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Interviewee: Jim Corson (JC), Part 7

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

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TM: Today is Wednesday, February 24, 2021. This is Part 7 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 fine for 96.

TM: Good, I'm glad to hear it.

JC: That's about as fine as it could be. I don't get around very well.

TM: Okay. Hey, Jim, may we have your permission to record this oral history over the telephone?

JC: We certainly do.

TM: Thank you.

JC: I wanted to ask, though, if it's ever gonna be reduced to writing—

TM: Yes.

JC: —and if I can have a copy when you get one.

TM: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I'll get that to Paula when the hard-suffering students transcribe it.

JC: That's good.

TM: Yeah. We left off last time, you had been in the Job Corps, run one of the first Job Corps camps out there at Cape Cod National Seashore.

JC: And had been very lucky.

TM: Yes, it sounded like it was, well, it wasn't luck. There was a lot of skill and a lot of hard work.

JC: It was luck. We had too many volunteers—good people and kind people—that the boys didn't have much to complain about. And they did have in some places. And my new job was to visit six of these camps on demand to help problem solve.

TM: How did you get offered that job?

JC: That's a very good question. I guess it was just considered highly desirable that somebody with experience would visit these camps and look them over and see if they could improve anything. And what was astonishing is every one of these camps needed improving [laughs]. Anybody could see it but them, maybe.

TM: When you became the supervisor, how many camps were there? I mean, when you started, there were five or six. Maybe the sixth one failed; that's right.

JC: Yeah, we were going to have six in the national parks.

TM: Did that line hold or were there more added between 1966 and 1967?

JC: I'm gonna be a little vague on close details, but I had six camps, and they were not all Park Service. There were Forest Service camps, and they needed the same kind of overview that the Park Service did. They were very similar. I don't even know if I can name all the camps, but one was at Catoclin, one was at Mammoth Cave, one was at Cumberland Gap, and there have to be a couple Forest Service camps that I'll have to think about. But they were in the Kentucky hills, surrounded by poverty and problems, and all had the same problems. They were working with the same kind of boys out of the same kinds of bad places and used to fighting for what they could get. So fighting was one of the things we had to worry about. And fighting with the local population was entirely possible. I only remember one occasion when it was the main problem, but it was at Cumberland Gap where they really didn't think that Black boys were full-scale human beings. This was from the boss of the camp all the way down. One of our boys was shot, and the police coming to resolve the problem were not very concerned. And our own management in the park was not very concerned. All the Black boys, naturally, were very concerned. And I had a great advantage. I'd get a call in the evening telling me I had to be somewhere next day, which gave us about 24 hours for the local folks to solve the problems,

and mostly everything was actually under control when I got there. It was not guaranteed, and in one, well, in what I just described, it was a bad situation that needed help from outside. Another, the center director was not center director material at all. He was kind and gentle and interested in music and poetry, and God knows how he got the idea that he should try and be in charge of a hundred boys from the big city.

TM: So what did you do? How did you work that out?

JC: Well, I actually recommended that they find somebody else as soon as possible, and I didn't feel disloyal or unfriendly. I felt that I was doing everybody a favor. I don't know if he felt I was doing him a favor, but he surely should have. That job didn't last very long.

TM: Why not?

JC: That's the one where I was sitting in my office one day, thinking about these things, and a young woman came in and said she was looking for a young conservationist who hadn't already established a band of enemies to help with Lady Bird's Beautification Project. You know, Lady Bird was very fond of beautifying highways. We were building the interstates by that time, and so there was a world to work with. She was interested in getting people involved in beautification wherever they were, whoever they were, and that involved all the youth clubs in the United States. I can't even name them all now, but Boys Club, Girls Club, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts. That's four. And youths from the Red Cross, I think.

