

**Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society**

**Interviewee: Elvira Arnberger (EA)**

**Interviewer: Kristen Luetkemeier (KL) and Audience Members (AM)**

**Subject: reflections of the Grand Canyon National Park Community**

**Date of Interview: Saturday, February 23, 2019**

**Method of Interview: Video recorded at the 2019 Grand Canyon Centennial History Symposium**

**Transcriber: NA**

**Date of Transcription: NA**

**Transcription Reviewers: NA**

**Keys: NA**

KL: Well, I'm really delighted to look out and see so many people hanging around. I think you're going to be glad that you are here for this, our final session of the centennial Grand Canyon Historical Society's symposium. This is the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February. We're here again in the Shrine of the Ages at Grand Canyon National Park, and I think whoever put the schedule together wanted to try to finish strong, because we're here for an interview with Elvira Arnberger. I got really interested in hearing more from both Rob and Elvira at last summer's picnic, where they were both awarded recognition for their efforts in community service here in the Grand Canyon community. And I knew that Elvira has been a community liaison, and been really involved with Grand Canyon community, but I didn't know quite what that meant, and wanted to understand that and the workings of it better, so I'm really delighted that she agreed to my invitation to come and share that story with all of us here. But before that involvement with Grand Canyon community, I want to just begin at the beginning, and ask if you would tell us just a very little bit about where you were born and raised.

EA: OK. First of all, I really appreciate everybody for staying behind and listening to my jibber jabber. I was born and raised in Midland, Texas. Yes, I'm a damn proud Texan. I was born with the name of Elvira Mendoza Tucker. Mendoza is my mom's maiden name. Tucker was my father's last name. I'm the oldest of three. I graduated from high school from one of the high schools there in Midland. I took a little bit of community classes while I was there. Then after that, I worked at a local hospital for approximately 15 years.

KL: As you were growing up in Midland, did you have childhood experiences with national parks?

EA: Not really per say. One time, I went with my grandparents to Big Bend National Park, and we were going to go to a wedding in Boquillas, Mexico, which borders Big Bend National Park. When we passed by there, I saw the name Big Bend National Park. I was like, ok, it's a park. OK. So, we went to the wedding. Next thing is, after I graduated from high school, some friends and I wanted to go camping. So, I remembered – hey, let's go to that park over there. I think it's called Big Bend National Park. We didn't know anything about it or anything. So that was kind of the first two things about going in to Big Bend National Park. And also, I had a little bit of connection, because my father was born and raised in Terlingua, Texas. My father and my grandfather and my dad's brothers worked the mines there at Terlingua. So, I had a family connection to the Big Bend area. But as far as knowing what the national park was about, not really.

KL: Did you go on to work for national parks, ever?

EA: Yes. Because of a previous marriage, I moved to Big Bend National Park. And once I moved there, then I started learning what the national park system was all about. I started volunteering with the school system there, since my son was going to school there, and then after I did that, I started volunteering for the National Park Service for a little bit, and then I got on as an emergency hire as a national park interpreter. And then, from there I was very lucky. I got my permanent position as a telecommunications supervisor, which was a dispatcher. I was under the ranger division. Then I became a single parent. So, I continued working for the National Park Service, and then I also started volunteering outside the park. I was part of a group that was – we needed a little bit of medical services, and our nearest hospital was two hours down the road. So, a group of us got together, and said you know, we need some kind of small little clinic. And by the time we left Big Bend, there was a small little clinic, so if you needed really immediate first aid, there was a small little clinic there. Then I met the love of my life, mi amor, known as Roberto. I only call him Rob when he's in trouble. So, we married, and we left Big Bend National Park to move to Grand Canyon.

KL: That clinic sounds like a great contribution.

EA: It was great.

KL: I'm going to think twice about referring to your husband as Rob now! I wanted to hear about your first impression of Grand Canyon, and we have a little bit of an illustration, too, to guide that story.

