

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

Interviewee: Jim Corson (JC), Part 3

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: In this 8-part interview series, 96-year-old James W. “Jim” Corson recounts his upbringing in rural New Jersey. His B-24 was shot down over Germany in 1944 and his POW camp was liberated by General Patton in 1945. Jim graduated with a degree in archeology from the University of New Mexico, in 1950 Jim and his very pregnant wife Barbara moved to a woodstove heated cabin where he worked as a Seasonal Interpretive Ranger at the Wayside Museum of Archeology at Grand Canyon National Park, today’s Tusayan Museum. Jim reviews his 30-year career with the National Park Service.

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TM: Today is Saturday, February 13th, 2021. This Part 3 of a Grand Canyon Oral History Interview with Jim Corson. My name is Tom Martin and, good afternoon, Jim. How are you?

JC: Fine. My stay in New Mexico was three years in Farmington and three years in Aztec teaching science—biology in Farmington and all the sciences, even a couple made-up ones, in Aztec. We had aviation in Aztec, and we had geology. Actually in high school that was remarkable. Only two high schools in New Mexico had geology. And I must add that the schools were quite different. Farmington was overwhelmed by a, well, let’s just say a boom. They had gas, oil, and uranium and people coming in from Oklahoma and Texas mainly in the oil and gas pursuits. The uranium was slightly different, but it was the same. The people who followed it were not living civil and happy lives. They were following the boom, whatever was going on. Anyway, I liked Aztec a great deal more than Farmington because Farmington I was teaching biology and it was in effect a required course. So half the kids didn’t care whether they were good there or not. In Aztec it was a smaller school and smaller classes and everyone in every one of my classes was a volunteer and it had a quite different atmosphere. We also had a difference in the principals. The principal in Farmington was not qualified to be a

principal and not really a very good one. The principal in Aztec was a kind of a surprise because he was a brilliant man, but he had come in as assistant principal to Lydia Rippee who was, I think, about 65 when I was there. She was certainly getting on toward retirement, and an assistant principal sounds like a small job but, in fact, it was a major job. He was mostly principal and then went on to become the Dean of Men at the University of New Mexico. But here I am minding my own business when I get a two-page telegram from McKinley Park saying that they've got a permanent vacancy, and with a good reason. The man who had the job felt he had to climb Mount McKinley, and he did. He and two others made it to the top of Mount McKinley and coming back down he slipped and slid and went over a cliff and was killed, and so I'm inheriting a job that was not planned, not intended, and certainly not wanted; but they sent that telegram to eight different people, the last of the list of park rangers and actually it, that list had been superseded but that list was made up requirements of being a park ranger by rangers and so they requested permission to go back to that one because the one that superseded it and to rangers was just a general intelligence test, like all other federal employees. That was a bad idea, I might add. So I was hired as a ranger and, in spite of the fact I had a wife and three children, they were hoping to get a young couple where they could both work for the Park Service and save on housing that way. So I had an old car that was not reliable, and I declared that I couldn't make the trip in my car, so we went up by public transportation and they did have a train that went from Anchorage to Flagstaff and went through McKinley National Park with a stop there. On one day it was going one direction, on the next day it was going in the opposite direction. So we had a wilderness area with the railroad running through it, not too likely. And the other charm was they had built a dirt road, I think mostly during the CCC days, and the dirt road was about 75 miles long from Park Headquarters out to Wonder Lake. Wonder Lake was a kind of a starting point to climb Mount McKinley. It's a wonderful reflecting lake and not very long. You could row down it with a rowboat in about 20 minutes. But it was more than 20 miles across the tundra to start up Mount McKinley, and that ground had lost favor because Mount McKinley was actually in the national park, and you could fly in and land at 6,000 feet and that saved a hell of a lot of work. You didn't have to carry everything across the tundra on your back, which was quite a physical challenge. You were in water often up to your ankles at least and sometimes longer.

TM: Hey, Jim. Hey, Jim, let's back up a minute. What do you remember of the train ride from Flagstaff all the way to McKinley with your wife and three children and what must have been a bunch of boxes of stuff?

