at the University of Colorado in German literature and then got a teaching position at the University of Toledo in Ohio. And then this is the real irony, then he got a teaching position as a civilian faculty at West Point. And it's kind of ironic because in some respects, he was, I'd have to say, sort of like a militant pacifist. And why he would teach at a place like a military academy, I'm really not sure. But it's the first time in his life that he really had any kind of security, which is something throughout his life he never had. It was interesting. When I went back to West Point and talked to the department chairman who actually hired my dad, I asked this guy, "Why— You knew— You obviously did a lot of checking in my dad's background, and why did you hire somebody like that?" And to their credit, and he said, "Well, we want to give the cadets a broader perspective on politics." And so, I thought that was really a much more sort of open, broader education than I had assumed. And so anyway, at West Point he taught German and German literature, but he also talked about, sort of, the political context in which the literature was developed.

TM: Fascinating. Very fascinating. And what did your mom do?

GR: Well, she worked at a bank while I was growing up in various capacities. Later on, she retired from that and taught French, German, and even English at Berlitz because she really— She was a very gregarious person and really enjoyed that contact, and so that's what she did after she retired from the bank.

TM: I'm assuming that going to college was something your parents were— They weren't saying, "If you go to college—" They were saying, "When you go to college—"

GR: Oh yes, they always emphasized education, I think, very strongly because again my father's dream had always been just to be a university professor. And unfortunately, the Nazis pretty much squashed that until the very end of his life.

TM: Right.

GR: In Jewish culture education is very highly praised, so yeah. [Crosstalk]

TM: Where did you go to high school? And where did you graduate from high school?

GR: East High in Denver.

TM: Okay. What year was that?

GR: 1960.

TM: Okay, and what had you— You mentioned that you ended up in in water. As a senior in high school, what were your interests? What really interested you?

GR: Girls and the outdoors.

TM: Ha! Okay. Makes sense.

GR: I guess I've— I'm not sure what, if anything, I thought about, sort of, academically, but I was always interested in politics because that's something that we always discussed around the dinner table: what was going on politically and what was happening. So, I never, you know, thought about any sort of career out of that, but that was always something that was always a topic of discussion around the house.

TM: So, you went to Colorado State University. That's in Denver?

GR: No, that's in Fort Collins. And I actually started out in a, because of my interest in the outdoors, started out in forestry. But at that time forestry was basically tree farming as opposed to what it now is, more ecological. And so, after about two years of that, I switched majors. And the only thing that I could sort of put the various courses that I'd taken together was sort of a more general degree in physical science. So, I had courses there, you know, in forestry, but also in water and the whole variety of different things. And again, while I was there during the summers, I was working here in Denver for the Denver Water Department.

TM: How did you get that job?

GR: Persistence. I'd heard someone say that, you know, they pay pretty good, and so I actually went down there the first time, and they said, "We only hire people that we've hired before." Wait a second! That doesn't make any sense. So, I was just persistent, and then they hired me. And then, as I said, I work for four summers in different aspects of, sort of, water supply engineering. And that kind of cemented my interest in water. But then I was actually fascinated by just— There's so many dimensions of water. It touches every aspect of our life. We have rainbows. You have clouds. You have glaciers that carves the landscaping, and so many aspects of water fascinated me then and still do.

TM: So, by 1960, within '61, '62, '63, that time period, you were working on going to school and working summer for—

GR: For Denver Water.

TM: The Upper Colorado River Basin Storage Act had been passed, and that included, if I get the terminology right, the Arkansas Frypan—

GR: Yes.

TM: —Big Thompson, if I— I think that is in there as well, initiative to get west slope water that was headed toward the Sea of Cortez on the Colorado River over the Continental Divide, or under the Continental Divide in tunnels—

GR: Right.

TM: —and then onto the Front Range of Colorado, Denver, Pueblo. I don't know about Fort Collins.

