

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Richard Hanson (RH)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

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TM: Today is Saturday, October 10th, 2020, this is a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Richard Hanson, my name is Tom Martin, good morning Richard, how are you today?

RH: Doing well, thank you.

TM: Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this interview. May we have your permission to record this interview over the telephone?

RH: Yeah, no problem.

TM: Thank you. Richard, what year were you born?

RH: 1948.

TM: How did your mom meet your dad?

RH: They were in San Francisco. My father was a sailor, and this is right before the war started. They met there, she got pregnant, he went to war, he came back and they got married.

TM: Was he in the Navy? Was he in the Merchant Marines?

RH: He was in the Navy.

TM: What was his position in the Navy?

RH: He was, the last one was, he was a Chief Petty Officer. He did basically everything. He was the Pearl Harbor guy.

TM: Stop right there, he was in Pearl Harbor?

RH: Yeah.

TM: Did he ever talk about that?

RH: No. He didn't talk about anything.

TM: So you have older siblings?

RH: Had one older brother who passed about two years ago from Agent Orange.

TM: I'm sorry to hear that.

RH: Yeah, cancer.

TM: And so your mom got pregnant, your dad was out to sea and yet they kept wanting to see each other?

RH: I guess. Back in the day I think you pretty much had to. I'm not real clear on it. I'm as clear as I can be. They definitely got married. My father abandoned another family he'd been married to, three kids that I didn't even know about till I was about sixteen and finally was able to hook up a little bit with my half-sister and two half-brothers.

TM: Oh.

RH: Yeah it was convoluted.

TM: After that did he leave the service then after the war or did he stay in the service?

RH: Yeah, yeah, no, he left and went to work at the Standard Oil Refinery in Richmond, California.

TM: Is that where you grew up?

RH: Yeah, well, we were part of the White Flight. You know, I was born in Berkeley and we were part of that initial White Flight, you know, get out to the suburbs. So I grew up in Pleasant Hill, Walnut Creek. And he went and did his thing, shift worker.

TM: Did you guys do the summer vacation thing with the packing in the car?

RH: Yeah, once in a while, once in a while we did. It wasn't a normal thing. I remember World's Fair in Seattle was one that stands out.

TM: Wow.

RH: Going to over on the Olympic Peninsula and then he had a brother in Long Beach so we would go down there once in a while.

TM: To the ocean?

RH: Yeah, to Long Beach, California. The first time I ever sat on an airplane was San Francisco to Long Beach. Yeah, yeah, so we did some of that stuff.

TM: Did you learn to swim there?

RH: Where'd I learn to swim? I think I took swimming lessons in a pool. In the Bay Area if I remember right.

TM: Did you like that?

RH: Yeah, I did.

TM: And did you go hiking? Did you get out in the hills or were you a bookworm? What were you like as a kid growing up?

RH: What was I like? I was paranoid I'd get the shit kicked out of me if I said something wrong.

TM: By your older brother?

RH: No. No, by my father.

TM: By your dad? Okay.

RH: No, my older brother walked point for me. Two years, well, until we both went off to Vietnam. He saved my, saved me from a lot of cracks, a lot of lickings. I just always loved him for that.

TM: Nice. It's interesting, sailors can often make difficult parents cause they don't necessarily learn how to raise kids.

RH: Yeah, and I think when you get older, like I am now, and you look back and you have your baggage. You look back and you see the man had to have a lot of baggage. I think he was a foster kid in Iowa and then Texas. Not very educated, depression, the Great Depression, and then the war and all of that. Yeah, he had to have a lot of baggage. He definitely wasn't a spare the rod, spoil the child kinda guy, that's for sure. But like I said now, when we get older we start looking at our baggage. You can look back and go well, that's why he was like this. Didn't make what he did right but it made it more understandable.

TM: Now what was your mom like?