JC: We didn't have a bunch of stuff (laughs). We were teaching in Farmington and Aztec and not even making enough to live on, and so we didn't have a houseful of furniture, and the trip was not eventful. But we got to Anchorage by flying, not by train.

And in Anchorage we got on the train that ran through Alaska up to McKinley Park and on to Fairbanks. And that was a novel experience, and we did have three little kids, so we hadn't been on a train, hadn't done any flying before to speak of, and so it was exciting and it was interesting but nothing particular happened to us anywhere, so.

TM: Okay. When you arrived there who was the superintendent of the park?

JC: Dwayne Jacobs was not the superintendent and, oh, dear, the superintendent had been there through World War II, and I'll have to think of his name in a little while. One of the features of being 96 is that my memory is pretty scattered. Anyway, Pearson was the superintendent and he had been there since he joined the Park Service and that was before World War II, been there for 20 years and was eligible for retirement any minute and did retire with a little pressure, I think, from above because he had been everything at that park and nothing, I guess, anywhere else. He had a kind of a peculiar experience. He knew a hell of a lot about McKinley Park, but he didn't know much else and got the job when the superintendent who was running it, when he came went in one day and announced to Pearson that he was going back in the service and was recommending Pearson for superintendent. I think under normal circumstances he might not have recommended Pearson, but Pearson knew McKinley Park from head to toe and had done much of his own dogsled and really did know his way around the Arctic and the problems that go with it, along with it. So...

TM: And how many other people were there when you arrived?

JC: They had a staff of 12 with families and with a post office that had a father and son and no mother or wife. So the total of the number of people in town was about 25 probably. That was a very small community, and it was entirely possible to get sick and tired of it, but housing for me and a wife and three kids was a serious problem and then again it wasn't. They had motel employee housing and they had an 80-room motel so there were plenty of places to put people, but they were not even in the Park's headquarters; they were down at the railroad. And so we got rooms in the employee dormitory, which we could only occupy in the winter because the employees lived there in the summer and that meant we were gonna have to move maybe a couple of times in the spring and fall but it worked in our favor. We had very nice rooms in a very nice employee dormitory with room for about 10 in the bathroom and they had to keep the heat on up there because if you didn't everything went to hell. The frost there reached as low as 46 degrees below zero when I was there, and we had a couple of adventures that we needn't have but due to the bad weather. I tell you about them because they were interesting. One was somebody quite reasonably decided to put a concrete block under the spigot on our spare oil tank. Fine idea except the permafrost does funny

things to the topsoil and the permafrost in this case was a good, hard freeze that just took that spigot off the tank by raising the concrete block about a couple of inches and I don't know, 2500 gallons, I guess, of fuel oil was lost that way. It might have been less. But, you know, we didn't have a spare 2500 gallons of oil. We had to put it back together and get a new order from Fairbanks probably. But Anchorage had a port and consequently Anchorage was our main source of supply, but Fairbanks was closer. Anyway, what was it like? Well, in the winter, and we got there in August, so we drove out to visit Wonder Lake and see the park by way of the dirt road, but we didn't take up station there until next spring and they gave me that house because it was a lovely house, built by the CCC and had lots of room and I had three kids. So we moved out into a house that had been occupied by a female grizzly and (laughs) it kind of left it a mess.

TM: Yeah. (laughs)

JC: The grizzly had a very happy home there, but she made enough of a mess so that they felt justified in shooting her in the spring. The way she got in was interesting because the snow drifted up to the second-floor window and she just went right up that drift and tapped on the window and walked right in. So we had a supply of groceries, canned, and packaged anyway, and all she had to do was help herself to anything she wanted. She could bite the top off of a can and I'm happy that this happened the year before we got there because we had two big grizzly tracks in the house and showing them to our little kids and asking if they'd stick around the house and not get too far away had a very profound effect. That's what they did, and our kids were 6, 4 and 2 so they loved it. They actually did. They entertained each other, and my wife had to be the acting ranger when I was away anywhere so I didn't want to go away very far, didn't want to go away very often, and I think as a ranger I might have not passed all the tests, but I had a good time there and we didn't have any catastrophes. They had a big one a few years before I got there where a plane crashed on Mount McKinley and killed, I think 20 people or something like that.

