

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

Interviewee: Richard Hanson (RH)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Richard recounts time working as a mule packer on the Payette National Forest in 1977-78 then getting hired at Grand Canyon National Park in 1980 as a trail foreman

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TM: Today is Sunday, October 18th, 2020. This is a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Richard Hanson. This is a Part 4 interview. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Richard, how are you today?

RH: Good morning. Doing fine. Thank you.

TM: Good. Richard, let's see, first things first here, may we have your permission to record this interview over the phone?

RH: Yes.

TM: Thank you. We were talking last time about your getting a job for the United States Forest Service/ National Forest Service in the McCall District of the Payette National Forest around 1977 or so. Could you pick that thread up?

RH: Yeah. I had been living at McMeekin Ranch in Idaho on the Salmon River picking up skills and basically practicing a craft that I never thought I'd be doing and that was packing mules. At the time I was gonna have to move back into town and look for work, and happened to see a job posting for a seasonal animal packer, and I applied. I thought I had a good shot. I had Veterans Preference that I really didn't know I had, I would get the five points. I applied for the job and got it. It was gonna be like a lot of things in Central Idaho, a four-month/five-month job. To start off it was... Everything in the Forest Service in Idaho is basically also attached to fire. My direct supervisor was the FMO.

TM: What's a FMO?

RH: Fire Management Officer.

TM: Thank you.

RH: Fire was always a collateral duty for anybody in the Forest Service there. That first summer was basically packing...

TM: Hey Richard, for the Park Service to be around fire, you have to do what's called a pack test...

RH: Yeah, pack test, yeah, yeah.

TM: ...to be able to carry a...what is it, a 40-pound pack and you've got to be able to cover a mile in four minutes or something like that? No, that's not...

RH: No, when I first started out in fire it was a step test. What they had you do was put on a pack. I think it was 30 pounds/35, and then they had a stepping deal, you know, step up, step up, step down, step down, step up, step up, step down, step down. That's why it was called the step test. They would check your heart rate at the beginning, check your heart rate in the middle, check your heart rate at the end. I think the test lasted 10 minutes and then there was the parameters there. Later on, yeah, we had the pack test. My remembrance of the pack test was more like three miles in 40 minutes, something like that.

TM: That sounds right, yeah.

RH: They did the same thing, check your heart, check your vitals, do all of that, and if you fell within a certain parameter you were good to go, you could be a firefighter.

TM: So when you got the job, was that something you had to do was then do the step test to...

RH: Yeah, yeah, had to do the step test. I had six head. Had one Appaloosa horse that was just an unbelievable trail animal. I'm sure it came from the Nez Perce Tribe, you know, up Lewiston. And then I had five mules, which was basically the perfect number to have on your hip. Any more than five the string got too long. Some of them hadn't been worked in a while. I learned so much more there those first few years with the Forest Service as far as working with mules. A lot of rugged trail rides, some of them cross country. One of my jobs was to...like when smokejumpers jumped a fire, there wasn't always a trail nearby but they always had to get their stuff out. It was packing out the saws and the packs and the other things of smokejumpers. And packing fire lookouts. I think on my district, I think there was six lookouts and that would be... Those were tough days cause they're...

TM: Why?

RH: Well, they're remote and you're packing in stuff for basically somebody's food, and sometimes a lot of water and tools and all that. They're gonna be up there for three months so they're always big loads, they're always very awkward, and some places real hard to get to. But you know, I learned so much there.

TM: So this is a four- to five-month job. Was it a summer job or the fall or the winter or the spring? How did that work time wise?

RH: You know, Idaho gets a lot of snow and so initially that first year I think I got hired sometime in May and was usually laid off. The government's fiscal year starts October 1st so that was always a time, basically, that if they had extra money or if they had a little something, but normally they'd tell you you'd be laid off on the first of October just coinciding with the fiscal year of the government. I guess it's still October, well, I know it is still October, the start of the fiscal year.

TM: How much were you making an hour, do you remember?

RH: Six or seven dollars. I think I got hired to start as a WG-4 or something like that. So not much, six or seven bucks an hour.

TM: Was that for an eight-hour day regardless of whether you worked twelve or fourteen?

RH: Yeah, pretty much. You could keep track on it and... You don't work eight hours when you're packing. It's not like at the end of eight hours you drop all your loads wherever you're at, you know.

TM: (laughs) Right.

