

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Richard Hanson (RH)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Grand Canyon Oral History Interview, Part 2

Date of Interview: October 11, 2020

Method of Interview: Telephone

Transcriber: Aimee Mantell

Date of Transcription: November 8, 2020

Transcription Reviewers: Dannie Derryberry, Tom Martin

Keys: Vietnam, Yosemite, Yosemite Riots, Grand Canyon, Anti-War, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland, Mather, Fillmore Auditorium, People's Park, Rolling Stones, Grateful Dead, Altamont, Playa los Cocos, Mexico, PTSD, Mules, Sweet Pea, Park Service Rangers, Berkeley, San Francisco, Curry Company, Ahwahnee, Snow Creek Cabin, Stoneman Meadow Riots, Jim Wurgler, Dick Marks, David Vassar

TM: Hey, good morning, Richard. How are you today?

RH: I'm doing good, thank you.

TM: Good, glad to hear it. May we have your permission to record this interview over the telephone?

RH: Yes, you can.

TM: Thank you. When we wrapped up our first interview you had returned from your tour of duty in Vietnam and had just seen so much over there—discrimination and just a number of things. Can you pick that thread up from there after you returned to the States?

RH: Sure. I just grabbed ahold of my discharge so I could get the dates a little closer; it's been a long time ago. It doesn't have the day that I got back from Vietnam, but I spent a total of one year, seven months, and two days in Vietnam. I think I got back sometime in March of 1969. I still had seven or eight months to do in the military. I came back a drug addict and a stoner and I knew that in the current situation that was gonna be trouble. I was coming back from a place where basically you did what you pleased, you grew your hair how you wanted to do it, you didn't shine your boots, you didn't do any of that kind of stuff to be attached to a military hospital as the backseat in an ambulance crew. I knew that it was going to be kind of a difficult situation. I came back about as anti-war as you could get and that was still early, '69 was still early to be coming out against the war if you were a veteran. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War that Kerry and the boys basically founded back east I think might have been founded in '69 because I joined the organization, but after I got back I had thirty days before I had to report to my new duty station and I alternated between anti-war rallies, San Francisco mostly, and Berkeley, Oakland, and then taking days and days at a time at Yosemite. I reported for duty at Mather in Sacramento, I think it had to be sometime

in April of 1969. It was immediately, I don't know how to say it, the feelings that I had about reporting to this place were. I think was kind of like maybe a gay guy not being able to come out. This was the last thing I wanted to do, it wasn't who I was. I was hiding my true feelings and by that time I was mostly drug free except I smoked pot all my life and I still smoke pot, but I haven't done any hard drugs in fifty some odd years, some psychedelics and some mushrooms and some pot basically. But I lasted about three weeks to a month. I came to work one day and it was real weird; it was like OK, and I had made Sergeant. That meant that I could live off base which was nice. I made it my last time, my last few months in Vietnam, stoned as I was, I was still able to pull off the deal. I might have been there a month at Mather. Coming to work one day after a weekend of Fillmore Auditorium, street fighting and protesting, my commanding officer looked at me and I was not ready to, I didn't have the look, I had sideburns. I was growing those out, and my shoes were dirty. And he said to me, "Sergeant Hanson, you get out of here and don't come back until you look like a soldier." So I left and didn't come back; that's when I went AWOL. During that AWOL period, I again headed up to Yosemite and San Francisco, Yosemite, San Francisco, Yosemite, San Francisco, til I got busted. There was also, I don't know when People's Park, I got arrested in People's Park. I was one of the first ones. I was still in the military. We got thrown in the Alameda County Jail, and that might have been, I don't know what month it was, but basically I was in turmoil. I wasn't able to live the life that I wanted to or that I knew I should be living. Like I said, the closest I could get is being gay and not being able to come out of the closet or being trans and not being able to come out of the closet. I wasn't able to come out of the closet. To a certain degree I was, I drove a 1955 pink Cadillac adorned with anti-war stuff, and that didn't go over well on Mather.

TM: When you went to Yosemite what did you see there, what attracted you there? I can appreciate when there's an action happening on the street, anti-war action, you're going to want to be there, but between times you didn't head to a library to read. It sounds like you took solace in the Sierras.