Anyway, it was the same with all of them. They had to come up with a project that called for muscle and not a great deal of experience or training and with some supervision so that they could keep the kids from killing each other with their enthusiasm. The one that I remember best was tearing down an old camp that had been abandoned and was falling down anyway. That was out near Seattle, and a lot of the kids in that group were my selection. My best friend lived out there, and his daughter was the same age as my daughter. She was included in the group that was tearing down this camp. And we were tearing it down largely for a film we were making, showing what youth could do if they got hooked up and carried in the right direction. And it included every kind of renewal and, oh, restoration. Sometimes we fixed buildings up; sometimes we tore them down. And this film was made by a Jam Handy Corporation out of— oh, dear, Detroit, I guess— out of some place kind of unexpected. When I retired, I had a copy, but I've given it to a library since then. I don't even know where it is. I could find out if I search through my records but I'm not even good at searching through my records anymore.

TM: So this is Lady Bird Johnson, the wife of the President of the United States?

JC: That's right.

TM: And how was the woman who came in looking for someone to help, how was she connected to that project?

JC: Well, this is the most embarrassing part. I listened to the lady, and we talked an hour, I'm sure. I said "I've just come to work on this job for overseeing Job Corps camps, and I can't leave this soon. It's traditional that you stay a couple of years at any job, whether you like it or not, and I need to live up to my organization's reputation." And she went away quietly. I stepped out after she was gone and said, "Who in the hell was that?" [Laughs.] She hadn't dwelt much on the subject, but she was Lady Bird's niece and in charge of this program by default, I suppose. She was not a conservationist. She was not an outdoor worker. She was a girl that got a good start early by running away with a Russian. Her father ran a trading post in Santa Fe. She was in charge because she was available when Lady Bird wanted somebody she had some connection and control over it. The program was funded with volunteer money, and this girl's job was to go around and round up money, if any was available, and keep the program going. It didn't cost much money. You could get a whole camp torn down for a few bucks if you had volunteer kids and enough tools to do it. So we were on the cheap, but I didn't have to be. I was a traveling supervisor.

TM: So you've told her "No, I'm not interested." How did you turn that around?

JC: How did I turn it around? It was pretty easy. I had her phone number. I called her right back the next day, probably, and apologized for not paying enough attention, I guess, and took the job, and taken it with the complete support of my supervisor. My supervisor, by the way, was picked for the poverty program because he knew all about it. He was a Hispanic from the Santa Fe area, or Albuquerque area, with a large family. He knew all about poverty from the inside and was one of the finest supervisors and Park Service persons I ever met or worked for.

TM: Do you remember his name?

JC: Anyway, his name was Luis Gastelum, and he had a dozen kids, and he was guaranteed to be interested in anything that benefitted people. He was in the Park Service for 40 years, and several of his kids were with the Park Service after that. Anyway, he said, "By all means."

TM: So were you still a Park Service employee, or who were you working for?

JC: Well, that's a good question, and I was not. I was on the payroll of the Job Corps, but I had a letter in my pocket, saying that "this is fine, but if you want to come back any time, why, we're for you." And the Park Service had guaranteed my going out and coming back. So anyway, I didn't come back for another year. But at the end of the year, we'd spent all the volunteer money we had, and it included from Coca Cola. I don't even know who else, but lots of other donors. And Coca Cola was sort of at the top of the list because they were the biggest and best. Anyway, we spent the money, and we made a film. We went to visits everywhere to encourage people who were doing these kind of things, and that was my job—to be the traveling expert, I guess you could say. So I would get a call, maybe at 11:00 at night as the young lady didn't have any real sense of order. She'd tell me that I needed to be somewhere the next day a thousand miles away, and I would cheerfully go. I enjoyed the travel, I enjoyed the being an out-of-town expert, and I enjoyed the kids enormously. They were all the best kids in the world.

They all volunteered to be in these programs, and they all loved the work they were doing. This was after I had just spent a year with the bottom of the barrel, so it was a nice contrast. You change horses in midstream. The kids I was working with now were natural leaders in any school, anywhere.

TM: Where was Barbara and your children? Where were they stationed while you were doing this?

JC: Where were they while they were doing this?

TM: Yeah.

JC: In their hometowns.

TM: No, no, no. Where was your wife and your children?

JC: I'm sorry.

TM: Barbara and your kids...

JC: Oh, my wife? She was right there in Washington where we were before we took this job.

