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Interviewee: Jim Corson (JC), Part 6

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

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TM: Today is Monday, February 22, 2021. This is Part 6 of a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with James Corson. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, James. How are you today?

JC: I'm fine, thank you.

TM: Great. We left off in Part 5 where you were assigned to a Job Corps camp at Cape Cod National Seashore. Can you remind me who came up with the Job Corps concept?

JC: Well. It was one of Lyndon Johnson's conscience moves, I think. When JFK was killed, there were a lot of proposals in the mill, and many of them to benefit poor people. This Job Corps camp idea was one of those. The Park Service bought it full scale because we had back in the 1930s the CCCs.

TM: Right.

JC: And many of their projects are still with us. They were constructed very strongly and to last a long while, and wherever you go, you can find an old CCC building that was built by these guys. But these guys were just out of work. The Job Corps introduced a new idea and that is to take boys from the poorest sections of the cities and the poorest sections of the country and bring them in for some life in the Corps, I guess. They mostly had never worked, and I say mostly because they got some perfectly good, well-educated boys, but they were the minority. They were definitely not numerous.

Numerous were Black boys from big cities, and numerous were Indians from reservations, and we even got people in from Puerto Rico and out of the country. We had the bottom of the barrel from everywhere. When I heard that I was getting somebody new from Chicago, new from Baltimore, new from the Boston area, I knew I was in trouble [laughs].

TM: So, you know, we've talked about this a little bit, about the lack of diversity in the Park Service. I mean, a bunch of White men—

JC: Well, the Park Service was used to middle class admiration, actually. We had people coming to visit us who were anxious to be there, who wanted to be there, and we didn't have a lot of experience with downtown city boys. I think I told you about my good luck. I was selected to be the director of the first Park Service camp, and that was going to be at Colonial National Park down in Virginia. And because of one individual who stirred up the local population, this camp was cancelled. They had a public meeting, and hundreds of people came, and they didn't think they wanted the riffraff from the big cities to congregate in our parks. And the guy who was stirring this all up was very interesting because he had come to the Virginia area with the CCCs. He was a poor boy benefitting from a similar but different program. So the director of the Park Service was getting calls from the congressmen in western Virginia and other poor places, saying, "Please, don't give these guys a Job Corps camp if they don't want one. Give us one." That saved my bacon, in a way, because the camp that I was supposed to be in charge of didn't open, and I was sent to the next choice, which was Cape Cod Seashore. There I had an old Army base that had been abandoned and looted, looted much worse than we realized. So this was an army base with no copper pipes, no plumbing fixtures, and mostly beat into the ground. It was used for summer encampments of the National Guard, but they had not treated it well. Consequently, it took us a lot longer to get it ready than we thought, at least a month longer, and we were standing by and using all of our help, and our help was a motley group of plumbers and painters and rebuilders.

TM: Did you use the Job Corps people to help with that, you know, getting it ready?

JC: Yes and no. We had to have it habitable before we got any in, and so we were working our butts off getting it ready before any of the boys came. But they came certainly before we were ready, and they came before we were comfortable by any means, but they didn't come until we had running water and toilets that flushed and things like that.

TM: And so were these high school kids or college kids? And did you expect them to go away in the fall? Or were they gonna stay with you year-round?

JC: They were year-round, but how long they stayed, and this was both lucky and unlucky, how long they stayed was up to them and up to how they felt about it all when they got there. Some of them went home pretty quick. They liked it better where they were in downtown Chicago and places like that. But most of them really discovered this was a pretty good place. We had three good meals a day, and it was my good fortune to catch a man who had just lost his restaurant to bankruptcy. This man had delusions of grandeur. I had the only dining hall in the whole service. There was a big sign out front that said Dining Hall, and everyone who came from Washington was thrilled beyond words to see that I had a dining hall. I might add I had white tablecloths, and we expected the boys to behave. One of the things that the boys could come up with was a food riot, and we never had one. Kind of nice because some of the other camps had chaos a time or two.

TM: Well, if the food was good, I think I'd rather eat it than throw it.