RH: Compared to, she was Mother Theresa. She was a farm girl from Nebraska, one of five sisters. Grew up in a soddy, 640 acres in a sod house. And she was the middle one, she was the third oldest. And each of the sisters as soon as they turned eighteen, they caught the train to California, San Francisco. And so my mother, I think, went out there in '33, '34 and was a player. She worked for a restaurant called Alioto's, and Alioto, Joe Alioto, the Alioto family, basically owned San Francisco. And there's still an Alioto's on Fisherman's Wharf. You know, long, big time San Francisco family. My mother actually went on to be, I think she won the Miss San Francisco World's Fair. When was that, '36, something like that. And she was kind of a San Francisco socialite, barking with the big dogs. Very beautiful, very beautiful, beautiful, beautiful woman. Beautiful with her soul also. How she ever ended up with my old man that's just...and after he died, he didn't live very long working at Standard Oil with no fuckin' safety. Not back in the day. Nothing. And I think he was working, he was on the

fire crew and he was working in the asphalt plant so who knows what, and two years or not even two years, I don't think, after he retired he died of just body cancer.

TM: And what he was exposed to as well before then in the Navy and before then as a young boy, it's just hard to say.

RH: Right. Right. Right, my bet would be Standard Oil. So my mother was just lovely, just so nice. And just she felt so bad and she told me, back after he died she basically apologized to my brother and I for not stepping up when he was kicking the shit out of us, and we just said "Ma, we definitely know how it is, how it was back then." And I think after both kids, me and my brother got out of the house, that they might of actually developed a relationship where they were both happy for a little while.

TM: Nice.

RH: Yeah, so anyway I don't understand how this family history even ties in with the Grand Canyon, but you're the guy doing it.

TM: Yeah, so this is kind of a background of who you are as a person. Did your mom really encourage you in education and the things you were interested in then?

RH: No. Education was kind of secondary. Neither one of my parents had gone to college. Like I said, my mother grew up in a soddy and headed out to San Francisco and got a job as a waitress, and my father bummed around til he went in the Navy, and he went in the Navy twice. He got discharged right before the war and then got called back up, or reenlisted, eight or ten months before December 7th. So, yeah, education, no, I was, I was an awful student. I didn't care. I, no, so education and what we, as far as pushing us to what we liked, I can't, you know, I can remember one deal that I said "Man, I really want to do that," and that was be one of the guys that stands on the side of the garbage truck and they pull up, man, this is before they had all the automated stuff. You know, they'd pull up to your deal and they get out and they dump your trash bin in the back and they hop back on the back of the garbage truck, and I always thought that would be just so much fun. But that was the only thing I really aspired to be.

TM: And nothing in high school sort of attracted you to go in a direction one way or another?

RH: No, I actually had a couple of classes that I thought maybe I should do this, and I was good at them, and I was on the school paper. I was the assistant editor of the sports page and then the photographer for the yearbook and all of that. We would develop our own prints and I enjoyed it. I could get a free pass out to go interview somebody, and kids wanted to be your friend because you could get their name in the paper if you wrote about them. And I did that. And my mother was still kind of tied in with the politicians and stuff and she would get, basically whenever she wanted them, she would get the mayor's seats for, I was a big Giants' fan, and she would get the mayor's seats for Giant games.

TM: That's cool.

RH: Yeah, it was way cool, man. And we did, we had to write, cause the mayor always, when he went he had to write a newspaper story or just, you know, like ten paragraphs or something about the game that night. He always did that. And so then it was up on my brother and I to fill that void and it would be printed in the LA Times. My mother saved all of those stories and it is pretty interesting now, I go back and look and I remember that game, I remember that game.

TM: What was your brother's name?

RH: Frank. Frank Anthony.

TM: Wow, that's pretty neat that you two guys would go to the game and write the story and run it under the mayor's byline. That's pretty neat.

RH: We had our own byline. And that's what was so much fun about it. It was a pretty good size newspaper and you'd open up and there'd it be: By Dick Hanson and Frank Hanson.

TM: And was Frank doing photography as well?

RH: No, he was more of an athlete than I was. He was two years ahead of me in school but, no, he was more of a jock and he was a better student. And he did, when he got back from Vietnam, he was the first of us to graduate college, well, the only one of us really.

TM: What did he get a degree in?

RH: Recreation. He just, he absolutely, he moved down to San Diego and that's where he went to school and then he hooked up with the recreation department down there and he worked with inner city kids. And he was still, up til the day he died, friends with some of the kids that he had helped out back then.