EA: Well, you know, when Roberto said that we were going to be coming to Grand Canyon National Park, I had, of course, heard and read and seen pictures of Grand Canyon, so, you know, really excited to move here. And he told me, because he had previously been here: "There's a pretty large community there." And I'm going, large community? I mean, it's a national park. Look at Big Bend! You know, we're a community, too. And he said: "You're going to be surprised." And so, when we drove in, our first stop was at Mather Point. And so, we stopped at Mather Point, and we all three got off the vehicle, and Samuel looked at the canyon and he said: "Wow." You know – eyes got big. "Wow." And I looked at the canyon, and I said: "Oh, shit!" You know. I mean, pictures, as you well know, or movies don't do justice to what you are about to see. And this picture right here was taken at our first stop, when we came in to Grand Canyon.

KL: So, I know you did become deeply involved in Grand Canyon's community. And after you arrived in Grand Canyon in 1994, I do wonder what stood out to you about that community that he had mentioned.

EA: You know, I couldn't believe – after we left Mather Point, we started driving in and heading to our home, and as we're driving in, I'm starting to see how big this community really is. And, to see that it's a large community – hotels, grocery store, a bank, and I heard there was a clinic here, and I'm going, oh my god. And also, there was a multilingual, multicultural community. That was unbelievable to me, because coming from Big Bend National Park, our Texas friends will know, Big Bend is like living in a ranch. Our nearest medical facility, our nearest grocery store was two hours down the road. And so, you really need to plan ahead on what you're going to be cooking, and you find out what you can freeze and what you can't freeze. So, to have a grocery store – you run out of eggs, you can just go to the grocery store. So, it was – I just couldn't believe how large this community really was.

KL: And then how did you start building your involvement within that community?

EA: Well, since Roberto was the superintendent of the park, I knew, because of the nepotism – when you're a superintendent, whether you're a female superintendent or a male superintendent, your spouse can not work for the national park. Why? Because he or she is in charge of everything. So, I wasn't able to continue my park service career. And, believe it or not, as Samuel grew up, he wasn't going to be able to work inside the park, either. Not even at the local grocery store or anything. So, one of the things I remember my father in law telling me after he found out we were going to be moving here, my father in law Les said: "Elvira, I want you to know that being a

superintendent and being a spouse can be a very lonely role.” And I looked at him, and I said: “What do you mean, Les?” He said: “It’s really hard to make friends. And it is hard for the community to accept you, because you’re going to be looked at through different eyes. Your husband is the superintendent, and you’re going to be the superintendent’s wife. So, it’s going to be kind of hard.” So, after I moved here and I was here a short while, I noticed you do get treated differently. People would see me, and they’d go: “Hi Ms. Arnberger!” And I’m going: “Hi. I’m Elvira. Ms. Arnberger’s my mother in law. I’m Elvira.” And like: “Oh! OK!” I said: “Call me Elvira.” “Oh, OK.” So, I’d see them the next day, and they’d say: “Hi Ms. Arnberger – I mean, Elvira!” So, I knew that I had to start opening some doors for myself. And it was easy for Samuel. He was going to school, so he was making friends. But I personally needed to do something for myself. Like I said, I wanted for people to see me as Elvira, not as the superintendent’s wife. So, I decided I was going to start volunteering, and in a multicultural community. And when I mean community in general, I mean not only in Grand Canyon, but also in the Tusayan area, because we’re all part of a community. We are all one family.

KL: I wanted to talk specifically about some of the ways that you volunteered, and I wondered if you would tell us how you started doing English-Spanish interpretation.

EA: Well, being a bilingual individual, I started going out to Tusayan a little bit more, and I started meeting a lot of the Hispanic people that lived in Tusayan. And I introduced myself to them, and I gave them my phone number, and I said: “Hey, if you ever need any assistance in interpreting, please call me.” So that’s how I started getting my foot in the door, is interpreting for the large Hispanic community out in Tusayan. Of course, because I speak Spanish.

KL: One of the other projects that sounded really significant to you when we talked was the holiday food and gift drive.