TM: This was at a time when aircraft were really starting to trouble the park and it wasn't long, well, maybe right about in there that you couldn't land a plane in the park or drop something out of it without the superintendent's approval.

JC: This is absolutely true, but this was a military plane and very likely just flew over to Mount McKinley to have a look, but they crashed and went down, and it was even getting on toward winter so the weather down at the bottom where they landed was probably zero and no one survived as far as we know, but nobody got to the ruin for two weeks so just exactly what happened as they crashed is not for sure. We made up the

story later from the wreckage and it was wreckage that was scattered around. It was not an airplane anymore. All right. What did we do while we were in McKinley? I was (laughs), I love this part of the story, I was a park ranger over an area the size of New Jersey. My district was really just about that size and since I was from New Jersey that's where I got the comparison. Anyway, people could come out, driving their car, but to do that they had to put their car on the train, either in Fairbanks or Anchorage, and ship it into the park, take it off at the park, and put it on the 75 miles of dirt road. And it was amazing the number of people who were happy to do that. They'd come to Alaska for adventures, and this was kind of an adventure. But we didn't see a lot of cars, and I had said that I wasn't able to come in my car so wherever we went I was in a Park Service pickup and one wife and three children and me in a Park Service pickup. They had little old ones without the crew cabs and things. We had kind of a nice fun time actually just beating around in this pickup, and that's how we got to Wonder Lake 76 miles out of park headquarters. But they still thought that was probably the best place for me because we would be comfortable in a nice house. So I got the best job in the park by, more or less by circumstances beyond my control and everybody who came to the park with their car would drive out, visit Wonder Lake, which was at the end of the road, and visit Kantishna, which is a little mining town that was left on the edge of the park and the folks there didn't really know whether they were in or out but for all practical purposes they were in because it was a, one way to get there was to fly and another way was to parachute in. They didn't have visitors in the winter when I was there, but it was a mining town in the '20s and people actually lived there but there were only two at the end of the time and they were both hermits that stayed until the Gold Rush went away. There was still gold, quite a lot of gold, and it was a fun feature because the Alaskans weren't willing to compromise gold mining and so they required that the Park Service allow it within the park and this is pretty funny because it is not, it's not a preservation activity. And nobody really had the nerve to challenge the Park Service as it made several rules to make it difficult, and nobody wanted to bring all the stuff and send it all up and try and mine gold in a difficult situation. I know that there was gold and individuals could actually get it by shoveling the streams into sluice boxes and gold pans and just working individually. And my ranger station was supervisory to all of this kind of activity. There wasn't much, but I had to learn a little about gold mining and, as I say, when I wasn't there my wife was the assistant ranger, and she was a city girl that knew nothing about the wilderness and nothing about the Park Service when we first started, but she was also game and enjoyed it quite much. Anyway, we had two summers there, and the outstanding feature of summer in Alaska is that the sun shines all night and summer is not like anybody else's summer except other Arctic climates. So the kids would talk all night. We had black curtains on their bedroom, didn't make a bit of difference. Really didn't think you had to go to sleep when the sun was shining. So we would stop in a couple of times and threaten them with physical harm, and they'd