TM: Nice. It sounds like you're developing some pretty good skills with photography, which is sort of getting a view or an image of things.

RH: Yeah, I was good. I look back, you know, my mother saved all the friggin' papers and the school papers and stuff but, you know, on the other end, I didn't care about math, I didn't care about, I didn't care about anything. But, yeah, I did take some pretty, pretty good pictures, you know. I guess about every picture in the last two yearbooks that I have is things that I photographed and

TM: Were you using a school camera or did you get your own camera?

RH: No, I had one of those kind of big box cameras that you could go in and we had a little, had a little darkroom attached to the journalism office.

TM: Like a, like a Speed Graphic, like a four by five or something like that?

RH: Yeah, something like that.

TM: Wow, they take great shots. Nice!

RH: Yeah, I liked that, I was able to roam the corridors with my camera around my neck and you know.

TM: Nice. Okay. And working out the math here... '48, '58, so you graduated about '64, '65?

RH: '66. Graduated in '66. Yeah, class of '66. My brother graduated in '64. I think I was a freshman when Kennedy was shot. That's one thing I remember being in class when we heard about it. I might have been a sophomore, but I think I was a freshman.

TM: And so you're not thinking about college? Were you thinking about joining the service then as soon as you were out of high school?

RH: Well, that's the way it kind of turned out.

TM: I mean, you know, you're born in Berkeley and that's kind of an interesting place in the early '60's for, but you're in Richmond so it's far away, kind of but I'm sort of thinking

RH: It was pretty close. I mean, we moved out of Richmond, like I said, as part of the White Flight and settled right, right near Walnut Creek. City bordered with, we were some of the first White Flight kind of people. I think it was, I was born in '48, I'll bet we moved in '52 or '53.

TM: So Walnut Creek is just, is east of Berkeley? Is that right?

RH: Yeah. Yeah, just right through the Caldecott Tunnel and probably either a ten-minute BART ride or it was a fifteen-minute car ride. I definitely participated in some of the stuff going on. But it was more in the late '60s, early '70s where I really got into the revolution and to the anti-war stuff. But my brother graduated in '64 and he devastated me when he came and told me, he said he got a little apartment. He said, "I gotta get out of this fuckin' house." I said, "You can't leave me here by myself." He says, "Brother, I gotta do it, I've done what I could." And he did that, he had an apartment for about six months. I remember when he came over to the house. This would have been in late '65, mid '65, and he said, "I just enlisted in the Army. And I want to go to Vietnam." And I said, "What the fuck. What are you talking about?" I was a sophomore, maybe just starting my junior year or some shit, and I remember just arguing with him and just doing that whole deal. I gave you the Cliff Notes, once he shipped off over there I knew that's what I wanted to do. And it hadn't really entered my mind up until then about joining the military doing that, doing this. I didn't have any goals whatsoever. And so that's basically what happened. As soon as I turned eighteen, I was in Nam '68, '69, so I may have the time frame just a little bit, it was probably '66 or something when he joined. He was shipped out in '67 and we were both there for a time where we actually were able to hook up twice and that was in '68. We both had our tours extended by six months so were both over there for 18 months. And then when we got back we really didn't see a lot of each other. I got back about ten months after he got discharged and he had moved to San Diego and then there's the rest of the story.

TM: If you're willing, it sounds like Vietnam offered a way to get out of the house.

RH: Yep.

TM: And Frank was there and he was, must have been giving you data back about it.

RH: Yeah, it's not like we had cell phones. Once in awhile, once in a great while, you could, if there was a ham operator or something, you know, you could go to a rear base and stand in line and maybe get three minutes to talk. I think that only happened a couple of times while I was there.

TM: Where did you go to basic training?

RH: I went to basic training in Wichita Falls. I was in the Air Force and I joined the Air Force because they let you pick your MOS and I decided I wanted to be a medic. And then I went to medical school at Lackland, in San Antonio, for a long period of time. Or could have been reversed – did Basic at Lackland and several months of medical stuff at Wichita Falls.

TM: Did you like that?

