

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Jason Nez (JN)

Interviewer: Haley Johnson (HJ) and Audience Members (AM)

Subject: Reflects on Grand Canyon National Park archeology and fire management.

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HJ: Hi everyone. Welcome, and thank you for joining us. For the sake of the oral history interview I'm just going to say today is Thursday, February 1, 2019. We're in the Shrine of the Ages in Grand Canyon National Park. I'm Haley Johnson. I'm the vice president of the historical society, and I'm here with my friend Jason for this oral history interview. He's agreed to share some of his experiences working with archeology and fire in and around Grand Canyon National Park. We'll talk for about 30 minutes and then we'll have plenty of time for questions, I hope, if you have any. So, Jason I'd like to just welcome you. Would you like to introduce yourself?

JN: Ya'ah'teh. *Navajo language introduction.* My name is Jason Nez. I'm Navajo and my clans are of the Zuni Edgewater, born for the Salt Clan. My mother's father is a Tangle people, and my father's father is the Mexican people. And that's just how we introduce ourselves.

HJ: Thank you for that introduction. To start off, I'd like to get a feel for your personal background. Would you start by telling us some about your family, maybe the place you grew up, a little bit?

JN: I grew up east of here. South of Tuba City there's a place called Coal Mine Mesa, and that's where I spent a lot of time with my grandparents, my aunts. Aunts and uncles and different people helped raise me, and I'm still out there whenever I can. We have cattle. We have horses. I've got a big fat horse; a donkey. We're out just working with them whenever we have funding.

HJ: I know you've worked for several units, programs, of the National Park Service as well as the Navajo Nation and the Museum of Northern Arizona. Can you walk us through some of those jobs, and maybe what led from one to another?

JN: I was a backcountry interper ranger over twenty years ago at Navajo National Monument, and I was stationed out at Keet Seel. And that's where I learned a lot of my academic archeology, was just being out there for two weeks at a time, reading all the archeology literature we had there at the monument. And then I started working for my tribe as a shovel monkey, just out excavating. And then starting to apply my science background in writing reports, writing site descriptions and all that, and then I got into surveying, more excavations, and eventually I was

managing the field projects and managing the lab in Flagstaff. And then I started working for the Museum of Northern Arizona, and then came here to Grand Canyon. Been here since 2011, with one season with the forest season. I'm waiting for the next three weeks; I can start my season with fire.

HJ: I'm sure you're looking forward to that, right? One question I have really wanted to ask you; what excites you about working with cultural resources in public lands?

JN: I think that, as a Native person working with cultural resources, it's a way to connect to things. We walk around, we're looking across the landscape, and, oftentimes, we don't pay attention to what we're – we're just out walking. We're enjoying the scenery. We're enjoying the sounds. But, growing up on the reservation, I'm always looking down. I'm looking for tracks. I'm looking for where the sheep went. I'm looking for who's ahead of me and what they're up to. And as an adult archeologist, I'm looking down; I'm like: "Oh, here's a flake. Oh, here's another flake. Over here's a projectile point. Over here's some pottery sherds. Oh, here's a rock art panel. And here's a small pueblo out here." And to me, it's like this innate nature to find it. I jokingly call it The Force, but I legitimately think sometimes that there's something out there. I'm walking around, and it's like: "Come here! Come here! Come here! Come here!" And I go over there, and I think that's just a part of allowing myself to hear what nature has to tell me. Allowing myself to have learned that language of history and science, and allowing it to communicate this to me. That's what excites me.

HJ: I can tell. Kind of along those same lines, if someone was new to the subject, how might you explain to them how fire and archeology fit together, and why your position is important?

JN: Right now, I'm just a regular firefighter, but I also cover a lot of cultural resource issues on fires. So, what we want to do is, when there is a wildfire, we want to plan out how we're going to suppress it, whether we're going to let it burn and do its natural thing... And while we're doing that, we're also assessing the possible impacts to cultural resources. Because everywhere we go here on the South Rim, into the Coconino Forest, into the Kaibab Forest, there's people that have been there for 10,000 years. We have lithic scatters, rock art panels. We have old cabins. And the ones we know about, we're making those determinations. Is it fire sensitive? Is it going to be damaged? What can we do? What should we do? And can we even do it? Is the fire running toward it? And we try to figure all these things out, and then go out and try to protect or mitigate damage to our sites that are out there. So, it's a lot of technological work using GIS. It's a lot of field experience. And a lot of fire experience. And we have a great team here at the canyon and in the forest that were able to come together – put all these minds together and come up with really good plans for taking care of our sites out there.