JC: I had something else going for me, and that was the staff. The staff [was] made up of local people [and] included a great many with extra talent that wasn't in full-time, year-round demand. Cape Cod is a very seasonal area, and they had just closed a Navy base, an airfield, and something in downtown Boston. And so I had many, many military who had retired because they had 20 years and figured they could go out and get a decent job. They'd bought homes in Cape Cod. They expected to spend the rest of their days in Cape Cod, and they hadn't figured out how to make a living. So these guys came all the time, applying for any job we had. I don't know if you know about GS, but that's Government Service numbers, and GS 3, 4 and 5 are entry levels. Some of our jobs are even 5, but some of them were less than that, which means that they didn't pay much, but they paid something, and they were reliable. And in this case, they were gonna be very damned helpful.

TM: And this sounds good because the people just off the base would be able to continue with federal service.

JC: And they had a feeling for, oh, young people with high spirits and bad ideas. There were some of those in the military, too. Anyway, my camp was formed up with whatever we could find, but best of all if I couldn't hire somebody, I'd say "Come around at 8:00 in the morning, and we'll put you on as a volunteer." Those who'd been looking for work for quite a while were actually getting feverish about not having any, and so we had, I think, by the end of the first year we had maybe 60 volunteers. And they would come

and spend the whole morning, usually, with volunteer reading class. Their volunteer reading was greatly assisted by reading machines and all kinds of learning aides that were available by then. But if you got a retired colonel, for God's sake, you've got somebody with a few things on the ball. And we hired, well, I know one lieutenant colonel and one Navy commander. My bad luck was that the Navy commander was a drunk. He was not a full-time drunk, but he was a recreational drunk. And nobody had the nerve to tell a commander that he was a miserable son-of-a-bitch, so he didn't even know it. He was, though, because, well, a commander has bad habits, too [laughs], expects everybody to do what he tells them and do it right now. We had a little trouble with this one. He slept with a pistol under his pillow, which was distinctly against the rules, and when he had spare time, he went out and drank. He had a big Buick that he liked to drive after he'd been drinking all evening. I don't know why I'm dwelling on him because we had lots of good people. In fact, we had all good people except him. Getting rid of somebody that you've hired in good faith is harder than you think in the government. But one day my educational director came to me and said, "You're gonna have to choose. If you want to keep me, you're gonna have to get rid of him." So that relieved me of making a very tough decision because the educational director was the most valuable member of our team. He had the job to do and was doing it well. Alright. So, Cape Cod—

TM: Yeah. The National Seashore there, did the superintendent there really embrace you and the camp?

JC: Our connections were simple. The Park Service was in charge of everything, and my good fortune was that I got a superintendent who was sympathetic to the Job Corps. In a couple of other locations, friends of mine got a job where the superintendent was not sympathetic, and that made it very damn difficult. In one of these situations, one of my best friends got a job with a superintendent who was a lower grade than he was, and you can imagine that wasn't desirable. Anyway, I kept in touch with all of my friends who were running Job Corps camps, and I had two very, very good friends who'd accepted the challenge and decided they ought to be Job Corps directors, too. One was at, well, down near where the president goes to get away from the stress of the city.

TM: Is that Camp David?

JC: Camp David was one of their neighbors, and the other one was at—oh, dear—Endless Cavern, or do I mean that? I don't think I do mean that. Anyway, one of the caverns down in Kentucky.

TM: Oh, alright.

JC: His superintendent was an ex-colonel, and with all due respect, if I'm hiring the ex-colonel, I could get him at any price I want him. But if he's my boss, I'd feel quite differently about it.

TM: You mentioned Ralph Roan.

JC: I did.

TM: Did Ralph get in on this as well?

JC: Well, Ralph Roan is a special case. He had been my best friend for quite a while in another location, and I begged him to come and work for me. But he was greatly fearful that best friends working together in stressful situations don't get along, and he certainly didn't want to spoil a lifetime best friendship. So he didn't want to come at first, but I talked him into it, and he did come, and he did enjoy it. He had been absolutely poor, as poor as any of these boys from the big cities. And his big city was Butte, Montana, which is, I suppose you'll forgive me saying, one of the assholes of the universe. Butte Montana, knew poverty, it knew destruction of the environment, almost total destruction. The fumes coming out of the smelters there at Butte, Montana, were totally poisonous and killed the vegetation for miles around. He'd grown up selling newspapers on the street with holes in his shoes that were, sort of, not cured but helped by having some old, folded newspapers from yesterday in the shoes to keep the holes from being real serious. So he knew about poverty and still was one of my best friends and—

TM: I think that would be really helpful there in that camp.