GR: Yeah, the northern area got water primarily for irrigation at the time. A lot of that has been switched to municipal water, but— Yeah, it was interesting. I guess I should point out that, and I forgot what year it was that when I was working for the Denver Water Department, one of their water projects, and I forgot which one, it must have been, like, I guess it must have been building Dillon Reservoir that, at the time, they were in the process of either applying for that or actually building it, they got an order from the then-Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall to stop construction because the project was in violation of the Blue River Decree. And of course, that caused incredible stir at the water department. But they ended up basically blowing off the Secretary of the Interior, and I thought at the time, wow, here is this little

municipal utility telling the Secretary of the Interior to basically go out and take a hike. That just, to me, was actually shocking, but that was kind of one of my first introductions to, sort of, the politics of water and how—

TM: Interesting.

GR: —power utilities can be.

TM: And so how did that get resolved?

GR: I have no idea, but I mean, Denver went ahead with the project, and I'm not sure if there were any sanctions or anything else. They, again, proceeded with the project despite the order from the then-Secretary of the Interior to cease. So, again, I don't know what happened in terms of any discussions between Interior and the Denver Water Department, but I know they went ahead with the project.

TM: You mentioned you were interested in water law. Had you hung out with any water lawyers from Denver? Or was that just something that, you know, you saw as an issue that you were kind of interested in?

GR: No, it was really more the latter. Because again, I would read in the papers about, you know, this particular court case or that particular court case. So, I actually applied to a couple of law schools and got accepted there as well. But then, as I said, my interest, I thought, was really more interested in science and so I started looking around at what sort of graduate programs were available in water. Virtually all the programs were in engineering departments, and I was really interested in more of the scientific rather than engineering aspects, even though I had taken some engineering courses. So, at the time, the University of Arizona had a hydrology program where it was supported by US Geological Survey. USGS determined that they really needed more trained hydrologists, and so a fair number of senior scientists from USGS were adjunct faculty at the University of Arizona. So, that seem to be the kind of program that matched my interests really well, and so I ended up going down to the University of Arizona in the hydrology program.

TM: And that would have been 1964-ish?

GR: Yes.

TM: Do you remember some of the professors there or who might have your advisor been?

GR: The only person that I remember was the department chairman John Harshbarger. Oh, the other one that I remember Tom Maddock Jr., and I don't recall how to spell his name.

TM: Okay, what do you remember about Tom?

GR: Well, he's in some respects— I don't remember very specifics, but I just sense sort of a New Renaissance man, very broadly thinking. Oh, and I just thought of another one that I remember. John Kessler? I think that was Chester Kisiel. What I remember particularly about that, about him and his courses, it was a lot of, sort of, systems engineering. And then the two courses I took from him, the textbooks were actually graduate-level textbooks in electrical engineering because the flow of electricity and the flow of water is very parallel, so a lot of the models from electrical engineering were applicable to hydrology.

TM: Interesting.

GR: But I was completely lost in those two courses. I survived, but that gets me, I guess, to John McComb. John McComb, who I met there, was also a grad student in hydrology. And his undergraduate degree was in electrical engineering, so John actually, sort of, helped get me through that class as well as in a much broader context on the Grand Canyon.

TM: How did you first meet John?

GR: Well, when I moved down to Tucson, I just—I guess I hooked up with John and his then-wife, Joanna, through the Southern Arizona Hiking Club. And John and Joanna really introduced me to the southwest and the Grand Canyon, specifically, both through the hiking club, as well as other adventures with both of them.

TM: Okay, wait a minute. I've got some questions. Do you remember the first hike you did with the Southern Arizona Hiking Club?

GR: I don't know about the first hike, but the first hike I did ever in the Grand Canyon with them was down, I think it was called the Salt Trail into the Little Colorado.

TM: The Hopi Salt Trail.

GR: Yeah, and it was really— It was called a trail, but it was really, it's more of a route than a trail.

TM: Yep.