RH: Oh, that's exactly right. They were the healing influence on my life. It was the peace and quiet. It was the nature would just wash all over me, the physical activity of just being able to get out. I wasn't a climber. I did a lot of bouldering but just, no, it was petty, it saved my life. The wilderness basically saved my life. I had a place to go where I felt at peace and I could do basically and feel how I wanted to feel. When I was in the city on those days where there were rallies in Fillmore, and Avalon, and Winterland, and the Grateful Dead and everybody else who ever played guitar, it was the acid and the pot, and getting high. Yosemite set the pace for the next fifty years of my life. I live here in Hawaii. I have a house with no walls. Don't fence me in. We're at '69, it was probably June or July. I lost time on my discharge, went from June to October, which means that's when I was AWOL and then busted and then in jail.

TM: So June, July, August, September...

RH: Yeah, half the time would have been AWOL and about half the time would have been jail.

TM: I don't mean to be flippant, but couldn't you make an argument that said my commanding officer told me to leave until I was ready to come back and I wasn't ready.

RH: Yeah, and I think we broached that, but I also looked at my psychiatric evaluation that I had to have done before trial and I could read you some of that shit if you actually really wanted to hear.

TM: No, no, I don't.

RH: Basically, my lawyer decided the best way for me was him to just ask me why I left. That's when I spent two and a half to three hours spewing my anti-war what I had seen, why I couldn't continue being a military guy. It got a little press cause I say it was early to have someone court marshaled for being against the war and stuff. That had an adverse impact that my father, who I hadn't been really talking to at all, saw that I was being court marshaled for AWOL, desertion, and we didn't talk again for quite some time. He basically disowned me. When I got out of jail, this would be October of 1969, I still had all the time. My lost time didn't count towards my enlistment, but every day I was in jail, and I didn't know that 'til I got out.

TM: So when you were in jail it didn't count or it did count?

RH: It did not count. I basically still had the same amount of months as when I went in there. When I got out I was a friggin' mess. I was a mess. It played out that the doctors and such that I was working with were mostly draftees. The psychiatrist I had been seeing, he was also a draftee, and I had to see him to see if I was fit to stand trial and if I know right or wrong and all this other stuff. I stood trial, but my commanding officer was a lifer. My first sergeant was a lifer. The first thing they said to me when I got out was: "Hanson..," and when I got out I was back to an E1, I lost my Sergeant stripe, I was an Airman Basic and I was like all right, went in an E1 and got out an E1. They said to me "Hanson, you still got six, seven months to go and we know you're going to fuck up again, and we're going to be watching you every fucking step of the way. And the next time it's not going to be two months in the friggin' jail, it's going to be Leavenworth." They're smiling the whole time they're telling me this and that would have been on the 5th or 6th of October. I soldiered through for a couple of weeks and I was talking to this doctor friend of mine, just telling him, "Bro man, I'm not going to be able to do this. I can't fuckin'..." He was going, "You only got six or seven months, you got to do it." I said, "No, I'm not going to be able to do it."

TM: What did they have you doing for those two weeks, I mean you're back to an E1, what kind of stuff were you doing?

RH: I was answering the phone at the friggin' base hospital. I had been taken off the ambulance crew. I wasn't doing a very good job answering the phone either. I got a call one day. You don't know who's calling, but it's a lady, and she's going, "I need to talk to

somebody, my vagina really itches.” I just said, “Scratch it,” and hung up. It turns out it was some officer’s wife. I didn’t get in big trouble, I think I got an Article 15 for that one, but these doctors and the psychiatrist said “Let’s set up a meeting with the commanding officer and your first sergeant and just see how we could make this, make this shit go away. And you could do your five or six months without fucking going to prison or without going to Canada,” because they really liked me. I had done my time in Vietnam and I had done a really good job there. I said I’d be willing to do that. This is sometime the first week in November and we’re having this meeting, cause I got discharged I think, so anyway we’re going to have this meeting. We go into a little corner of the mess hall and there was twelve or thirteen of us there, mostly doctors, showing support for me, a couple of career guys, the commanding officer, the first sergeant, a couple of career guys, and two psychiatrists. They started talking about how I was going to have to do this, this, this, this, this or this was going to happen. The doctors would come in and go “How about if he did that,” and the other guys were going “No, he’s going to have to do this, this, this,” and I think I listened for about ten minutes and I had a nervous breakdown right there. I just started, stood up, and I started bawling, just fucking bawling. And pointing my fingers at these guys and going, “I’m not the one fucked up. You’re the ones fucked up. I just want out,” and just screaming. Then I started picking up the folding chairs, tossing them and shit. An MP was right there and ten minutes after I started my little rant I was back in jail. Two days later one of my doctor friends come in and he goes, “Let’s go, you’re out.” And I said, “I don’t wanna go out, I just don’t wanna go out, and I’m not going back out there.” “No,” he said, “No, you’re out of the military.” And I said, “What?” He says, “You’re out of the military.” So it turns out that the psychiatrist and the doctors in there that saw something real and I was given a mental discharge. I was a passive aggressive schizophrenic and my court martial diagnosis that I knew right or wrong was adult situational disorder. You gotta laugh at that, having trouble finding my place, well duh, adult situational disorder, fuck. Three months later, I had graduated to passive aggressive schizophrenic.

