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Interviewee: Jim Corson (JC)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

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TM: Today is Thursday, February 18, 2021. This is Part 5 of a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Jim Corson. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Jim. How are you today?

JC: I'm about the same.

TM: Okay, very good. We went through Part 4 talking about your four years at Glacier National Park. How was it that you came to leave Glacier?

JC: Well, I got an interesting offer to be a superintendent's assistant at Sequoia. That was a step up the ladder, and Sequoia was a very nice place to go.

TM: Okay. Had you been there before?

JC: I had not. I knew, though, that John Muir, of course, is one of the Park Service heroes and talked about Sequoia a lot. So we were looking forward to going to the High Sierras. They did have good schooling within reach and housing for families, and it was not a hardship area. Neither was Glacier.

TM: Okay. I'm trying to figure out what year it was that you would have moved over to Sequoia. Was that 1963?

JC: Probably '62. And my offer came as a minor surprise because I knew the superintendent that I was going to be working for many, many years before. He came up from Santa Fe and interviewed me when I was teaching school to put me on a temporary job with the Park Service. We talked it over, and I thought about it and declined.

TM: What was his name?

JC: It was John Davis, Sr. John Davis, Jr. continued in the Park Service for many years.

TM: Right. What do you remember about John?

JC: Well, that's the fun thing. John was unique. He had been in the Park Service for a long time, and in fact there were only a couple of people who had been in longer as, you know, upper echelon. He was the superintendent for a long while. He really envied, I guess, the man who was at Yosemite who had been a superintendent longer than he had. He had a funny feeling about how superintendents behaved, if they can get help, and was not what I'd call super ambitious for himself.

TM: Okay.

JC: He thought the Park Service required him to be an executive type, and he thought that public relations were the most important part of his job. So he belonged to the local country club and played golf every Thursday, and he did not feel obliged to get his hands dirty. He had two helpers, one assistant superintendent and then me. And my job was a new job that they created at his request because he was working so hard, which, when you get there and examine the situation carefully, was slightly fraudulent. I did have a lot to do, but John Davis decided what I did out of the things that he had to do, and it turned out to be quite a lot of them.

TM: Okay.

JC: He liked being superintendent. He'd been superintendent for a long time. And he was even superintendent at Yosemite, which was considered one step up compared to Sequoia. Both of them were made into parks before the Park Service was created. Both of them are old mind, old habits, old prestige and top of the line in the Park Service.

TM: Okay.

JC: I am not sure what I expected, but it was different than Glacier, for sure. It was hardly a wilderness area, although we had lots of wilderness. We weren't right downtown. We were out in the country, for damn sure. Seems to me we were 90 miles from—oh, dear—Fresno, and we were less far, but I've forgotten how far to— Well, let's start over. The nearest town was Three Rivers. Three Rivers was not any kind of a town to brag about. They had a restaurant, and the restaurant made homemade pies and was famous for them because they were very good.

TM: Ooh. Well, that's okay then. [Laughs]

JC: Yes. We went to town from Sequoia on our days off by going downhill all the way. It was up in the Sierras, and Three Rivers was not near the top. It was, oh, just up the first layer, I guess. We had a road with— I'm remembering badly now, but maybe there were 28 curves in this road. It just went around and around and around. It was designed by an Army engineer, and he was preserving the wilderness. That's all very well if you don't get car sick, which my wife always did.

TM: Oh, no.

JC: This road was not designed for ordinary people. It was designed for Army engineers. Anyway, a lot of people went up it, and not many people got in trouble because the moment you got on that road, you slowed down. There wasn't anybody who had any thought of going down it in a hurry. So at the top of that road were the giant trees, and down below it was just ordinary California mountain country. I don't know if ordinary California mountain country sounds right, but it was pretty civilized. The kids didn't all go to school right there at the park. We had to put our high school children on a bus to go down winding mountain roads a bit further. I think they were going 40 miles, something like that.

TM: Wow.

JC: Anyway, my daughter Paula was 14, had just gotten to be a [chuckles]— I don't know what I'd call her. She was a full-grown female, but full-grown females in my family were about six inches shorter than a lot of families. So she was still pretty small, and we were due to have— Well, no, we weren't, not when we moved there, but we did have our fifth child, a boy, from Sequoia.

