

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

Interviewee: Jim Corson (JC), Part 8 of 8

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: The Final Years and Retirement

Date of Interview: February 27, 2021.

Method of Interview: Telephone

Transcriber: Dannie Derryberry

Date of Transcription: December 19, 2021

Transcription Reviewers: Susan Seibel, Richard Phaneuf

Keys: Colonial National Historical Park, Independence National Historical Park, Jim Sullivan, Philadelphia, Anniversary of the end of the Revolutionary War, French involvement in the Revolutionary War, Gen. Charles Cornwallis, Washington, D.C., first head of the NPS volunteer program, Regional Chief of Interpretation—Boston National Historical Park, hiring staff, Bruce McHenry, Freedom Trail, Faneuil Hall, Braintree housekeeper Wilhelmina Harris, nightmarish Boston traffic, Corson family life, Paul Revere home, U.S.S. Constitution, Massachusetts State House, State Dept. consultant, White House consultant, Tortuga turtles, Man and the Biosphere Programme, National Park Service consultant to India, tiger preserve, riding elephants, Aid to India, Delhi Zoo, food poisoning risk, retirement.

TM: Today is Saturday, February 27, 2021. This is Part 8 of a Grand Canyon Oral History Interview with Jim Corson. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Jim. How are you today?

JC: I believe I'm about as good as usual.

TM: Good. Glad to hear it.

JC: Which is mostly old.

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

JC: For sure.

TM: Thank you. You mentioned at the end of the last interview that after four and a half years at the Colonial National Historic Park, it was time to do the next job. Can you tell us how that happened, how it came to be that you left Colonial, and what did you do?

JC: Well, I'm not absolutely sure how I came to be moved out at that time, but as I told

you, Jim Sullivan came in from Philadelphia, and he had just had a big deal there and handled it pretty well. And I think they wanted him to handle our—what was it—the 81st anniversary of the celebration of the end of the Revolutionary War. Maybe it wasn't the 81st [laughs]. Anyway, it was gonna be a big deal for sure. Hopefully the President and the French, possibly the president or the ambassador anyway. And we always had a reenactment with some soldiers and an unbelievable number of people coming. So I didn't want to miss that. In fact, I came, and they had kind of miscalculated me and had two spots for me. One was actually in the main building with the President. Somebody didn't get the word out on that, so I just came in the gate like other people and found a place and didn't get to meet the President, Ronald Reagan.

The [French] ambassador had already done a lot for me. I have a medal from the French government certifying that I'm a special friend of theirs, and I more or less earned it only by being nice to the French. The Virginians always considered the French kind of the imposters, thought they'd won the war there, and they did. The French were fresh and lively and willing to go to battle, and the Americans had been fighting for four years and were pretty raggedy and tired. But even so the two together made an impossible deal for Cornwallis. Cornwallis couldn't get in and out of the harbor so he couldn't escape, and he couldn't get reinforcements. The French had it bottled up with battleships. I'm sorry in a way I didn't get to witness the fight because it was a good one.

Anyway, the celebration a year later when I attended was pretty much as usual. We had a secretary who loved that celebration and thought that it was the biggest and best thing of the year and plotted every detail, every word, every action, and I resented her to a certain extent. I thought that a certain amount of spontaneity wasn't a bad thing for a celebration. Anyway, I had to go, and I did go, and I was satisfied. We celebrated the ceremony, and I didn't get to shake hands with the President, but that was all right.

And where did I go from there? Well, I went to Washington, DC, to a no-account job. It was just a time killer in a way. I got to be the first head of our volunteer program in the National Park Service, but all you do is go around and visit people who've got volunteers, talk to them, and talk to the volunteers, and see if everything is working all right. So I did travel. I did visit people with volunteers. And the idea was popular. I think perhaps the best volunteers in the Park Service were camp hosts. A camp host is a man or a single person or a couple who wants to be in charge of a campground, and that's not quite as simple as it seems nowadays. I think it's gotten worse since then instead of better, but it was possible to have to deal with somebody much better able to give you a hard time than you were to give them a hard time. A ranger might have a pistol in the car, but we hadn't gotten used to carrying pistols. We certainly hadn't got

used to using them. And this couple managing the campground could only call him up on the radio and ask him to come around and help. So there were a few little misunderstandings. Most of the people who come to parks are not looking for trouble and not looking to break any laws or create any hard feelings.

TM: So, Jim, I get a sense that bringing in volunteers was a way to, kind of, cover for a lack of staffing, and volunteers might be taking away jobs from people that could otherwise work for the service. Was there any resistance or grumbling to this new volunteer program?

JC: Well, that's a very good question, and of course, there must have been some. But don't forget I was the main advocate, the main guy that thought that we certainly should use a volunteer if they came forward and said they wanted to help. And so I wasn't looking for disagreements, and I wasn't looking for trouble. But I promised to discuss trouble a little bit [chuckles] because there were plenty of people who were opposed to the idea, and anybody whose job could be replaced by a volunteer was feeling very vulnerable.