TM: Okay, so they're in Washington, DC?

JC: Yeah. And my oldest child was getting a driver's license, using the Capital Beltway as part of her training program. Downtown Washington as part of her program and getting a driver's license going through three automobile accidents. She wasn't careless. She wasn't carefree. She was just doing the best she could, but it was harder. And Washington, DC, doesn't get my vote for any driving program now. Anyway, she did fine, and none of the accidents were serious. My wife, I may be remembering correctly or not, but it seems to me she was equal to every opportunity and took it in stride. We were going to good schools, we were living in a good neighborhood, and it was quite different than living out in the parks. I don't think Barbara minded having a little civilization. Anyway, that was only a year, and it went very quickly. And, as I say, when we spent all the money we gathered for this program, why, we closed it down. We had advised youth clubs all over the United States. We even had a White House conference so that every one of these kids who were in one of these clubs, doing these projects, was up for grabs to gather at least one from each club and come into the White House and be discussing it with Lady Bird, which was kind of a high point in my career. I was there, too. Anyway... It was a fun assignment.

There was nothing bad about it except how loosely organized we were, and that was somewhat up to me. I'd show up from out of town with a briefcase and looking important and talking as if I knew what I was talking about, so it was easy. It was not hard. And the kids we were dealing with were all the top of the barrel. They were as good as kids could get, terribly dedicated to

doing good, which is not a bad thing for a group of young people. And working together with other kids they didn't know was fun, too. So we had mostly a good time.

I don't remember any bad time except the camp that I'm talking about we were tearing down I was gravely concerned that one of these kids was gonna kill himself with a wall falling or something like that. Didn't happen, but we were making a film of it. We would have had footage of a catastrophe if it had happened. All we had was footage of endless youthful enthusiasm, and that film could be shown anywhere they had a motion picture projector. I have no idea how much coverage it had.

TM: So where did you go from there?

JC: The next thing we've got to do is find Jimmy a job.

TM: This is 1998. Sorry, 1968, '69?

JC: I wish I was better at this, but that's probably a little further along than I was. If I moved back to Washington—well, let's see, two years at the Job Corps, eight months as traveling supervisor—that makes it about three years from Sequoia. You're right, 1964 plus three is 1967, I guess. Close anyway. What did they find for me? Well, Washington, DC, is a giant office compared to anyplace else in the Park Service and there were, I suppose, hundreds of jobs in the Park Service right there in the Department of Interior. I've never added them up. What I got was little items of interest by being a stranger to all that was going on there. But for a little while I had an office with a couple of other old timers that they didn't want to throw away because these were people who had endless experience in the Park Service. I think one lady who had been a secretary right there in Washington had probably 30 years, and they wanted to keep her knowledge, and they wanted to keep her on. She wanted it, too, so she was one of my workers. And the other guy had been high up in the National Capital Parks Police. Consequently, he knew where all the bodies were buried and a lot of things that they wanted to use, but he wasn't captain of the police anymore.

So here I am in an office with three of us. And they didn't quite know what to do, but they wanted to keep us. I'm sitting there wondering what happens next because Lady Bird did send over a nice letter written by the niece, saying "Mr. James Corson has been with us a year helping us endlessly and serving us well, and we certainly hope you've got something good for him to do." So there's that letter on the Director of the Park Service's desk, and they are puzzling over what to do with me. And it was my good fortune that one of my previous supervisors was there in what we called the Hall of Heroes as an assistant director for the Park Service. I know that he put in a good word for me to be superintendent at Colonial National Park.

He had been superintendent there before me, several years before me, and he knew what he was talking about. I had a good time there partly because I came directly down from the office of the director, and there wasn't anybody real anxious to tamper with me. I say that with

reservations because two people did write in letters to the director saying that they certainly wished that I could have a job someplace else. But I had 81 employees, and that's a pretty good record. [Laughs] And the two were both mental misfits. I had known one, who was the wife of one of the rangers, for 15 years by that time, I guess. And it's funny that she would write a letter of objections because her husband had not been a big success in the park business because he grew up in a, oh, dear, who are the folks in Pennsylvania who are a little different?