keep right on talking, and we'd finally give up and go to bed and sleep because we'd been working and were a little more worn out. But the kids had a good time, too. And on one occasion we went over to go gold mining, we didn't know a thing about gold mining, and it turns out that day we didn't have to. There was a, no, there were two streams that were full of gold. It seems the early people had two crude methods and didn't take it all and the two streams still had lots of gold in the banks on either side, and all you had to do was shovel it into the stream and ran it through your sluice box or whatever and left the gold behind, not all of it, not even most of it, I guess, but enough to make it quite interesting. Anyway, took my three little kids over and we went to one of the streams that nobody had been to lately and there was a big rock in the middle of that stream that had kind of an elbow and there before our eyes there was a nest of nuggets that had been caught in fractures in the rock. So we're standing there looking at gold that has not seen any other human being anytime lately and you can pick it up with your fingers. My little kids could pick gold nuggets out of the stream. And I've got them (laughs) in a little bottle in the bank vault because I still think they're valuable. I've got about a half an ounce. And some of the folks who were working there were doing a lot harder job of working and shoveling and because they were getting mason jars half full of gold nuggets and a group of three, one wife and two men, had taken out three of these pint bottles but only half full each of nuggets in the summer, and two old gentlemen who had been in the Gold Rush and promised they'd come back when they retired, and so they were there for a couple of months digging and shoveling and working everything by hand. The other team had a sluice box, and they would throw tons in but throwing it by shovel and having it drift through and leave the gold nuggets and dust behind in the riffles in the box. So it was a gold mining activity right there beside our house, about three miles away, and I could go over and visit at any time. I was always welcome because I had a telephone, and they didn't have cell phones in those days. So they could come in and use my phone, which was practically worthless, and they could come in and get sympathy and a little refreshing talk about the rest of the world. And we did have a radio. It was a most interesting radio I have ever experienced because it picked up anything, except what we wanted. It took messages out of the air from 80 miles away that had nothing to do with us and it was very difficult. Once in a while you could get through nicely to headquarters but mostly it was very difficult to talk on the radio and get anything sensible. So we were fairly isolated, and our groceries all had to come from the railroad and headquarters and the folks at headquarters were astonished that I never came in all summer. When I think about it, I feel exactly the same as I did then, that I could spend all winter at headquarters, but I certainly didn't have to spend all summer, too. We just called up and asked somebody to bring us some groceries one night, and McKinley was genuinely wilderness even though it had a dirt road and cars. All right. What else?

TM: So did you learn how to do dogsled work there or did you just observe it?

JC: No, our dogsled, this is a peculiarity, and I must confess the dogsled was the main tourist attraction. You were living in the wilderness, and we've got gold mining and the dogsled was irresistible. Anybody who came to the park wanted to see the sled dogs and we had a dozen, and we had to feed them every night and Jimmy, that's me, had lied to get the job. I had declared that I'd be fine with the dogs even though I'd been bitten four times and had no enthusiasm for dogs at all. And it turns out one little secret that I didn't know, and I should have is that the guy who feeds the dogs is the dog's best friend. So I never had a moment's difficulty with any dog, and I had to go down and cook up salmon. We got dried salmon by the stack, about a six-foot stack, and then worked through them two or three salmon at a time and just cooked them up and feed the dogs salmon. I'm not sure it was a balanced diet, but I am sure that we put on a demonstration if there were any visitors, and we'd hook up the dogs and show them how to run. And if anybody important came to the park we'd take them on a ride on the dogsled out on the park road, which was not much of a road, but it was certainly easier than across country. And we did have important visitors and we just showed them things they didn't want to see. The dogsled, you remember, is controlled by voice commands. There are from a half a dozen to a dozen dogs and voice commands are interpreted variously by each dog and telling them what to do didn't guarantee that they were gonna do it. We didn't really use the dogsled during the two or three years that I was there. We did take a new stove out to one of the ranger cabins and that took us about three days, and it was dangerous. This stove was not a stove in the old spirit. We had a camp stove that you buy from L. L. Bean by catalog, and you set it up in a tent or in a temporary cabin somewhere, and it's just really for emergency use. Anyway, that was our actual trip with the dogsled. In the earlier days the Park Service liked to get stuff that was free and right after World War II, one of the surpluses we really thought was wonderful were mobile snow tractors. They had a tread, and they had a cab that would hold two or three people and you could get in that sled and go anywhere that there was enough snow, in theory, and it was only a problem if you wanted to come home (laughs) because these tractors were worn out when we got them, and I never made a real trip in one of the snow tractors. And they did have a couple of trips out to Wonder Lake, but 75 miles with one of those tractors was a real good test of how much life it had left in it. I have a nice story that I enjoy. That is part of the staff took a tractor out to Wonder Lake, which is 75 miles, remember, and it failed out there. So they came in by skis and snowshoes 75 miles and went into the superintendent and said, "We had to leave the snow tractor out there at Wonder Lake," and he said "Well, go get it," and they had to find some tools and things they needed to get the damn thing to run again, go back out, but on foot, they had snowshoes and skis, and work on it out there. It was not a happy time and I'm glad I missed that. I would have been one of the people doing