We didn't have enough money, and if Congress had a chance, they would remove some of what we had probably. So you're quite right; it was a risky business, and that's why we had put it off for years and years. I, as I said, sort of broke down the dam that let in volunteers when I had my teachers teaching the boys at the Job Corps camp. We got up to a large number, dozens anyway, before we were through because the people who did it, liked it. The boys loved it. They were getting attention from high-quality people that they might never have had before, and they were learning to read, best of all. So, I have a nice letter in my file that says I had the best reading program of any. They didn't go on to say that if you had the best reading program, you had the best camp because these boys came to learn, and it was harder in the other camps.

TM: Right. And I think of volunteers— Certainly at Grand Canyon there's a well-known and well-liked volunteer at the bottom of the Grand Canyon at Phantom Ranch. And that gentleman's been there for 30 years and has done an incredible job. So there's, you know, there's a good side to the program as well.

JC: It was a good idea. It certainly wasn't my idea only. Often people would come forward and say they wish they had a job like mine. That was a good start, and I would agree with them that I had a job that was enviable and pleasant and helpful and useful. I think everybody in a park could use some more help, and I think that sort of broke down the barrier. But I know that proving that I could have dozens of volunteers and not get in trouble, that helped a lot, too. So they did ask me to ask, I mean, to read over and see

what I thought of the agreement we were preparing. And I was in on the ground floor, but the Personnel Office handled it and without much a fuss. There wasn't anybody ready to put up a big fight about using volunteers because we needed help. So what happened after that?

TM: Yes.

JC: Still there?

TM: Yes, yeah.

JC: I was only on that job for a few months, and I got a very funny reaction one morning when I went to work and somebody else was sitting at my desk. It was a young girl who didn't know much of anything, and it was obviously gonna be somebody at a lower grade than I had. What they had done was found a position for me that was in my line of ambition. I was going to be the regional chief of interpretation in the Boston office, and the Boston office was gonna be brand new. We were moving in some park people from everywhere to open a new office. And I must say that I loved that because we were hiring people from outside. We took in—what did we take? Nine people, I think, heads of divisions and things like that that we were able to hire from a great many displaced military personnel because they were cutting back in our military.

So I had a chance to interview a half a dozen girls, I guess, for my own secretary. And there was a lady 55 years of age who had just lost her position with the Draft Board. After the smoke cleared and everything was done, I had hired her for my secretary. I'd had younger girls, and I liked younger girls, but younger girls have their own agendas. This lady wanted a job, which I thought was admirable, because she's 55 and could have retired probably. But as she said later, she wanted to stand up and hug me when I told her I was gonna hire her. I had a couple of pretty girls, and I was worried about their future. I knew that it wasn't gonna be to be my secretary any longer than they could help. And it worked out very nicely. This lady was a kind of an office manager with three or four of us. That sounds like a lot for a secretary, but we didn't do a lot of correspondence, and that was the main business of the secretary. The other is to keep appointments straightened out and in order, and to handle any complaints that come in and find the right person to handle it.

We had a historian, and we had an archaeologist, and we had— What else did we have? Whatever interpretation includes. We had a naturalist, and the naturalist was a fellow whose father had been in the Park Service for 30 years, Bruce McHenry. Have you ever heard his name?

TM: No.

JC: Well, the old man was big at National Capitol Parks in Washington, DC. And the young man had been in the Park Service all of his adult career and had some peculiar ideas, but he was a naturalist, and he was a good interpreter.

TM: What was your secretary's name?

JC: Oh. Oh, dear. Umm—

TM: Well, let me know when you remember it.

JC: Yeah, that should come forward pretty quick.

TM: Yeah. And then you— So you're in a region that, and the office is in Boston. There are a ton of things around Boston that I'm assuming you got to check out.

JC: We did. We inherited a pot full of miscellaneous fragments. The Freedom Trail, have you heard of it?

TM: Remind me.

JC: The Freedom Trail had a dozen locations, maybe only half a dozen, but they were all owned and operated by somebody already. And we wanted to make it into a National Park hike around Boston, visiting everything that had anything to do with the Revolution and maybe a couple of others. And that worked pretty well, but it meant making peace with these other organizations that were all sensitive, one for lack of money, two for struggling through hard times and then having somebody come in and take over. And so we didn't take over, exactly. We had a cooperative agreement with everybody: such people at Paul Revere's home and the Navy Yard where they kept the Constitution, and what else? Downtown, the State Hall, State something. It was right across from the building where we had our office, and the State, oh, dear, was right across from Faneuil Hall. Faneuil Hall was a great marketplace with a dozen different shops and attractions in it. We had restored this not quite to its historical function but to a very useful function. It was a, oh, almost a mall. We had several places to eat, we had three levels of building, and we had lots of historic content and attractions in Faneuil Hall. Everybody who came to Boston was looking for a place to eat, and they were looking for history, and right there in the center of the city we had lots of those.

Anyway, I loved it. I didn't know what I was getting into. I was awfully pleased that somebody had gone to my earlier records and seen what I wanted to be. I thought they put those records in the deep freeze and never looked at them again. Indeed, I had said I wanted to be a chief of interpretation in a region somewhere as my highest ambition and here, by God, I had it, out of the blue. I was where I wanted to be, doing what I wanted to do, and Boston is a great place. I don't know if you've ever visited much but you can't run out of things to do. And history has been there for a hundred or two hundred years before you, and all of the people who are running these places were absolutely consumed with enthusiasm for the history. So it was a neat place.

TM: Isn't the country's oldest lighthouse on an island in Boston Harbor?

JC: Is what there?

TM: The oldest lighthouse?

JC: Oh, the oldest lighthouse? I don't remember that there was.

TM: I may be wrong on that, but—

JC: There certainly were lighthouses all around the harbor there and—

TM: But as you say there's a lot of history there.

JC: You couldn't turn over a rock without finding some, and the American Revolution was alive there compared to anywhere else. The soldiers who marched to Lexington and fought the British, and out at Lexington and Concord important events happened. We beat the British and— Oh, I can hardly keep on going because I haven't been there or thought about it for a long while, but everywhere you turn around there was something important British and American conflict. And it was sort of fun because we won. It was interesting because there were a lot of people involved, and they had changed through the years. All the folks who were there stirring up trouble at the time were considered riffraff, and when they won the Revolution they were suddenly heroes.

TM: Right.

JC: But they changed things quite a bit. But a couple of the old-line Boston outfits considered them riffraff anyway, and it was our job to make sure that everybody lived together and told the story pretty much the same and didn't fight.

TM: Nice. Did you move the family then to Boston?

JC: Well, we moved to Braintree. We went up— One of the things the Park Service did for you is give you a week to find a place to live, and if it was difficult, a week was not a bit too long. But we set out to find a place and did find a place pretty easily. But it was 15 miles from downtown, and there were buses and even subways. You could go in all directions from Boston without trying very hard. We lived in Braintree, and Braintree was the home of John Adams. I don't know if I've talked about John Adams and his home or not. I think I probably have. There was a deal when we got to take over the house that we had to take over the housekeeper who had been there for the Adams family but later. Anyway, we got Wilhelmina Harris, whose husband had been a colonel and was dead and gone. And Wilhelmina Harris believed, and really believed, that she knew the Adams's better than anybody else, and we believed it, too. So we let her have the final word on lots of things, and we let her run it as superintendent of that park. And it was sort of fun to have a, oh, I suppose she might have even been 75. She was old to me at the time, but I was younger, so I don't know how old she really was. She had a grandson, and the grandson hadn't heard a word about World War II. So she actually invited me over to dinner one evening to talk the whole evening about World War II to this grandson because she'd been married to a colonel and she thought our military adventures were well worth preserving and honoring. Nobody else ever gave me that much time and consideration to talk about the war until more recently.

So anyway, that was Boston, and it was really quite nifty. It called for somebody who could get along with people, and that was me. In the office we had a nice variety with an archaeologist and a historian and a naturalist and a secretary. We had to keep points of view separate and honor everybody's point of view and get them all to work together. Five years of that was [chuckles] an exercise in human relations, for sure.

TM: So from Boston and the surrounding area for your region, what was the furthest away historic site that was in your area?

JC: Oh, well, that's an important question, too, because the Boston office extended in all directions and had all sorts of properties. I can give you an easy and quick example: Cape Cod Seashore. And I earlier had been serving there, you know, in the Job Corps.

Anyway, that was all pretty nifty. We liked Boston. Driving there was a nightmare. The best example I can give is two one-way streets running the same direction, side by side. I never did figure how the hell that happened. But we also had a bus station and a subway terminal that certainly should have been set together in the same building, and

they were not. So you had to walk a little ways to get from one to the other. Later they were combined into some sort of travel terminal, but that was after I was gone.

TM: And this was in the 1980s that traffic was a nightmare?

JC: I'm real sure that traffic was a nightmare when they founded Boston. Boston had a serious appetite for travel messes. It was actually worse than Washington, DC. And Washington, DC, is another nightmare, thanks to—oh, dear, what was his name? The fellow who designed Washington, DC.

TM: Right. Who laid it out. Yeah.

JC: The man was one of a kind. Anyway, Boston was great. We liked it. The kids liked the schools, but they were going to a working-class school. They were not going to where the folks thought they were better than everybody over at Concord and Lexington. They considered they were sort of the aristocracy. And our school at Braintree had mostly working parents and kids who were used to getting along with other kids of the same sort. My kids had been in every kind of school, but they hadn't been in this kind, and so it took a little adjustment. But it was a good school, and there wasn't anything wrong with it. I think they all profited by associating with ordinary American kids a little more than they did before.

