

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

Interviewee: Clare Donato (CD)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Clare recounts her time as a mule packer at Olympic National Park, as a tavern owner 1996-2000, and back to mule packing until retirement in 2013

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TM: Today is Thursday, December 10th, 2020. This is Part 6 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Clare Donato. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Clare, how are you today?

CD: I'm fine, