

**Transcription:** Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

**Interviewee:** Jim Corson (JC), also at times Paula (P)

**Interviewer:** Tom Martin (TM)

**Subject:** Part 4 Glacier National Park

**Date of Interview:** February 15, 2021

**Method of Interview:**

**Transcriber:** Dannie Derryberry

**Date of Transcription:** August 7, 2021

**Transcription Reviewer:** Susan Seibel

**Keys:** Glacier National Park, Ralph Roan, Butte, Montana, Going-to-the-Sun Road maintenance and snow removal, Assistant Chief Naturalist, diversity of tourists, wildlife, park highways, fatality, campfire songs, professional old-timer Jim Wilt, Francis Elmore, Going-to-the-Sun Road visitors center, the Continental Divide, railroad, East Glacier Hotel, St. Mary's Lodge, Two Medicine Lodge, hikes, grizzly bear attacks, bear deterrents, West Glacier, East Glacier, avalanche, Barbara and the kids, family relocation, Mission 66 housing, Ed and Becky Hummel, Fred and Amy Binnewies, Class A uniforms, Washington, DC, offices' King's Row

TM: Today is Monday, February 15, 2021. This is a Grand Canyon Oral History Interview with Jim Corson. This is Part 4 of our interview with Jim. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Jim. How are you today?

JC: I am pretty good for a fellow who's 96.

TM: Good. I'm glad to hear it. Last time we learned about your time in Washington, DC, seven months of training in 1958, and then you got sent to Glacier National Park. Can you pick that story up for us?

JC: Right about there. I didn't take my children with me because moving them in and out of the school was mildly traumatic, and so I went out by myself to get started and lived in the bachelor dorm. We were just talking about that bachelor dorm today. It was a regular pathway for mice. They walked along a sill just outside the window and came in the window, if it was open, and made themselves at home in my bed, which is not nice in the middle of the night. However, at the dorm I met one of the best friends I ever had, and as we got acquainted at Glacier, it turned out I was in one of the best parks there ever was. And it's still good, by the way. I've been back.

TM: Who was that person you met?

JC: Who was the person that I met? He's dead and gone, but it was Ralph Roan, and he was a single man living in the bachelor dorm at that time. He heard that it was my birthday day, which is a kind of a landmark, and went back to his room and baked me a cake, which got us off to a pretty good start.

TM: Wow. What do you remember about him?

JC: Well, I remember too much. His growing up years were in Butte, Montana, which is a really rotten city. Have you ever been to Butte?

TM: No.

JC: The copper mines had put out a polluting smoke filled with copper, I guess, that killed everything for miles around. It was before we got real good on taking that out of the air. I don't know how it is now. Hopefully they've shut the damn thing down if it's the same as it was. Anyway, he was so poor that he sold newspapers on the corners, with old newspapers in his shoes to make up for the holes in his soles. And his mother taught school. His father was disabled by TB, and his sister was mildly retarded. She was a pretty functional human being, but she had a problem. She didn't go to school anymore because it was very difficult. So that was Ralph Roan. He later worked for me at the Job Corps camp in Cape Cod and died at age 56, I think. Not a good story.

[Reviewer's note: Ralph Roan died at 52, according to [Courier, The National Park Service Newsletter, Vol. 5, No. 3, Pg. 23.](#)]

Anyway, so I'm at Glacier. I met a fellow that's gonna be a friend for the rest of his life and my life, and I'm learning my way around. The park is an interpreter's dream because we've got everything in wildlife, we got everything in scenery, and we got pretty much everything in weather. The weather is not abominable there. In the winter we got 15 feet of snow, maybe [laughs]. That's not too good, but we also had the sides divided up. The east side and the west side were operated more or less separately because of the winter. The winter snows there closed the park highway, which was called the Going-to-the-Sun Road, and opening it up in the spring was exciting because of that 15 foot of snow I mentioned. You could go up and you knew where the road was last winter, and they started closing it, but you didn't know where it was now for sure. So they just plowed down and plowed down and plowed down until they got to this road, which was from a conservation standpoint an abomination, but from a scenic tourism standpoint a miracle and a wondrous trip. A lot of people like that highway.

TM: Hey, Jim, I've got a question for you. You took over as chief naturalist from somebody else.

JC: Assistant Chief.

TM: Assistant Chief Naturalist, okay. Did you get a chance to talk with the person you were taking over for to learn from them a little bit about, you know, what was going down and what was expected of you and what you were supposed to do?