TM: And by this time your oldest daughter's about ready to head for college.

JC: [Chuckles] Well, the oldest daughter went to college from Colonial, and she was— Well, they were all in the Girl Scouts in Boston, and I have a picture showing four daughters in four different sets of Girl Scouts. You know, the Brownies and the—oh, I can't even name them now—but I love that picture because I had one each of all the Girl Scouts they were. And that pleased me. It still does. The cookies have just become for sale this year. Have you bought any Girl Scout cookies yet?

TM: Not yet this year, but we're suckers for those. I'm sorry, it's bad, bad, bad [laughs].

JC: Anyway, Boston was an enjoyable experience. We were honorary members of all of these organizations that we went around to so that we were invited to all the parties and invited to participate in any special events. We got fairly well acquainted with a wide, wide variety of historically busy and prominent people.

TM: Nice. Do you remember some of the more interesting things you got wrapped up in at that time?

JC: Well, Paul Revere's home. You can make Paul Revere's ride into a lot more, and they had. You know, you can't portray the ride more than once a year, but you can have his home and everything he did. And Paul Revere was a silversmith, so having the public visit and see what he did was fun. And then the Constitution; you can actually go on board the Constitution. It's tied up in the harbor and owned by the Navy, and they took it out once a year or maybe a twice a year even and turned it around so that it would face the weather differently tied up at the harbor.

TM: Oh, that makes sense.

JC: The sun and the tide and the water all had an effect on it, and they wanted to keep it as small as possible. That was some boat.

TM: How did they keep it from rotting? I mean, it's got wood sides, right?

JC: Well, it was called Old Ironsides for a good reason. It was very sturdy when they built it, and I actually never got into any of the details of maintaining and keeping it nice. I should have, probably, but the Navy was doing a good job there that we didn't have any real role except to see that the visitors were treated with respect and got a little tour of all the history.

They had, what else? Well, I mentioned the State House downtown. That had a historical library and just two people working there, and those two people were the most sensitive and possibly the poorest of any group in the operation. They were very nervous about being neglected, and our job was to keep their feelings from being hurt because they were a little neglected. They didn't have as much to offer as they thought they did. The State House was the scene of the riots. That's where the, well, the first rebellion took place. The soldiers came and fired on the riffraff there, and that started the Revolution. I'm sorry I have a bad attitude toward the State House but the couple working there were both fairly funny people and so sensitive that it was embarrassing.

And as I say, we loved Boston. We liked living there, even though we were not in the upper crust downtown. We were out 15 miles and lived closer to John Quincy Adams than we did to downtown revolution. Finding a house at all was a treasured gift, really. We found an empty house for rent, and we took it immediately because it was what we were looking for. We later found another one further out of town down at Cape Cod, but it didn't have the same charm. It was possible to walk out of my house and go only a block or two and catch a bus in the morning. There was no way to tell if the bus had come and gone, but mostly it hadn't because I got there in time.

TM: Did you report then to Washington, or did you report to another regional district?

JC: No, we didn't have to report to anybody in between. We were equal to the other regions. Since we were new, I think everybody expected us to be a little surprising once in a while, but I don't believe we had any crusaders or any big shake-up people in the office. We were all old-time Park Service and pretty amenable to getting along with other park centers, whatever they were.

Well, we've spent, I think, probably enough time in Boston.

TM: How long were you there?

JC: About five years and getting older all the time.

TM: Oh, yeah.

JC: But what happened after that?

TM: And that would have put you sometime into the early 1990s maybe.

JC: I can't even relate that to Cape Cod where I was in the Job Corps. I lost my continuity.

TM: 'Cause we were talking last time, and it was in the 1980s, early '80s.

JC: That was quite a while after my Job Corps. I knew I should have laid out a little outline so that I could be sure of myself but—

TM: No worries. Yeah, it was 1981, it sounds like, that you ended up leaving Colonial, so it would have been toward the late '80s, I guess, or the '85 to '88, maybe, that you were—

JC: I retired in '82, so we don't have a lot more time to fill out. Anyway—

TM: Did you retire from the Park Service in Boston then?

JC: Well, yes and no. I'm sorry about this, but it got complicated after that. I was a consultant to the State Department, and I was a consultant to the White House, and I retired after those jobs. And so I even had been sort of separate from the Park Service

toward the end. The State Department—I had an office, or a spot in their office, in Washington with the Park Service headquarters, but I went over every Friday for a staff meeting and didn't have much to say.

My work at the State Department was pretty clearly outlined by the State Department, and I had three supervisors over there, which was a lot more than I needed. And we went to a couple of international conferences, and we worked on profiles to let anybody going into a project at the State Department know what they were getting into. Curiously, that hadn't been done, really.