RH: But, you know, I basically hadn't worked since I got out of the military, which was in '69, late '69, so it was nice getting a paycheck whatever it was. I mean, I'd done the odd jobs that we talked about before but... And then the second year...

TM: So before we get to the second year, you've got a horse and five mules. You'd never... Well, I shouldn't say you'd never run a string that long because you may have in Colorado.

RH: I had run them about that long in Colorado but it was so much easier country. It was more open. Basically in Colorado our trips could be two to three miles at the drop zone to a mineshaft and then after that, depending on the nearest road, they could be up to five or six miles.

TM: So short distances.

RH: Yeah, short distances.

TM: You'd cover that much in a day on a multiday pack then in the Payette.

RH: I would cover sometimes 23/24 miles in a day.

TM: Wow.

RH: A lot of them were like, okay, 10 miles in and 10 miles out. I mean, you just plot it out like day trips.

TM: And you'd go in and you'd drop off your load, or pick up a load, and then move out?

RH: Right.

TM: So it was a long, moving day.

RH: Right.

TM: Wow. And you'd have to take care of your animals. Did you learn how to shoe them or did someone else do that?

RH: No, I did learn how to shoe. It was something I was never really good at. I mean, I could put on a good shoe and I could put on emergency shoes, but I could only shoe like two to three in a day. I had kind of the wrong body type, you know. I mean, a good horse shoer/good mule shoer could do 10 or 12 in a day, and they're short and stocky. That's a good body style for a shoer. But I knew how to do it and,

you know, I would basically... I guess the one thing they tell you, and it's very true, is you fit the shoe to the animal, you don't fit the animal's foot to the shoe. So, you know, if you remembered that... But I got tired of... When I got to the Grand Canyon we had a shoer but, no, to start I was the guy.

TM: All right, that first year, four to five months, did you ever have any wrecks that year? Anything come to mind that you remember that first year?

RH: Definitely some wrecks. I think where I had problems the most was like overnights. They had to eat and I had a bell mare. Put an old cow bell around a mare that all the mules looked up to. Hobbled her and then you would listen to that bell in the morning and then go have to round them all up. Sometimes they were pretty far away (both laugh). I got that down, too. I got that part down.

I remember, what the f*** was the... I don't remember the name of the lookout, but I know a lady... They told me, "Be at this trailhead and we're packing in...." I think it might have been Jenkins Crossing or something like that. This big lady gets out all her stuff, she's got a ton of stuff, and she's got a little dog, a little yappy dog. I've got another saddle animal for her. We get everything loaded up, there was a ton of stuff, and I don't know, hit the trail probably around 11:00 after she got there and we got everything loaded up and stuff. The last half mile to the lookout was probably two and a half/three feet of snow or better. We plowed through that and got up to the lookout. Most of those lookouts, you know, they're just a huge stairway to get to the top. So dropped everything at the bottom of the stairs and I helped her carry the stuff up and we put it on the landing there. I said, "Okay, give me the key, let's get this stuff in there." She goes, "I don't have a key."

"What do you mean you don't have a key?" "Oh, I thought you had the key." I said, "No, I don't have the key. It's not my lookout." So I'm going Jesus Christ. By that time, you know, it's gonna be close even just getting back down before dark. So I called my boss, George Griffin. I say, "George, we've got a little problem. There's no key up here unless there's one stashed up here." He goes, "No, there's no key up there." I said, "Well, what do you want me to do?" He says, "See if you can put a small hole in one of the windows you can get to" (laughs). I said, "Okay. I never heard of a small hole in a window." So I just took a pulaski and just smashed the friggin'...and those are floor to ceiling glass, you know...and got the stuff in and headed out. Somebody else went up later on. I packed somebody else up there to fix the window. So, yeah, I mean, it was just always something. I mean, always a good something. Always something where you had to pretty much stay focused. You had to be focused all the time on the animals. You had to be constantly looking around. You had to totally be aware of your surroundings. And I did a good job that first year. The next year they added a three-person trail crew to the job so I was an animal packer/trails foreman title. So I got a little bump. I think I was a WG-6 or something like that. Had a little house in town with Heather, my first wife. Things were pretty good. Second year I think I got brought back in April, I believe, and we were gonna go down to the South Fork of the Salmon, which is low country. Then just had another, you know, pretty spectacular season riding mules in the Payette National Forest. And this was before... I don't know what year the Wilderness Act came out.

TM: '64.

RH: '64? Okay. I don't know what year the Payette was declared wilderness.