JC: I'm well acquainted with him because he was there for a couple of weeks after I got there and packed up with his daughter and moved to Washington. He was part Black, not very, but enough to feel a little out of place in Montana. And going back to Washington, DC, was something he viewed with pleasure.

TM: The Park Service even today, well, they're kind of better today, but they're not known for their diversity.

JC: No. We had a few Black tourists come by. But generally speaking, tourism is expensive, and that was enough reason why a lot of them didn't make it. If we had Blacks, they were in a car, and they were a family usually. We didn't have hikers; we didn't have stray ones because they were more likely to be found in the big cities. So we did have all the wildlife there is—grizzly bears and mountain lions and smaller lions, like the Canada lynx and whatever. You name a mountain animal, and we had 'em.

TM: Elk? I'm thinking of moose, maybe, elk, marmot,

JC: Yes. They, we had an area called the North Fork. I think it was the North Fork of the Flatbed River, and if you were wanting to see a moose, you more or less had to drive up a two-lane road, not a very good road, to the North Fork and you might see one. You might not, too.

TM: And you had sheep, too?

JC: Anyway, we mainly dealt with people who came in on the east side or the west side of a good, improved two-way highway, and they traveled across the mountains. I don't even remember how high they got up but not nearly to the top, about halfway up on a highway that wouldn't be built now, or most likely wouldn't be built, because it was a desecration of a wilderness area. But it was absolutely as beautiful as a highway could get. We had very few highway accidents because anybody who got on that highway was suddenly a very careful driver. They could visualize going off a mountainside and

going down 15,000 feet, perhaps. This was kind of the side of the mountain during the days of the CCCs, and consequently we were more interested in creative work for people than we were in conservation. That came later. So I lived on the west side, but it was my assignment to be in charge of the interpretation on the east side, which was my good fortune because the man in charge of the west side, the chief naturalist, if I'm allowed to say so, over the years was not much account. He didn't want to give a talk. And the slightest excuse meant we wouldn't have a talk, or we certainly wouldn't have group singing, which was my favorite possibility there. We had camp songs, and we had a printed pamphlet that gave us the words for 30 campground songs. And before we'd have an evening talk, we'd warm up the whole crowd by singing their favorite campfire songs.

TM: Can you remember some of those songs?

JC: Oh, I could if I had to, but if you've ever sung around a campfire, you'd know some of them, too. Oh, dear. Well, "Sweet Adeline" was surely on the list, and "Camping Tonight on the Old Campground," and I don't know. At the time these were standard campfire songs, and we had 32 and the words of them so that the folks that came didn't even have to know them. They could sing along. But seasonal rangers and full-time rangers, too, had to be able to lead a songfest. And my chief did not have the slightest interest in leading a songfest. And it was quite possible to hire a seasonal ranger who didn't want to, but he would lie about it [laughs] because he wanted the job. So seasonal songfests varied, but everybody seemed to enjoy them.

We had an old-timer there that was a professional old-timer. He didn't do any work. He was hired as a camp tender, but his specialty was being a character and wandering around and talking to people in the camp. And he had his wife—and she had a sister—doing the work, cleaning the campgrounds every day and, you know, the restrooms and all the camp trash all the work that had to be done for the campgrounds to be nice. We referred to them as Jim Wilt's two wives, which was not very nice. But Jim Wilt had been a cowboy, and had been an explorer, and a fellow who just got to know the West down deep and loved to talk.

TM: How would you describe him? Was he tall or short?

JC: Yeah, he was more than six feet tall. Cars had running boards in those days, and he'd put his foot on your running board and your car would actually tilt a little. He was a big guy. One of his famous stories was being shot. It's not as good as a story as it could have been because he shot himself. Getting on his horse with a rifle one day, he put a gun into his midsection, or a bullet, and he had to ride 20 miles to get anybody to help

him. Stories like that, you know, are not common, and at campfires in the Park Service they were not common. We were lucky to have a genuine character on hand. And all of the rangers who spoke at the campfires came from far and wide, so we had a wide variety of camp talks. I gave one if somebody else was sick or something. I loved giving them, and I loved leading the songs. Mostly I considered this the way it was supposed to be. My supervisor was very shy and did not feel that he had any reason to be singing for public consumption. He was a different kind of a fellow altogether and liked to be in the office and liked to be informed on everything that was going on but did not like to go out and meet the public. So I had a field day every day. And his name was Francis Elmore, and he had been there for 20 years. I don't know if you know the Park Service well or not but being in the same job for 20 years was not going to hone you and make you better. It was gonna wear you down.