They had started these profiles to, well, to outline all the natural resources, and all the likely things that needed to be done, and all the problems that they had with their natural resources. Because the State Department had waded in with good intentions and no knowledge and screwed up several places around the world, the conservation organizations went to the State Department and said, "We're gonna sue the hell out of you guys if you don't put some conservationists on the job." And so the State Department agreed to hire a half a dozen, and when I was there we'd only gotten up to two. I don't know if they ever got up to a half a dozen or not, but they had agreed to it anyway. And that would allow them to spread them around and get them a lot better acquainted with the actual circumstances.

I was a bureaucrat in Washington, so it was just more of the same for the State Department. But it was enjoyable and finding out the environmental problems in the country a thousand, two thousand, five thousand miles away was sort of interesting. We had a guy at the Library of Congress compiling all the facts about the environment everywhere, and he would finish one profile after another. We were sponsoring those. We were paying for those.

I think I told you the example the other day of down in the Tortugas, one of the things they had was turtles, lots of turtles, and they ate them. They were good to eat, and the population had about the right number of turtles to eat. Then they decided to put in a turtle catch and refine and sell factory. And it took no time at all to catch most of the turtles, and the people who were used to eating them didn't have anything to eat now. They might have more money, but money ain't as good as a regular food supply. So we wanted them to not do any new projects based on total ignorance, and that was entirely possible. There was more information than they were bothered to look for about every area they were working in. We were looking for and putting it before them. I came pretty close to enjoying that.

The State Department is a big place, and I was depressed as could be to get in there with a lot more people than the Park Service had and find that ignorance was the standard equipment. I still feel bad when I think about the State Department because they all used all the initials they could think of, and every project, every location, every organization was initials. I suffered mighty much from that because they were not initials that I was familiar with. And then about possibly even six months into the job I realized that these folks didn't know what the hell they were talking about either. The initials were kind of a screen. They talked, and they had a line of talk that was reasonable, but there was an enormous amount of ignorance in the State Department.

I still feel bad about that. We're dealing with the whole damn world, and we should have better people than the whole damn world. It's sort of the top of the pile. We think, anyway. I mean, to have serious ignorance there in charge of things was alarming. And this little office I had was funded with a grant which was only going to last a couple of years. Then in theory they'd have ironed out some of the kinks, and I enjoyed it. But I had two supervisors who didn't really know anything, and that's embarrassing. And I haven't said this before [chuckles]. I didn't make a big thing of it there, but I was hesitant to accept advice from above because I did have the feeling that I certainly knew as much as they did.

Anyway, the State Department was just a little sideler, and that did lead me to—I'm gonna have trouble with time—but after the State Department, yeah, that's when I retired. I made it to '82, and the money ran out. I'm afraid I have tangled some ends, though. Anyway, when the money was gone, I was gone, too. I had a grant and it was administered by the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme, and Man and the Biosphere Programme was separate but funded by the State Department and answerable to the State Department.

I had a smart boss at the Man and the Biosphere. He was only my financial advice consultant. He was my boss, but he never took that seriously. He thought I knew what I was doing [chuckles]. That was nice of him. And he did have smarts enough to cope with the State Department, and I thought I'd just leave most of that to him. So we had a kind of an insulated little pocket of people actually working for the State Department but on a separate contract. So I hope I haven't made it simple for you because it's not simple, and I don't know what they're doing now. I've not the slightest idea.

TM: How did you get transferred over to the White House? And who was the president at the time?

JC: Well, I didn't get transferred to the White House. I got a connection and that was through a niece of Lady Bird Johnson, who was running the beautification program. And that was almost fun. I had the pleasure of showing up at any town in the country posing as an expert, and talking with the kids about the projects they had and making suggestions and even finding money for projects and things of that sort. It was a very social job.

TM: Got it. This is the story you recounted, I think, at the last, no, two interviews ago when you were working for Lady Bird Johnson and traveling with the Job Corps. No, the volunteers. Sorry.

JC: Like I say, I should have made up a little chart for myself.

TM: Yeah, no worries.

JC: I'm getting the ends of time tangled, for sure.

TM: So when you retired from the Park Service, did they call you back for any special assignments?

JC: I had run out of money in this assignment with the Peace Corps. I'm not gonna catch the ends and put them together here, but at the time, I went back to the Park Service to get a new job. And the Chief of Personnel looked me straight in the eye and said, "You're crazy. You're 55, you can retire with a full pension, and if I could I'd do it tomorrow." I believed him because he was not an old-time park man. He was not greatly inspired by conservation ideals and things like that, but he knew the laws and the rules about retirement, and my retirement would be smaller than if I kept on but not much. So I did retire. And even after that I was not out of the Park Service. Something very funny happened; we went on vacation to California, and I got a phone call one day asking if I wanted to go to India for two months as a consultant on national parks. And of course I did. I went to India and consulted with them, and they had a wonderful, wonderful set of parks with not very much money and not very much staff and a lot of background in running preserves for the British. These preserves were actually national parks, but the British came down with three rifles and hunted the tigers and hunted the gorillas and hunted all the things in the parks, and the average man in the street had no business in the parks at all.