GR: That was my introduction to the Grand Canyon, and I was just absolutely blown away. That was the most, sort of, awesome experience I'd ever had.

TM: Do you remember roughly how many days it was and where you went?

GR: Well, we went down the Salt Trail, down to the junction, and then I forgot the trail that comes out from the junction into the regular Grand Canyon.

TM: And so maybe you hiked out the Tanner Trail?

GR: Tanner Trail. That was it.

TM: So, you would've had to set up a shuttle for that.

GR: Yes.

TM: And that would have required a lot of driving.

GR: Yep.

TM: And then to get to the top of the Hopi Salt Trail, that is some really impressive navigation out there on some— You know, it's all flat country, and you've got a— There's a fork in the road, many of them, and you've got to figure out how, the right way to go.

GR: Well, John and Joanna were, I mean, they've done a lot of backpacking and exploring. And John, in particular, was incredible with navigating with a compass and the old USGS quad sheets.

TM: Got it. Got it. Can you paint me a picture of your early recollections of John and Joanna?

GR: Well, John, as I said, was really incredible in terms of navigating the backcountry. Joanna was really skilled at technical climbing, and she actually had, I believe, a number of sort of firsts in rock climbing. So, on a number of our adventures, John would kind of lead the way, and then when we'd get to an obstacle, Joanna would take the lead and set up a rope, and the rest of us could sort of follow. Incredible combination of skills that opened up so much country to me and others.

TM: So, on that hike down the Hopi Salt Trail to Little Colorado River, the water is blue, maybe, unless there's some sort of flood happening in the upper basin there.

GR: Well, I had never seen those kinds of travertine pools, bluish water. And then down there is, I forgot the exact name, it's a big spring I think that the Hopis consider where they merge from.

TM: Right. Right.

GR: There were so many different aspects of that trip that, to me, were so different than anything I'd ever experienced before so [*crossstalk*]

TM: And then down to the confluence with the mainstem of the Colorado and the Little Colorado River.

GR: Right.

TM: Passed the Beamer Cabin there.

GR: Yeah, I remember the Beamer Cabin.

TM: And then down along the Beamer Trail, kind of up high on top of the Tapeats, looking down on the river. I wanted to ask you, and that was 1964. In 1956, there had been a plane crash on the, well, over the Grand Canyon that had scattered the two planes and much debris over that area. When you walk that trail from the confluence down toward Lava Chuar Rapid, do you remember any aircraft debris on your side of the river?

GR: Not on that hike, but as it turns out, on one of our river trips, we actually hiked up to where there was some of the crash remains.

TM: Okay, that would have been on the other side of the river. There was some debris on the, which would be the Little Colorado riverside, but I'm just trying to tag together when that material disappeared, because it did.

GR: We never saw any of that.

TM: All right. And then, so, hike down top of the Tapeats. But Tapeats breaks down at the butte fault there, and then suddenly you're, kind of, right down by the river there at the Palisades and down to Tanner to Tanner Rapid. What time of year was this? Do you remember?

GR: I think our trips were always, I think, usually in June.

TM: So, June! It would have been hot!

GR: Yeah. But, as you know, you can hop into the river, and it always cools off.

TM: Yeah, and then out the Tanner.

GR: Yeah.

TM: And what were your thoughts of that first hike?

GR: Again, I've never seen that kind of spectacular country, and I was just sort of blown away by the awesomeness. And I think what really struck me is just how immense the place is and so often it's hard to get a real sense of scale when you see these, the landscapes, but if you have a person there, all of a sudden you see, wow, how insignificant we are, and how magnificent the canyon really is.

TM: Was that your first time to Grand Canyon?

GR: Down the Salt Trail, yes, into the Little Colorado. I'd never seen the Grand Canyon before.

TM: That's quite the introduction.

GR: Definitely. Very definitely.

TM: Do you remember who else was on that hike?

GR: John and Joanna, a fellow named Eber Glendening, who was very active in the Southern Arizona Hiking Club, and a lot of other subsequent trips was, Glen was also involved.