Otherwise, what was good about Glacier Park? Well, Going-to-the-Sun Road, when I got there, had a little visitors center, which was entirely appropriate. They had a stand that looked like a wayside fruit stand, you know, an agricultural dispersal by the road on a farm. And it had wheels under the edges of the building so that they could wheel it up into the parking lot and open a lid, which was a kind of a shed roof, and meet the visitors there in the wilderness and tell them all about it. During the time that I was there, our office of constructing new buildings got the wild notion that we really had to have something much better and decided they would build a monument up on top, which was a literally terrible idea. But it had nice restrooms, and it had shiny windows, and it had views in all directions, and it was very attractive to tourists. And those of us who loved the wilderness found it utterly distasteful. In fact, one fellow lost his job by disagreeing with the superintendent on whether we should have that building there at all. The answer is we should not, but if you've got the whole damn planning system working to build something very nice up there, it's hard to convince others that it's all a mistake. So when I went back to visit later, why, we had this lovely visitors center up on the highest point of the highway, not of the park, and it didn't— You know, it wasn't instantly insulting because most people weren't in the spirit of preserving wilderness. Most people were tense about wilderness. They didn't feel comfortable, and when they went in a nice visitor center with counters and people waiting on you and answering your questions and nice restrooms and maybe a souvenir bookstore, they felt that that was what was right. And what else there? Well, we moved—

TM: Hey, Jim, if you lived on the west side but your talks and all were on the east side, did—

JC: I'm getting to that.

TM: Okay, thank you.

JC: The east side and the west side really were divided by the Continental Divide so that the west side was the winter residence because there weren't many visitors in the winter and the road was closed in the winter. You could drive north and south because there were population areas, but you couldn't drive over the mountains on that road. The railroad had gone through, and they built another highway beside the railroad to allow maintenance and stuff. But that was down much lower, and it was still mighty scenic. It was a nifty ride on the railroad.

TM: Was that further south then?

JC: It would have been a little further south. Not much, about 15 or 20 miles maybe. Anyway, riding through on the train was popular also because it was certainly a scenic trip, and we even put a naturalist on once in a while in the summer. We didn't have enough to put them on regularly. Maybe we did. Maybe once a day, and one man only, something like that. Anyway, that was different. And the people who stopped there stopped at the East Glacier Hotel. And there was another hotel north of there, the St. Mary's Lodge, and the Two Medicine Lodge, and the Grand— Oh, dear. Shoot. Anyway, the greatest of them was the most far north, and it's the one I can't even come up with the name. But all of them were mountain lodges and rustic and expensive so that if you wanted to stay overnight there, you'd better bring some money with you. But then in the daytime while you were there, there were about four hikes to choose from, varying in difficulty, and the longest one was about 25 miles. Went out and hiked up the mountain and then back down on a good trail, and the ranger had to be the leader and the speaker and the fellow who interpreted all the wildlife you could see. The thought that you could meet a moose or a grizzly bear on this trail added a little spice, but you didn't ordinarily.

TM: Did you lead these hikes?

JC: I led the hikes whenever anybody else couldn't go, and it was what I enjoyed the most, so somebody who couldn't go was fine with me. A lot of these folks come from the city so that they were not really mountain-tuned, and the way I remember it anyway, I was leading a hike most of the time. You know, having somebody not able to take it that day was not remarkable. And that was in each of those locations. Many Glacier was the third one, and the biggest lodge was at Many Glacier. And St. Mary's, and that was right on the road going across. And then Two Medicine was a separate little area south between us and the railroad. With a few rangers and a few visitors, it didn't have a great

appeal that St. Mary's and Mani Glacier did. But those were full of heavy-paying visitors, and full of activities, and full of scenery, and about as good as it gets.

TM: How many people were on your staff?

JC: Well, on the staff I had 22 seasonal rangers. They were mostly college teachers, mostly people who loved to be out in the wilderness, and many were people who came back every year. So a guy might have been at the park 15 years when I got there, which meant that he knew a lot more about it than I did, but all I had to do was listen to learn everything I needed.

TM: Well, I want to go back to Frances Elmore for a minute 'cause you mentioned he'd been there for 20 years. Was he desperate to stay there because he loved the place or because he'd found a niche where he could just kind of hang out?