JC: You'd better believe. He was the voice of reason whenever we had a meeting, and I can only quote him one time but it's worth quoting. We had a boy who weighed 460 pounds show up. Christ, we had nothing for him. We had nothing that fit him in clothing. We had no experience with 460 pounders. And as he summed up his life, he said he'd really gone on a diet and lost a lot of weight, and when he got to 360 pounds, he discovered that there wasn't anything for 360 pounders either, so it wasn't a very satisfactory process.

Anyway, we had boys like that. We had boys who were certainly not well fitted at home, and many of the boys were not well fitted because they'd been living by their wits and by their strengths, and we were supposed to make civilized people out of them, which they weren't naturally. Anyway, they came from everywhere and they could be, God, I'm not sure. I think the youngest could be 16 maybe, something like that, and the oldest

could be 21. It turns out the youngest we could get along with, but the oldest who were 21 had been getting by on their wits in the worst of circumstances and had learned a lot of bad habits. Anyway, we had reading and writing and arithmetic at the very basics, and a good education program where reading was the prime object. All of these boys now were about the age to get a driver's license, and in Massachusetts you couldn't get a driver's license if you couldn't read and write, counting on the street signs meaning something to you. So every one of these boys wanted to learn to read.

TM: Interesting.

JC: Yeah, some of them had been in school for 10 years, for God's sake, and hadn't learned to read, and it was a great light opening upon them that they could actually read. And we had, as I say, had volunteers, we had people paying attention to them for the first time, and our reading program was a great success. I've got a letter in my files that says we had the best one, so I felt pretty good about that.

TM: Did you have young women in this program as well?

JC: No. At the time, there were young women in Job Corps camps, but they were women's camps. Later, they integrated, and I'm awfully glad that I missed that because one of the spark plugs, as you know, is when you've got young women and young men together and they both don't know how to behave, you got a receipt for lots of stress.

TM: Right. The other thing I'm wondering, Jim, when I think of Cape Cod in the winter, I don't think of Florida. It sounds like it's damp and cold and not very sunny.

JC: Well, I guess you're wrong about not very sunny. Cape Cod has lots of sun.

TM: Oh, good.

JC: Winter is the off season, for damn sure. They can't fish, and they can't dig clams, and they can't do much of what they do in the summertime, so there's no reason to have tourists because the weather is not friendly. So Cape Cod is a land that learned to, kind of, hibernate in the winter, and many of the people there didn't have a job in the winter and didn't even feel bad about it. They just felt poor.

TM: Right. But you can't hibernate these kids. They're not gonna go for that.

JC: Poor people had an appreciation for these kids a little more than any other location I know. Anyway, it was our good fortune that we only got maybe three or four who were

insane. Telling how bad off a kid is mentally is a professional job, and we didn't have any professional psychiatrists or anything like that. But we did have a pretty good staff that was aware of bad signs, like one who howls at the moon.

TM: Right, right. Did any of these kids get to hang out with Park Service employees at the seashore and learn some trades or admin skills? Did any of them go on to get jobs with the Park Service?