TM: Not the Mennonites, but not the Shakers, the—

[Reviewer's note: Mr. Corson may be referring to the Amish. Pennsylvania is believed to have the largest population of Amish in the nation.]

JC: Well, Mennonites comes pretty close anyway. They were people whose religious differences were sizeable, and this boy had not kept on with their religion because his father was shot and killed on the front steps of his home. And I don't know if the boy was at home at the time or not. He left that group as soon as he could and became a park ranger, not a bad one, but he had a couple of obstacles to be a success by being pushy or aggressive or even standing up for himself. He was a mild-mannered fellow. And I'm afraid his wife was a little more aggressive than he was. I don't even know if he knew about this letter. But he had maintained his status as a GS-9, and I was recently promoted to a GS-15, and we both started at the same time. So she had a good reason not to feel good about me.

TM: Where is Colonial National Park, and what was going on there?

JC: Well, it's Yorktown, Virginia, and it's two parks. It's Colonial National Historical Park, but it's also the scene where the battlefield, Yorktown Battlefield, was where the British surrendered to the American Army at the end of the Revolution. So it's a Colonial Park from the beginning of the country and a historical park from the beginning of the new country's self-government.

So I had to be enthused about this Colonial Park even though I had spent a time up in New England and was personally descended from the pioneers up there, who came a dozen years before the folks at Jamestown. It's embarrassing to the folks at Jamestown. They really like to think they founded the country, and they were two different groups. There were religious protesters in New England and adventurers down in Virginia.

So I don't think I contributed a great deal, but both of those parks had enough to keep everybody interesting and interested. We had a visitor center for each park, telling the stories, and we had a staff, including rangers, that were on both parks. We had a parkway in between, Colonial National Historical Parkway, and the only problems we had there were Coast Guards, who had a base right there at Yorktown. They'd go out and drink up a little and come home in a boisterous mood. They were not too bad, although after a confrontation, they came in one night and destroyed one of our restrooms for us with five-pound hammers.

Somebody should have been hung up by the toes for that one, but I'm not sure we ever absolutely determined who it was. It was somebody who was irate because of being arrested or detained, at least, for drunk and disorderly.

TM: The person that you replaced in the job, did you get a chance to sit down with that superintendent and learn about the issues that are going on? Or did you come in and rely on your managing assistant to help you?

JC: The park was considered a model park in a way. It was in a way, and it was not in a way. It was about four hours away from Washington, DC, if you drove and one hour if you flew down. Consequently, it was far too damned handy for the folks from Washington to come down to visit a park. And several people in Washington, including the former superintendent, felt they knew enough about it to run it if I needed help, whether I wanted it or not. And, oh, there were two or three little adventures that are sort of fun, but I don't believe we need to talk about that. The biggest adventure was actually replacing some of the staff at Colonial. The process had begun, and the assistant superintendent had been retired, and the chief of interpretation had been switched to become chief historian so he wasn't supervising anybody anymore. And Larry Hadley, whom I mentioned, had straightened all the little details except for one. When I went out to talk to anybody on the battlefield— And there was a village, you might say, of Black people who came up after the Civil War and settled right there in Yorktown Battlefield. The former assistant superintendent had been the big cowboy who'd run around, talking to them as if they had no rights at all.

And they had to move because he wanted them to. I'm sorry that they had him on the payroll at all. He should have been fired. But he was retired and displaced, and I didn't have an assistant superintendent to get me in trouble. I had to make all the decisions myself. And the man just before Larry had been there for 15 years and had made the most of a fairly well under-control area. He was actually running a private business from his office as well as running the park, and strangely enough his secretary was under the impression [laughs] that she ran the park. She did to a certain extent, but this guy kept his door closed. If you wanted to get in to see the superintendent, you had to first make peace with his secretary, who was a pleasant young woman but had a few notions that she got from this superintendent.