EA: Yah. One of the other things was there was about four of us that I started making friends. The door started opening a little bit more. And so, there was four of us that got together, and we noticed that during the Christmas holidays, there was people in our communities, Grand Canyon, Tusayan, and some of Valle, too, because it was all part of the same community, that might need a little bit of extra things for the holidays. So, this group of four of us, we got together, and we got together with the local businesses, not only in the park, but in Tusayan. And we went and we met with them, and we said: “We would like to start a food drive and gift drive to give these families a little bit extra

during the holidays.” So, we put out the word and everything, and we met with the businesses, and it was very successful. I think we did it for approximately four years. And we had not only the businesses, but the hearts of the people in the community, in the park, Valle, and Tusayan. They pitched in. Let’s say a holiday basket was going to be 45 dollars. And at that time: “Let’s call the Babbitt’s store.” Babbitt store contributed a lot of things, too. So, the community went in and we got together, and all the names of the families were only known by the businesses and us four, and that was it. So, we got all the baskets together and then we would take the baskets – we got together with McDonald’s, and they set up a Christmas tree. So, we asked them if they could do it as an angel tree. So, these family’s children could have a little bit of extra gifts. We had anywhere from 50 plus baskets that served the communities. It was a big success, and it was a success because the communities came together. The businesses came together.

KL: So, this volunteering that you were doing, at a certain point turned into a full-time position. Would you tell us about how that came about?

EA: Wow. It certainly did! I was trying to find ways in volunteering here and there, getting involved in the community not only here, Valle and Tusayan. Well, I got a call from the Coconino County district supervisor for District One, Paul Babbitt. He called the house one day, and he said: “Elvira, I’d like to come meet with you tomorrow.” I was like: “Oh, shit. OK.” I didn’t know what he had planned. So, he came over to the house, and he said: “I’m aware of all the community things that you’re doing in the area.” And he said: “I’ve got a proposition for you. I would like for you to be my representative for this district. I’d like to appoint you to a four-year term to be at the Coconino Board of Health.” And I was total blown away. It was like: “Me? Why?” And he said: “I need someone to help me represent this district, and with all the volunteer work that you’re doing, who better?” So that’s a picture of me – believe it or not, that’s me, a lot younger and a lot of kilos lighter – and that picture was taken of me going to my first Coconino County Board of Health meeting. And that’s how that started. As a representative for Paul Babbitt, I had talked to Paul, and I said: “There’s some things that are not being represented in this district.” That’s part of what your question was going to be – what did you do. Well, I represented Paul Babbitt in deliberations that this district was basically kind of being treated almost like a stepchild. The Coconino County Health has a lot of services that are free to the communities. We have a wonderful clinic here, and it was doing a great job, and I don’t take nothing from it. They serviced the community and the visitors here. But, one of the things was that living out here in the boonies, some of those health services were not being brought here. Free health services! That’s where I came in. Going to the board meetings and stuff, and I started

saying: "Hello! We're over here, and we need some of these services!" People seemed to think because you live near Grand Canyon National Park, the feds are taking care of you. You think the feds are taking care of us here with a medical service? What about the people in Tusayan? What about the people in Valle? So, I started to open up their eyes a little bit, and with their help, the help of Paul Babbitt and the help of the communities here, we were very successful in bringing in some of these free services, like free immunization for our children, free dental, a dental fair. Right before school started, some of our kids are going to play sports and some of the regs for the school was that they needed to have a health exam. There were some other services. So, we started bringing in those services over here. And they started realizing you're part of county health, and started bringing some of those things here. So, that's how some of that health service started.

KL: But then your position here eventually became broader than health services, is that right?

EA: Yah, no kidding. All of a sudden, I started getting involved in some things here that, oh my god, I didn't know what I was going to do or what I was really doing, or whose feet I was stepping on, whether it was county health, Paul's position, or park service position – I didn't know. So, I called up Paul and I said: "I'd like to come see you." So he said: "Oh shit. OK. What's wrong?" So I went over there – let me back up just one moment. When Paul asked me to be a board member with the county health, he said: "I got this proposition for you. It's going to be as a volunteer. You're not going to get paid." "OK. That's fine." He said: "But I do promise you I'll pay for your mileage when you need to come in to have pow wows." "Ok, to have some meetings. Alright." So I went over there and met with him, and I said: "Paul, I'm starting to see a broader picture that I'm starting to get involved with. The health stuff is one thing, but I'm starting to see a lot more of the social needs that your district needs. And I'm not sure how to go about this. How do I go about doing this? I'm with the county health stuff, so that's kind of taken care of. But some of the other social needs – how do I represent you in this?" And he said: "I got just the thing." I go: "What is that?" "Well, it's going to be another volunteer position. Yep – I'm going to nominate you as my community liaison." It was like: "OK. Fine." So, as a community liaison, I worked closely with the National Park Service in coordinating some of the events or things that I was going to start getting involved and I needed the ok from the National Park Service. Well, there was few times I met with Superintendent Arnberger. So, I would call up Superintendent Arnberger's secretary and say: "I need to meet with the superintendent. Could you put me on the calendar?" She's like: "OK." So, the superintendent apparently got the calendar for

what was going on that week or that day, and he saw Elvira Arnberger on the calendar, well he was like: “My wife?” I said: “Yes. The community liaison is going to come meet with you.” So, I started working really closely with the National Park Service in making sure that some of the things that we were going to get involved in, that they were really going to be done.