JC: He loved it because nobody really depended on him to work hard or do anything useful. He was a reviewer kind of a supervisor. He reviewed everything that went on and criticized it, but he didn't like to do it. I'm sure he's dead and gone by now, or I wouldn't be so freely speaking because he was my supervisor, and I gave him a hard time quite often. He had a hard time finding ways to get back at me, but I'll give you a nice example because we had a natural history association. We printed up the little booklets that we passed out to the visitors and sold for a quarter or 50 cents, and so we had a business there. And the two of us, plus the secretary—no, two secretaries, actually. We each had one—ran this business of deciding what should be printed, what should be reprinted, and how many copies we needed, and all the things that went with running a little publication business. In December I went somewhere on some business, I can't remember what even— Anyway, I went away in December, and there wasn't any reason in God's world why he couldn't do anything that I had left behind. And, of course, the end of the year meant things were due and required, and he saved all of those for me so that they'd be late, and I'd look bad.

TM: Oh, my gosh.

JC: Nice guy... Anyway, people didn't dislike him. He didn't do things wrong. He didn't stick his neck out. You met one or two of him in every park you went to, sort of a standard employee, you know, of the government, relaxed and enjoying himself. I don't know why I'm dwelling this time and thinking back to the good old days except that it made me look good. And looking good mattered so that when we got ratings on how we were doing, my ratings were always good. His were just so-so. And we did have interesting things to do there—moving summer and winter sounds bad, but they were

tied to what was going on so that we had school for the kids, actually, in both places, but on the east side there was hardly any population, and you might have to ride a bus 15 miles to go to school. On the west side there was a sizeable community, one inside and one outside the park. The outside one was made of private property, which included a grocery store and a post office and, oh, several things so that visitors had the services they needed, but in the winter, it got very damn quiet. And we did our shopping at the one store that was there and liked it, and if we didn't like it, we'd get in the car and drive 30 miles to the next community. And that was fine except that the weather didn't always permit you to come back after you'd driven 30 miles, and you might have to spend the night elsewhere. Glacier was fun that way. West Glacier was a sizeable community in the summer, especially, with a lodge and souvenir stores and whatever. East Glacier had less so that in a way it was more fun. You had nature and that was the main attraction, and you had other park employees who were always an attraction and most always good neighbors. So we loved moving from the west to the east and then back again for the winter season. The winter season had social events, and I don't know how many employees we had there, but it might have been 40 or 50, and so we had a sizeable community. That was fine.

TM: Okay. So if you had 20 or so seasonals, how many do you think permanents did you have?

JC: Permanent?

TM: Yeah.

JC: For the whole park?

TM: Yeah.

JC: Geez, I ought to know but I don't. Let's guess, though, that it was likely a hundred because we had a maintenance staff, and we had the folks who did the highway with maintenance, but it was damn difficult maintenance in the spring and fall when it was snowed in or snowing again. And everybody in the park went up to watch them plowing the road in the spring because plowing the road was a death-defying activity. We didn't have much bad luck, but we had one avalanche that buried perhaps four people. They knew where to dig for almost everybody and dug everybody out in pretty good time, but one guy was in the snow for eight hours and when he came out, he was able to easily get disability although he was not ruined forever. He was more or less ruined for normal activities because spending eight hours under an avalanche is not good mental exercise. Anyway, we loved him, and he stayed in the area because everybody loved



him, and we didn't think a whole lot about this, it was just part of his job. Anyway, we'd just drive up and watch from a distance when they were plowing this road. And, you know, they'd start up 15 feet of snow, and they'd plow where the road was last year and hope that it was still there. So they'd plow down and plow down and plow down and shovel a lot of snow out of the highway until they got to the highway. And then it had to be fixed some because the weather was not easy on it.

And so when you were driving this highway, it didn't look like a real good highway. There were mountainsides poking out into the road, and there were drop-offs almost everywhere you went. You'd go through a cut in the cliff once in a while and have land on both sides, but most of the time you could see down. Most of the time the driver was paying a lot of attention to driving, and his wife was [laughs] holding her breath. We had one accident that I'd rather not think about even now. A man and his wife and daughter came to the park, and the wife just looked at it and was terrified. The father and the daughter kidded her in joshery, you know, and gave her a hard time and said that, alright, she could ride in the back and they'd ride up front where you saw more what was going on. And the bad part of the story is that a big boulder came down and crushed the back of the car and killed her. And my brother-in-law was visiting. He was a doctor, and everybody knew he was a doctor, so they showed up at my house, asking if the doctor could come up and declare somebody dead. It wasn't something he couldn't do. It was not something he expected to do. That's the worst accident we had. We didn't have two-car collisions. We didn't have anybody go off the side, and we did have a large maintenance crew who spent a lot of time keeping that road safe. The interpreters on both sides talked about the safety hazards and talked about the animals and lived almost a picnic life. You know, they had summer quarters, but summer quarters are not very fancy. And these rangers came from all over the country to be seasonals there. The one in charge, so to speak, of my side had been coming for 15 years, and he had discovered that he could be a lot of things without having to work so he was writing a book on birds, and he'd been writing this book on birds, for God's sake, for 15 years and it really was an excuse to do nothing. [Laughs] He brought three kids, and one of the trips that we had, a hike up the mountains, this guy said, "Oh, take this boy along. He wants to go." They went up the mountain, and a group of about eight or ten, I guess, met a mother grizzly. That's exactly what we'd been telling them about and what they shouldn't do, and to keep from doing that you sang as you walked along the trail. You had bells that you rattled along the trail. You were taking precautions, but if a bear got on that trail, it was easier than coming through the woods, and so they stayed on it. In this case they caught the group flat footed. The boy was 10, and I know his father just asked the ranger to take him along. Anyway, he was mauled, and a lady with the group was mauled, and the ranger with the group was up in the tree secure when he looked down and here's the mother grizzly eating the boy with his head in her mouth. This