TM: Ah, good question.

RH: Frank Church. But I know we were still using power tools and they would send us out different places cause they knew it was coming, Wilderness. So it was another really good year. I was getting to know the animals real well, had the same animals as I had before. I still had my animals, my personal animals. So a lot of times I would rotate one or two of them in and...

TM: Nice, cause that would give the Forest Service animals a break and it would keep you familiar with your animals.

RH: Yep, that's exactly right. It worked well and, you know, when I had my animals with me I didn't have to pay to feed them or I didn't have to pasture them out somewhere.

TM: Oh, cool. Richard, you mentioned that your second year you were packing for a trail team of three people. I would think that'd be real different cause now you're assigned with a group, you're working on a trail, you wouldn't have these long rides, you know, like the tower resupplies or the long, rough rides out into country with no trails going to a helicopter drop for the hotshots.

RH: Well, I still had those. Not as many but, no, that was still part of my gig. My job with the trail guys was pretty much the same; get camp in, line them out with what we were gonna be doing, and then maybe split for a couple of days to pack a lookout or whatever. During fire season the trail crew guys were also firefighters so there was a lot of times they'd be put on a fire and I would be going back to being solo. But, yeah, that was my first... I had done some trail work on the trail where I was living at McMeekin Ranch, cause it was a three and a half mile trail to get up to where I was living. It was a rough trail. So, you know, I'd move rocks, I definitely built a few walls. I fixed bridges and that kind of stuff but, yeah, this was a different... It was good for me, you know, it really was. We were building a lot of puncheon bridge, we were doing just a lot of different stuff.

TM: What kind of bridge is that you mentioned?

RH: Puncheon bridge, punching bridge. I don't know how to spell it. It's small bridges over boggy areas or real bad muddy areas. You just use native materials. Most of the time we'd build them out of lodgepole. Some of them could be a hundred feet. So learning a lot of chain saw skills, some rock skills, lots of rigging, doing lots of different types of rigging, pulling large objects with a block and tackle. Yeah, lots of learning going on. I finished off that second year, so that would be, what, '78 or something like that, 'cause I went to Grand Canyon in 1980, if I can believe my arrowhead. So I think that was '78. Then I had one other great... There was another packer, his name was Clem Pope. They wanted to keep us around so the Forest Service flew two permanent jobs, subject to furlough because still we weren't gonna be working year round but, you know, then we didn't have to worry about our friggin' job every summer. Clem and I both got the packer jobs. His was up in a place called the Chamberlain Basin. Beautiful, beautiful country. If you ever look at a map of the Salmon, his unit was up above a place called Mackay Bar....

TM: Oh, that's pretty country.

RH: ...which is where the Main and South Fork, basically, come together right in there. He was up top in the basin. But I think it was October that they called me up and said, "We're gonna take you into Chamberlain Basin and you're gonna help Clem bring the animals out." We were gonna winter them at a place called Paddy Flat. That was probably... Trail-wise it was probably about 45/48 miles. God, I had some fun on that trip, and I was able to do it a few other times with him.

TM: Was that the trail that runs along the Salmon, that runs along the river?

RH: Runs along the South Fork of the Salmon and then you go up over a place called Lick Creek Summit, and then from Lick Creek you drop down towards McCall, and Paddy Flat was about 12 miles from McCall. But he had close to 20 head up there and it was just me and him. It was just so much fun. Took us a couple of days. Then in the springtime I would help him run them back in there, too, and it was just us. I had done something similar with... I think I told you about Cort Conley at the Shepp Ranch.

I helped the Shepp Ranch in the springtime run their mules. They would come right through the McMeekin Ranch where I'm at so I'd meet them at McMeekin all saddled up, and then we would take 25/30 f***** mules, trail them in, one guy in the front. The thing about a mule, they know where they're going so, you know, if they've done it once they'll remember, okay, this is gonna be where we're gonna...this is where we're headed.

TM: So this wouldn't be a string, you wouldn't have them...

RH: No, no. Loose, loose herding them.

TM: Wow. Great.

RH: I always kept one or two on my hip just so I could switch out if it was gonna be a huge, long day. You know, I could go 10 miles with one and then 10 miles with another, so I could switch them out. That time in the Payette was a huge learning experience both in the profession that I worked 35 years in, and also as far as mental growth, spiritual growth. I think it was the first time I developed confidence in anything cause I'd been beat down so bad when I was a kid that I was starting to go f*** man, I'm pretty good at this, I'm pretty good at this. So life went on. I had stopped in '77/'78. I think I wintered, well, I know I wintered, in Idaho. Learned how to ski. There was a beautiful ski hill right outside of McCall, Brundidge, Brundidge Mountain. It was good, it was good.