KL: I know we did not talk about all of the projects that you were involved with here in the community. I have a short list of even five here, and I know we don’t have time to go into all of them, either, but one that stood out, I think to both of us, was trips that you took students on here at Grand Canyon to see the Nutcracker. How did that happen, and how did the kids react to those trips?

EA: That was really, really wonderful. Paul called up and he said: “I’ve got X amount of tickets to the Nutcracker ballet. Is there a way for you to get – let’s say it was 25 tickets – 25 students to come over?” We wanted to expose our kids to a different culture than what they had ever experienced, so we went to the school and met with the superintendent of the school or the principal, and we figured out which one of the students were going to be going, etc. They donated the transportation, the bus, and it was during the winter, so all the kids got on the bus, and they were all excited, and we met Babbitt, he was there to meet us at NAU, and we attended. The kids on the bus were really laughing. They were going: “Is he really – the guys wear tights? Really? And the girls dance on their little tippy toes?” I got some of the local parents to volunteer, and we all went up there. And the kids were, like, blown away. Their eyes all wide open, because it was totally something new for them to attend this beautiful performance. On the way back, we didn’t come on 180 because there was a big snowstorm, so we came back on 64, and the whole way the kids were just talking and reminiscing, and what a wonderful time and they enjoyed. One of the other things that I got involved in here is that I was a board member with the chamber music here. I started as a volunteer with the chamber music here, and then that led to being a board member, and we were able to work with the kids at the school, in getting them introduced to another new form of art, the chamber music.

KL: Just one other program that you were involved with was the Victim Witness program here. What is Victim Witness, and why was that important?

EA: That was part of the social part that I was getting involved with and working really closely with the National Park Service, especially the protection division. Some people don’t seem to realize that we, as you well know, we live in a very large community here.

Not only here, but in Tusayan. There's drugs. There's alcohol. And there is domestic violence here. There were some events that was happening with domestic violence, and so I notified Paul about this, and Paul selected me to go with some of the county supervisors out of Flagstaff to go to sunny Duluth, Minnesota in the middle of November or December to attend a domestic violence class, a training. So, I started learning a lot of things there. I would get phone calls at home in the middle of the night, Jane Smith saying: "Hey, Elvira, I don't know who to call. I thought to call you. I need to get out, because my husband or boyfriend or someone had beaten them up." And I'd go pick them up and drive them into Flagstaff to the shelter over there. So that's how I got involved with the domestic violence that was going on.

KL: You were doing a lot. And your husband was superintendent; we just heard about that. And your son was a teenager, which I remember as a very busy time in my household. How did you arrange for and spend, or did you arrange for and spend, personal and family time in Grand Canyon?

EA: Believe it or not, it wasn't an easy task. We all had our busy schedules. Rob had his schedule. I had my schedule. First of all, I had a calendar in our kitchen. I mean, a big calendar, probably the size of this table. And it was color coded. My schedule, Roberto's schedule, Samuel's schedule, just in general. So, once a month, Roberto would bring me his calendar home and put it all down and things like that. I mean, there was things that I needed to attend with Roberto as his wife, and there was things that Roberto needed to attend with me as a community liaison. There was meetings that I had to go to. Plus, we had Samuel. He was playing sports, and a lot of the sports are held outside of Grand Canyon. So, there we go. With Roberto's calendar, I would highlight it in red, and that red means that he has to keep his nalgas here at home. That means his butt here at home. We were quite busy. We entertained VIPs. We had senators, presidents, ex presidents, Bruce Babbitt at the house. It was a little challenging, but we made it work. There was times that we all three felt like we needed to get out of Dodge, just for a little bit. We'd go to Phoenix for the weekend or something. We did take vacations. This picture right here, I do want to take a quick moment to tell you about this picture. Like I said, I met a lot of VIPs in the six years living here at this wonderful park. But, there's a few things that really stand out, and this is one of them. Putting politics aside, this photo is really special, and I'll tell you why. We were very fortunate to host President Ford and Mrs. Ford for a private dinner at our house, just us five. When they arrived, we sat around, we talked, and we talked about their family, and he asked about our family. Roberto mentioned that he had been previously married, and I have, too, and that shortly after we arrived here, Roberto