ranger came down out of the tree and attacked the bear from behind and got the boy out of her mouth. But the boy's head was bent for life because of the pressure, and both eyes were hanging out of the sockets. We all had to work at getting the group together and getting him up to the hospital 75 miles away. I was involved as a driver, driving a government vehicle I'd never driven before, but that was my role. I was an interpreter. They were mostly the rangers that were driving, and they were, most of them, you know, the Red Cross life savers, they were the most of the folks who took care of accidents and things like that. But in the car, I had the woman who was mauled, and she was mauled real badly. She was up the tree, for God's sake, but not far enough, and the mother grabbed her leg and pulled her down and took a bite out of her thigh. She was the one I was driving to the hospital without knowing whether she was dying or not. We just had amateur first aiders. And the ranger, when he pulled the boy out, still had a live grizzly bear to cope with, and so he just threw himself over the boy. And mama grizzly took a big piece out, oh, the size of a woman's purse, I guess, out of his thigh, out of his back thigh. And this boy was mildly crippled for the rest of his life and was a basketball coach back home where he was teaching school. So, he was mauled for life.

TM: And so, clearly there had been no thought to send the rangers out on their hikes with weapons?

JC: No, we didn't carry any weapons. We were instructed that it was wise to have a tin can full of stones and keep rattling them, but at the time the animals were sacred, and the rangers were not. I think we did modify that a little. I know we got guns in the parks later, but that time and that group of people were very poorly provided for meeting a grizzly on the trail.

TM: Right.

JC: Anyway, it did change. I remember when guns were first offered for rangers. We didn't expect the naturalists to have one, but the rangers all should have one. I remember being doubtful as to whether I wanted my rangers to have guns or not. That was later in a different location where there was a lot less hazard. Anyway—

TM: Well, I'll want to ask you about that later because in your career you would have seen the transition there.

JC: Oh, yeah.

TM: So I'm gonna make a note to ask you about that later, but I do want to ask you when did Barbara and the kids get a chance to come out and stay with you?

JC: They came out when school let out. We put them back in school where we went to school because they'd been there in and out two or three times. We'd moved, and it seemed like a good idea. I'm not sure whether it was or not because they loved the schools at Glacier, which had three rooms and three teachers. And the schools back in New Jersey where I went to school and Barbara went to school were full-size schools now with 30 or 40 kids in a class and a whole different ballgame. So putting them back in the same school they'd spent some time in when we were going there was better than putting them in another new school within the same school year. Not much better, but we thought it would be easier on them. So they went to school in Cape May, New Jersey, and came out when school got out.

TM: Okay. So they would come out and be with you in the summers then?

JC: Well, they came out to stay year-round, and we were there for more than four years. And, like I say, they loved the school. It was small with three teachers, and the teachers not only knew everybody, they knew all about everybody, that kind of a community. We even had a community center where we had card games and roller skating and things like that. Kids could go walking from where they lived to these centers, and it was a community where everybody felt at home, I think. I know if a kid is too fat, too tall, or anything, doesn't matter how many kids there are, the other ones will give those kids a hard time. But I don't remember any real bad times. I remember some grave uncertainties because in the spring the grizzlies come out of hibernation, you know, and they were around headquarters. When they came out of hibernation, they were hungry, and we had kids walking to school in a path that we dug with a shovel, and the path was just wide enough for two kids to pass, one on one side and one on the other. And if a grizzly or a young grizzly got into one of these paths, they couldn't get out. We just put it out where the entrance to school was and things like that. We didn't build a real good net of roads. Well, the kids were living in fairly circumstances that were wild by any definition, I guess.