So this was quite a conversion. India was independent now. The British were still revered in many circles. After you were there a while you wondered what the hell they

were revered for. The Indians suffered quite a lot at the hands of the British, in my opinion.

And I was shocked and horrified to find among the middle class in India a very strong feeling that if God had been kinder, they would have been born English instead of Indian. I am still shocked and horrified at this because cricket was the big game in India, and everybody was related to a cricket match somewhere, and that's pretty British. It doesn't have much to do with India as a country. And their conservation came late because the whole country was pretty well abused. Their resources were carried away. If they wanted a national park where they had an old preserve, they were lucky because that had been well cared for by the British, but it was so they could come and hunt. It was not exactly a good basis for a national park. And in the tiger preserve they had—I don't even know what they had, but they had a half a dozen tigers. In the whole country they had 2,000 tigers, and it's a big country, all the way from the Himalayas over to Europe. So I didn't get to all of it, but I got to quite a bit of it. The most exciting and pleasant time was either downtown at the New Delhi Zoo or out in the tiger preserve. Both of those were very civilized and very important from a natural preservation standpoint. I'll give you a couple of interesting examples. In the tiger preserve, they had a barracks where the hunters came to sleep, and the barracks had a fan arrangement in the ceiling. India was hot, for sure. And in the ceiling this fan arrangement was made up of a bunch of big fans hooked with reels and pulleys and ropes. Some Indian sat down in a chair below, a bit like playing the piano, but he had to do it all night long so that you could keep the British hunters cool. Does that sound nice to you?

TM: Well, it doesn't sound nice if I'm the guy having to run the fan.

JC: They weren't doing that for us. We were a different crowd, but it was still there. And they had a system for taking care of it; when they woke up and they were hot, they realized this guy had gone to sleep, so they'd get up and beat him until he was wide awake and then go back to bed. And the other thing that interested me greatly was that they didn't have any screens on the windows, for God's sake. I was expecting malaria and other bad diseases, but I was also expecting a tiger to come in some night and eat my head. And they assured me that the tigers wouldn't come into the buildings, but then they dropped back a little and they claimed that the leopards might. So you're gonna get your head bit off by a leopard instead of a tiger.

TM: Yeah, at least it's not a tiger. There you go.

JC: Anyway, it was fun. I enjoyed every bit of it. The man in charge of leading us around was, well, he was the equivalent of a park naturalist in the U.S. He had the right

education, he had the right background, he had the right knowledge, and he was in charge of getting the information to the visitors who came to the park. But the visitors in India were not ordinary people normally. They were people who could afford some time off and had money to travel. They would quite likely have a kitchen and dining room in the park and accommodations so that you could visit the park with a lot of help from the Park Service. While we were there, a grandfather walking home at night was killed by a tiger, and they had experts who went out and negotiated with the families of people like this and paid them for the grandfather. The case that I heard about was about \$750, and that seemed like a pretty damn poor price for a grandfather to me. But the Indians signed up and went away feeling very good that they'd been fairly treated. In the morning they had actual— What shall we call them? Tiger trackers who knew where the tiger spent the night and could take us out on the back of an elephant to catch up with this tiger in the morning before he got gone. And so every morning the question was the same: "Do you want to see the tigers?" Every morning the answer was the same: "Yeah, sure we do." So we'd have breakfast, and then we'd go ride on the elephant, which was a big deal for a boy from New Jersey.

The tigers never made a hostile move, and I never did figure this out because the tigers could have jumped over the elephants. We had a tiger there that was 12-feet long. That's a lot of cat. When he sleeps, he finds a quiet place and gets out of sight altogether. And when he wakes up, he sees an elephant full of people out there. He's not pleased, but they never made a false move.

They had an agreement with the elephants that they can each mind their own business, and the elephants took us around and gave us a thrill if we'd never been on an elephant. One morning they had a tiny elephant, a really half-sized elephant, and he had the box up on top just like the others did, and they urged me to ride on this tiny elephant and assured me I'd be closer to the tiger.

[Laughter]

JC: My answer to this was "Did I ever say anything about wanting to be closer to the tigers?" I didn't want to ride on that little elephant who was no size at all, pulled up to a big tiger. Anyway...

TM: Jim, when did the Park Service start taking its expertise out of the country?

JC: Oh, that was— Yeah, that's a better story than I have made it. We had a Aid to India program, and it was a pretty good program for us because we had the largest wheat crop we'd ever had. We had more wheat than we knew what to do with at the same time

as India was having a famine. So we sold them tons and tons and boats and boats full of wheat, and their pride was at stake. They said they would take this and they would pay for it, but the money had to go into India banks, and the United States had to spend the money in India.