Anyway, she lost that ability because I wanted an open door. I wanted to see everybody who came to see the superintendent and introduced, therefore, a kind of a new feeling about running a park. Larry certainly had made it easy for me in taking over after the other fellow retired and after the assistant superintendent had retired. So he was moving into an area that had been under control by managers that you wouldn't approve of. And he had run through all the things that really needed to be done. He made it easy for me in every category, except one. I have mentioned the assistant superintendent driving around the battlefield, telling people they had to get out, and they didn't have to. I wrote a letter to the director very shortly, and you don't do that. The superintendent of a park has to write to the regional director.

And if the regional director agrees with what he says, it might get a letter forwarded to the director in Washington. But I wrote directly. George Hartzog had sent me down with some instructions, and the main instruction was that the folks down there were very reluctant about equal opportunity. They were not keeping up with the pace in the country, and I needed to do something about that. Alright. I wrote a letter directly, with a copy to the regional director, and I'd never done that before and never did it after. But I started right out by saying that we're supposed to buy this property and we are never going to buy it with the present approach. If you want to buy this property, first of all, send me a lot of money. And second of all, send me somebody who knows how to treat these Black people as human beings. And we got both. We got a fellow from out of town that had no enemies and no problems in Yorktown. And he was as polite as a man could be and a complete change of pace. But we had something else wonderful going for us.

The Congress had been prompted and, God knows why, there was a new bill in Congress that said if we were buying land within public places, you know, parks and highways especially, we had to treat the people we were dealing with as human beings. They had to have a decent place to move to before we could make them move, and so it was all a new ballgame. And I'm claiming credit for part of it, which is true. If we'd kept the same people and the same management, they would have been treated poorly, even though the Congress declared otherwise. I'm running on and on about one thing that I feel strongly about.

TM: That's okay.

JC: Yeah. Anyway, we bought a lot of property that hadn't really been for sale because they were so mad at us. I bet there are still a half a dozen places in the middle of the battlefield because we had problems. The Black families had been there for 75 years, and I think in some cases it's very likely they didn't even know who owned the property. There were heirs and heirs in all directions and not living there, and there were some living there that had some small claim directly but not very good documentation. Anyway, a lot of people got to move out to nice housing, and I deserved some of the credit, but the Congress deserved some, and the new man that they sent me, like I say, was so polite and so kind that everybody immediately felt that he was on their side. It was a fine choice, and I don't even have his name.

TM: And the assistant supervisor, were they packed up and sent someplace else then?

JC: I'm sorry?

TM: The assistant superintendent, were they promoted up some place else? I mean, what happened to them? The one who did the bad job?

JC: Well, the one had a private business, remember, and he was just retiring to an easygoing landscaping operation that he was a partner in.

TM: Gosh, it just seems like it was not only very stupid but very closed minded on his part.

JC: Yeah, the stupid bastard who didn't deserve the job he had just retired because he'd been in the place for 30 years. So nobody came out very badly for any of this and in fact it was all done rather nicely, I think.

TM: Who did you fill his position with? Who took over his job?

JC: The assistant superintendent?

TM: Yeah.

JC: Nobody.

TM: Oh, okay.

JC: They abolished the position.

TM: Oh, that's handy.

JC: And if they'd abolished it a few years earlier we would have a much friendlier population with property in the park. They put up with him because they had to. And the Park Service put up with him because he was doing other things besides antagonizing property holders. He had other jobs in the park, and I am giving him a harder time and I haven't written it up for anybody and I am sorry to be this way, but both of those guys were well beyond their expectancy of usefulness. And the secretary got used to my ways, operating with the door open and me knowing everybody who came in was okay. She was just not high quality. She was used to doing it otherwise. So, anyway—

TM: Did you get— Would you, like, spend time with the maintenance people and spend time with the naturalist people?

JC: That's the great charm of being a superintendent. You don't have to spend time with anybody, and you've got four division chiefs that have to come in and meet with you once a day, once a week, once a month. It was up to you. And they're supposed to go out and do what you ask them to, which is sort of fun. If they've been there for years and are used to not having anybody tell them anything, then having somebody come in and tell them something every time was a change. I'm not gonna pretend that everybody dearly loved me, but I am gonna pretend that it was refreshing for everybody to know that the top was watching what was going on.