TM: Okay.

JC: That closed down the having children. We had four daughters and one son, and the one son was a bit of a surprise. I certainly expected another girl since we had clearly established a tradition of having girls. The first three were two years apart. Then it was five years, and then it was five years more. So we had children for 20 years. I don't know if that adds up right or not. Anyway—

TM: Well, we were talking about Fresno and Three Rivers. Did you have to go to Three Rivers to shop, or would you go past it to Fresno?

JC: Fresno was considered a real city, and we went there, but we had another one. I'm suddenly blank on the name of the town where my son was born, but they had a full hospital and full-service everything, and we went to this other city, which I should think of the moment I stop trying.

TM: I wanted to go back to Glacier for just a minute because you had mentioned Ralph Roan. Did he stay on at Glacier or did he move in the Park Service as well?

JC: He moved as we all did, every two or three or four years, and he did not go to Sequoia. He went in other directions.

TM: Did you stay in touch with him?

JC: Yes, and, oh, I had three or four best friends. Certainly, he was one of them.

TM: Okay, great. Well, I'll ask you about him as we go along. If he comes back up in the story, don't hesitate to bring him back in.

JC: Well, he does.

TM: You mentioned you were a superintendent's assistant. I think of a deputy superintendent or a management assistant. Do you remember—

JC: I was the management assistant.

TM: Management assistant? Okay.

JC: And there was a deputy or assistant superintendent. There were three of us in the office, plus the director of the administrative affairs, and plus two secretaries. The superintendent had a secretary who had been at that park for 30 years.

TM: Wow. What was her name?

JC: Erma. Of course, she had another name, but I don't instantly have it. But she was a force to be reckoned with. I believe it was her theory that she ran the park.

TM: I bet she did.

JC: I'll bet she did, too. To get to the superintendent, you had to get by her.

TM: And she'd been doing that for 30 years, so she knew everything about the park.

JC: Well, she didn't have that job for 30 years, but she was in that job for a long time and did know more about the park than any of us.

TM: Well, that's a question. When you came in as the management assistant, did John Davis sit you down and say, "This is what I need help with. These are the projects"? I mean, I'm assuming when you came to Sequoia you knew nothing about the issues.

JC: It was a new job there. None of us knew what it was gonna be. What it turned out to be was I was preparing a lot of stuff for John, and he was accepting this with gratitude and claiming full possession. If we had a talk anywhere, I wrote it. And if he liked it and wanted to, he gave it. If he didn't like it or didn't want to or had another thing,

important thing like a golf game on Thursday, I gave it. So I felt a little proprietary about the talks we had.

TM: Did he ever say to you “Hey, I can’t make the golf game. Go in my place”?

JC: It wasn’t that way, but we did know that golf was important on Thursdays. He did pick and choose because some places were pleasanter and easier to talk to than others. We had a big project going. We were trying—and I guess that’s one of the reasons I got that job—we were trying to get a large segment of the river included in the park. And I say *the* river, but there were two or three rivers involved. Anyway, a large segment of the most beautiful had been left out from the threat of dam sites or irrigation projects, and they had all been bypassed because other locations were better. They had built the dam a couple of places further up the river and they had done away with the need for a dam within the most beautiful area you can imagine.

TM: Okay.

JC: And so I was a public assistant for getting the local public enthused about being added to a national park. It worked, and I think it was changing times as much as anything, but John Muir had said of a part of Kings Canyon National Park that it was the most beautiful spot in the whole Sierras, and that was, sort of, a three-level waterfall called Tshipite Falls. I did have a personal relationship with Tshipite Falls. First of all, in the winter we didn’t have many visitors, and Kings Canyon National Park was considered much more backcountry than Sequoia, and both had everything you could possibly need for a national park. We had waterfalls that were very spectacular, and we had mountains and we had trees, and what else? We had rocks, we had gold seekers in the old days, and we also had a lot of attention from John Muir.

TM: Hmm. Okay.

JC: And quite a lot of publicity. They had tried to put it in the park when it was created, but they wanted more. And I did instantly the way they felt because it was beyond compare. Have you ever been?

TM: No, I have not.

JC: Not either Sequoia nor Kings Canyon?