TM: So the kids came out in the summer of 1959?

P: I think so.

JC: That's about right. Pretty close, anyway. And I'm moving four kids from Alaska to New Jersey to Washington, DC, to Glacier Park, all in one season. And they all took it well. They'd done it before, actually.

TM: Sounds like it would have been a great adventure.

JC: It was.

TM: But kind of hard to make friends and keep friends.

JC: Well, yes and no. It's easier to make friends if you get to know them well. And if there's a lot less in the school, you'd get to know them well.

TM: Right. That's true.

JC: And with only three teachers, the teachers knew all of the kids pretty personally. One teacher had been there for 15 or 16 years or maybe longer, and I think the other two had been there for years anyway. They weren't new. But we did have a retirement and a new teacher come in to be principal of that little four-room school. He certainly didn't know what he was getting into but he was equal to it. The hardships with that job came from everybody knowing you, everybody knowing what you did, everybody knowing all the kids in your class. It was a public performance.

TM: So, Jim, I want to ask you, that sounds fairly typical for all of the remote parks—

JC: That's true.

TM: —where everybody would pretty quickly know the faults and also the good things about everybody else.

JC: Everything.

TM: Yeah. Yeah. So that could be, I bet, uncomfortable at times.

JC: Well, if you were definitely a very private person, it wasn't that good at all. But my wife had three kids at home to take care of and that was her full-time job. Once in a while a wife might have no kids and have a job in the park. And people did come and go because they could transfer, and it was a lively time.

TM: But it also sounds like Barbara was pretty game about this kind of stuff. She was covering for you in Alaska.

JC: [Laughs] One of the reasons she married me was that both of our families had been in Cape May, New Jersey, for 200 years, and she thought it was time for a change, and I did, too.

TM: All right. Good. I also wanted to ask you who was the superintendent at the time when you were there at Glacier?

JC: At Glacier we had two good superintendents, which was nice. One was Ed Hummel and his wife Becky. And the other was Fred Binnewies, and I have actually forgotten his wife's name, but it might have been Amy.

TM: What do you remember about them, about Ed and Fred?

JC: Well, Ed Hummel was one of the Park Service's best superintendents. He always spoke at a meeting, and he always spoke last. He listened to what everybody had to say without comment, mostly, and then at the end of the time he clearly indicated that he listened to every word of it, understood every word of it, and had a plan for everybody that needed one. And his wife was just right for that kind of a fellow because she liked to be social, she liked to be acquainted with all of the women in the park, and she was alive, you know. She had lots of energy and lots of intelligence, and they had a staff of, I don't even know, but maybe 40 people. It was a large group.

TM: This was the administration offices?

JC: We had administration, we had interpretation, and we had the rangers. We had law enforcement rangers as well as, oh, traffic control and things like that, and we had rangers in ranger vehicles all day, every day on the highway. At an accident we could throw in three or four more pretty quickly. And what else did we have? Well, the maintenance crew was, you know, they were a big crew. They had to maintain a lot of park vehicles, had to maintain a dangerous road all day every day. And they had east side and west side employees also. We had trail [unclear] and divisions in the spring when the road was clear. We moved over, and we got used to different houses, but it was our good fortune that at that time Mission 66 was adding new homes to parks. So that wherever we went there was a good chance there was a new home that was being vacated by one of the other staff moving to a different location. We had a location at St. Mary's that was rather remarkable, we thought, because three young couples in the new housing area were named Jim and Barbara. [Laughter] All we had to do if we wanted a Jim and Barbara was stand on the porch and yell. And some of the folks were old-timers who knew what they were doing. Some of the folks were new-timers, and I was really among the new-timers. But we had seasonals. I mentioned one who was

there 15 years. That wasn't the longest. One of them was there 16 or 17 and brought his wife and child every summer, had her grow up there in the summers at Glacier Park. And we all became a community that didn't have a lot of time getting along because we were busy. You know, we gave talks at night, we gave walks in the daytime, and nobody was just hanging around much. The wives generally stayed home and did things that needed doing at home, but once in a while a park wife was also the wife of a ranger or something like that. It was not against the rules.

TM: So when you gave your nightly talks and the daytime walks, were you wearing your Class A uniform, or were you able to dress down a little bit?

JC: No, we wore Class A uniforms all the time, and they were rough and tough. You know, they didn't handle badly, so we looked like rangers.

TM: And who did the laundry? Was that Barbara that had to do that?