legally adopted Samuel. President Ford was sitting right here where I'm at, and Samuel was right there, he scooted his little chair over there a little closer to Samuel, and he patted Samuel on the leg, and patted Samuel on the shoulder, and he said: "Samuel, do you know how special you are? Do you know how special you and me are?" Samuel looked at him like: "No. Where is this going?" And he said: "Samuel, I'll tell you how special we are. My mother was a single parent, too. My stepfather adopted me, too. Just like your stepfather adopted you. You're special, just like me." And then he went on and he said: "You know, Samuel, I wouldn't have been Gerald Ford if it wasn't for him. I wouldn't have been the president if it wasn't for him. And I still wouldn't be Gerald Ford right now, if it wasn't for him. Samuel, you're Samuel Arnberger. That's who you are. And do you know that you're going to continue to be Samuel Arnberger, and it's all because of your dad, too." And I tell you what, he had me in tears like you wouldn't believe. That was so special because here was a president speaking to Samuel with his heart in his hands. That was really special.

KL: That's really beautiful. I'm glad you wanted to share that. And it's a good note to end that Grand Canyon time on, too. You left Grand Canyon National Park in 2000. We've still got some time, so you can tell us in just a little bit of detail, where did you go after here, and how did you spend your energy?

EA: Well, Roberto came, and he told us that – Samuel was going to be graduating from high school here. We talked about Samuel was going to continue to go to school in Arizona, so the opportunity came for Roberto to be the regional director for all the national parks in Alaska. So it's like: "OK. I'm a desert rat. I don't want to go to no snow!" But I said I knew that we weren't going to be there forever, so I said: "Let's go. Samuel's graduated." So we went. We moved to Anchorage, Alaska, and that took a lot of getting used to. Living in a small community here, going into a city. I found it hard to try to fit into the community there. I found it difficult to try to find places to volunteer. Believe it or not, sometimes in Alaska, if you're not a native Alaskan, the doors don't open very easily. Anyway. I finally started volunteering at a senior center there. That was fun. And then I found myself volunteering for one of the local hospitals there. They had a program at the local hospital there. It was basically if you were a patient and after you went home and you needed a little bit of extra assistance when you went home, I was your pal for a month, maybe two months. I didn't do any medical things on you, didn't change your bandage or nothing like that. I was your buddy. I took you to the doctors, I took you to the movies, to run errands, whatever you wanted to do. So that's what I started doing. Then, when we left Alaska, we moved to Tucson. So here I go again, being in a city again. I missed not being in a community. So moved to Tucson,

and so I started volunteering a little bit in Tucson. I volunteered a year and a half or so with the Sonoran Desert Museum. I said I don't want to handle animals, I don't want to do nothing with no snakes, because I don't like snakes. I started inputting data into their computer system. Did that for about a year and a half. Volunteered once or twice a week. After I finished with the data, I stated volunteering with the Pima County Superior Courts. I started inputting court data into the files. And then I found myself volunteering again with a women's shelter.

KL: We are good. We have ten minutes left, and I did want to offer you all in the crowd a chance to ask some of your own questions if you have any for Elvira. If you want to raise your hand, Helen will walk the microphone to you.

AM: Thank you so much. I feel a real heart connection to you, and I don't even really know you. I love this thing of including Valle and Tusayan. I think, in my period of time growing up here and being part of the community, that was always very true. And there was also sort of a divide sometimes that was hard to bridge. So that was beautiful. I'm just a Grand Canyon Village lover, and that you had that same love for this community in other decades really touched me.

