

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Robert Arnberger (RA)

Interviewer: Helen Ranney (HR) and Audience Members (AM)

Subject: Being a Superintendent of Grand Canyon National Park

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HR: OK, Rob. Ready?

RA: Yes ma'am.

HR: Awesome.

RA: That's how I answer. Can you all hear me back there? I'm looking to make sure that the projection is just right here. Is it good?

AM: Yes!

RA: OK.

HR: Rob, you have an early and special connection to Grand Canyon National Park. Can you share this and more about your unique childhood with our audience?

RA: Well, on June 17, 1947, I was born here on the South Rim. I remember the day well. As I came out of that warm environment, I popped out into a place that I recognized as the old clinic, which is now the offices of the Grand Canyon Conservancy. And I emerged out into the two-room clinic, and met a kindly physician and his wife, who in fact delivered me, and I was sorely disappointed, because my dad, who was a ranger, I didn't see his flat hat anywhere around. And it kind of pissed me off a little bit, as I recall. I found out later, he was fighting the fire all backed up on Rowe Well Road. And he finally showed up and make his appearance. About the next to the last thing I remember out of that great event was hearing my grandmother yelling at the nurse in there about the rats that were crawling through the room, and my mom meekly saying: "Mom, they're not rats, they're chipmunks, and they're good ones!" Obviously, I don't remember any

bit of that, but that story and several others were told to me by my parents, and that began my life in the National Park Service.

HR: Do you want to talk about some of the places you lived as a child with your dad who started here as a seasonal ranger at Grand Canyon, but we talked about some of those interesting places you lived.

RA: Yah. Well, dad had come back from the war. He was a B-24 copilot, and did 37 combat missions over there. And he had done several years at school there at NAU, which at that time was AST – Arizona State Teacher’s College. And it just so happened that his roommate was a guy by the name of Wayne Bryant, whose father happened to be the superintendent at Grand Canyon, and one thing led to another. And my dad had always been interested in the National Park Service growing up, and was able to get on as a seasonal laborer here, and then that evolved into some seasonal ranger positions. So, I don’t remember growing up in Grand Canyon. I only have maybe several months, really, that I can really – my only claim to fame at Grand Canyon is having been hatched, born here. The rest of the time – it took awhile for dad to get on permanent, which seems to be a common theme for just about anybody trying to get in to the park service. It follows generation after generation. It was difficult for him, it was horribly difficult for me, and it was horribly difficult for my son. So, some things never change. But he finally did get on permanent, and his career started off at Casa Grande Ruins. And from there he went to Santa Fe. And the trajectory of his career was as a naturalist. In fact, it was Louis Schellbach that hired him here. While he was a laborer working on top of the roof of the Yavapai Museum replacing some shingles, he looked down and saw this guy giving that talk and thought: “Wow! I could do that!” And one thing led to another. The trajectory of his career, as I said, was as a naturalist. It took us from Casa Grande, although he was doing archeology and interpretation there, to Santa Fe, then to Globe, Arizona, which was a field office that served many of the national monuments in the Southwest. And I grew up there collecting scorpions and snakes and so forth. From there, he moved to Blue Ridge Parkway, and he was the first chief naturalist there at the Blue Ridge Parkway. And I grew up there chasing monarch butterflies and collecting box turtles and so forth. And we left there and returned back to Santa Fe. So, in my growing up, a lot of people reminisce and ruminate about this, I didn’t have a traditional growing up in the National Park Service type of thing of moving from one park to another. We did Casa Grande Ruins, which I don’t remember, and we spent a good part of our career at Santa Fe, in the regional office. Blue Ridge Parkway I remember very clearly. And then we moved back to Santa Fe, and my dad’s career trajectory had taken him into park planning. And he was responsible from bringing in many of the national

parks we hear of today. He was in charge of the team that brought in Canyonlands National Park, Guadalupe Mountains, Padre Island, and quite a few others. So, I grew up in the park service, but I didn't grow up, you might say, in the parks. I knew of the park service, but like a lot of kids perhaps, I didn't really know what the park service was. I just remember all of these people, people like Bates Wilson and a few other luminaries, coming to the house. I remember that, and getting together for picnics and so forth, so my upbringing was a little bit nontraditional in that regard. But, as my dad's career progressed, we eventually moved back to Princeton, New Jersey, where he was in a senior fellowship program back there for a year, and then he moved to Point Reyes as superintendent. Cape Cod. He was in the Washington office as deputy associate director for operations. And from there he went to Yosemite as superintendent. And ended his career returning back to Santa Fe and retiring in Santa Fe. My career overlapped his career in there in several key places. The trajectory of my career was noticeably different, but it became the same towards the ends of our career when he was park superintendent in quite a few well-known places. Out of the ten places that I worked at in my career, I was superintendent at five of them.