TM: Hey, Richard, what do you remember about Clem Pope?

RH: Clem?

TM: Yeah.

RH: He was a local boy. He was good, I mean, he was excellent with the animals. He had been working a few more seasons than I had been. I think he might have started in the mid '70s. Real nice guy. Good packer and good shoer. We never actually socialized-socialized, you know, just when we were on the trail. I liked Clem.

TM: Nice. Cause you mentioned him and I thought I should ask you about him because I had a chance to.

RH: Yeah. No, he's a good man.

TM: Cool. So this is the first winter that you didn't go south down to warmer climes.

RH: Yeah. So '77 and '78 I basically stayed in McCall and would... I still had the lease on the place at the McMeekin. I would go up there a lot in the winter. My daughter and my ex would mostly stay in town. But, yeah, things were good.

TM: Cool. And so with that job as a permanent subject to furlough, would you end up working, say, six to seven months a year or eight? How did that...

RH: Yeah, exactly. I would start earlier than most of the seasonals and it was not uncommon to work until snowfall. Some of those trips out of Chamberlain Basin would be mid-October and then I would... I never really worked up until Thanksgiving or any of that kind of stuff but I think I was working six/seven months, yeah. Maybe eight.

TM: Okay. Cool. And that sounds like a decent wage, a livable wage back then.

RH: Yeah. I don't know what I was making when I got permanent but I think it was like a WG-6 so that might have been, I don't know, s***, \$10/\$12 bucks an hour. And then we would also get per diem. I think that was like \$12 bucks a day. I was away from home more than I was at home so, you know, that added up, too, those per diem checks.

TM: Yeah. Cool. And the skills, like you say, so this is more on-the-job training.

RH: Yep.

TM: Did you get a chance to mentor under anyone for trails or was everybody just kind of in it together? Was there anybody you got a chance to spend some time with that was really good that you learned some stuff from?

RH: One of the seasonal guys that I hired by the name of Richie Perez and the other guy on my crew was a long-time old friend from the Bay Area and also a Nam vet. Everybody called him Che because he looked just like Che and he talked just like Che. So those were my crew members to start that first year. And Richie was a spectacular carpenter. He was good with a saw. When we were laying out these bridges and stuff, you know, I didn't know how to make a turn without big gaps and that kind of stuff. He showed me how to just lay the log out and put it where you want it, and how to rip the log so that you could make these turns. And so, yeah, he was really...

TM: What do you mean by a turn?

RH: Well, like if you're turning. You know, there's no straight lines in nature. It would go through a place and then you'd have to turn a little bit to the left or a little bit to the right or...

TM: Like with a bridge, you mean?

RH: Yes, a bridge.

TM: Oh, okay.

RH: He basically taught me how to do that kind of stuff and really made me more proficient with a chainsaw and such. Actually my house, the house that I'm sitting in right now, is built with skills that I

learned in the Forest Service and the Park Service. And I ended up... I think the next year... The next year got to be a little hectic. I don't know if I want... I'll just tell you it was when my father died. I think that would have been '78, maybe '79, one of those two years. I wasn't there. I got there, I did try to make the move. My mother had called me and asked me to come back. So I got down to Boise, got on a plane, and by the time I got to San Francisco he had passed while I was on the airplane. I ended up staying there helping my mother out for I'm gonna say a couple of months. I'm not gonna talk about what happened in McCall while I was gone, but suffice to say that—that must have been friggin' '79—that when I got back up there that it was time for another yellow brick road.

TM: Did your animals make it through okay?

RH: Yeah, yeah. I had some good friends there that had large properties in McCall, or the Long Valley actually. I was good enough to... They would let me turn them loose and I could do my thing. So, again, I'm trying to figure out months. I guess I could go look at the family bible if I still had it and tell you exactly.

TM: No, roughly's enough for this.