JC: That was the whole point. We had jobs that needed doing, some of them not skilled at all: painting, even a plumber's helper, carpenter's helper, machinist's helper. These guys were learning, and they were starting from a lower background than most of the fellows entering these professions, but it was the same. They, if they wanted to learn, could learn several trades at the park. We had firemen, for instance, and we managed to get some boys into everything they had. But our really, really good fortune, and I should have this guy sitting here, but one of the rangers there— I don't know, he wasn't a ranger. He was a general handyman. Anyway, for some reason, I guess his own background, this guy really, really had a way with kids, and he was one of our strong helpers. He was one of those who would talk to these kids and talk to them about things they needed to hear, and so kind and helpful that he wasn't offending them by being kind and thoughtful. So anyway, we had others, of course, all the staff, but they started with the understanding that we could manage with 26 people and that wasn't half enough. They started thinking of CCCs, and the CCCs had student government. They elected their officers, they elected their managers, and they elected anybody who had any power or authority and got away with it because their student body, shall we say, were all people who had no jobs, but many of them had lots of education. Some might even have been to college. And my boys had the education of the rottenest parts of town. So my boys were not candidates for student government in the early days. We did have it eventually, and I knew it was gonna be a very mixed bag, and it was. But we tried hard to get into the situation as best we could. Boys who lived in big cities had student government alright. The powerful ran things and often at the expense of the weak, and I feared our camp, we may have had a little of that, too. But student government wasn't too far from life in that respect. These kids were all used to it.

TM: Hmm. Okay.

JC: What else did we have? We had, as I say, we had an occasional kid who'd gone all through school and wanted in the Job Corps because it was an opportunity and a job.

TM: And were the kids getting paid?

JC: Yes. It was, I think, called an allowance. It certainly wasn't a salary, but it was enough to make it worthwhile.

TM: Okay. So making minimum wage or less than that?

JC: I think less than that, but I'm seized with a vacancy here. I don't even know what they got. Like I say, I'm pretty sure it was an allowance. They got special treatment in my camp. My camp was used to poverty. My camp was sympathetic to poverty. And my camp was run by a large number of volunteers along with the paid help. The Park Service supplied quite a bit of paid help, but we also had a salary scale and a hiring so that we were picking up people from the community.

TM: What year did you start this?

JC: Well, that's a very good question, and I can tell you more or less. My son was born in California in '63, and we moved to Cape Cod probably in '64. That's probably.

TM: Okay, 'cause I'm thinking you got to Sequoia in '62, maybe.

JC: Yes.

TM: So this would have been '64 or maybe '65, I wonder?

JC: Two years in Sequoia and then off to—

TM: Two years? Okay, so '64. That makes sense. Tell me about some of the successes, some of the kids that really succeeded there.

JC: Well, there were several success stories we liked to brag about and think about because we were succeeding where others had failed for 15 years. If we taught a boy to read, God, that was a thrilling adventure. He was learning something he hadn't learned in 10 years in public school. And I considered it a miracle, and so did every boy who learned to read. He had failed to pay enough attention, he'd failed to have enough attention, and he was handicapped socially and economically. So learning to read was enough reason to have come to our program and enough reason to brag a little when we taught them all to read. We had three who couldn't learn, and I wasn't surprised at all. I thought we'd have more. But these three had some mental hang-ups. I don't know what they were. We didn't have a camp psychiatrist. We could take them to a local psychiatrist if we felt we needed to, and we did. We took, oh, not many at all, just three or four maybe, out of a hundred. But having a psychiatrist on your side when you want

to throw somebody out of camp was highly desirable. And if we had a kid who couldn't even think clearly, he wasn't gonna do too well, and we did have two or three. I had a fellow from West Virginia, and I was astonished to learn that all that I'd heard all these years about feuding and getting along poorly and having trouble socially all the time was true of some of my boys, but it was not true of some of my boys from the same area. They just hadn't had the chance. So sorting those out and actually rejecting some was necessary and desirable, but we sure didn't reject anybody early or easy.

TM: Right.

JC: Anyway, we taught reading, our best subject, but we taught all the other subjects, too. These kids went to school with a whole different attitude, and the school was run with a whole different attitude. My education chief had actually been, I think, the principal of a military overseas school on a base in Germany, and that gave him at least some variety of experience, and he was really good. And, in fact, he made our camp a success more than I did.

TM: What was his name?

JC: Gene Hale from Boston. I was gonna call him and see if he's alive. I rather doubt it. He was pretty much my age, but I— And if you want to call him, I presume the phone directory still has him. I've talked to him several times since this experience, and his attitude remains the same. He thought it was wonderful. And, yeah, that certainly helped a lot.

TM: So this was when the Vietnam War was going full blast, and did—

JC: I wasn't a bit worried about the Vietnam War. I'm sorry, now that you mention it, that I might have had it on my hands and not thought much about it.