TM: If I was, I was there as a small child and do not remember them.

JC: Yeah. Well, drop everything [laughter] and go because both are very worth it.

TM: Okay.

JC: Yosemite had a lot of trouble. I’ve got some literature laying on my table about Yosemite because we’ve gotten interested in things that happened, due to you, thank

you. You know, we've looked for some of the details and gotten them from the Internet. So I have more information on Sequoia and Kings Canyon than I used to have, and Yosemite, actually. Especially Yosemite, because I kind of forced a fellow into being a superintendent at Yosemite. I didn't mean to or intend to, and it was the days that George Hartzog was the director, who did things impulsively.

TM: Ah!

JC: He looked me in the eye and told me that he thought I should be superintendent of Colonial National Park in Virginia. This is later, and in fact, it was quite a lot later. It was about three to five months later, I guess. But I cheerfully went down, walked into the superintendent's office, and said, "George has said that I might have this park," and George had never mentioned it to the superintendent, who'd only been in there a little more than a year and was perfectly happy to stay there for a while. And this was a friend of mine, and I don't believe we were ever friendly after that. But he never said he wasn't my friend; he just went off not so cheerfully from a very nice job to a very difficult job. That was at the time when they were having the riots in Yosemite, and I wanted to read more about those. I hadn't ever read about those.

TM: Yeah, so that would have been 1970. Let's go back to Sequoia in 1962. What do you remember about the housing and the people there that you worked with?

JC: Well, that's kind of a fun thing. Three Rivers was a very settled community, had been there forever.

TM: Is that where you stayed?

JC: No. Three Rivers had some nice new Park Service housing built by Mission 66. They did offer me one of those houses, but behind Headquarters was an old settlement, old houses, that were built or even bought when the park was acquired, and I chose one of those old houses. It had character. It had space. It had a fireplace. And the living room was 26 feet long.

TM: Wow.

JC: And I thought we'd like that. Turns out we really did, but it had a couple of features that we didn't quite care for, and one was rattlesnakes. California rattlesnakes are usually small, but they can be big. I believe it must be two different species, but we had one each in our time there. One day the girls were yelling, "There's a rattlesnake! There's a rattlesnake!" We sort of turned off whatever we were doing and went, but we didn't take them seriously. We didn't think there were rattlesnakes in the headquarters area. And one of the boys, one of their friends and neighbors, was about 14 or 15, and he had the rattlesnake. Even though we were conservationists, we didn't think rattlesnakes were deserving of a lot of protection, so I think he might have had the rattlesnake with its head cut off or something. And we were grateful because our kids

played there all the time, and you don't play with rattlesnakes voluntarily. The other story comes later.

Anyway, living in the headquarters area at, well, I believe it was still called Three Rivers, and there was private property nearby, and from that property was the secretary who worked for me some. She also worked for two other people, so she suffered from personality disorder. She had three different jobs. Anyway, she was only 20, and she was very attractive and was enjoying being very attractive and one woman among a male staff. That's as much as we need to talk about her, but her name was Marilyn Riegelhuth. No, it was Marilyn Hall, and she married a man named Riegelhuth. I'll admit not many people are named Riegelhuth.

Her father was a private property owner of some river property there. He had moved up from the coast to live there just outside the park. He was a farmer of sorts. He had a couple of cows, and he grew some hay, and he really did like being where he was, which was exactly right to be an annoyance to the park.

TM: Were there lots of in-holdings in the park?

JC: A little, but the High Sierras was not really a good place to build your cabin.

TM: Right. Okay.

JC: And the parks had been created a long while before, so there weren't a lot of in-holdings.

TM: Okay. And I wanted to go back, Jim, to John Davis playing golf. Who would—

JC: I shouldn't have started with that.

TM: Well, no, that's good 'cause I'm assuming he would have played with the head of the nearest hotel and maybe the concessionaire manager and, you know, maybe people from the surrounding town, like the mayor. I mean, was that—

JC: I never went and played golf with him, and so anything I say is hearsay and not necessarily even reliable, but he was playing the leaders of our nearby towns, and our nearby town was 45 miles away.

TM: Okay. Yeah, 'cause that is an important part, I think, role of the superintendents is that community relationship, however you can do it.