TM: With the medical discharge were you able to keep any of your military benefits with regards to healthcare?

RH: I never, yes, the answer is yes. I could have bought a house I guess on the GI bill, I could have gone to college on the GI bill, but I chose to have absolutely nothing to do with them. I mean forever.

TM: Yeah, makes sense. I’m just thinking, wow, that a medical discharge is not exactly what was going on, but the military had no way to accommodate what was happening. And I’m assuming that as decades went by they got that figured out, but were you stripped of all that was due to you for the service that you rendered to the country?

RH: Not all of it. I don’t think I can have a flag on my coffin. Like I said, I haven’t dealt with them. I saw the way my brother, for fifteen years he was a hundred percent disabled vet. He was the same as me basically. He had been wounded but his was all PTSD. I think they coined the phrase PTSD in the mid-’70s, I’m not sure, but they didn’t

have anything for us. But I saw how getting that monthly check made, a VA healthcare and all this stuff that comes along with being 100% disabled, actually keeps you from having any drive, I guess.

TM: Right, it can be a trap.

RH: Right, it's a trap. Don't get me wrong, my brother had a really nice life. He did volunteer and he did stuff, but he lived very simply. You know, 100%, I don't know what he was getting a month, but it was enough to get by and have some beer money. I never wanted to go there, never really, had never wanted to go in the office and fill out the papers, and people, shit, eight or ten years after were telling me you could go get on disability with the discharge, it's right here, you're a passive aggressive schizophrenic, I would change the name to fucking PTSD. I'm going "You know, I don't even want to deal with that. I don't even want to walk into the office." I got out sometime in November of '69 and I remember going, the night I got out going, to a Dead concert. They were playing in Sacramento for benefit for KFAT and I went back to Berkeley and Altamont was happening in a few days.

TM: Remind me what that is.

RH: Altamont was the free concert by the Rolling Stones and the Grateful Dead at the Altamont Speedway right outside of the city. I should have googled the dates of Altamont but this is my memory, but I don't know the exact dates. I went to Altamont and it was a freakin', a great movie about Altamont is Helter Skelter. I ate two hits of purple mescaline and about forty-five minutes after I ate them Wavy Gravy got up on the deal and said, "Please, please don't take any of the purple mescaline, we're having a lot of bad trips at the aid tent."

TM: Oops.

RH: Yeah, that's what I said, those were my exact words, kind of oops and I was just coming on to them. I said I had enough sense to move to the back and just sit up on the hill and it wasn't bad, it wasn't bad. After that when winter was coming, I made my first sojourn down to Mexico, hitchhiked from Berkeley, had a little sign, a little telegraph that said Mexico. Some guy friggin' picked me up, drove me all the way to San Diego and crossed the border, found a little spot about 1,000 miles down called Playa Los Cocos. I was by myself, I was getting better, I was healing. I got a little palapa, very little thatched roof place at the end of the beach.

TM: So this is down in the jungle? If you're a 1,000 miles down it's...

RH: It was south of Mazatlán about 200 miles so maybe it was, yeah, I mean, it was jungle-y. It was in the province of Tepic.

TM: Tampico?

RH: Tampico. Tepic, Tempic is a city. Playa los Locos, the nearest little town was San Blas. I bought a \$20 surfboard and I was there about a month and there was hardly anybody on the beach. The palapa about a hundred yards down from me all of a sudden had five people staying in it. I went over introduced myself and there were five gay people from San Francisco, two guys and three girls. Some of the nicest people, some of the finest people I ever hung out with. I ended up falling in love with one of the girls. We ended up traveling together and hanging out for four or five years, never slept with her. Well, we slept, but we never made love. I started on the road to recovery that winter, '69 and early '70. Yeah, and then things started getting interesting from 1970 when I was out of the military to just about 1980 when I, I think it was late '79 when I took the foreman's job at Grand Canyon. But those nine years were, those are the ones that blow my mind. I tell people that I wouldn't wish the first 25 years, 24 years of my life, on anybody, anybody. I just, with the home life and then the war and the aftereffects of the war, and fighting, I was still fighting at the demonstrations. Man, I was so good at, I felt a sense of liberation. I could make a gas mask on the fly and pick up the tear gas canister and throw it back at them. I was good and the liberation part, man, was like finally, finally, I'm doing something that I believe in after years of not. It was probably, again, the only reference I could make is probably like a gay guy coming out after a whole lot of years and just going hallelujah.