TM: Well, no, I wonder if the kids, you know, what was their choice in life? Not great, but once they learned to read, they would definitely have a chance in the military if they were industrious, if they became industrious.

JC: I was in with an illiterate group in World War II. I actually came in with a special group by accident. I was not one of them. And having a fellow lean up from where he was writing a letter and say, "How do you spell truck?" was quite a sensation for me. I always thought I was educationally inclined. Anyway, our boys were not concerned about getting into the military, but many of them couldn't have. They were just really negatives from the educational standpoint. And boys from Center City sort of have to

join or get killed or something. They didn't have a lot of choices with whom they associated with. They fell in with bad company and had to stay there until somebody came up with a way out, and this was a way out. You could leave town and leave a lot behind you, and many of them did. God, I still look back on the worst that I got. This 460-pounder became the student body president.

TM: Is that right?

JC: You know that wasn't from charm. You know that wasn't from outstanding ability, though his mental processes were working. He was not a beast. He certainly looked like one. In fact, when he went home at Christmas time, he was arrested a block from the train station and charged with murder. He just looked that kind of a guy. So he was great— In fact, a big point in our favor that when they contacted us we could tell them they had to let him go. He discovered then that there were some advantages to the program he hadn't thought much about. Anyway, he was not a democratic leader. He was a leader by being the biggest, roughest guy you ever met. And what was nice about all this is he freely acknowledged that I could throw him out any time I wanted. And I didn't want to.

But we talked about Ralph Roan, and I probably haven't quoted him. At the meeting we were discussing what in the hell are we gonna do with this 460-pound monster, Ralph Roan sat and listened for quite a while and finally piped up and says, "It'll help a little if you remember that this guy's gotta keep on living, whatever we do to him." And that's when we decided we'd keep him and give it a try.

TM: Yeah.

JC: He built a following quickly, and I don't say it's because of his charm or his intellect. It was because he knew how to manage tough kids, and his tough kids became a political party. And I won't say that we were letting a gang leader rule the camp because the great thing was that he knew any time I got sick and tired of what he was up to, I could throw him out immediately. So he was nice to me, and I was nice to him, and I only had one special meeting with him when his boys beat the shit out of one of the other leaders because they thought this guy had come and ratted to me on something bad that had happened. It wasn't even true, but [it] led to a little misunderstanding for a while. Anyway, the boy was offered the choice of having him arrested and not having him arrested, and he chose to go back and start over. He was one of my best boys, but there's more to his story. We had volunteers, as I've told you, and one of the volunteers fell in love with this boy. A 40-year-old divorcee with a 17-year-old boy, for Christ's sake. And we banned her from coming into the camp, asked her not to come in ever. So she

came in in the back, behind the front seat, covered with a blanket, just to get a glimpse of him. She was really bad off from a standpoint of being overwhelmed with hormones, I guess. Anyway, she had a little advantage. She was a sister-in-law to the police chief in our community, so we felt we had to be nice to her. But she added a little humor to the situation; it was so obviously ridiculous.

What else? We did have regular classes. We had regular classes all day, every day. And we had regular work details all day, every day so that if they weren't in class, they were out working. Winter in Cape Cod can be bitter, can be cold, and I've quoted often one of my boys. He felt that working was disgraceful and not something that good people did. He felt that going out and hiding in the snow was more manly than working. Have you ever imagined anybody like this?

TM: Well, you don't last long hiding in the snow 'cause you freeze to death.

JC: He was from Chicago, and I attribute it to that fact. But imagine a guy who would rather go out and freeze to death in the snow, not doing anything, than shoveling or whatever we had to do. We did lots of shoveling. And I often think of him as a fine example of a fairly hopeless case, for Christ's sake. I believe he was living with his grandmother when he was home in Chicago, but I know that he supported my notions about Chicago. They were not producing what we wanted for citizens. Anyway, what else?

TM: Where did Barbara and your children stay?

JC: Well, that's an interesting tale because it wasn't easy. We had a house, but the house was one that the Park Service had bought and wanted to move from a piece of park property into our camp.