JC: That is true, and I enjoyed that role at Colonial later.

TM: Whether it was Rotary or, you know, service clubs. Those types of things.

JC: You had to be in good terms with anybody connected to the politics, or you had to try.

TM: Right.

JC: And I was perfectly willing to have him in that role because I considered it a lesser role. You could be friends with these people without being friends with these people, if you follow me.

TM: Yeah.

JC: Public relations is a funny business, and having people on your side if you're working for a government agency is not guaranteed. They sometimes resented the Park Service for being big and heavy handed, and sometimes were absolutely thrilled to have something as good as Sequoia and Kings Canyon as part of their physical attractions. So John Davis was not downtown all the time, but if anybody wanted somebody to appear downtown, he was the first consideration. If he didn't want to go, he sent me, and I must admit that I was a good speaker and wrote speeches that were convincing, and I didn't have any trouble.

TM: What were a couple of the more difficult?

JC: Our topics were all the same. They had to do with tourism, and they had to do with what a great benefit we were to the community, and they had to do with anything we needed. And what we needed the most was this big political change where the local folks had to be convinced that the best thing to do with this great stretch of the river was to include it in the park that we had already created. And we did that while I was there.

TM: So this was before the National Environmental Policy Act of 1972. Were you able pretty much just to go ahead and do it or did you have public meetings?

JC: Any time anybody wanted a speaker, which happened to be our subject, then either me or the superintendent went. I don't think the assistant superintendent gave any speeches of this sort. He had a different role. He was there keeping a close eye on what went on in the park, and we were on the public relations end of things.

TM: Were you able to— I guess, maybe, tell me a little bit more about how you were able to get the river into the park.

JC: It was a simple matter of changing the ideas of the people who lived along the river, and we didn't really change them. Circumstances had changed them. They'd built a couple of dams up the river further and accommodated all the water that was available to store it and use it for agriculture, which was a big argument against putting it in the park in the first place. Are you with me?

TM: Yes, absolutely.

JC: And that was a public relations job that we all had and worked at. And I wrote a number of speeches; I probably even have copies of them. I've got a file of my 30 years in the Park Service, and I don't ever look at it. I don't know what's in there. Anyway, they were just general speeches about the good results of having a park, and there were a lot of good results. We had people come from all over the world to visit John Muir's old stomping grounds, and John Muir went everywhere. You know, he was a hiker and a backpacker, and he had a farm that he inherited with his wife. The wife looked at him as a farmer for a while and said, "Oh, come on, John. You don't want to be a farmer. I'll manage the farm, and you go backpacking in the Sierras like you like to." It sounds unlikely but they were well enough off so that he could just go wherever he wanted whenever he wanted.

TM: Okay.

JC: And his job was to get the world to know the High Sierras. He walked all the way to Florida, and there's several books on John Muir, if you want to read more about him. And I never met him. I wish I had. He camped with Theodore Roosevelt and some other person of equal importance there. They camped with a truck camper, and they didn't exactly tame the wilderness or anything. They were living it up, but they weren't living it up in the usual ways, either. They weren't drinking and carousing. They were living it up in nature. Theodore Roosevelt was a good friend to have at a time like that, and I would like very much to be on the camp detail that were managing things. I think they didn't probably chop their own wood and things like that, but I'm guessing.

TM: So I'm assuming you had to liaison with the California Congressional Delegation.

JC: We didn't try very hard. They came to us. And you're right; they were certainly paying attention constantly because we were talking about acres and acres and miles and miles of Sierra's wilderness. And the big trees were the big attraction. There were big trees down on the coast also, the coastal sequoias, but the best and most trouble to get to were up in the High Sierras.

TM: Were there conservation organizations that were helping to make that enlargement happen as well?

JC: Every one of them. It was a big project, and anyone who went there instantly agreed that this really ought to be in a national park. It was very hard to take the opposite view, even though old-fashioned farmers were well able to take the opposite view when the original Kings Canyon National Park was created. There was a lot of water, and there was a lot of land to irrigate. And like I say, they got dams enough built so that they didn't have to add any sites in what we proposed for a national park. But we certainly could have proposed more space, and that would have included more water dam sites. Anyway, our topic was very simple, and that is when we went out to talk, we talked about adding this extra land to Kings Canyon National Park. As I say, that was accomplished, and I did have a major role in that.