HR: You and your father very similar careers, really, at the end, don't you think?

RA: Well, we did have similarities. The early part of my career was a trajectory of – in my career, I started out as an interpreter. My first job was at Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, there in the Gila Wilderness. And I call it my first job, even though it was a seasonal appointment, and doesn't, kind of, qualify as your career progression. Well, I beg to disagree. It was the beginning of my progression. I left Gila Cliff Dwellings and went to Tumacacori National Monument, and I was an interpreter there, and then went to Fort Union National Monument, an interpreter for three years there. So, the early part of my career was in interpretation, more in history. My dad's career, interpretation, but more of natural history. But then, I wanted to take my career in a different direction. I wanted to go into what we call in the business the protection side of things, and that is the law enforcement, firefighting, search and rescue, park protection, visitor protection, resource protection types of things. And I went off on that direction, and I think that subliminally there was an interest not only in doing that, but I also wanted to distinguish myself and differ myself from my dad, you know. And, as I began to do that, I began to loosen the bonds of – sometimes, kids that grow up in the park service and make a career of it, you're always under the shadow of your father. You know: "You got what you did because of your father," and so forth. And I remember, in my career, frequently meeting people who would come up to me and my dad, at that time, was a pretty senior person in the park service, and they'd say: "Oh,

are you Les's son?" And I'd say: "No. No. Les is my dad." And they'd look at me like: "Well, that's what I said." And I'd say: "No, that's not what you said." But as time went on and I began to learn my craft and develop a career in a different direction, I was able to basically be known as Rob, and my dad was Les. And we had separate careers that then, finally, did come back towards the tail ends of our careers. I became superintendent much earlier in my career than my dad did, but we ended up our careers as superintendents, and, for me, a regional director. So that's where the commonality – the commonality is that we worked for the park service, and it was our way of life.

HR: So, I have a question. What did your dad think about your park service career?

RA: Well dad – he was very proud that his son finally saw the light and went in to it after majoring in education at the University of New Mexico and disappearing into Valley High School in Albuquerque to be a history teacher. And I think he was quite relieved when I called him up after about four months of doing this and said: "Dad, I'm a massive failure." And he said: "Well, what do you mean?" And I said: "Well, I've spent money going to the university. I spent four years to become a teacher, and I've just figured out I don't want to do that." And at that time, he said: "Did you ever consider the National Park Service?" I grew up in the National Park Service! Well, I'd thought about it, but I guess I was like a preacher's son, you know. The last thing I was going to be was be a preacher! I had worked seasonally for the Forest Service as I went through college. And I said: "You know, I might do that." And he said: "Well, why don't you call so and so and talk to them." And I did. I filled out applications and I did everything all normal and all that kind of stuff, and I was able to walk into the principal's office and resign my position as a temporary teacher after about five months, and start on as a seasonal position, a GS-03 position, at Gila Cliff Dwellings. And the story I have about that is – it's a little bit maudlin, and so forth, but it is the absolute truth. I traveled down into the Gila Wilderness, and they had a 35-foot long two-bedroom junk trailer for me to live in. I was starting out the seasonal's life as all seasonals do, right? And I didn't have a wife with me at that time. She was pregnant, and I left her in Albuquerque, and I got up early in the morning and had a cup of coffee, because it was going to be my first day on the job. It was the first time I'd ever worn the uniform. And I put the uniform on, and was drinking my coffee and making sure – I put the uniform on, and I stood in front of the mirror just to make sure that the hat was on, and so forth, and I had this tremendous sigh of relief just come up, and I looked at myself, and I said: "Geez. I finally know what I want to do." And it's emotional to me, even now. And I don't apologize for that at all. It meant a lot to me, and – you ever notice when you get older how your emotions bubble up faster? Well, it sure does. I apologize for that. Anyway, I finally

figured out what the hell I wanted to do, and it was to be a park ranger in the National Park Service.