HJ: That's very important work. Thank you! In your work with fire you've been all over the region. What, if anything, I'm sure, have you learned from working with other cultures and other cultural resources. Maybe prehistoric and more recent?

JN: What have I learned?

HJ: Yah, what have you learned, personally, that's most important.

JN: As a scientist, as an archeologist, there's things we learn in school; there's things we learn in books about history, time; and things I've learned as a Native person through our own oral histories. And one of the things that we talk about is Clovis – people that were hunting mastodons. People that were, according to our scientific way, they came down about 13,000 years ago. And these are sort of things that we don't really see. We don't really – from a personal level, we don't quite connect. And I was out on the Wildcat and the Fuller Fire two years ago doing some post-burn-effects monitoring for the North Kaibab, and we're standing out there, and this place *burned*. It was fine white ash. And I was out there with my friend and coworker, and I was like: "OK. I want you to just imagine everything you learned at NAU – the university. Imagine it in a big box. Now get rid of it. I'm going to show you how we do it." So, we're out there. There's still trees burning up there. We're in a good, safe spot. And I was like: "Do you see this? Hold it out, and when it gets warm, we're going to go over there." So, we're standing there, and I was like: "Do you feel it? Do you feel it? Let's go over there." And we went over there, and there was a L-shaped pueblo that was exposed by the fire. And my coworker, he was just like: "Oh my god! Did you know that was there?" I said: "Nope. Never been here before." And I was telling him: "Now, I want you to focus. I want you to just let The Force flow." And we're standing there, and I was like: "Stop! Look at your feet!" And he looked down at his boot, and there was something sticking out, and I just reached over, and I was like: "Clovis point." And it was a Clovis point! So, it's one of those ways that you really connect to landscapes and history when you can touch those things, when you know they're there, and when you know the story, the scientific and the cultural stories, behind it. And those stories are out there! And that's why I'm out there.

HJ: Let's change gears a little bit, really quick. Can you talk to me a little bit about why you think it is important to have traditionally associated Native Americans working in Grand Canyon National Park?

JN: When we look at the history of most parks, it's not always the story of the we. Sometimes there's a dark history out there, and in modern times, we're trying to work past it. We're trying to work together and manage these places properly. And when we think about the history of somewhere like Grand Canyon, there's 13,000 years of Native American occupation and use. And that's not just people living here, it's people managing. We think of management as: "We have this plan, we're going to write it out, and we're going to do it." But from a Native perspective, these things are the ceremonies we do for hunting. During this time of year, we're going to hunt over here, and what that does, is it helps maintain populations and it helps move animals across the landscape. When we go into the forest to gather pinyon nuts, there's also the benefit of all those people in the forest who are doing fuel reductions, who are building campfires and were utilizing resources in those areas. So, in that way, it is management. We're encouraging animals to move, we're moving plants, seeds, sometimes not on purpose, across the landscape, but we are changing these things, mostly for the better, and I think that oftentimes we tend to forget there's that long period of occupation when we were doing that.

HJ: Is there a downside to being a Native American working in the national park, do you think?

JN: I think that sometimes The Force is too strong. I can't go for a walk without finding anything. Going for a walk out on the edge: "Oh, here's an arrowhead! Oh, here's another one!" I'm like: "I'm going to turn off my brain and go walk by the airport," and I'm like: "Oh! Pottery sherds! Pottery sherds!" All over the place.

HJ: I know one of my favorite past times and definitely one of your favorite past times is, I think you've called it hunting for pottery and pot sherds and stuff like that. Do you have any memorable experiences out in the field, maybe on your homeland or anything like that, of coming across a ruin or a potsherd or anything like that?