There's a little sideline, if you remember backward, I was selected to be the head of a Job Corps there, and the local population rose up and objected to having one, and so I didn't take that job. I went away and enjoyed myself and came back as a superintendent instead of as one of the leaders of the Job Corps.

So there was a hell of a change, and I was worried that some people would remember my Job Corps connection, but I never made anything of it except in the treatment of minorities. I was a considerable advance for the minority because they hadn't been treated fairly. So we had [laughs], we had a college student with an Afro hairdo. We always kidded him about we were gonna buy him hat pins. But he had the sense of humor and the appearance of being thoroughly Black. We hired a ranger to patrol the highway for the first time there who was Black, but he was also the principal of the local high school. We had a good man there. And what else did we do?

TM: You know, Jim, what do you remember of George Hartzog, the director of the Park Service?

JC: Well, I had a fair amount to do with him, and we were all intimidated by him. His appointing me to a long-time job that was highly coveted came as a blow to several people, but he was notional. Do you know the word?

TM: No.

JC: He would do things on the spur of the moment. He'd meet a man in an elevator— This was a joke, and I don't know if he ever did, but the guy would get to talking about something he thought about national parks, and George would go back to his office and sit down and think it over and do what it took to make a change. So we had visits from the director, which everybody was fearful of because he liked to drink. He only liked to drink a certain kind of whiskey, and if you were a thinking superintendent, you had a bottle of that in your house somewhere if he came to visit.

TM: [Laughs]

JC: Anyway, George was director for quite a while and during a period which was heavy on change and surprises, new activities, and did a pretty good job. I never would have accepted the job as director of the Park Service. I didn't want in and still don't because you're a front man fending off a lot of activities that, let's say, Donald Trump was working for everything it was worth, trying to steal back the land that had been declared a national park or a national monument to sell to divide up. Donald Trump days in the Park Service were worse than any others, I imagine.

TM: This was an interesting time in the Park Service, the late 1960s into the early 1970s.

JC: It really was. It was a rebirth in a way. The Park Service had stumbled along with very little money, and then President Eisenhower was sold the program of building the interstate highways and building tourism at the same time. So we had new highways, and we had easier travel to parts everywhere. And, as I say, this park was only four hours away from Washington, DC. They had the two groups, the pioneer memorable occasions and the history of the national victory over the British. So we had two groups of supporters and two groups of people we had to

get along with. The DAR felt very strongly that they had a bigger interest in Colonial National Park than anybody.

TM: This is the Daughters of the American Revolution?

JC: Right. They were not there. They didn't have a representative there, but they had a once-a-year meeting when they came down and surveyed their territory. They really did feel quite a sense of ownership, and of course, they had a sense of ownership because they'd been among the folks agitating to make this into a national park. And there were four groups, I think: the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Sons of the American Revolution you never hear much about, the, oh, dear, this is a little weird [laughs]. I'm not remembering as well as I should, and I'll think of these things long after. But four groups came in and had a meeting, talked over problems, went back home and quite possibly talked to their congressmen about the problems they were bringing, and in a small way felt that they were helping to run the national parks. The DAR was not made up of that kind of women. They felt strongly that there probably wouldn't have been any national parks if they hadn't got into the act and very strongly that they should be in charge any time they wanted to be. So we were careful when we were dealing with the DAR, and I would still be because I'm sure it's still the same kind of organization. They trace their history back to the American Revolution and, by damn, they're better people than most of us.

TM: One of the things I was thinking about was the changes that happened in law enforcement at this time as a result of the Yosemite Riots of 1970 or '71. I have to look it up. All the way across the other side of the country the...

JC: Well, that, by the way, is all available in writing from the park, I presume. It's already printed up and you can get copies of all that went on there.

TM: Yes, that's right. There's much written about it. I kind of wonder, how did that impact you as a superintendent of your park?