JC: We had washing machines, dryers, all sorts of things. It was a normal American community by the time we got there. Some of the old-timers told quite different stories. So—

P: You did have trouble with making them wear the hats, some of them, the seasonals.

JC: The ranger hat looked like a highway patrolman hat. I'm sure you've seen the ranger hat.

TM: Yeah, this is the flat hat.

JC: Yeah. And one of our seasonal rangers was determined that he shouldn't wear one because it made him look flat. You know, it really cut off your height. And I had the job of convincing him that he might look ridiculous all day, but he could take it off at night and he had to wear the damn thing. And I personally loved the hat. I thought it was a badge of courage and a badge of a good job.

TM: We've got one hanging on the wall here. It's a hat of honor.

JC: Yeah.

TM: How did you encourage him to wear his hat?

JC: It was fine. It was fine with everybody, except later at another park I had a guy who was about four feet and a half tall, and when he put that on, he looked utterly, completely ridiculous. I felt a little bad about that, but he didn't even mind wearing it. Anyway, it was a point of honor, but it was a point of disagreement, too.

TM: So how did you convince the ranger there at Glacier to wear his hat?

JC: Oh, Christ, it was a rule, you know.

TM: Okay, that's easy.

JC: Yeah. It was just doing what he had to do. Then he later became a curator of a museum, went on to educational fame, sort of, and it didn't hurt him a bit.

TM: Nice.

P: We sort of adopted him, too. He was part of the family.

JC: Yeah. He was one of my protégés. I took on the job of convincing him and liked him.

TM: Well, good for you.

JC: Yeah, I didn't even mind that he didn't want to wear the hat. I knew what he was talking about. I was not tall and handsome; I just wore the hat [laughs].

TM: So is that Paula who just spoke up there?

JC: Right. She's my supervisor this evening.

TM: Good. Alright. I'm glad you're under supervision. That's good.

JC: And she did start with me in the beginning in the Park Service. She had all of it.

TM: So how old was Paula at the time? 1959, '60, '61?

JC: Well, she was born in '50, so she was only eight, but we were there for four years.

P: I started 4th grade there.

TM: Okay, 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th grades?

P: Yes.

TM: Okay. Fun. Very good. What else do the two of you remember about Glacier that would be good to recall here?

JC: Well, I'm sorry you asked that question. Any time you drove the highway, it was thrilling and frightening. So we did drive back and forth, but if we were on the summer side, we stayed there. We didn't make unnecessary trips back and forth. And my boss back in West Glacier was so anxious to mini-manage everything that it drove him out of his mind that I was over there running things without him, and he always protested and argued when we got together that this wasn't necessary, and I always hoped that he would drop dead. Anyway, we had separate east and west crews, and we managed them both differently in winter than we did in the summer. But I think we managed it adequately except for that bear adventure, and that could possibly have been avoided but maybe not. You know, predicting what a bear is gonna do under certain provocations is hard.

TM: Well, it just seems, you know, today in the times of bear spray and shotguns that we've learned, I think.

JC: We did.

P: But I was back in '69, which of course is not now, but they— Well, no, wait. I was back— Didn't we go there six years ago when we went to Banff?

JC: Yeah.

P: Yeah. And they still weren't wearing guns that I could see. They told us the grizzly bears wouldn't bother us if we didn't bother them.

JC: Oh, Christ, we had about 20 more people working on grizzly bears. That was a subject where it was easy to get money to do research, and one of the things they had decided was that if you wanted bears not to come into the campground, you made damn sure that they knew that they were not wanted. So they would actually fire off guns and chase bears out of the campground to keep them spooked and keep them from encountering people.



TM: Right, because they could be a real nuisance in campgrounds where there was food.

JC: That's right. One of our adventures was later when I was at Yosemite for a training program, and they had a female bear that came around every day inspecting the garbage cans. She had never done anybody any harm, and so we let her do it. But I came down from Alaska with three little kids and we lived in tent cabins. They asked us not to come and bring any kids, but I had three little kids in Alaska and had no intentions of turning them over to strangers to take care of for the winter. And so she's here with three little kids and has to take them to the restroom and has to bring them back and has to pass a mama grizzly who comes every day. She wasn't a grizzly. She must have been a black bear. At any rate, this bear followed her back to the cabin. And when she's fumbling with the lock, trying to get her key into the cabin, this mama bear takes a hold of her calf of her leg. A bear with its teeth on the calf of your leg is a pretty good test of your composure. My wife stood still, did not scream, did not stir a muscle. And mama bear looking at her with her three little kids decided that she really didn't want to bite her after all. So Barbara got the door open and she got the kids inside and the bear outside and for the next few days she had purple tooth marks on the calf of her leg where the bear would have taken out a whole chunk if she had bit. That, I think, is Barbara's wildlife tale. It's easy to look at this situation and realize that they had no business leaving a bear there to come around every day and inspect the garbage, but this bear was more or less domesticated and more or less hadn't bothered anybody. So Barbara was a good test and everybody passed.