JN: Everywhere we go out here, there is something. And as someone who's been mostly everywhere – I've been on fires in the Coconino Forest from south of here all the way to the reservation. I've walked along the rim. I've hiked along the canyon. There's just something everywhere, and you can't help but find it. And when you allow these things to pull you, when you allow them to communicate to you, I think that you interact with the landscape a lot better. If you really allow these things to – I guess it's sort of metaphysical, but when you allow them to communicate with you, you'll realize that they're not telling people to vandalize. They're not telling people to damage. They're not telling people to steal. They're just like: "We're here. Ask questions." What do they have on Reddit? "Ask me anything." That's what these artifacts are doing out there. They're educating us. They're reconnecting us, and if we allow ourselves to listen, then they will.

HJ: Thank you. I think you kind of covered this a little bit, but do you have a recommendation for any of us who would really be interested in learning more about the rock art in this region? How would we go about learning more about it, respectfully?

JN: It's easy to say find an archeologist and ask them, but I can't be everywhere. There's the museum in Flagstaff. They have really great people that are really good at interpreting rock art. There's people like Jerry. In an ideal world, everything in my brain, I would have communicated to all the rangers and all of the people whose job it is to interpret these things and tell visitors about it. Maybe we'll get to that ideal world and we'll all know what's up here, I guess.

HJ: Would you recommend the same, what you just said, if someone was looking to learn more about Navajo culture – Navajo way of life? Would you recommend the same sources?

JN: Well, we have a big reservation full of Navajo people there, and it would be as easy as asking, but... We have a museum. We have a historic preservation office. But it can be difficult finding the right communicator, the right person, and I'm not quite sure how to answer that part. They're out there. We're all teachers in a way, and we talk to the right people and they'll open our eyes up a little more.

HJ: I think that's why I ask that question. A lot of people want to learn more about Navajo culture, but they don't know how to go about it. Maybe they're afraid of being insensitive accidentally. That's why I asked that. Thank you.

JN: Yah, and I think that is something my tribe could work on. We have a parks and rec department, and again, we have the historic office. And since the '60s, since these departments started, it's something that we're moving very – we're getting there. Eventually we'll be able to interpret these things and tell these stories to anyone, I guess.

HJ: Hopefully. Let's switch it up again. What's next for you in your career, in the area or at Grand Canyon?

JN: I'm starting my season here in a couple weeks – three weeks, I hope. I'll be with fire for the rest of the season again.

HJ: I think I asked you about this a couple days ago – I asked if you would be spending some time on the North Rim. Can you elaborate on what you're going to be doing this summer with fire?

JN: As a firefighter, I'm just a firefighter. I just love cleaning the engine, sweeping the floor, and doing all the things we do. Training and getting ready. If the ground is wet and stays wet through the spring, I think we're going to be a lot of training and waiting. But when it hits, it hits. Last year I was out until the end of October. It was a long, dark season.

HJ: Yah, it was. Let's see. So, you did an interview with Grand Canyon Trust recently. Well, maybe not recently. During it you talked about being in balance with the past, future, neighbors, and sky. Can you share some of your thoughts about balance, and how you're trying to achieve it? Do you remember that?

JN: As a Navajo person, one of the bases of my culture, tradition, and religion, and science. Of those four things; I can't take them apart. They're inseparable. They're all part of the same. They don't exist without each other. So, I'm always looking to be in balance with everything around me. And sometimes I'm not, and that's just human nature. But I want to know what happened in the past, so I can learn from it. And I learn from these things that happened a long time ago, and it makes me a better person in the present. And being a better person in the present, I'm able to influence the future. I'm able to know what I'm leaving behind. I'm aware of my potential damage that could adversely affect future generations. So I have to be in balance with where I'm coming from and where I'm going. And I have neighbors. I have family. I have different people around me that I have to be in balance with them. So, looking at all these directions – backwards, forwards, sideways, right, left, I also have to be in balance with above. I guess religion is above us, too, and those are things I have to be in balance with. Air, environmental quality. You have to be in balance with water and earth beneath me. So, considering all these things, I'm always trying to balance them out. I'm always trying to be careful where I'm at, and just be aware of what's around me and how I'm affecting it. And that's sort of – I think a lot of us strive for it, it just has a different name, a different label.