TM: So, Eber Glendening and his wife Lorna. What do you remember about Eber?

GR: Again, a very strong hiker, great outdoorsman, always hiked in tennis shoes, which in some incredible rugged country, but that's all he ever wore, but—

TM: This was not long after you came to Tucson. Was that the first summer you came to Tucson, or the next summer?

GR: Probably the next summer would be my guess. Next spring.

TM: All right. And you mentioned a river trip. What river trip was that? Were there multiple river trips?

GR: Yeah. Actually, and boy, this is about 50 years ago, but we actually went on three different segments of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. One segment was from Lees Ferry down to Hance. Another one, I know, was from Havasu down to Diamond Creek, and then a third one was somewhere in between, and I don't remember exactly where we went in, where we went out. But again, three different trips. Each trip was about 10 days. We would have to, depending on logistics, we would have to either carry our little rafts, paddles, life vests, down a trail or up a trail. And so, it was always very interesting to see the reactions we would get from hikers, coming down a trail with, again, life vests and paddles sticking up, or coming up a trail.

TM: So, these would have been basically what we call today pack rafts.

GR: Well, they were actually four-man army surplus rubber rafts.

TM: So, they were a little bigger than pack rafts.

GR: A little bigger. And they're— Really, they're called four-man rafts, was just ideal for two people and gear. So, each of our trips, as I recall, had about five rafts, around about 10 people, and [*crosstalk*]

TM: So, not too far off from pack rafts.

GR: About the same size

TM: Certainly not like a like a 14-foot or a 16-foot, you know, rubber raft kind of thing.

GR: No, definitely. Definitely. Yeah, and I didn't quite appreciate it at the time, but John McComb, who sort of organized all these trips had to deal with incredible efforts with the Park Service to actually get permission to do this, and he had numerous meetings with both the park superintendent and the chief park ranger to get permission to do this. And so, it's only, I think, through his, sort of, persistence that we were given permission to do these trips.

TM: Right. The park didn't have a river management plan, but they did have a permit requirement system in place since the '50s. And that those— You couldn't boat in anything smaller than a ten-man.

GR: Right.

TM: And kayaks weren't allowed—

GR: Correct.

TM: —so yeah, you guys were pushing the system here.

GR: I just happened to have a letter that John received from Theodore Thompson, the chief park ranger, in 1966. And let me just read you a couple paragraphs from that.

TM: Please.

GR: This quote in this letter:

We receive many letters from individuals who wish to traverse the Colorado River in Grand Canyon National Park with light equipment you propose to use. They are not familiar with the river, the region, or the environmental hazards indigenous to the area. Unfortunately, it is necessary to deny them a permit. In that same light, there are people who will learn of your trip and will be misguided into undertaking a similar venture, only to be denied permission. We would appreciate your cooperation in not encouraging others to try what your trip entails. Only due to your personal experience, your attention to safety, plus your fine reputation as inner-canyon hiker will a permit be issued to you.

TM: Yes, that's very indicative of the time, even into the mid '50s. We don't think you have the skills. We're not going to give you a permit. And the denials were many, as Ranger Thompson is saying here. But John worked that and was able to work through that.

GR: Right, and one of the conditions of the permit is that we portage every single rapid, which I must say we did not always do.

TM: How'd it go?

GR: Quite well. I actually, on all three river trips, I never once flipped my raft, but others did fairly regularly. But in those small rafts, it was not that big a deal because you could ride them pretty easily. Never got any trouble. The only, sort of, I'd say serious misadventure we had on one of our trips— You're probably familiar with Vulcan's Throne—

TM: Yes.

GR: —sticking up in the river. We had been told that had never been climbed, and so a couple of the people in our trip decided they would try to climb it, and one of—

TM: Oh, so this is Vulcan's Anvil.

GR: Vulcan's Anvil.

TM: Got it. Okay.