the work, but fun to hear about it anyway. What else happened at Wonder Lake? There was, I really don't know why now, but we had a seaplane with pontoons that could land in this lake. It was a small lake. You only had room enough to land and by the time you taxied to a slower speed you had come to the other end of the lake. But the folks who had built a lodge out there on the homestead had this plane and flew in and out, could actually take visitors in and out, and we required that they keep it out of sight and don't tell anybody except on business, and I never got to fly in that plane, but the people who built the little lodge, and it was very, very rustic, had two who had been, what were they called, these were women pilots who did airplane ferrying from the factory or from one field to another and those two women were demonstrating that women could be plenty tough. They did all the work that anybody did, and they liked it, and a visitor who came to the park was immediately handed something big and heavy and told to join the fun and do the work. It was I think called Camp Denali and it's still there, but it has grown through the years. They just had started with a couple of buildings and expanded when they made some money, which wasn't often. And they were our neighbors. We couldn't see them or hear them, but we could drive there in about three miles, and that was not all the humans out there because the mining camp had one hermit who just stayed and then the miners who came in the summer that I told you about already who were working in the streams of...

TM: So, Jim, how many people were climbing Denali at the time?

JC: We had, yeah, we had no real social life out there. If we had an adventure, we could get everybody pretty easily because they were all in a small, about a five-mile area. And we did have a couple of adventures and I guess they were talking about a doctor from one of the bases in Fairbanks area brought a nurse out to camp and I'm still enjoying this, anyway, one of the things that he decided to do was throw a can out the opposite window which gave him a chance to rub down the nurse that he brought along and also gave him a chance to lose control of his car. So his car went over the edge of the road and down about 20 feet, which is not something you push your car back up, and everybody in the area, all the 20 people or whatever (laughs), got on the job of getting this car out. The car had ruined its radiator and getting it out was sort of fun because there was no garage, there was no repair services, except us amateurs and this car was pretty well ruined. The nurse was not ruined, the doctor was not ruined, but they were certainly in an embarrassing situation. And the folks from Camp Denali had surplus military vehicles, you know, those kind you put 12 troops in and travel over the desert and over the mountains and wherever you have to go. So this big truck was used to, with a steel cable, to pull the truck, not the truck, the car out of where it was stuck down below the highway. But to keep it from tipping or doing anything worse, the folks had a jeep and with another steel cable they just anchored the car upright so that when

they pulled the car was being pulled in two directions, up and forward, and the whole park and all the visitors turned out to enjoy that. That was a special treat. That's the only real adventure we had while we were there. We didn't, we were certainly lucky.

TM: Did anybody, Jim, did anybody come through attempting to climb McKinley?

JC: Yes. You didn't come through the park anymore. In the early days I was the administrator of climbing Mount McKinley, too. But like I told you, they had discovered that they could fly up to 6,000 feet and land on Glacier and nobody wanted to walk 30 miles across the tundra cause you could do the same thing. So I didn't have a real trip up to the top of McKinley from my ranger station. They flew in and went from there.

TM: So how did you interface with those people, or did they just come and go on their own?

JC: Yeah, we didn't really have to interface at all. Actually we did have a team of three, I guess, who came in and did it the old way, but without event. They just carried all this crap across the tundra, which was a very challenging, awkward, and climbed the mountain, and it was easy to climb they said. But my experience with the man before me told me that it wasn't something I needed to do so I never did anything but look out and see the mountain was still there in the morning. And I did this every morning because mostly it rains in summer in McKinley Park. A day with no rain didn't happen, but a day with a little period of sunshine was listed among weather records as a sunny day. It might be sunny for an hour or two but mainly it was just some rain, and anybody was gonna climb Mount McKinley had to face this that they're gonna be wet and they were gonna be miserable, they were gonna be tired and they were gonna camp in a wet tent, and it wasn't gonna be fun. But the mountain is the highest in North America and the fact that it wasn't difficult to climb led people to keep making attempts, and most of them succeeded. And if you want more information on Mount McKinley there's a fellow names Bradford Washburn, he's probably dead by now, but he was the head of the Science Museum in Boston and he had made Mount McKinley his project. He knew all there was to know about climbing it, getting up and down it, taking his wife up to the top, and I met him (laughs) by going and looking for him in Boston at the Science Museum. I never saw him while I was at the Park.