HJ: Thank you. Someone actually asked me to ask you this one. You don't have to answer it, remember that. If you were in a position of power in the park service – I know. I know.

JN: Secretary of Interior.

HJ: You have my vote! Is there anything specific you would do better to better manage the park or its resources? It's a loaded question, I know.

JN: Hum. I don't know. I talked a lot about the history of the area and some of the stories that we're not quite aware of. We know there's a story out there, but we don't hear it. The park, and parks in general, are working on better relationships with the tribes – the former occupants of these lands. We have the Desert View working with local craftsman to showcase crafts and arts and all that and a little bit of history, and those are great steps forward. I can see those things expanding and going throughout the park service, not just this park. I think that these are good things that are happening with or without me. That's something to build on. Something to make the world a better place for Natives and non Natives. The more these stories are told, and they are out there and we're aware of them, then we can make better decisions for everyone into the future.

HJ: That was a good answer. Say someone a hundred years from now – we're going forward in the future a hundred years. Someone's listening to this interview, or watching us on tape. Is there anything you would like to tell them, or request of them, or just say for them to hear.

JN: We are trying our best. The world is changing around us. The weather is changing. The earth is changing. The people are changing. We're trying our hardest to stay in balance and leave something for them.

HJ: That is very important. I hope there's something left. I'm going to ask you one last question, and then I think we're going to open it up to the floor, so start thinking of your questions. I have a microphone runner somewhere. Thank you, Kristen. My last question for you – do you have a favorite place in Grand Canyon National Park? So within park boundaries, your favorite place.

JN: I'm a bit ethnocentric, but the confluence is very important to Navajos, and it's important to me. We just ended a long, eight-year conflict to try to preserve and protect that special place, not just for Natives, but for everyone. And I'm glad it's over, and I love going back over there. I was just there on Monday, and it was beautiful. No trams, though.

HJ: OK, but do you have a second favorite?

JN: Actually, down at the river confluence is even better than up on top.

HJ: I knew you were going to say that. Thank you, Jason, that was really great. Do we have any questions from the audience? Right here in front.

AM: There are, what, eleven tribes that are affiliated with the canyon? How close do you feel with the other tribes? How similar are you all? How do you feel you're different from Hopi and some of the other affiliated tribes?

JN: We are close in that we have common goals. Common goals in management, protection, and preservation. We're separated by language, we're separated by color, but there's single things we believe in, and single things that we're able to agree on and work together, just like – I'm going to reference this Escalade again. It's something that we're able to set aside our differences and just get it done. Did that answer it?

HJ: Anyone else? Any other questions?

AM: Jason, thanks for being here. What was it that brought you into archeology from all the other things you could have done? What's your educational background? Are you planning any advanced degrees? And any books in mind?

JN: Maybe a book. My background is actually in environmental science. I graduated from Northern Arizona University, and there was no work. I had an environmental science degree. There was nothing going on anywhere, and one of my professors, she says: "You know, there's a job opening at Navajo National Monument. You should check it out." And those were the old days, where you could go in, do an interview, and get hired that day at that unit. None of this six-month stuff. And I started there, and I just loved it. I started as a Navajo, strictly not knowing what I was getting into, and over time I realized our cultural connections, our stories, to these prehistoric people. And then my wariness, I guess, fear, I guess is a word I would use, sort of dissipated. And once I realized these connections, I was stronger. I was tougher. I walked around and learned things, and it just sort of turned me into what I am today, able to walk around in these places without fear, without those apprehensions. And the second part – I don't know. Maybe I'll get a master's degree or a PhD someday. Or I'll just win a lot of money and donate it, and then get an honorary PhD. Yah. That would be easier than going to school.

HJ: Any other questions? Way back there!

AM: Is it in the planning for the inter-tribal heritage site at Desert View to have representatives of the nations with associations to the canyon to be there on a regular basis? Maybe a rotating basis, or simultaneous basis, to be able to speak to visitors about their heritage, their connections, to the canyon? And also, I'm hearing you talk about your incredible ability to walk around, and, oh, here's a pot sherd, and oh, here's this, because I'm somebody that never sees anything, even if I'm looking at the ground. You know, we have the wonderful trail of time, which has done so much to help educate the public here in a very visitor-friendly way about the rock layers in the canyon. Do you foresee something being created like that, or just Native nation people who work here taking people out on walks and pointing things out to them and being able to share about the heritage?