HR: Well, we're glad you were! So, we're going to jump ahead a little bit in time, and one of the things you and I discussed was – this has got a couple questions within this question. What was your last assignment before Grand Canyon, and what made you ready for an assignment at Grand Canyon? What experiences on the job made you ready for Grand Canyon? How were you selected for this job? Was your family ready for it also, and were they excited?

RA: That's a bunch of questions in there, aren't there! OK. Well, first of all, the progression through your career supposedly, and hopefully, does prepare you for positions of increasing complexity. I had been superintendent at Saguaro National Monument. I had been superintendent of Palo Alto Battlefield. I'd been a chief ranger. I'd been a district ranger. I'd been an interpreter. I'd worked at new park areas, established park areas. I'd been the deputy superintendent at Everglades National Park and acting superintendent there for about four months, and then I went to Big Bend National Park. And those positions were positions of increasing complexity, managing several hundreds of people and dealing with issues that were resource issues and people issues that were extremely complex, and having a lot of failures along the way and making mistakes and learning from them and then having some mentors and some other people that would give you some guidance and correction. I applied for the job at Grand Canyon. It was past the days when you just got the mysterious call from somebody saying: "OK, that's where you're going." It used to be that way, but it is no more and hasn't been since the late '70s. So, I applied for the job. I wanted the job. I was a divorcee at that time. I had an interest in a young lady that worked at Big Bend, and I wanted to leave Big Bend and to try for the superintendency at Grand Canyon. And I didn't anticipate that I would be called about it, but I submitted my credentials and I did the requisite interviews and so forth, and lo and behold, one Saturday morning, I did get a call there at the house from the selecting official, who was the regional director in the Western Region at that time, and said he'd received approval from the secretary and from the director and so forth and wanted to offer me the position. Well, I about fell on the floor. You know, I cleaned up my spilled coffee, and I realized I was heading back to the place where I was born. And I was going to go there with a new family. I remarried to my love of life, Elvira, and had a eleven-year-old son, and we were going to arrive in the big hole in the ground and start, not only one of the most complex jobs in the park service and in the department, for sure, but also start a family life as well. The two of them came together in perfect fashion.

HR: You're quite the lucky man, there.

RA: Absolutely!

HR: We're going to find that out in the next hour. So, this is a really big, hairy question. What were your expectations of the scope of work that was waiting for you when you arrived as the new superintendent of Grand Canyon?

RA: Well, you know, if you're a professional in the organization, you come to understand that there are some jobs that are at the top of the list in terms of difficulty and in terms of complexity. So, I wasn't a rube, and I wasn't ignorant of the fact of Grand Canyon. Grand Canyon was known within the service as being, perhaps, if not the, certainly in the top three most difficult field superintendency jobs there were. And, for those of you that wonder where the real park service is, it's in the parks, and it always has been, always will. There's a tremendous compliment of people that work in our headquarters office and our central offices, and they are required to make things happen as well, and are key components, but the parks are where things happen. And Grand Canyon had a reputation as being one of the most difficult nuts to crack because of the complexity of the issues. Here they ranged all the way from river management to some kind of a controversy about airplanes flying over the place to discussions about restoring river flows, historic river flows from a concrete plug in the river upstream to managing hundreds of people and the ecosystem that exists with politics – every politician had their oar in the water in some fashion, and still do in some fashion, at Grand Canyon. So, I would say that there's an analogy I would use, perhaps. And that is if you're a test pilot, your career has brought you to the point where you can pilot jet planes and you have the technical competency of being in that kind of a situation, but you don't know how it's going to all work out until you get into that new plane and you hope that thing works, and you hope that your own skills and your own reactions are on target, so no matter all of the training and the exposure you had up to that point in time, you're still getting into one heck of a fast model of a plane that's never been piloted by you before, and you're hoping that you don't have to bail out, and if you do, you hope that you survive.

HR: Take a drink of that water!

RA: I will!