RH: I did. And that was the only time in my life I studied because it was like going through EMT training. Maybe a little more intense than EMT training.

TM: Yeah, which can be rigorous. I mean, there's lots of Latin words and anatomical body parts.

RH: Yeah, well, I had to know all the body parts and had to know how to do a tracheotomy and how to know how to set IVs. It was a very intense training session. Then I think there was eighteen or nineteen of us in that class and the way they did it was where you finished in your class and then when orders came out you could actually kinda put in a request of where you were gonna go. And I finished third in the class and there was five slots maybe to Vietnam, a couple to Germany, one or two to Korea; Cape Cod was on the list. My goal was to get over to Vietnam and follow in my brother's footsteps and I think also try to please my father who had been a military man and basically thought I was just lost and a piece of shit. And I was thinking this will make him proud. I actually had visions of going over there and fuckin' getting killed, John Wayne shit. Anyway that didn't happen, thank God.

TM: What was Frank doing? What did his service pathway take him to?

RH: My brother was basically a sniper. He was a LERP. Called them LERPs - Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol or something, I don't know. But he tried to do things right when he got discharged. This was before there was any mention of PTSD, there was no word for that. There was no word. There was shellshock or pussy or coward or, in my case, I was diagnosed as a passive aggressive schizophrenic. So there was no word for, my brother got home right in the midst, as I did, of all the anti-war stuff going on. He just decided he was going to go to college on the GI bill. He tried for years, he really tried for years to lead a normal life, quote unquote. And he failed. His marriage only lasted a couple of years, only his beautiful son from it. He started drinking. Basically, he got put on the 100% disabled list and that was that. I'm real proud of the life that he did put together and when I returned we kind of drifted apart after being so close growing up. But anyway, yeah, that's where that...

TM: And then in Vietnam, you got a great skill set it sounds like that's going to serve you well in future years and yet what you're going to be sent to Vietnam to do doesn't have a lot of John Wayne there, it's got a lot of pain and a lot of suffering.

RH: Yeah, I just wrote a note to, I was flashing back on 1968 in a Facebook post and comparing it to this year and all of the turmoil. In 1968, after Martin Luther King and then Bobby, and I was a huge Bobby guy, it didn't take but a week to understand that this war was bullshit. Weakened country, and by June or July of 1968, I was basically addicted to morphine. I was starting to use my own product. I always had access being a medic. I was in the Central Highlands and I just started to help me make it through the night. I was starting to, smoking a lot of pot, and I was still able to do my job, but it was such trying times. It was like 2020. And besides the COVID and besides the asshole in the White House, a year and three months ago my wife had a terrible accident and now she's paralyzed.

TM: Wow, I'm sorry to hear that.

RH: I'm a full-time caregiver and it's all good. It really is. She is such a fuckin' beautiful spirit. You want to do things for her. You want to go over there and make whatever you can make easier for her. I just took her down the hill, we live on a four-wheel drive road. Somebody gifted us a handi-van, an unfuckin'-believable gift. So we can't get it up here so we park it at

the neighbors. So I took her down and she's back to working two days a week and fighting the pain. It's been one of those deals you would never wish for, but it was also something that, I would say, probably brought us closer. And she just tries so hard. Anyway, that was '68 and 2020 and this last 15-16 months reminded a lot of what I was going through in Nam.

TM: But you were able, it sounds like, to keep it together in Nam even, even amongst what was sheer hell. I mean, I can appreciate why you might want to turn to morphine. You weren't alone.

RH: No, no, I wasn't. You know, that's the first time I was ever really exposed to hardcore racism. The military was full of institutional racism when I was there. I think I spent my 19th and 20th birthdays over there and I'd never seen any fucking thing like it. Fighter jets with Confederate flags painted on them. Big separation of Black and Whites. The Blacks were just treated so fuckin' horribly that is just absolutely, like I say, about a month after I got there, man, I was just going what the fuck. And so it was an interesting time. '68, yeah, I, this was July or August when I started popping. It was not long after Bobby had been assassinated. And everywhere fragging started picking up. I felt like the Blacks felt when Martin Luther King was assassinated. That one tore me up, too, but Bobby was my guy. And there was no cohesion over there, there was no brotherhood, there was no, you know, sure, you know, you're fighting for the guy in the foxhole, you're definitely not fighting for the fuckin' country. And so it was real trying on a guy that just turned, in '68 I turned 20, and that was in March I turned 20. So, yeah, man, I was fucked up.