TM: Well, wait a minute. You're living in it.

JC: We're *not* living in it. [Laughs] We're wishing we could live in it. It's assigned to us, but we're just making do with what we had for a while, but my kids were not there. They'd usually come in two or three months. Anyway, the maintenance staff of the park was building a foundation and getting my house ready for occupancy and didn't feel any great sense of urgency. It wasn't their house; it was my house. So my family didn't live in the camp for a while and were back home with their grandparents.

Then they came and lived in the house, which fortunately was at the edge of the park rather than right down in the middle of the camp. In the middle of the camp, we had

three mobile homes— nice trailers—with adequate space and rooms and everything but surrounded by a hundred bad boys. It was comfortable, it was law abiding, and the only concern was that they had little kids, and some of these boys liked little kids very well. They had little kids at home, and at least one of the boys had designs on little kids. We didn't worry much about him because he didn't even have normal intelligence, but we had two 7-year-olds. One of them was mine; one was Ralph Roan's. They used to wander down to the camp and enjoy the boys, but when we found that this boy was cultivating their friendship, we decided we must ask these two little girls to stay home. One of them lived right there in the camp, so staying home didn't remove her entirely from the area. But it was a game, and all of these boys had more experience with the bad things than we did. We were not well prepared to cope with all the bad things that came up.

TM: How did the other Job Corps camps do? Who was coordinating them all? Who was overseeing the whole project?

JC: Well, we had some dual personalities. The Job Corps, of course, was in charge of the appropriation, which meant that they had people everywhere we were. And their people were not answerable to the Park Service, but the Park Service people were, and so we had some division of responsibility and some division of sympathy. I think everybody in the Job Corps, everybody I met anyway, was in there from some social conscience at work.

I haven't even got to the subject of entertainment, but we did have entertainment for the boys. We would have a busload of girls come out from the city—Boston—and come to dances. The boys, for the most part anyway, were strictly on their honor and behaved well. But they were boys, too, and some of the girls were not from the upper crust. But we got away with this. I don't know, I think it was enough of a pleasure to have a group of girls come in to put the boys on their good behavior. We didn't have any riots or bad behavior, and God blessed us with—

TM: Did you have dance classes for the guys so they'd learn how to dance?

JC: We didn't have dance classes, but these dances were classes. They were pretty heavily supervised. All of our staff and all of the wives came to the dances and acted like we were having a good time. And the boys overcame their timidity, mostly, but some of the boys were a lot better than others, and so there were some on the sidelines not having a great deal of fun but having more than usual. So anyway, we went to the city and took busloads of boys up to dances there, and others came down to our camp and enjoyed the company there. So what else?

TM: Did you have any music classes?

JC: Music? Now you've hit me between the eyes. I don't remember any music classes, so I think we didn't. In theory, some of these boys certainly must have been musical, but we didn't have any musical organization either. So that was one we overlooked. I do remember bad things, naturally, and that was my territory. Ralph Roan became my administrative assistant, and that meant that I could relax entirely about spending money. He knew everything we spent and everything we spent it for, and I knew that he was going to protect the Park Service interests every time. So we didn't worry about money, but we did worry about the social life. There was an adult in every barracks, and they varied in enthusiasm. The lieutenant colonel that I mentioned was one of these barracks-keepers or house mothers we sometimes called them, and we didn't have usual riots. We had riots regularly. If we sent the boys to town, the only identification they needed to buy drinks around there was a five-dollar bill, and we had a liquor store just at the edge of our camp, for Christ's sake, and you could walk to go to it.

So liquor was a problem, and on payday weekend they went to town with a little money, all determined to spend it in the worst possible way. Coming home on the bus we would usually have a fight or two break out. One of our boys, I don't even remember now where he was from, but he wore a pair of black gloves all the time to protect his knuckles. His knuckles were his pride and joy because he could punch anybody out, mostly. But one night coming back, he got a little ahead of himself, and one of my country boys who came from Farmington, New Mexico, where Blacks were simply not welcomed. This boy was big, and he was strong, and he hit Howard once and knocked him out, and then spent all night on a sofa out in the rec room, expecting me to throw him out. It was against the rules to fight, and the next morning I came in and strode right up to him and shook his hand and thanked him because Howard was an asshole who believed that being strong meant that he should be in charge.