GR: Yeah, I'm sorry. A guy named Matts Myhrman decided he would try to climb it. So, he was about, I don't know, maybe 15 feet up on this thing, and the rock broke loose, and he fell into the water, and as it turns out, apparently fractured a rib. And so, there's not much we could do for him down there other than sort of bandage him up as best we could and just continue on the trip, but he was, kind of, pretty sore, let's say, put it that way.

TM: Yes. Yes, I bet.

GR: And that was the only, sort of, misadventure we had in, again, three river trips.

TM: Those were, sound like quite the adventures. How— Do you remember how heavy your raft weighed?

GR: No, I don't, but, again, when I was in my mid 20s—

[Laughter]

GR: —somehow things were very different then. I think it was more— It might have almost been more awkward than the actual weight. Because in addition the rafts, again, we had to carry life vests and food and paddles. It was pretty awkward.

TM: So, 60 pounds, 45-, 50-pound packs?

GR: My guess is something in that range. Although, to me that was— Remember, because, again, I had done very little river running before and then all our trips, you know, the standard practice is, you know, when you approach a rapid, you beach upstream and go down and look at how you're going to run it. And at that time, my mouth would go completely dry, cinch my life vest up as tight as I could, and then of course, once you're on the water, you sort of forget all that and there you go.

TM: So, the Glen Canyon Dam would have been built and taken over control of the river. That was in 1963, and so you guys went in after that.

GR: Yeah.

TM: The water temperature was getting colder, but the reservoir was still fairly shallow. The reservoir was filling up behind the dam. How cold do you remember that water being?

GR: I guess I don't remember much about water temperature, to be honest with you.

TM: Okay. And again, it would have been really nice, really warm in 1963, and then as the years progressed, it would have been colder and colder.

GR: Right. This is an aside: one of my real regrets is that never having seen Glen Canyon before was flooded, although it looks like I might get the chance again.

TM: Yeah. Did you have tides? Was the dam generating electricity so it would in the early morning, they would start turning on the turbines, and then they would turn them off later in the afternoon, evening, and so there would be these tides of water flowing through the Grand Canyon below the dam. Do you remember that at all?

GR: No, I really don't. I remember we were always pretty careful in terms of where we beached our rafts. But in terms of the kind of fluctuation that were occurring or reoccurring more subsequently, again, I don't recall that at all. I was just so taken over by the immensity of the canyons and the rapids, and some of these other things just never registered.

TM: All right, and then during this time, the Arizona Power Authority was looking at building a dam, actually two dams in the Grand Canyon, one at Bridge Canyon, which the Bureau of Reclamation had done some survey work on in 1940s, and the Marble Canyon Dam site, which, again, the Bureau of Reclamation had done some work there in the late '40s, in '49, '50, somewhere right in that time period. Were you all talking about that on your trip? Actually, when you did your Lees to Hance River trip, was Arizona Power 30 actually doing work there at the Marble Canyon Dam site?

GR: I don't recall any work, but I think we passed some scaffolding.

TM: So, that had been done already. It was after the fact. Okay.

GR: I didn't notice anything active, but you could see the some of the previous work that had been done.

TM: Right. That was from the Power Authority, the reclamation work in '49, '50. I do not believe they left scaffolding there. I could be wrong. I want to, you know, figure out who did what work when there.

GR: No, I think we, yeah, we talked about that, and—

TM: What do you remember the conversations, you know— How did the conversations go?

GR: Oh, basically that this was too beautiful and unique an area and it really should be protected, and we thought it would be, given its location. And so, again basically, that putting two dams in what we consider the Grand Canyon, you know, some of it was outside of the park, just really didn't make any sense and was really inappropriate.

TM: And so, to that end, what did you guys do about that?