JC: Yeah, I know. And the answer is it did change it. We had never carried firearms. We all had one, but we left it at home in a bureau drawer. We did not expect to need firearms. So within our own group we had a few people who were firearms nuts, and we had a lot of surplus military firearms, which were dangerous to the person using them because they were all worn out when we got them. But suddenly we were not only authorized but expected to carry firearms. And so we went from the very, very pleasant, easygoing park ranger who wasn't pushing anybody, just talking to them about being friendly to the environment, and talking to them about behaving themselves if they were in the national parks— And we did have the right to issue them a ticket, make them go before a justice of the peace if they were doing something terribly wrong, and we did every once in a while.

But Yorktown to Jamestown had a parkway, and this parkway at one end had a Coast Guard station. I think we had 20—I'm making this up—but we had a whole bunch of military bases, certainly a dozen and quite likely more, all within about 15 miles, 20 miles from the park. And

Southern Virginia was the main place, I suppose, was Norfolk, and they had Navy bases of every kind there, and there was a base out in the country that was a secret base training, oh, the intelligence and an Army base. Anyway, I sometimes said jokingly that I was earning a living going to parties because every base liked to have a party once in a while, and it depended on whose base and who was in charge of the party whether we paid for drinks or not. Very often the drinks were free, and if they weren't free, they were 35 cents. We didn't have a week go by that there wasn't a party somewhere that Barbara and I were supposed to dress up and go to. And so going to parties was how I earned my living.

TM: Well, it's interesting because I remember you mentioning the superintendent at Sequoia who liked to play golf once a week.

JC: You know, it varied all over the country and, in fact, the needs and wishes of the superintendent grew mainly out of his own personality. He had a job and expectations, and one of the expectations is that the people who worked for him would do what he asked. So that worked out fairly well because he asked almost always for something that should be done and needed to be done and would be done. We did have the power to fire anybody. It was a long process, and nobody wanted to do it because most of our people were law-abiding and good people, but once in a while somebody would get fired for performing badly.

TM: So did you then have to tell your law enforcement officers to start wearing their firearms?

JC: Right. Here's your pistol. You're now expected to wear it in public if you want to and in the glove compartment of your car if you don't want to wear it, but have it available at all times. And it was because we were dealing with a whole new generation of law breakers, we were likely to meet somebody carrying a gun. And it seemed only fair that we had one. And at my park I had something that I didn't even know existed, but we had a park ranger who was a gun nut and thought that everybody should have a gun, and had actually been engaged with a shootout with, oh, revenue problems in the Blue Ridge Parkway. There was a great deal of running liquor down that parkway because they made it back in the hills there. So if you're dealing with folks who are running liquor, you're dealing with a set of laws that are pretty firm, and you're dealing with a set of people who were pretty determined to break these laws.

So this guy had earned the conviction that you're gonna need the gun sometime. And when we went out to the range to fire, this son-of-a-bitch arranged for me to have a pistol that was defective and fired back in your face, a little range of powder particles burning. I am not playing fair with him, but he was from New York City, for God's sake, and he didn't have the perfect personality for a park ranger who was supposed to be a clean cut, all-American boy.

Anyway, that's when we introduced guns. And my encouragement was that if they're patrolling the parkway at night, they're likely to meet drunks, they're likely to meet people that are doing damage, and they're likely to need a gun to wear all day, every day. It was mainly still gun-free. You didn't see a gun on every park ranger, and you didn't need to see a gun on every park ranger because we didn't have any banks to rob, and we didn't have liquor stores selling

whiskey on the parkway and things like that. We had a peaceful, pastoral setup where you expected it to be peaceful. Everybody did, and everybody knew this. Anyway, so much for law enforcement. It was easier at the parkway than it was at some places. We didn't actually have any shootout problems even though, as I mentioned, we had a dozen bases and all these guys at the Army, Air Force, Marines, Navy had weapons. They didn't bring them with them when they came out to party. I'm afraid we've used too much of our time on that subject.

TM: No, some of the other stories I'm hearing are some superintendents were very reluctant to do that.

JC: I'm sure that some superintendents thought firearms were a fine idea because they were in charge of a sizeable law enforcement group. I was of the opinion that anybody who couldn't talk themselves out of a situation like that probably weren't the kind of guy we wanted for a park ranger.

TM: Well, and the parks that were collecting entrance fees would...