We kept Howard, too, but he had learned something important: he was not the king of everybody. I've often thought about Freddy from Farmington and wondered if he succeeded at all, if he got enough benefits out of his education to get a decent job because there was nobody in Farmington working for him except about 15 Blacks, and one of them had somehow managed to open a dining room, so there was a little colony.

TM: Did you ever get approached in decades later, in the '80s or '90s or 2000s, by someone who went through your Job Corps camp and tracked you down to either thank you or try to shoot you?

JC: All I had to do was mention Job Corps and I was instantly intrigued. And I had a couple of followers who thought that, to me, I was the king of the world because I was in charge of the program, but did I follow up? I tried not to. Instead of being fond of all of them, I tried to be distant and managed fairly well.

This 460-pounder, as I say, knew damn well he better defer to me and did. The ones that I sympathized the most with were the timid little guys who hadn't succeeded at all because they were intimidated from birth, and there were several of those and they did thrive. They did a lot better in the Job Corps camp where everybody was more or less equal than they did back home.

TM: Cool.

JC: I got a Christmas card from one boy that was a fine example of our success. I mentioned having volunteers come over and help with reading. Well, one of our volunteers was a 15-year-old red-headed girl, and this boy fell madly in love with her and her with him, I guess, because the father eventually issued the word that the next time anybody from the Job Corps came around, he was gonna shoot them. I was on the side of the father. I was very damn anxious about having a 15-year-old red-headed girl as one of our volunteers for these guys. So the boy in charge had been one of our miracles. This kid didn't know how to read, but just because he didn't know anything. His father was in a mental institution, his mother was in a wheelchair, and this kid had perfectly normal intelligence. Nobody had ever invited his intelligence to come out and show.

So he learned how to read in about nine months instead of nine years, and he was a great success. He knew it, we knew it, but he wasn't especially charming, and he didn't take the father's notice too seriously. He came by my house and said since I had three daughters the right age, maybe I would like to loan one of them to him as a volunteer. And I said, "That's okay." We [lived] on the far edge of the camp, and we intend to maintain some distance. I got a card from him and his wife and his baby after I'd left the camp, and I didn't consider it a big success. I considered it a very questionable maneuver. But I liked him, and he used to come by the office every day to be sure I was there because he thought I was Jesus Christ. And I knew that I had done something wonderful with this boy. That's worth something.

What else did we have? We had anything you can name. I've mentioned somebody who howled at the moon. I believe this was on purpose to keep everybody thinking he was weird and not to be tampered with. And what else did we have that was funny? Well, we had three or four who knew how to read and write. That was funny. And they

did, sort of, sort themselves out into groups. The Blacks from the city center were not too welcome in White groups, but there was some crossover. They were learning to get along together because it was in their best interests. And the Puerto Ricans— I had three from Puerto Rico, and they were sort of my favorites. They all carried a razor blade, and if we'd searched them, we wouldn't have even found it. They all let the whole camp know pretty quick that if they had got in any trouble there was gonna be bloodshed. And we didn't look for them. We didn't depress them or suppress them because they were carrying a razor blade because none of them had an aggressive bone in their body. They were carrying razor blades because they were smaller and weaker and likely to be miserably treated by the bigger guys. So I, well, I had three people in the camp that I greatly admired for being well organized and more secure than others. It sounds a funny way to run a camp, doesn't it? [Laughs]

TM: Well, it's interesting. I talk with someone who came into the Grand Canyon National Park Job Corps camp. And there, for discipline, if you messed up, they sent you to the trail crew but—

JC: Well, that doesn't sound too bad to me. It was enjoyable to a lot of people.

TM: This person figured out that there were mules working with the trail crew, and she loved mules, so she was, like, "Hey, sign me up to the trail crew." They kind of stood back and were like, "You want to go there?" And she's like, "Yeah!" And she ended up working for the Park Service for the rest of her career as a mule packer.

JC: My son signed up for a volunteer program that included working on the trails. Working on the trails was not considered punishment; it was considered outdoor exercise.