JN: Well, I think that what's going on at Desert View has been great. It's been a great, positive step forward for the local community in Cameron and especially for the local reservations, just to get us out there. Unfortunately, I'm way out of the loop on everything. I get stuck in this fire world. I get stuck in this archeology world. And sometimes a lot of these issues, they are going on and I get busy with other things. I think that as time goes on, we'll be able to do these things and we'll have a better Native-oriented educational interpretive program, I guess. And that's also up to us, too. We can't just expect these things just to be given to us. Native people, we need to go out and we need to get those degrees. We need to get that education, and we also have to teach ourselves how to talk, teach ourselves how to interpret, teach ourselves to speak in public. I'm a very fortunate and spoiled person. I had a great upbringing with a lot of literature, a lot of books, a lot of insistence that I talk, and especially as a park ranger, too. And those opportunities, they're out there, we just have to... People like me, I have to encourage my siblings, my relatives, and all Native people to get out there and be part of it. Don't just talk about it, but let's do it!

HJ: Any other questions from the floor? Right up here in front.

AM: We live part of the year in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and we have conservation trusts in a lot of the towns on the Cape. There's also a Native American conservation trust. In our area, they have partnered together, and a member of the Wampanoag tribe and the conservancy where we live, which is Harwich, go together to sites and take guests, and they explain the significance of that site from both perspectives. They explain how they interpreted one another's behaviors back in the day, and how they misinterpreted what they were saying, and then there's a dialogue around that. Has anything like that ever been done here?

JN: Not officially, but a few – the people I work with, as an archeologist, too, it's my belief that the more I can teach other archeologists, the more I can teach other coworkers, the more I can teach other firefighters, the more they'll be able to see what I'm seeing. And when people can see what I'm seeing, they're going to feel how I feel about resources. They are going to love and care for these places and these resources and the people that identify them. So there's a big picture plan, I guess, for me being here, saying these things and educating people in the places I go, on the different fires, and when I talk to school groups and different organizations, it's like I'm trying to help people realize that those connections are there, we've just got to make them. I don't know if those things are going on officially, but certainly those are some of the things I do on my own.

AM: Maybe this kind of goes along with that last question. Is there anything that the non-Native archeological community believes about the history of your culture in the area that you disagree with?

JN: I don't know if I disagree with it, I just think that there's a bigger story out there that we're getting at. We're working together on telling it, but we have to always remember that this has only been three percent of the human occupation of Grand Canyon started with Pedro de Tovar was out toward Lipan Point in 1540. Even then, there was a long period of time when he was

gone, so it's less than three percent, so we need to work together on this other 97 percent to be able to tell that story, and maybe – it's just something to work towards. It's a goal, I think. Did that answer? I tend to ramble.

HJ: Any other questions out there? Don't be shy. Come on.

JN: And we are working together. There's an inter-tribal group – Grand Canyon Trust has been working with the tribes, and there's a lot of communication, and there's a lot of consultations that happen now, so it's not as dark as – I haven't said enough, I guess. If I keep talking, I'll tell you the whole story. We are working together.

HJ: I have another question. How can people like us, how can members of the historical society or the general public who maybe don't live in this area, how can we help you obtain your goal, or your coworkers. Does that make sense?

JN: I think the best thing we can do is learn about the people in the places we're at. Learn about who was there, and then just be supportive of your federal employees. We go through a lot, we get vilified sometimes, sometimes it gets rough, there's a lot of ups and downs, and just thank the maintenance guys, thank your interp rangers, thank your backcountry rangers. We're all working toward common goals in different ways. I'm just focusing on fire and science, and some people are looking at plants, and I make fun of them sometimes, but we're all working toward this greater picture of this place that we all care about, and we all love it. And you go to other park units, and there's people just as crazy about history as me. So just be supportive of them.

HJ: Would you recommend that people don't be afraid to ask questions as well?

JN: Yah! Don't be afraid to ask.

HJ: Any other questions out here?

JN: Thank you. If you have any further questions, just catch me.