TM: How did you deal with the addiction when you came back to the states?

RH: Well, that's where we get to the rest of the story. When I got back to the States I still had seven months in the military to do. And when I shipped my whole baggage, that's the baggage that, you know, that leaves about a month before you do, I put in I don't know how many pounds of Thai Stick. I'd gotten a bunch of stereo stuff like everybody did back then, in Hong Kong, big old speakers and, you know, a great sound system and I stuffed the back of the speakers. I undid 17 screws in each speaker and I put, I put probably about 30 ampules of morphine and a few pounds of pot in there. And they came in and packed it up and shipped it home. And so that's how

I dealt with it. Up until, a thirty-day supply and that's basically how I got involved with wilderness, with nature.

TM: Can you expand on that?

RH: When I got home I had thirty days leave. And being from the Bay area, I was real familiar with Yosemite, I had been up there a few times and stuff. And I got another friend of mine that I went to high school with who had just gotten back from Vietnam, and he was discharged. We started to make a trip up to Yosemite and it was that time, and we hiked basically the John Muir trail, and I weaned myself off the narcotics.

TM: You still had some time left in the service.

RH: Yeah, seven months, seven or eight months left in the service. And I took that thirty days that I got when I got back from Vietnam, I took that thirty days and I was going to be stationed an hour and a half from my house for those seven months, which turned out to be a fuckin' mistake.

TM: Because you were back in the home situation?

RH: No, it was more because I was back into the epicenter of the anti-war movement which I definitely supported 100%. And then basically my life just started following this unbelievable road. I call it the Yellow Brick Road; I just followed that road. So that would be 1969, '68, '69, yeah, and by 19-, ten years later, I was the fuckin' trail foreman supervisor at Grand Canyon National Park.

TM: Whoa, wait a minute, that's a big jump, a bit too fast for me.

RH: I know, it blows my mind...

TM: How did it come about?

RH: It came about...

TM: You would have been discharged from the service.

RH: It's a long story.

TM: Well, here we are.

RH: I didn't get, basically I didn't get discharged, I got thrown out of the service because I'm a passive aggressive schizophrenic. I was very involved in the anti-war movement.

TM: So would this be a dishonorable discharge?

RH: It was, turned into a medical discharge because that's when they threw the handle on me as a passive aggressive schizophrenic. And that there's a lot that happened to where I got to that point. I was court marshaled; I was thrown into jail. And I was fucked up. And they had a meeting, I had just gotten out of jail and I had deserted. They found me at an anti-war rally in Golden Gate Park, even though I was wearing a long-haired wig, and court marshaled and sentenced to jail. I had a civilian lawyer at my court marshal and he asked me one question: he said, "Why did you desert?" And I talked for two and half to three hours on that one question. Basically I did it, the good thing is they took it from desertion down to AWOL. And I was gone about forty some odd days, I guess, before I got busted. And, again, at that time I went back up into Yosemite, hit a couple of rallies and went back up into Yosemite. I don't know, man, it was just pretty freakin' amazing. I feel so lucky that path took me to where it took me.

TM: Yeah, because many other young men just like you didn't make it.

RH: No, I could have been homeless, I could have been whatever.

TM: But all of you that did come back had to deal with the same things that you were going through.

RH: Yeah, yeah, that's what I told anybody that wants to know that, you know, wilderness and wild places and mules basically saved my life.

TM: Nice.

RH: Yeah. Can we pick this up again a little later? We've been talking for a while now.

TM: You bet. Thank you so much for going through what you've gone through. Let's go ahead and wrap this up then. Today is Saturday, October 10, 2020, this is Part 1 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Richard Hanson, and my name is Tom Martin and Richard, thank you so very much.

RH: Yeah, thank you and let me know if you want to do a Part 2.

TM: I do. Hold the line for a minute.