TM: Yeah, yeah. Well, it depended how you came at it.

JC: Yeah.

TM: What did you guys do for punishment? How did you merit that out? What was the thing that, I mean—

JC: That's a good question, and I can't give you a good answer. We let the boys select if there was a vacancy. If there was no vacancy, we just sent them out with anybody that needed somebody. So they got a wide variety of experience, and once in a while somebody fell into a niche that fit. What else?

TM: How many years did you do this?

JC: Oh, it was only two, and the first half of the first year was maintenance work. I was painting and plumbing and all the things that had to be done. And so were all the others, including that commander of the Navy.

TM: Were you still getting a salary from the Park Service then?

JC: Yes, indeed.

TM: Okay.

JC: And it was a step up from what I'd had before. As center director, I was happily in charge of the whole lot, including a big budget.

TM: Yes, it sounds like it.

JC: My comfort came from good relations with the Park Service, and I think they were pre—guaranteed in a way because the Park Service wanted this program. It wasn't what they thought it was gonna be, but they wanted it. And it did provide quite a lot of labor, and it provided a feeling of doing good.

TM: Right, right. No, I bet that the seashore superintendent would have been very happy to have some extra labor around, even unskilled.

JC: Well, my superintendent was a very, very lucky choice for me. He was a Christian Scientist, so we went to the same church. We have a belief that good is likely to come out ahead if you have to choose. And he didn't try and run my camp. He didn't feel that he was better qualified than I was, and consequently he never, in two years, interfered at all except that the budget had to come through him to me. So, well, his influence was there all the time. I only had one confrontation with him, and it was perfectly right and reasonable, and I think maybe he knew it right away. But I was in his office yelling, and his only gesture in the right direction was to come around me and close the door. [Laughter] I thought that was manly.

Anyway, what I was yelling about, for Christ's sake, is that the park staff were restoring the buildings, and it was quite clear that they didn't give a shit when they were restored. They were not working hard, they were not working extra, and they were not even using common sense. They were dressed in parkas, working in buildings, and fixing up the heat, the water, the walls, and burdened with these uncomfortable clothes when all they

had to do was put plastic over the empty windows and light up a heater in there and work in their ordinary clothes. And I dropped by to tell him that people from the staff who were in charge of this program were goof-offs and didn't know what they were up to, and we changed it. And I'm very pleased with him. We didn't socialize a great deal, but he was perfectly willing to have us over to dinner, my wife and I, and we were not on any adverse terms at all there at the park.

TM: Nice.

JC: Yeah, it really was good. It was not that way everywhere. Some of the friends of mine fell into very bad situations. They had superintendents who felt that they were in charge, and they were not supposed to be. But the money came through them, and that gave them the notion that it was their money.

TM: Right, right, and if they wanted to use it someplace else, they just might.

JC: Perfectly normal, I guess, to react the way they did. But in both cases, these were guys who were a little insecure with their position anyway, and they have some guy come in from outside who's got a bigger job than they have and just irresistible the urge to manage theirs, too.

TM: Right. Right.

JC: Anyway, can we leave the Job Corps?

TM: Yeah, I think so. So this would have been '96 or '97? Sorry, 1966 or 1967?

JC: I got an offer I couldn't refuse, and that was to be a traveling supervisor to go and visit the other six camps in the Park Service and in the Fire Service there in the east coast and tell them how to solve their problems. This sounded like a kind offer, and it was. It certainly relieved me from the day-to-day management of 100 ornery boys. So I took it and went to Washington, DC, where I worked pretty vigorously visiting camps with problems.

TM: Okay, you know what, Jim? We've been going on for about an hour.

JC: Have we? Time flies, doesn't it?

TM: Maybe this is a good time to put a comma here and next time we'll pick this up with you going to Washington, DC, to oversee these camps.

JC: Okay.

TM: All right. Well, hang on a second. This will then conclude Part 6 Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Jim Corson. Today is Monday, February 22, 2021. My name is Tom Martin. And, Jim, thank you so very much.

JC: Are you planning to keep this up?

TM: I am. Hang on a second...