RH: So I got back up to McCall, found some things out, and just knew it was friggin' time to leave. My brother was... So this was fall cause I still... My brother had moved up to Seattle. So I took off from there and went up to Seattle, and then went to see some friends in Vancouver. I met this lady in Vancouver and I'd go back and forth. I was working a little construction up in Vancouver and every payday, man, I'd get busted by Immigration. Took me about three times to figure out that my boss was calling them, telling them... (laughs) "Hey, man, I got this guy, I don't think he's legal." So I met this lady, nice, born in Nova Scotia. Real... Hung out with her in Little Italy in Vancouver for a couple of months and we decided... We talked to some friends that told us about this place called Supai and that it was just the most almighty best place to go down there and do some psychedelics and land of blue-green water, you know. So we left Vancouver, it was probably November or December, and went to Supai and had this just friggin' incredible time there, incredible. Then we decided...

TM: Let's talk about that a little bit. The main visitation time in Supai is sort of spring and summer and fall, and in the winter it can be kind of quiet down there.

RH: Yeah.

TM: Did you like, you know, drive out to Hilltop and just start walking with your packs or did you arrange to have some horse transport? How did that work out?

RH: No. We just decided... We just got there and hiked in. The first time I'd ever been there and it was real quiet. There was hardly anybody there and this is the year before 1980. It had a reputation with... It was just starting to get known, at least in the circle of people that I ran with. I don't know how long we stayed down there. It was at least a week.

TM: It must have been really nice coming down from cold, snowy Idaho.

RH: Yeah. I was coming down from rainy Vancouver/Seattle. I'd left there, Idaho, and like I say, I don't want to get into the reasons I left but it was time and, yeah, it was an unbelievable place.

TM: So did you spend like maybe a week there roughly?

RH: I think at least a week there and then we went up to Grand Canyon. First time ever in Grand Canyon. Staying at Mather Campground there. I remember it being cold there and, you know, yada, yada. Back in the day, they used to have all their job openings and stuff posted on bulletin boards and things. There was no USA Jobs computer site. I saw a job announcement for trail crew members and there was also one for trail foreman. So I applied for trail crew job. I put my application in and then we went to Austin, Texas. And then it was time to really wrap up Idaho, figure out what I was doing with my animals. This was springtime, early spring. After about a month, hadn't heard anything from Grand Canyon so I was actually thinking that, well, I'll go back to work for the McCall District one more year. And then I got a call from a guy by the name of Adrian Hatfield. He was a Hatfield and a McCoy, he was all part of that deal. He wasn't the chief of maintenance, he was second in command, I guess, for facility manager or some s***. He called. So I got back to Idaho, my friend told me that somebody from Grand Canyon called you, here's the number. I called him back and he offered me the trail foreman job.

TM: Oh.

RH: I know. I was probably 30 at the time, 31—'48, '58, '68, '78. 30, yeah, 32. He said, "That's gonna be a WS-9." I don't know if you're familiar with the WG, WL, WS stuff.

TM: I'm not.

RH: Okay. WS is a wage supervisor. WL is a wage leader. What I was at Idaho was a WG and that's just a wage grade. It's the paying system for blue collar types working for the Park. We weren't GS, we weren't general services. Basically it's the way they pay their maintenance guys. It's a sliding scale depending on the cost of living in your area if they have the prevailing wage in your area, of what your wage will be. So in other words like up in Olympic, when the prevailing wage was tied to Seattle, it was really high. In Arizona where it was tied to lower paying jobs, it was still a huge bump up from what I was making in Idaho but it was also a huge bump in responsibilities. I took it. I got up there and...

TM: When did Adrian want you to start?

RH: I'm trying to figure out exactly when I started. It was 1980 and it was definitely early. I'm saying springtime that I had to be back up there. So I wrapped up the stuff in McCall. Sold my horses to a guy by the name of Dave Dooley, took great care of them; kissed my daughter, told her, "Gotta go", and headed to Grand Canyon.

TM: Okay. You know, we've been going for about 47 minutes here. It just seems like a good place to maybe wrap this part up and we can pick up again with what happened on your first day of work at Grand Canyon.

RH: I agree. It's a good place to kind of tidy s*** up. I didn't know this was all gonna be on the internet or I probably wouldn't have said f*** so often, but that's the way I talk.

TM: Nobody worries. You know, the neat thing about this is this is who we are...

RH: Right.

TM: ...and we're all different, unique. I just cherish this stuff. I just, I don't know... When we try to be somebody else who we're not, well, we run into trouble.

RH: I agree.

TM: Cool. Well, with that let's wrap up this Part 4 interview with Richard Hanson. Today is Sunday, October 18th, 2020. My name is Tom Martin. Richard, thank you so much.

RH: Yeah, thank you.