JC: Yeah, they had money.

TM: They had money, lots of money, and needed to get that to the bank and so...

JC: I don't believe I remember a single event of an entrance station being robbed of their entry fees, and I would surely have heard about it if we did. We had a wonderful reputation, and we were very fortunate that everybody expected things to be peaceful in the parks. Bank robbers didn't choose to go through the park on their way. Anyway, so much for that.

I was there for four and a half years. We had it better than anywhere. We had the superintendent's house, which was built as a memorial during the days when they first took over the park to make it into a national park. I think the CCCs were there, and building anything they wanted was possible because they had all the money they wanted. All they had to do was ask. So our house was built in the 1930s, but it was built as a copy, a funny copy, because it was twice as big as the house where the Revolutionary War ended. Our house was right on the battlefield, and it had four bathrooms, and I had three daughters actually of dating age. So a boy might appear at the door with a date with one of my daughters, but when he came to the door you always wondered if he was interested in a daughter or just had accepted a dare from other boys in the class because he was intimidated. Our house was sold and moved because it was an intrusion on the battlefield.

I would have never allowed it to be moved. It was lovely and had been there for 75 years, for God's sake, and it certainly didn't really interfere with the battle. It was on the edge. So the battlefield was there. The big interference was the settlement in the middle of people who'd been there since the Civil War, and the big interest in the park was keeping it decent. Dandelions were a major enemy, and my office was a little walk across the battlefield, which I

preferred to taking a government vehicle but I did once in a while if I was gonna go somewhere. That's the whole story about...

TM: Where did you— So four and a half years it would have been about 1975, just kind of roughly, or 1974 or so—

JC: The next job was a serious downturn. Here again, I'd been there four and a half years, which everybody thought was long enough, including me, and they wanted to give me something that I would want and take so I became the head of the volunteer program in the Park Service. Before now I mentioned that I sort of invented it. At least I'm the one who started using volunteers before it was legal up at Cape Cod in my Job Corps camp. They had put somebody in charge of the program, but it was one person. And the small office in the Park Service in Washington and not as good as the job I had.

But they were moving a fellow down who was good on big deals, and that was James Sullivan from, well, the original Philadelphia Colony. He had been through lots of big ceremonies, and we were coming up to the Bicentennial, and I was very happy to be out of there. My secretary was the one who liked those details, loved them, and would spend all day and all night, thinking of details for our public programs. She was promoted right out of being secretary to being a program planner. And that's proof that the fellow from Philadelphia was smarter than I was because I think everybody believed that I was the superintendent, but they also believed they had to make peace with this secretary [laughs] if they wanted to do business with me.

It was a little different. When he moved in he picked the prettiest girl in the park as his secretary and promoted this one who thought she was in charge to a job where she was in charge alright but of one office and not the superintendent's. James Sullivan was a city boy, and he stayed through the Bicentennial up to '81 and I suppose a little while beyond. I didn't follow his career entirely. I went back and visited a couple of times and sat and talked with him about it. We were harmonious. We had no serious issues.

And in somewhat reconstructed, we were moving buildings out of the battlefield. And there were some nice houses, by the way. At one edge of the battlefield there was a highway of streets and half a dozen high-priced homes, and we wanted to buy those, too, just to be fair. It wasn't easy to buy a house from somebody who had hundreds of thousands of dollars tied up in it and wanted it all back.

TM: Hey, Jim, maybe this is a good place to put a comma in this and we'll pick it up next time when you become the head of the volunteer program for the park.

JC: I certainly ought to be able to tell you and I cannot. It was before the Bicentennial, and so it was about 1980.

TM: Let's see, the Bicentennial. Was that 1976?

JC: No, '81.

TM: '81? Okay.

JC: It was the celebration of the surrender.

TM: Got it. Okay.

JC: Alright.

TM: Alright. Well, with that, we'll wrap up Part 7, Grand Canyon Oral History, with Jim Corson. Today is Wednesday, February 24, 2021. My name is Tom Martin. Jim, thank you so very much.

JC: Thank you, and are we gonna do this again?