And that's a pretty darn clever idea, and I was very taken with it, most of all because one of the things they were doing was paying me not a salary. That's interesting because the first plan was drawn up and sent up to the Secretary of Interior, and he looked at the cost and said, "My God, this is too much. Can't we use some volunteers?" I had retired, and I had told them that I was very anxious to be a volunteer and be useful, and so they called me up and traded me for the guy who was on the proposal. I went over thinking that I was being a volunteer and gonna be poor, and Christ, they went to the bank and came home with the money and gave us all the money for our whole two months the first day. And we're talking packets of currency that you don't ordinarily see. There were hundreds of dollars of India money. Our money was worth about 10 to 1 so that even when you divided the packets of India money by ten, you still had a lot of money. They decided what we should get based on the living allowance of the State Department, which was like \$75 a day.

So at the end of our two months over there, every one of us still had a pocketful of currency. The last three days of all of our visits was out just spending as wildly as we could to get through and take things back to the United States that we wanted. Oriental rugs were at the top of the list. They were right next to all the oriental rug makers, and they made them themselves. You could actually visit and watch 12-year-old girls ruining their eyesight, building these oriental rugs.

Anyway, the other one that was especially interesting was downtown, the Delhi Zoo, and the reason it was interesting was that it was an oasis. It was an island of green in the middle of the city. And the Indians were most noticeable for not having islands of green. Everything was picked clean. If there was a stream, there were people living in it and on it and scouring it and using it up. If there were streets— And there were lovely streets, and there were lovely buildings. The British had been very good about leaving wonderful things behind, and the Delhi Zoo was one of them. But anybody who could come to the Delhi Zoo on Sunday, so there were thousands of people coming in and out. Every animal who had wings or feet or any way of getting around would head for this Delhi Zoo and hide there to keep from being eaten.

You had to see it to believe it. The sky was full of birds flying in and out without any restraint, you know. The Park Service didn't have any control over these birds, but they had them. And it was the liveliest zoo you would ever see. And our good fortune was to

stumble onto an 11-year-old boy whose father worked there. This boy said he would give us a tour of the zoo, which included tigers. It turns out this boy knew more about the zoo than anybody there, I think, because he would take us around behind, lead us right up to the tiger cages. All in all, I think, well, I don't know what I think. I think he was the most valuable member of the team, and he wasn't getting paid at all except if we wanted to slip him a little after the tour. And I look back on him fondly. I hope he went on to a future in conservation. He probably did.

TM: Do you know when the Park Service started doing these trainings and consultings overseas? Had that happened before you got sent over?

JC: No. But the fact that I was a consultant to the State Department and a consultant to Lady Bird read well on my résumé. Then it was sheer coincidence that the Secretary of Interior thought we shouldn't be sending them a program that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars if we could get people free, and so I was theoretically not costing them anything. And as I say, they didn't feel that that was fair or reasonable, so they gave me the living allowance that they gave to people who came over to the State Department, which turned out to be not poverty at all. It was a high level of living, and we got treated like royalty wherever we went. It was a wonderful assignment.

Anyway, I don't know how much we did for them. We did what we could, but I remember a particular instance we wanted to send them equipment for slide shows and things like that, and they had a projector that had been donated by the World Wildlife Fund, a motion picture projector. I asked the fellow who was gonna run the program for us what did he know about the projector. And he pointed and said he understood OFF and ON.

[Laughter]

JC: And that was true. They were— An awful lot of them were Stone Age people, really. They didn't have any of the new stuff that we had. And it was quite startling to find them giving a program of slides or motion pictures because they really were not comfortable with this kind of stuff. I was pretty sure when we went home and made our recommendations, we sent a whole lot more over, and even the Park Service had bought some stuff they shouldn't have. It was too complicated for us, too. But the Indians were, many of them, kind of Stone Age. They had no experience with technology. They were good at the park, they knew the park, they knew the animals, they knew their jobs, but they couldn't cope with a lot of new stuff. So we had to come up with recommendations that fitted in with their natural abilities and their natural inclinations. And their natural inclinations were to envy the British and to help them shoot the tigers.

It was a fun cross-assignment. We were trying to teach them that they could get a lot more out of these animals if they were alive and well, and I never had a better time, really. I can only give you one example, but it's a nice one. The chief naturalist, who was our guide and very well educated and kind of above anything I've been talking about, had us over to Sunday dinner. I explained about how our Park Service had campfire singing and sang "You Are My Sunshine" for them, which must have been fairly entertaining, as it turns out, because I asked if his girls—he had four or five girls—if they sang. It turns out they were competitive singers.

They were competing all over the country and doing very well. They were wonderful singers. So I sang one song, and they sang a half a dozen for us. That was not a typical experience, but it was at the top of the list of good things that they were willing and happy to do for us.