TM: When did that happen? When was the enlargement passed?

JC: I'm real sorry you forgot that. Remember my memory is sieve-like nowadays.

TM: No worries.

JC: But I think it was past probably 1964 or '65. I believe I had gone from there by then because I accepted a—let's say an urgent call from the Park Service for a special kind of people, and that was when they were establishing the Job Corps as a major national project. Lyndon B. Johnson, after Kennedy was assassinated, became the great public hero who wanted to make things better for everybody. It sounds a little like Democrats today, and I think it wasn't as natural to Lyndon as it is to today's people. I think he had to see the light a little. But anyway, he easily talked the nation into establishing camps to put the poorest boys from everywhere there were poor boys into training for useful employment. That's interesting because they had as a role [model] the CCCs from the 1920s and '30s.

TM: Right.

JC: And the CCCs included anybody who didn't have a job so that in a CCC camp of boys, there would be people with college degrees, people who had good jobs and lost them. It was entirely different student group than the ones we had in the Job Corps. We were gonna take the poorest boys from the poorest areas and teach them to be good citizens. And most of them didn't know a damn thing about being a good citizen because they were totally poverty and in rougher circumstances than the old CCCs, growing up absolutely poor in Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, places like that. Was disgraceful. It was— We've moved on by the way. We've gotten out of Sequoia but—

TM: We have, and I'm just waiting for this point to say, Jim, is there anything else about Sequoia that you want to go through, interesting things that happened to the family or interesting things that happened to you on the job?

JC: Well, I think I've already mentioned that our son was born there.

TM: What's his name?

JC: Steven, and James is his middle name, and he did come as a fairly complete surprise. We—oh, dear—I've still got to think of the name of the town with the hospital, and I certainly can. Like I say, he was there, and he was a turning point in our family production.

TM: Jim, how many of your children were born in national parks or nearby them? I mean, Paula was born in Grand Canyon National Park.

JC: Right. Susie was born while I was teaching school in Farmington, New Mexico, and Farmington, New Mexico, had the crappiest old hospital imaginable. Oh, well, the fun about that was that the nurse went back and brought me out a new baby and said, "Here's your new baby." I looked at this baby and knew that it was a Navajo. It was kind of unsettling, and I don't know even now whether they did that regularly or not. Every sixth child in New Mexico was a Navajo, and so there were more of them and there were blond and blue-eyed babies. But I did tell her to go back and have a look and see if there was a blond and blue-eyed baby because we came from a long line of Swedes and didn't expect any Navajo babies, and she did. But Susie has gone through 70 years nearly now, and I'm wondering if there's a child out on the Navajo reservation that really belongs in our family. [Laughs] It's not a mistake that a nurse should make if she works in a maternity unit.

TM: And you've got two more daughters.

JC: We have four daughters, and one was born in the home, in transit, you might say, because I was moving from Glacier— No, I was moving from Alaska to Glacier by way of that training program in Washington that you already heard about. So anyway—

TM: Yeah. What was her name?

JC: Ann. And Ann is now living in Utah, and I think it's the most busy town in Utah. I may be wrong, but it's a small town and became really famous when uranium was the main activity there.

TM: Ah. Like Moab or—

JC: Charlie Steen was a big operator in Moab, and that's a whole separate story, for sure. But Annie was working there for the National Park Service, and her husband became chief ranger, which was his life ambition, and then retired fairly shortly. So they're still there, built their house on the hill and feel that it's a good place. But it's not an ordinary place. It is a good place if you like to be unusual, and that's a separate topic, too. We shouldn't be on that one yet.

TM: Hmm. Okay.

JC: I went back to be the first director of a Job Corps camp.

TM: Hang on a second. We got one more daughter missing.

JC: Need another daughter?

TM: Yeah.

JC: She was born while I was teaching.

TM: Well, no, you got Susie, and you got Ann. Who was between Ann and Steven?

JC: The third daughter's name was Lorna, and she's just two years after Susie, and she became a river runner due to circumstances entirely beyond my control.

TM: Where was Lorna born?

JC: In Aztec, New Mexico.

TM: Oh, I thought Susie was born in— Or Susie was born in Farmington. Lorna was born in Aztec? Okay.