GR: Well, this was in, again, in the mid '60s, and recognizing the political climate— There was a lot of political unrest, Vietnam etc., etc., And that was also before a lot of major environment legislation. So, a number of us would write letters to the editor of the paper, saying, look, this is not a good idea. But at that time, the papers would not print any letters and opposition or even questioning any aspect of the proposed dams of the Central Arizona Project, so—

TM: So, Gene, hang on a second. Sorry, I'm going to interrupt here. So, you were living in Tucson and the news that— Tucson had two newspapers, the *Arizona Daily Star* and the *Citizen*.

GR: Correct.

TM: And so, you're saying that you would write a letter to the editor to both of those newspapers in Tucson, and they would refuse to print them?

GR: Yeah. So, as a result, a number of us got together and decided, well, let's, and I don't recall who actually came up with that idea, but let's actually buy an ad in the paper. And so, we bought an ad "No More Dams in Grand Canyon" that was published in the *Tucson Daily Citizen* on August 11, 1966. And there we questioned the need that— We pointed out that, look, Arizona could get its share the water, but you didn't have to build a dam. The dams were— The only purpose was to generate hydropower to subsidize the project. They were not for diversion. They were not for storage. It was to generate hydropower.

TM: Had the concept of buying power on the open market or, you know, that constructing the Navajo Generating Station, a standalone power plant, to feed the Central Arizona Project, which would pump water from the Colorado River, over to Phoenix, and then up again to Tucson, had that concept come out by that time, by the summer of '66 that, hey, we can get our electricity elsewhere?

GR: I had not heard any discussion of those options at that time.

TM: You hadn't. Okay.

GR: I had not. It could [unclear] be that they had been discussed in some circles, but in the water arena, a lot of things happen behind closed doors. It's not a lot of transparency, and that has subsequently improved because of some legislation, but there's still a lot of backdoor deals that go on.

TM: Right.

GR: At that time, it was very much of a closed, good-old-boy network. And so, there could have been other discussions going on that I was not familiar with.

TM: This would have been the Marble Canyon Dam site would have been part of the Central Arizona Project.

GR: Right.

TM: A larger piece of legislation to move Colorado River water to Phoenix and Tucson, which included a little bit of New Mexico. There was a project on the Gila—

GR: Right.

TM: —that was supposed to be built with that, and also Bridge Canyon Dam, another dam in the Grand Canyon, though, as you say, outside of the park boundaries.

GR: Correct.

TM: And John McComb would, with Jeff Ingram, I think, would move on to enlarge the park—

GR: Correct.

TM: —to sort of capture, if you will, the entire Grand Canyon for the Park Service.

GR: Exactly. Yeah.

TM: Yeah, so this newspaper ad, August 11, 1966, was published in the *Star*. Is that right? Ran in the *Star*?

GR: No, in the *Tucson Daily Citizen*.

TM: In the *Tucson Daily Citizen*. Thank you. Was your name on it? I mean, who's—

GR: Yeah, we had a list of all the people that signed it and a whole bunch of people from the hydrology program, other individuals. I could count the numbers, but it was a fair number of folks that signed the letter.

TM: And I suppose the paper, they had been blocking letters to the editor opposing the water project, or certainly the dam component of the water project, to be clear. But with an advertisement, they couldn't—I guess they couldn't avoid to run it. Did they run it, like, in Section 1 or in Section 5?

GR: What I have is page 27, wherever that is.

TM: Probably back in the sports section somewhere. And this was a weekday or weekend?

GR: A Thursday.

TM: Thursday. It was a weekday, yes. So, it would have been back in the back somewhere. Okay.

GR: In addition to where the page is, there's the television listing of what's being— And radio listing and things like that. And I don't—I wish I had a copy of it, but I don't recall—I know the very next day, the paper had an editorial just ripping us.

TM: Really.

GR: And I wish I could track down a copy, but no, they just really ripped into us.

TM: Interesting.

GR: And there were also subsequent letters to the editor.

TM: Were you able to then reply to their editorial, or did they again continue the great Cone of Silence, if you will?