TM: Did anybody think to, I mean, it seems like today that bear would be translocated or put down.

JC: I think they probably would normally shoot that bear, and I don't remember whether they did or not, and I certainly should. But we weren't advocating that they shoot the bear. We were just congratulating ourselves on making it through this crisis.

TM: Yeah, yeah.

JC: Living in a canvas-covered log cabin was not perfect for bears.

TM: No.

JC: I look back on Yosemite and can think of several things that needed changing.

TM: Well, it sounds like food wrapped in a candy wrapper.

JC: [Chuckles] Yeah. It's quite possible to find some other stories, I'm sure, from the bear days there.

TM: But, Jim, what do you remember about Fred Binnewies, the other superintendent?

JC: Fred Binnewies made a good assistant superintendent. Knowing that Ed was a natural leader, I neglected to mention that he was about six foot four and all he had to do was clear his throat to quiet an auditorium full of people down. He was a natural leader just because he was, and Fred Binnewies had to, you know, take care of administration and things that you do in the office, and being a public leader is something you did once in a while. The superintendent would take care of most public meetings if he was available, and the assistant superintendent would stay home and relax. So he didn't have as hard a job. But one of the reasons you have an assistant superintendent is so that you can move people. And Ed Hummel went from there, and I don't know how many stops he had. I think it was from there directly to the Washington office. He became an assistant director of the Park Service, and we would meet again. I was back in Washington two or three times, and if I wanted to talk to him, he was available, but he was on King's Row. The director has about four offices in a row on one alley or hall, and everybody hung out there and went out whenever a trip was required and came back and went to work at the desk.

TM: And I'm sorry, you called those offices there in the Department of Interior building in Washington, DC, King's Row?

JC: Yes.

TM: That's great. That's a great name.

JC: Well, I'm not sure everybody did, but it wasn't exactly respectful. It was just— I actually later got an offer. There was a vacancy on that row. Somebody said did I want it and my title was assistant to the director. I said, "I want it as far away as I can get." So we had another separate building a couple of miles away, and they found me an office over there where I wasn't going to be in the full glare. I was the director of the volunteer program at that time, and the director didn't want to talk to me, and I didn't want to talk to him. But he had to agree to what his assistant director was suggesting and that was that I'd be good to have there.

TM: Let's tie this up at Glacier. When did you leave Glacier and how did that come about?

JC: Well, that wasn't even hard. After I'd been there four years, everyone who was on the make, you know, expected to move in about three years. And it was at a time when we had money enough to move people regularly. I had three kids, remember, so that I wanted to be promoted any time it became available, so it wasn't hard to talk me out of Glacier, which I loved, to go somewhere else, which I could never be sure of until I got there. But in this case, they offered me an upgrade in Sequoia National Park. I was gonna be— What the hell was I gonna be?

P: Management assistant.

JC: Management assistant. Thank you. That was in the office of the superintendent and had a very severe advantage—anybody talking to you felt sure that the superintendent of the park would hear about it right away. And they assumed that if you said something that this would be agreeable to the superintendent or you wouldn't have said it, and so I wandered around the park acting like I was the third man in line for the superintendent. Anything I told them they believed me, and I had some fairly good times. I knew the superintendent, had known him for 15 years and actually turned him down on the first offer I had to get into the Park Service full time.

TM: Hey, Jim, you know, let's wrap this up here, and what we'll do next time is you can transition us over to Sequoia.

JC: Yes.

TM: Okay. That sounds good.

JC: From Sequoia I left the regular Park Service to become a Job Corps Center director.

TM: Okay. Well, that'll probably be another interview. I can see them; they're starting to stack up line planes trying to get in an airport.

JC: How long are you going to keep this up?

TM: As long as it takes.

JC: Okay. Well, I thank you. I've enjoyed it as much as you have, I'm sure.

TM: Well, hang on a second. I'm gonna wrap this up, but don't hang up yet. This will conclude Part 4, Grand Canyon Oral History Interview with Jim Corson. My name is Tom Martin. Today is Monday, February 15, 2021. And, Jim, thank you so very much.

JC: My pleasure.