HR: Because there's a couple of things. So, Rob and I took this really seriously. He was the superintendent here at Grand Canyon National Park. That's a tough job. I don't know why anybody would even apply or say yes. But there were some things that I knew about, because your timing at Grand Canyon was really my time of being aware of Grand Canyon more than just the beautiful place. So, do you want to talk about the GMP, and you can go into details.

RA: Oh. Yah!

HR: Yah. And then, just what it was and where it was in the process, because I found that very interesting by the time you came in and what you had to do.

RA: Yah. As a foundation and an undercurrent of how I was training and how I was brought up and how I learned in the park service, I need to express to you the considerations that I brought with me as I entered this job and the significant issues that we faced, of which the general management plan was a key one. I had some mentors that were really essential, and they helped me develop what I would call a three-part matrix. A consideration matrix, for when you hit an issue, when you enter in to an issue, and so forth, how you consider it and how you approach it. The first priority is what law and regulation says. The implication is that you have to know the law as well, if not better, than the people that wrote it. The second priority is National Park Service policy. There is a series of policies that are written that guide us in our mission and so forth, and you have to be really familiar with every sentence and every line and everything said, and everything unsaid. And the third priority was to do what's right – to use your own judgement to do what's right. And you're informed by your experience about what's right by your experience. In other words, don't discount your own judgement, because sometimes it's the only thing that is right in a situation. When I entered on duty, Grand Canyon had recently – was nearly completing, but had embarked on – the National Park Service is arguably the largest master planner general management plan ever done in the National Park Service. It was certainly the most complex, and it was basically to revision how we would use the Grand Canyon for future generations. How we would protect the resource. How we would provide for people to enjoy the resource. And how we would look at the infrastructure and change things. And it was an endeavor that had been started clear in 1992. I arrived in 1994. It went through tremendous public meetings all across the country. Professional writing teams, and lots of public exposure. Well, it was coming to a culmination when I came in, and ultimately my job was not to necessarily to fashion that GMP, which was nearly almost finished being written and approved, but my job was to take a vision and to implement it and to create

the teamwork in the park that saw it as our priority. To find partners and collaborators, and different kinds of imaginative strategies to carry out some crazy things, like a mass transit system using light rail. Well, I would tell you that 99.9% of the changes that all of you who are old timers and have been here for many years have seen over the last 20 to 25 years here – a new science and research building, a brand new reconfigured Mather Point, the Desert View change, and so forth, were lodged in the vision of that general management plan. It was a plan that provided a template for the future. It allowed an awful lot of things that had to be filled in by imaginative and innovative people in the future that was to come along. And it was to be a 20 to 25-year endeavor. And my job was to kick it off, and to insinuate it in every detail of what we were going to do – our budgets, our operations, and so forth. And it was basically to take this template and, in many respects, to create the conditions where change could prosper in the future, where, in fact, this word of collaboration, or innovation and imagination, of getting a broad collection of people to help in the endeavor. You could create those kinds of conditions that the National Park Service had to reconfigure itself. We had to reconfigure our funding streams and so forth, but we had to also realize that some of the visions of that plan were greater than what the National Park Service as a federal agency could accomplish. But we had to create the conditions where others could help us in creating and prosper that change. I've spent four days here listening to not only ruminations and reflections on the past, but also incredible accomplishments. The Desert View, the Watchtower, the Mather Point, the Canyon Information Plaza, the LP gas busses going around here instead of diesel belchers – all of those had their roots, at some point and in some way, in the general management plan. There's been a succession of imagination, or leadership and so forth that independently carried out a wide variety of those things. A brand new maintenance facility, a new boat shed, all kinds of things that have occurred here – they all have their origins and they all have their roots in that plan that was completed in 1995 and was implemented by an incredible team of people here that took it on their backs to insinuate and to put the accomplishment of a future vision into everything that we did while we were here.

HR: Phew. I want to say something before we go on. So, I've done – it's really hard to be a supervisor or a manager, to do somebody else's vision and come in and just do it, so good for you. But you had a little bit of encouragement from a special rock star of Arizona. Our own Bruce Babbitt was the secretary of interior when you came on as superintendent here at Grand Canyon National Park. And you had to go to Washington, DC to meet with him.