GR: I don't think we had attempted to reply. I don't know. But that was, to me, I guess, one of my, again, my first initial indications of, sort of, how powerful water interests were. And again, that has changed somewhat. They still have a lot of clout in the West.

TM: Yeah, so there were some other interesting studies that came out of the University of Arizona about the water project. Were you involved in those studies at all?

GR: I was not. I do know that some folks, I think, particularly in the then Economics, Natural Resources - Economics Department had some studies that were kind of critical of how Arizona was using its water, sort of indirectly attacking the CAP, which at the time, most of the water was for irrigation. It's my understanding that, again, I'm not unfortunately been able to confirm it, that some of the non-tenured faculty that either signed our ad or had some of these other studies, these were people that were assistant professors that did not have tenure, that none of those got tenure.

TM: Interesting.

GR: And so, again, that's what I've heard. I can't confirm that. If that's true, then I think the university lost some really talented young faculty.

TM: Did you have any personal ramifications from having your name on this ad?

GR: It ended up changing my life in many ways.

TM: How so?

GR: The day after the department— Pardon me, the day after that ad was published in the paper, the chairman of the hydrology program, John Harshbarger, called me in his office, slam the door shut, pounded his fist on the desk, and then he asked me, “Goddamnit, Reetz, do you want to be a hydrologist or evangelist?” That's a direct quote. And I responded to that, you know, I came here to study hydrology, but I thought the CAP and issues in the dam really needed public discussion and public debate. Then after a very, sort of, brief discussion, Harshbarger said, “Reetz, you don't have the maturity to stay on as a grad student.” And that's again a direct quote.

TM: So, you don't have the maturity to stay on as a grad student. Wow.

GR: And so, I was actually devastated, part by concept of what a university was all about in academic freedom.

TM: Yes.

GR: I mean, I had done reasonably well on all my grades and exams, etc., and I had really enough class credit for a PhD. But anyway, I was able to, sort of, finish my master's degree but then, sort of, had to move on. I was also told, for example, John McComb was also called in, and I don't recall whether it was Harshberger or somebody else, but John was told, and this is also a quote, “John, you have too many outside interest to remain as a grad student.” Unquote. Now, John went on, as you know, to become a southwest representative of the Sierra Club, ended up going back to DC, head the whole conservation program, very active in national conservation issues. I, on the other hand, ended up going back east for a while in Upstate New York, worked for the state as a water resource planner. At that time, the state was offering to pay for credits for anything related to the job, so I went to Ithaca and started taking some classes at Cornell and ended up getting my PhD at Cornell.

TM: In what?

GR: I would never would have thought of going back East. But I got my PhD in natural resources with a minor in water resource engineering, natural resource economics. I ended up making some very good friends back there, met my wife back there, in some respects, probably got, for what I wanted, a better education than had I continued at the University of Arizona.

TM: Nice.

GR: So, it was one of these things— Sort of the ironies of life. Something that at one time in my life was completely devastating sort of forced me into a path that I never would have thought about, so. Sometimes things like that work out with us. Now, in terms of some of the other people and their consequences, I don't know if they were so fortunate, to be honest with you.

TM: Yes, but in the end, the Marble Canyon Dam and Bridge Canyon Dam were not built.

GR: Correct.

TM: Did you follow that fight? Did you continue to write letters and work on that issue after the August 1966 article, advertisement ran in the paper?

GR: No, not very actively.

TM: Okay. And so then went to New York and got your PhD. Nice, but I wonder, that clearly, that would have been a big deal—

GR: Oh, it definitely was. It definitely was.

TM: —to get that out. And today, in the days of social media, anybody, you know, can— So long as you're speaking truth to power and, you know, not doing false news kind of thing, I guess, you know, I don't know that that information would be so hard to get out. Of course, we're all looking at water management now as the reservoirs are running dry.

GR: Yes.