TM: How did you end up leaving McKinley?

JC: Well, that was mildly interesting and mildly biological. My wife and I managed to get pregnant along the way and toward the end of two years she was seven months pregnant and that seven months is important, it is true, but to fly out of there you

couldn't be more than seven months pregnant, and she flew out with three little kids. You had to land and change planes in Chicago and flew to the East Coast because I was being reassigned to Washington, DC and going there for training for management. And that was a good way to leave the Park in most respects, but we left the Park with the Park Service going to pack and ship my stuff. We still didn't have anything worth mentioning but they packed it very nonchalantly, they didn't give a damn what happened to it, and the waterfront folks had a strike so that all of my stuff stayed on the docks or wharf anyway, down in Anchorage, where it rained every day, and just about all of my stuff was ruined by carelessness of the Park Service, and I still feel pretty mad about that. But it turned out that we managed without somehow and actually got paid I think 30 cents a pound for anything that was ruined, and that included the one double bed we had, and the washing machine sat on the dock with the lid on, but the lid was upside down so it wasn't closed and we had thrown in things at the last minute into the washing machine because it was gonna be safe and dry and during the time it was on the dock the washing machine filled with water and some of my winter gear, which was made for cold weather was ruined. A month sitting half soaked is not good for any kind of clothing I know. Anyway, we went to Washington.

TM: When? What month and what year?

JC: What year? I'm glad you asked that question. I'll have to think about it. But we went up in '56 and we were there for two years, so we went to Washington in '58 and we were only going into Washington for seven months. The training program had been designed to expose you to all the administrative features of the Park Service that related to running parks. So you had a month here and a month there and a month everywhere in the whole system.

TM: Did you apply for that job or

JC: You bet. I was old for the Park Service. I went in later than most people and there was no reason to expect to get this, but the superintendent made it kind of a personal necessity for getting somebody assigned to Washington for this training. Nobody ever had been, and he had an old guy that was smarter and better educated and well qualified for management that he wanted to help. So he did help him, and I shouldn't tell you the story but a girl working in the office had the other park ranger as a husband and her solution to this problem was to send my application by surface and her husband's application for the same program by airmail (laughs). And the superintendent, when he heard of this, didn't have any hesitation in knowing that this was a scandal and a crime, actually, and raised hell enough so that I was selected, and the other ranger never made it. Anyway, life's little fun and games. Anyway,

TM: Yeah. What was Barbara's thoughts about, your wife, what was your wife's thoughts about moving to Washington, DC from McKinley?

JC: The reason I married her was that she did think that going West and seeing the rest of the country was a really good idea and so we went to college in Fort Collins and Albuquerque, taught school in New Mexico, and neither of us were totally enthused about teaching school in a small town in New Mexico. When we went to Farmington it had about four or five miles of pavement downtown and nothing out beyond the center of town. All of the streets were dirt roads, so we had been adventurers before we ever went to Alaska and liked it. So how did she feel about it? I was thinking about it recently. She was with me for 70 years and died at age 90 so the life wasn't too much for her, and our kids, all five of them, seemed to think that that life that we had was as good as you get. I'm grateful because all we needed was one who was totally dissatisfied and that would have spoiled it all but every one of those kids thinks the wilderness is wonderful and gets there as much as they can. They work downtown but they think about being out in the wilds.

TM: So how did they take to Washington, DC?

JC: (laughs) How does anybody take to Washington, DC? It's a big, fat mess and I've got a plan, but I haven't gotten very far. My plan is to close Washington, DC and start over. Anyway, it was all new, it was all exciting, and it wasn't nearly as gross as it is now, and so we all thought it was a fine adventure. I didn't have a car. Well, I did have a car. I'm gonna have to over this part of the story again because... Anyway, I went to Washington with a car that was new to me and that's because I bought it there. And have you been to Washington, DC?