TM: What was the name of the woman that you met?

RH: Catherine Heuser. I'd love to friggin', she was from Santa Rosa, California, I would love to find her again. I tried googling her and stuff, but I don't really know the key words and how to do that shit.

TM: From Mexico, did you stay in Mexico with her or did you head back to California with her, back to San Francisco?

RH: A little of both. We stayed down there until about April or May.

TM: On a six-month tourist visa?

RH: Yeah, maybe we were there, maybe the end of November, I'd say April because then the mountains started calling. I went back to the city and a couple of the people had really nice places there. For the next few years that pattern held. It was Yosemite and San Francisco in the spring and summer, South America and Mexico in the winters. I got by in Yosemite by selling bags to climbers. Doing Sherpa work on some of the big climbs. Being a Sherpa, and that's basically the time frame, too, over those few years where I met my first mule. That just friggin' turned my life around there.

TM: Before you tell me that story because I'm going to want that story, I'm trying to place this in time with the Yosemite Riots.

RH: The Yosemite Riots were my last basically, the Stoneman Meadow Riots were my last riot. I think that would have been '72, I'm not sure. It's one I remember. I could

google that. I think it was '72 because it hadn't happened yet. I had a couple of good years up there before the riots.

TM: And you hadn't met or had the interaction with the mule yet? I'm just trying to put this into a timeline. Is that right?

RH: I had my first interactions with the mules, it would have been the spring of 1970. Sometime in the spring of 1970.

TM: And how did that happen?

RH: The Park Service at that time, since then they moved everything to El Portal and such, but had their corrals up by the Ahwahnee set up against the cliff where I used to go bouldering and stuff, right in the Valley. The first time I went over there they were sticking their heads through the fence and I go over there, rub their nose. I don't remember seeing a friggin' mule before. I pet them, scratch their ears. They would just do what mules do. Just smile at ya when they got their lips all curled up, their teeth showing, they'd kick each other. I would go over to the Ahwahnee and clear out every fuckin' sugar cube from the table and give them sugar cubes, and I got to the point where just about every day I was in the Valley I would go over and hang with the mules. And then I met a packer, one of the animal caretakers, one of the animal packers for Yosemite.

TM: Do you remember his name?

RH: Sweet Pea was all I know him by and he was, I guess, I don't know if he's still alive. I met other people from Yosemite through the years after I got hooked up with the Park Service and I asked if Sweet Pea's still there. He probably wouldn't remember me. We probably talked a total, he was a cowboy, they just don't talk much, but "Mind if I feed the mules?" "Yeah, go ahead." "Mind if I give him sugar?" "No." I would watch him pack them if he was heading out or sometimes I'd watch him shoe them and I just went, man, that just, that looks like fun. So that was my first exposure to mules. I was getting to know the back country real well and I came upon a fuckin' cabin, Snow Creek Cabin. I was basically lost; I was cross country hiking. It was about seven miles out of the valley floor, go up Snow Creek Trail, kind of by Muir Lake. I'm just cross countrying and I come across this friggin' cabin, all dilapidated. I go in, go in the door and stuff and I'm looking around, there's some newspapers and such there, and a pot-bellied stove, and there's a nice cook stove in the little kitchen area, wood cook stove. All the newspapers were about Bonnie and Clyde. I went fuck. So Cliff Notes version, I ended up kind of fixing the place up and it was my home away from the Valley, home away from San Francisco. I could spend weeks up there. Catherine was with me a lot of the time. And we packed in, I think it was twenty-three bundles of cedar shake and put a new roof on it. Cleaned out the spring that was next to it because before you had to go down Snow Creek to get water, which was about a half mile away and had this little spring in a meadow. In the middle of Yosemite National Park.

TM: Wow. And somehow it had fallen off the Park's radar screen if it had ever been on the Park's radar screen?