TM: And the states are still looking at receiving their water. There's not— There's slowly more and more talk about conservation starting to emerge as—

GR: And again, as I think, again, in the mid- to late-60s, things were so different. There wasn't a social media. A lot of the environment legislation had not passed.

TM: Right.

GR: The good-old-boy network was very strong. So, things have changed tremendously in terms of, you know, raising— Plus, I think the general awareness of the importance of ecology and conservation and stewardship is much stronger now than it was then. So, I think it was a very, very different era, I believe. I mean, I think there's still complete, some real challenges in terms of a political will to really seriously address the issues.

TM: Sure, that's right. I know that David Brower with the Sierra Club was instrumental, along with many other people about the Marble Canyon Dam fight, that issue. Did you ever meet Brower or anyone from the Izaak Walton League or the National Parks Association that would have been active on that issue at the time?

GR: I did not, no. That's when I joined The Sierra Club. I've been a member since the mid 1960s.

TM: Right. Anything else about that August 1966 piece in the *Tucson Daily Citizen* that—

GR: No. Again, I think that was our attempt, at least, to alert the public to our concerns, and as I said, I initially, given my parents' perspective about always speaking out, I think it was sort of my motivation to participate that effort. And I thought it was really important to try to get the word out that, look, there are other options. You don't have to put dams on the Grand Canyon.

TM: Did you have a sense beforehand that you might be asked to leave?

GR: No, I did not.

TM: The program. Really.

GR: No, I had— Again, my thought of a university, you have free and open exchange of ideas, and so I never thought that that would occur. I thought there might be, you know, I might get chewed out a little bit or something, but not kicked out.

TM: That's amazing. And then, what did you— With your PhD in natural resources, what did you do then from there? Did you stay in New York?

GR: Well, actually, I always thought that once I got my PhD, I'd come back West because— Ithaca's a pretty nice place. It's along the Finger Lakes. There are wineries around there, but the climate really sucked, and I really missed the grandeur of the West, but then they offered me a faculty position.

TM: Oh, my.

GR: Wow, that's not a bad place to start an academic career, and so then I was an assistant professor in the Natural Resources Department. And at that time, my father was a civilian professor at West Point, but then he passed away. And so, my mother had to decide what she wanted to do, and she wanted to move back to Denver, which was where her friends were, etc. And so, at that time, there was some question, Cornell was going through some real budget things, whether my position would be terminated or not, so I decided to return to the West. So, I left Cornell. We hitched— We got a big U-Haul and hitched a trailer to that and took my stuff and my mother's stuff and came back to Denver and started knocking on doors in terms of job and then got a position with the Environmental Protection Agency here in Denver.

TM: And did you then career with them?

GR: Yeah, my entire career which is— When I started with the EPA, it was still a fairly young organization, and over time we became more bureaucratic and, as you can well imagine, the EPA comes under a variety of political pressure at different times. And so overall, I think a very positive career, a number of ups and downs, but focused on water issues, was involved with quite a few different water controversies in Region 8.

TM: I bet. Very fascinating. Huh. We've been talking here now for— What are we at here? Just about an hour, and I wonder if this is a good time to wrap up this interview, though after we're done, I might ask you a little bit more about your time with the EPA, and maybe we'll do another interview about that, depending on how that conversation goes.

GR: Sure, sounds fine.

TM: Is there anything else in this interview we've just done that you would like to bring in that we haven't talked about?

GR: Why, I guess just an emphasis on how controversial water management was then and continues to be.

TM: Yes.

GR: And I think, again, with climate change, the issues are going to become even more complex, both in terms of the basic science, as well as our collective will to deal with reality.

TM: Nice. Yeah. No, it's definitely a huge issue that's facing us all right now.

GR: Exactly.

TM: Well, with that, Gene Reetz, I'd like to thank you very, very much for taking the time to do this oral history with me. This concludes our Grand Canyon oral history. Today is Thursday, May 5th, 2022. My name is Tom Martin, and Gene, thank you so very much.

GR: My pleasure, Tom.