TM: Just a couple times and just as a tourist.

JC: Being built on the plan of a circle where everything goes into a center is about as bad an idea for a town as you can get. There's a couple of towns that way and Washington, DC is one of them so that nobody knows how to drive in Washington, DC. And everybody makes a kind of, an attempt to manage in a strange situation. So we were looking for a place to stay, and if you go into a realtor and say you want a place to stay, he's very bright, he's got them. And then you say "and I have three children" and suddenly he's not bright at all and he doesn't have them, and then you say "We're only staying seven months," and the least he wants is a year's lease and so I guess it's reasonable to say that I had no help from anybody except the Payless Drugstores had a bulletin board, every one of them, and on this bulletin board you could post anything you

wanted the public to know. So they had posts of rooms to rent, houses to rent, and all those things that you needed but they were pretty chancy. There was nobody evaluating them or working them over before you got there, and I went to the Payless Drugstore for some help, yeah... The first story is that I got a room, and it was by way of a note in a Payless Drugstore, and the lady who had the room for rent actually came down every evening and hung around that bulletin board to see who was looking at her ad. She didn't want just anybody. She was a widow, alone, and she wanted somebody that at least was clean and decent. So she stepped forward and said, "Are you looking for a room," and I said I was, and she took me home and was very nice to me for the time that it took to find a real house that I could bring the family to. And how did I find a real house? The same way. Note on the bulletin board. And a woman who had a full house and wanted to leave it full and go visit her husband, her son in California. So we were as lucky as you can get. We found a lady who had what we wanted and wanted to rent it the way we wanted and so we lived in a nice house that came complete with vacuum cleaner and refrigerators and all the things you need to live, which we couldn't bring with us from Alaska. And we lived there happily ever after, but we were leaving in the spring and well ahead of six months. The Park Service offered me a job there, which was almost nice of them, but people in the Park Service did not want to work in Washington, DC and so they were thinking that since I'd just spent seven months there that I might be susceptible to a job there, and I assured them that I needed more experience in the parks and I needed to get it now instead of later. And they looked over all the situations they had and found one where the fellow in the park would be glad to be in Washington, DC and transferred him in and me out. So I went to Glacier Park and became the Assistant Chief Naturalist in a very, very large park and one that had the kind of winters they had in Alaska and one that had a school and a community and was absolutely lovely. That's Glacier Park, Montana. Have you been there?

TM: Yeah. I have. So hang on a second, Jim. The months, seven months that you stayed in Washington, DC, what was that training like? How did you get trained? Were you in a building, was it like a student setting with chairs and a chalk board? What was that like?

JC: It was in the Park Service offices in the Department of Interior.

TM: So the main Interior building?

JC: And it was individual to a certain extent. There were four of us from all around the country and my good fortune, well, so I knew a couple of the guys already, and I didn't have any bad fortune. We really were lucky. We had a good time there. Everybody wasn't a stranger and we all got together whenever we had a chance and talked about