RH: Yup, came to find out it was built by the Curry Company or some of the Currys, or some of the big guys to have a place to lodge back in the '20s and '30s if they were out cross-country skiing and such. I think it must have been abandoned right in the mid-'30s because I think that was Bonnie and Clyde time. That's what I remember looking at the papers. I found that place, I think, in the summer of 1970, and I stayed, fixed it up a little bit and it was just this, it was like an ashram, it was like a healing place.

TM: Like a refuge.

RH: Yeah, it was amazing. When I was in the Valley I had a, I found a little cave next to Camp Four and it was up off the floor of the campground just a ways up and put a little rock wall in front of it and I would stay there, my little cave. And then this place was, Snow Creek Cabin was just, I don't know, man, just wonderful, just wonderful.

TM: Yeah. Did you have any relationship with any of the Park Service personnel at this time outside of Sweet Pea?

RH: No. No, I, you know, Park Service was, Park Service was rangers and stuff. I didn't know anything about trail crews, this kind of stuff and that kind of stuff. I'd see the Rangers coming in, patrolling the campground and see this and that but, no. There was a heavy emphasis on law enforcement in those days and actually in a lot of the days. Rangers were cops. So, no, I didn't. Later on, I'm thinking it's '72, might have been '73, I definitely did, but that's another story. I went on for a couple of years disappearing from Yosemite and going down south and then I would come back. My revolutionary tendencies were starting to wane a little bit. They were mostly peaceful, but there were some that were violent and it wasn't doing me a lot of good to be around violence. I could come back from those feeling, like I said semi euphoric just because, okay, man, I'm doing, I'm fighting for what I believe in, but that thrill would wear off where when I was in Yosemite there was a long period of calmness. I came to appreciate that more than I, and by that time, '70, '71, '72 I felt basically that I'd paid my dues. So, yeah, that was my mule story. That's what I was telling you the other day. If you would have told me back then that eight or ten years later that I'd be the friggin' trail foreman in charge of all of the mules, the government mules in the Park, and all of the trails in the Park, I'd say you're crazy, there's absolutely no way. But that's an interesting part of my life is after I did make that connection at the Yosemite Corral and made the connection with an animal I just absolutely loved. I would talk more to them than I would talk to any person. I lived my life for thirty, thirty-five years and it had just been pretty fuckin' incredible. I guess we're probably at a point we could pick it up later.

TM: That sounds good, yeah, cause I would like to know about Stoneman, what happened there and

RH: The Stoneman, do you know how to google and talk on the phone?

TM: I do except that where I do the recording is in another room where the computer is over across the house.

RH: I was just going to ask if you could google dates on Stoneman.

TM: I can do that after the call. You worked at Grand Canyon so you probably knew Jim Wurgler.

RH: Umm hmm.

TM: And Jim and I did a wonderful series of oral histories. He talked about his experience there at Stoneman, his take on it.

RH: Also, the man leading the charge at Stoneman Meadows was Dick Marks.

TM: Who became superintendent at Grand Canyon.

RH: At Grand Canyon when I was there and who happened to hear that I had been at the Meadow because, and I don't know how he heard, I think it was because I went into Albright and I had heard that they had probably one of the last copies of David Vassar's film on the Meadows. And I asked if I could look at it and they gave me a private deal, a private screening. Later on, a couple years later I ended up actually doing a film with David Vassar and we talked a lot about it. He was the Director on the Paul Winter concerts river trips when they were making the album Canyon, and they also did a film called, Canyon Consort or something. I don't know if you've seen it or heard of it.

TM: I've heard of it, yeah.

RH: Actually it was a wonderful film. I just watched it with, and I was on all four of those river trips so I got to know David pretty well and a couple other people but, but anyway.

TM: We're getting ahead of ourselves and we got a lot of neat things to talk about so my tail is wagging. This sounds great. Yeah, maybe this is a good time to wrap up Part 2 and we'll pick it back up. And I'll look up the dates for Stoneman.

RH: Yeah, I can too, cause I, God damn, I think it's 1972 cause I think I pulled out of Yosemite in '73 or '74.

TM: We'll look that up and go through that and slowly work our way to when you do cycle back around to the Park Service.

RH: All right, then we got another eight years to go, bruh.

TM: That's right and I'm not in a hurry. This is great. With that, we'll conclude Part 2 Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Richard Hanson. My name is Tom Martin and today is Sunday, October 11, 2020. Richard, thank you so very much.

RH: Hey, thanks, man. It feels good talking to somebody about this.