Having us over to dinner was good. They went out and brought stuff back. If you watched any food sales on the streets, you wanted none of it because everything was coated with flies and what have you. But these were a middle-class couple, and I kind of had to assume they got their food from inside somewhere instead a street corner merchant. And we didn't get sick, but it was entirely possible. The guy who took my place in the next group— As soon as five of us had been there for a couple of months, we went home, and another group came over. And the fellow who had my place had to be carried off the airplane when he got back to the United States.

He was sick the whole time. So I was very fortunate. I think maybe my six months in prison camp might have toughened up my stomach a little because I had about 24 hours of unease. And I guess everybody in my group had about 24 hours of unease, but nobody was down sick. And getting around and enjoying ourselves was pretty easy. We didn't have to improvise too much.

As I say, we were living in the housing that was up for the British high-level executives who liked to hunt tigers, so we weren't bad off at all in the tiger preserve. And downtown—you had to see it to believe it—we were in the, oh, let's call it the Empress Hotel. The Empress Hotel had a guard sleeping on the floor in the halls, in every hall, and things like Tiffany stained-glass ceilings. I don't know whatever it cost, but it probably would have cost \$200 a day if we were regular tourists. But we were guests, and they never really asked us for money. Anywhere we went we were all gifted and treated like royalty.

So as people in the Park Service, I got along nicely around the world, and I got along nicely going to places that other people had to pay a lot to go to. I still feel that I was as lucky as anybody could be in the Park Service. And that almost takes us to the end of my Park Service time. But I did come out here thinking that I would be a camp tender and that we would manage a campground for a while.

TM: This is after you retired?

JC: After we were retired, yeah. And I did a volunteer stretch down at—oh, dear. Anyway, it was actually not a Park Service installation. It was partly Park Service, and it was a museum down in southern Colorado. I should not have introduced this because I've lost a lot of the details on that, but we were there a couple of months. I enjoyed that quite a lot. I was not a camp tender; I was a museum tender and speaker, and liked it very well. And the demands were very small, and I got to meet everybody who came in. It was just a great pleasure for a retired park person.

So we've sort of wound down to the end of my Park Service time. When I came here to Grand Junction, I volunteered to go up and operate part of the system at a series of monuments that we have here on the edge of town. It's all high cliffs and caves and windows and wonderful geography. And guess what! I was in charge of all the damn latest developments in electronics selling books in the Visitors Center.

Unfortunately, I was by then 60 years old and mean and ornery and did not like this system, which was greatly improved over anything I ever had. The electronics kept track so that you didn't have to do an inventory of books. You could press a button and find out what you had. But Jimmy was not geared for this, and [laughs] they fired me. As a volunteer, I had given them too hard a time. One day they called me and asked me to come right away, and I had just gotten back from a trip, just gotten back. The car wasn't unpacked yet, and I said I could come up tomorrow, but I couldn't come up now. And they never asked me again. And I was pretty sure I made them uncomfortable anyway. I was a GS-14 retired and their superintendent wasn't a GS-14. He was possibly an 11 or 12. And they had not discovered a lot of the benefits of volunteers, the idea of having you as a book salesman. There were other things that you could have done that you might have enjoyed more.

Anyway, that's the end of my volunteer career. And I haven't tried since. I did give many talks on National Parks when I first came, but slide talks have gotten out of date. I don't get a request at all from anybody now, even though I've got about—oh, I don't know—three or four thousand slides just sitting in my closet. So being a volunteer isn't always perfect either, and I don't have much more to talk about.

TM: Well, maybe this is a good place to wrap up this interview series.

JC: I think so.

TM: It's been really wonderful.

JC: I'm hoping it has. I'm acutely aware of these gaps in my memory that don't come forward.

TM: Well, you know, for 96, I can only hope I will have half your memory, if I live that long. You're doing great.

JC: Well, don't feel too bad if you die before 97 because it's kind of a lonely pinnacle you're on. I have a great advantage—three of my old girlfriends are still alive, and they're two or three years younger than me, so I can call up some people I know, but it's not a very large group. And if I want to call home to anybody I went to school with, if I want to call up military acquaintances, if I even want to call up Park Service people, there's a very small number that know anything about 97.

TM: I bet, yeah.

JC: Anyway, you have brought a lot of it back to life for me, and I thank you.

TM: Don't thank me. I thank you for taking the time to walk us through your incredible career with the Park Service. I'm very, very grateful.

JC: As I said, if you get this on printed paper, why, please send me a copy, and I can even find some mistakes and correct them.

TM: I will do that. That would be great. So let me— I'll wrap this up, and hold the phone for a minute.

JC: Okay.

TM: This will conclude Part 8 Grand Canyon Oral History with Jim Corson. Today is Saturday, February 27, 2021. My name is Tom Martin. And, Jim, thank you so very much.

JC: Thank you, and I've enjoyed it entirely.