EA: And you're right. The thing is, when I came here, I didn't like a divide. Park service and Tusayan. I know Valle's a little further, but when I would try to do anything and everything, I did it for the community. The community was Grand Canyon and Tusayan. It's kind of like the park service. Green blood runs deep, and we're a big family. And here at Grand Canyon-Tusayan, we were one big family. Whatever happened, it affected all of us, whether you worked for the park service, Verkamp's, the concessions, or any of the helicopter companies. Whether it was good, bad, or ugly, or positive, or negative, it affected all of us. We were all one big family here. I really appreciated that, that finally I was able to be part of a family here.

AM: Thank you for all that you have done. Barbara and I were so proud to be at the Shoshone picnic when you and your husband received the awards this summer. But as you were talking about all of your volunteer work for the county health department, I thought about the American Indians that live here at Grand Canyon, and there's a sizeable population of American Indians that live here. They're off the reservation. I'm not sure how they get their medical care. Was your involvement with the county to provide health care, or to supplement the health care for the American Indians that live here at Grand Canyon?

EA: Yes and no. What I meant by that yes and no, is that you're right. The Native Americans here, they could go to Tuba City for their medical needs there, but just like the rest of this community, it was going to be difficult for them or for us to go all the way to Tuba, to Flagstaff, things like that. When I say that, the medical stuff that was here, it was for all of us. It was for everyone. For every multicultural community, people that were here. The Native Americans that live in the community, they were able to get free dental care and everything else. We were all just one big happy family. It wasn't subsidized, in any way.

AM: Yes, Vera, thank you. Wayne Ranney. I didn't want to call you Elvira, unless you think I was Roberto scolding you, which I assume happens. You mentioned that Samuel stayed and graduated from high school in Arizona. I just wonder, if you don't mind, talking about how Samuel – life has evolved since his Grand Canyon days.

EA: Samuel was about five years old when we got to Big Bend National Park. So, he learned about the national parks there, and things. So then, when we moved here, it was totally different. He got involved as time went on. There was a wonderful Explorer program here, and Samuel got involved as an Explorer program. That kind of started opening little things. He was hanging around a lot with the rangers, and part of the Explorer program. The Explorers were being used in a lot of different ways. What brings a lump to my throat is that I remember what President Ford said to him. You are who you are because you're Samuel Arnberger. Samuel chose, when he left – he had mentors here in the park from the protection division. We started seeing that. We didn't know what was going to be happening. Samuel went on to college and everything. He actually came back to work here in the canyon as a PSAR ranger here. He could do that, because we were no longer here. As time went on, years later, Samuel became law enforcement with the national park system. Third generation. At this time, we're trying to get his little four year old to start maybe being the fourth person. Samuel went on to become park service law enforcement. Green blood runs deep.

AM: Where's he stationed at?

EA: He's stationed right now at Saguaro National Park. It's really interesting, because even now he runs into people, and they'll say: "Arnberger. Are you by any chance...?" The good thing is they don't say: "Is Rob your dad?" He says: "Are you related to Rob Arnberger?" And he says: "Yah, that's my dad."

KL: Thank you guys for those excellent questions and comments. I just have one more for Elvira, and this is what we'll close on. I wonder if you'll tell us what it was like to leave Grand Canyon in 2000, and what's it like to come back?

EA: It was really difficult to leave this community, to leave Grand Canyon, Tusayan, Valle. This community opened its arms to me as Elvira, not as a superintendent's wife. When I was leaving here, a lot of the people came up and said: "We're going to miss you. And we're very thankful for all that you did do." And I told them: "It's not all what I did. It's all what the community did, too." I just opened a few doors, with the help of Paul Babbitt. I had a lot of help. There was people in the communities, in Tusayan and here, that helped open those doors. It's great to return back. As soon as we start driving in, it's like home. It makes me feel good to come back, but it also gives me tears, only because the people think that I gave a lot to them, but in return, they gave me more. They gave me more by accepting me. I wasn't your traditional superintendent's wife. It helped, and I appreciated everything that people did by opening their arms. I come back and I'm greeted with open arms by a multicultural community.

KL: I thought your father in law was really perceptive with that comment about what a lonely role it could be to be the superintendent's wife, but it does not sound like you were lonely here.

EA: Nope! I was probably lonely for the first four or five months, and then I said: "I got to do something." You know! I can't sit around and watch soap operas all the time!

KL: Thank you so much for sharing those experiences with us.

EA: Thank you. Thank you very much.