RA: Yah. Probably you've already sensed from my personality that if there was something in that general management plan that would have given me some kind of a bowel problem, we would have stood up and we would have changed it. In other word, I thought it was a hell of a great vision. I mean, it was what it was supposed to be. It was not some kind of a management plan where you get mired into the details of this or that, but it actually tried to look ahead and say: "Look. We're going to have tremendous numbers of visitors. We've got a resource that is incredible and that we're learning more about the science of the resource – is telling us more." And so, I embraced that thing, and I didn't have to be drug to the watering trough for it. I was fortunate that I was selected from Big Bend. And I must tell you that I knew Bruce Babbitt only in passing. I had run into him occasionally when I was at Saguaro. I had written a couple of papers that had caught his attention when I was at Big Bend and NAFTA was being developed and so forth, and when we found out that 32% of the land along the border was managed by the Department of the Interior, it caught his attention. However, everybody knows and it's legendary, Bruce Babbitt's connection to the canyon. And that was one of the things that I knew when I came here, and I knew that could be a double-edged sword. There's nothing worse that somebody meddling in your business to the point that you can't carry out a job, and there's nothing worse that somebody that doesn't care. So, I was at a conference of National Park Rangers in Durango, Colorado. It was a once-annual event, and I had broken away. We had gone through some more public meetings and the document was very near to signing and so forth, and I was over in Durango drinking beers with my buddies, telling ranger stories. And I get a phone call from my secretary who says: "The secretary of the interior has called you," and all of a sudden, my deputy superintendent got on the line and he said: "And Rob, he wants you back in Washington, DC day after tomorrow." And I said: "Yah, but I'm here at this..." He said: "He's going to – you need to be back there to brief him on the general management plan and to determine how he could help." Well, I wasn't stupid. I mean, I had to put the beer down and look at the opportunity here. Here's somebody that was calling me to get involved at Grand Canyon, and, oh by the way, he was the big boss, and he wanted to assist me, and he was depending on me to tell him how he could do that. Well, we drove back to Grand Canyon the next day, and I packed a bag and got down to Phoenix, grabbed a flight, and got to Washington, DC. The team captain from Denver Service Center came flying in and we met one another, and I looked at him, and said: "OK, look. You're the team captain. You go through the five big highlights of this thing, and then we'll figure it out." So we went in there, and the secretary was sitting there, and he had his fingers steepled, all this kind of stuff, and I felt that the team captain's presentation was a little bit bland, a little bit of a formula, and I thought it needed a little bit of personality, so I began to interject a little bit of

personality in there, which I think that the secretary greatly appreciated. It was that moment that I think that we began to gel. And we became very, very close friends over a good period of time. Many of the things that we tried to do, and many of the things that have been accomplished to this point in time is because of a secretary of the interior that took a very personal interest in Grand Canyon. Well, I came back from that meeting. Came back here to the South Rim. I missed my convention – my conference with all my buds. And I found out that they were importing a mystery guest to speak to these 500 or 700 rangers over there in Durango, and the mystery guest was invited and he showed up and it was the secretary of the interior that I had just flown back to Washington, DC. So, he kept telling me – he says: “I’m leaving tomorrow. I’m flying out to Colorado.” And he never told me what he was going to be doing, and my bros over there at this conference, they never told me who the mystery guest was, and it turned out to be him. And it was the beginning of a close relationship. Stories.

HR: So, you’ve had a big career in the National Park Service, and you’ve had quite a full life, and it’s really hard to do it in 45 minutes with questions and answers. So, like you and I talked about last week, this is your oral history. This is your opportunity to leave a legacy for the next generation, so I’m going to ask you, do you want to share some of the things that you and I talked about, or do you want to open it up to questions. Because we have probably a few minutes.