JC: Right. They're only 15 miles apart. Neither town had good doctors, but Aztec had a, oh, dear, the folks who manipulate bones. Osteopath.

TM: Osteopath, yeah.

JC: And he was famous for being a good doctor.

TM: Oh, good.

JC: But osteopaths are looked down upon by regular physicians, so he had a territory that nobody else was really competitive for. And as I say, [he] was famous as a deliverer of children, so we were happy to have him. Our baby was delivered at home, and Sister Barbara came out from New York City where she just graduated as a nurse and was our assistant for likely a month, I guess. Anyway, that's Lorna, and as I say, she became a river runner.

TM: So that gets me to the five kids, and that's good. So at one point, I mean, it sounds like Sequoia is a really beautiful place.

JC: That's absolutely true.

TM: How did you get thinking you might want to leave there?

JC: Well, in a way, I'm sorry you asked that question because going into the Job Corps seemed to me to be a civic responsibility. They were asking people in the Park Service to be leaders of these Job Corps camps. And I, you will remember perhaps, had been a schoolteacher for six and a half years. I had been in prison camp for six months, and I had the education required to be a teacher. And the experience of being a teacher and working in an educational atmosphere, it was my theory, modestly, that I probably was better qualified to be a camp director than anybody else and managed with that attitude to get to be selected to be the director of the camp, the first one that was open, in the park. They were gonna have six, and we all took an exam, I guess you might say. We all went back and were interviewed, anyway, to be camp directors.

TM: This was back in Washington, DC?

JC: Right. And these were all people I knew and had worked with before elsewhere. And the six camp selections were mostly in the east since there was more poverty in the east. I was selected for the first one to open, which was kind of intriguing because one of the local citizens had come there with the CCCs, and he said very flatly that “we don’t want this riffraff in our neighborhood” and had a meeting. I don’t know exactly what sort of a meeting. I didn’t go to it, but the meeting drew hundreds of people who objected to putting a Job Corps camp of poor boys into the middle of the aristocratic section of Virginia. The first settlers, you know, were there at Jamestown, and that was a part of that national park, Colonial National Historical Park.

So Jimmy is there. He’s selected. He’s gonna be the director of this park when they riot, you might say, or a large public meeting of hostile people objected to having one created there. So Jimmy’s not gonna be the first director of the first park; he’s gonna wait and see what happens. And I was the luckiest fellow in the world. First of all, getting along with Virginia people is a specialty, and I did [chuckles]. I got into that, too, but later. Anyway, I’m assigned to the next one that is to open, and that’s Cape Cod National Seashore. And Cape Cod National Seashore was surrounded by, of all things, Cape Cod. Cape Cod had a very, very seasonal employment picture. A great many people were accustomed to not doing anything in the wintertime.

TM: Right.

JC: Fishing and tourism and other ocean-based occupations were there in large numbers.

TM: Hey, Jim, these camps, were they going to be in National Park Service units, in existing parks and monuments and—

JC: Yes.

TM: Okay. So the superintendents had to be onboard as well.

JC: True. And they didn’t have to be onboard because they volunteered. Some were onboard because they were told, and the relations between the center director and the superintendent were vital and not always good.

TM: Right.

JC: Anyway, Jimmy’s just drifting along, you know, waiting to see what happens, and I get the job at Cape Cod.

TM: Okay. You know what? Let’s stop right there. My chariot’s gonna turn into a pumpkin in a couple minutes, so this sounds like a good place to put a comma here.

JC: It is.

TM: And we will pick up next time going to Cape Cod.

JC: Okay.

TM: Alright. Is there anything else you want to add to this interview in another minute or two that we might not get if we run away to Cape Cod next time?

JC: Well, I haven't named the town that we did all our business with. It was near Sequoia, and I haven't thought of it, but I will.

TM: Well, let's put it in the next interview then. We'll get it right.

JC: Yeah. But do ask me. That's where my son was born, for God's sake.

TM: Okay. So I'll make a note of that: where was Steven born? Great. Alright. Well, with that, let's conclude Part 5 Oral History with Jim Corson. Today is Thursday, February 18, 2021. My name is Tom Martin. And, Jim, thank you so very much.