it. But it was individual training in individual departments of the Park Service. So you worked in the Office of Land Acquisition, we worked in the, I had one assignment for 30 days in the Department of Interior's Secretary of Interior, and I thought that was pretty good stuff, but they gave me a job that nobody wanted and nobody could do, and that was the working over complaints that made it all the way up to the Secretary of Interior (laughs), and the complaints were pretty much all the same. If you put two people in a totally isolated situation you can almost guarantee that they will hate each other in no time at all, and so I was dealing with complaints that made it all the way to the top, and every one of them was the same complaint—they left two people too long in an isolated area. So I was working my way through this trying to figure out what to do. There was always the basis for firing one or both of these people and always it was the same cause—they just got so sick and tired of each other that there was no way that they could do anything right. And one of my complaints was from the BIA about a teacher who had been teaching on the reservation for 20 years. Well, the reservation was like the national parks. They had situations where you were isolated, you might have a lot of people around you but if you did, they were Indians, they were not your kind of people, and the Indians were a source of pleasure and pride for a lot of people who worked there, but they were a change that was unbearable to some people. So this lady had been working for them for 20 years and finally somebody had decided she had to go, either she had to go or the person making the complaint would quit, which is fine. Usually you know which way to go with one like that. You make the person who made the complaint quit because it was their idea that this other person was impossible and for 20 years, they'd been doing some sort of job. Anyway, I enjoyed that particular assignment because I really had the power of life over these folks who were up for firing and was on their side immediately. I'd been in isolation; I'd grown to hate people (laughs). I knew exactly how it worked. Anyway, what else did I have? The chief biologist for the whole Park Service was on vacation or leave or something, and I went into his office and his specialty was not doing anything. He had letters there that were six months old that he hadn't answered, and all the windowsills were piled high with unanswered and undone jobs, and he was a good fellow and knew a lot and did have intolerable situations that he was supposed to solve but he got discouraged. And, man, I sat down and flashed out answers to all these people and emptied the windowsills and was feeling pretty hot stuff. I answered problems that nobody had answered before and laid out ways that we could solve our biological problems and enjoyed every minute of it.

TM: Did you get a chance to meet the Chief of Interpretation, a man named John Doerr?

JC: Yeah, but he wasn't the chief at that time. He was Assistant Chief and a man named Ron, oh, dear, anyway, his boss was brilliant and very, very well spoken, and had a little problem, too. Problem solving was easy when you started and always when you got well into it, it was hard, and so Ron was actually wonderful. He was a good Chief of Interpretation except for problem solving, and you know if you've dealt with bureaucracies that passing it around is the way to handle that. You just keep passing it around until everybody's so tired of it that nobody's even thinking about it anymore. And Ron had problems in his office that had been there for a couple of years and all came in with the idea that we could fix all these things (laughs), which has to do with being young and ignorant. But I had the same rule and that is if the problem hasn't been solved for months and months and you work out a solution, they're not really gonna be objecting to it and you're even likely to get it to work. So I made my way through all sorts of problems and all in good humor, and that's why I didn't want to accept a job there. I had dealt with all of these jackasses who could stall any problem hoping that it would go away for months, and I didn't want to join that atmosphere, and I expect it's still the same atmosphere, but I can't swear to it. Anyway, Washington, DC is not a healthy town and the folks who like it there are not totally admirable. Some of them are. They get a good guy in there once in a while who does a lot of good work and I'm not really condemning the whole Washington office, but we didn't think about those friends when we were out in the park. We thought of them as a force to be reckoned with, you know, and in between in everybody's good graces because I hadn't really trampled on anybody and leaving was the important part. I really wanted out of there at the end, but it never was seven months, as I said.

TM: Did you make any connections there that would be helpful in your future career?

JC: Well, that's the fun part. You know, after you've been to this place because this guy's been trained for management. It's as good as having a red light light up when your name shows up. Anyway, I was trained for a better job and got one immediately, and these guys in the Interpretive Office that I held in low esteem were responsible for recommending me highly and sending me to a better job. So I hadn't trampled their feelings too badly. Anyway, as I say, I went out to Glacier Park, which had a very serious opening for a transfer, a guy had been there two or three years and his wife had departed and he had a teenage daughter living with him and he was actually a city boy. He was not geared for life in the wilderness so going back to Washington, DC was fine with him. And it was going to be a promotion and he would probably stay there for the rest of his life, and I had no desire whatsoever to spend the rest of my life in Washington, DC. So that was the beginning of my real time being in real jobs in the Parks.

TM: Hey, Jim,

JC: Where do I go from there?

TM: You know, we've been talking for over an hour now.

JC: I'm afraid so.

TM: How about we call it good here and next time we'll pick up with you going out to Glacier?

JC: Okay.

TM: And so with that, this will conclude Part Three Grand Canyon Oral History Interview with Jim Corson. Today is Saturday, February 13th, 2021. My name is Tom Martin and, Jim, thank you so very much.

JC: Have you turned off your recorder?

TM: I will in a minute. Hang on.

End of interview.