RA: Well, why don’t – obviously there are some things like the river management issues, the adaptive management program of restoring experimental flows, the river management plan of oars versus motors that was an incredible controversy, overflights, of how to manage those overflights and so forth, and we can open it up to questions, and I would typify a little bit of a daily existence as the superintendent here as trying to rhythmically move amongst chaos, as opposed to lurching and stumbling. And it was difficult. And there were times when I’d get a little bit lost. Nobody knows what it is like to be a superintendent of a large park here like Yellowstone or Yosemite. They might presume they know, but until you’ve done it, you don’t know. The demands that are placed upon you, the variety of the knowledge that you’ve got to have, the amount of press and the political ecosystems you have to move in... I went to Costa Rico with President Clinton. I had his invitation. I had President Clinton here as a guest twice. I had Gerald Ford in the house as a dinner guest eating my wife’s famous cheese enchiladas and frijoles and arroz. I made very, very close friendships with John McCain. The congressman up here was by the name of Jim Stump, who was like a stump, and I went in the first time I met him to talk with him, and he propped his feet up on the desk and he told me, he says: “If I had my way, I’d put those damn dams back in the canyon.” And I remember telling

him: "Well, I don't think we have much to talk about. I'll spend my time with your legislative director, and I'll keep her informed." And I did. So, there was an ecosystem of politics of the environment, of the issues that were extremely complex, managing a complex staff of professionals, but who also occasionally marched to their own drummer, and trying to provide for openness and input and opinions, but at the same time we have to all get onto the same parade float. Those kinds of things are extremely difficult, and I'd get lost sometimes, and what would I do? I'd head out my office and go out here to the edge of the rim and sit with my feet over the edge and stare out there to try to regain some sense of perspective, and I'll end, and we'll take some questions, but I'll end with the fact that I would frequently then come away from the rim, and I'd walk through the cemetery, and see people who had dedicated their lives to this place. Head back to the office, have a cup of coffee and so forth, and I'd remember my grandma's great advice, and then I'll end and take some questions. And that advice, when I was in the ninth grade and I was getting ready to go off to my first time I had to give a public speech and do a debate, and I was all upset. She was taking care of us, because my parents were on the road. She handed me my lunch bucket with my famous peanut butter and jelly sandwich with jalapeno peppers put in the center, and she says: "Robbie, I know you're upset. Just remember on this day, all of those people you're going to be talking to, they put their underwear on just like you do every morning. Number two, they all have an opinion, and it doesn't make them any more right than you are. And number three, just treat it like a bowel movement. Did you have that, Robbie, this morning?" And I looked at her, and she says: "Just remember. This, too, shall pass."

AM: I have a question for you.

RA: Yes.

AM: Rob, you were addressing probably what might as well refer to as the descendants of the Grand Canyon Pioneer Society. When you arrived here, you very generously accepted our invitation to become a participant of some of our activities, and there were some old timers there, and I'd just like to hear your recollections of the Grand Canyon Pioneers, when you were able to come on out to our events.

RA: Well, I think I was struck then basically with the same emotion I've had for the last four days here. The incredible root system that exists around the Grand Canyon. It's humbling, in a lot of ways, and it's enlightening in other ways, and frankly it's intimidating as well. And the reason why, is there is so many of you out there that love

it every bit as much as I do. And some of you are incredible scholars in the history of this park. And the human history and the geologic history. I mean, I'm blown away. And for somebody like me, that can be intimidating, because, yah, I know something about Grand Canyon, but my god, I don't know all the things that I've heard about just in the last four days. Well, when I went out, I would join you occasionally with some of those pioneers, I realized that I'm with part of the root system that exists with this park and always has. And what this organization has done is coalesced that into something where it can be shared and exposed a lot more frequently. And I'll bet you all of you are blown away by the number of experts sitting in this room. It's incredible. And when you get down into that expert level, I can reflect upon my life, and that's the only thing I'm expert on. So it's humbling, it's enlightening, and, at times, intimidating for even a person like myself who has his roots here, as well, to run into people who have lived here, or generations of people who have lived here and carried out their lives here and done different things here. It's amazing.

HR: Your wife is coming on next. We need to make sure people have a bathroom break. But it's been fun. I've enjoyed our emails and our conversations, and I think you need to come back, because you have a lot more to share. And what I want to remind you, and I read this in a book that we have in our library, and it's just something – all of you have these oral histories of your own. "The idea of an oral history is to ask a question, then gather a story." You guys can all take that home to your parents, to your siblings, to somebody. Look how easy this is.

RA: You're right.

HR: All right. Thank you, guys. We'll see you soon.

RA: Thank you.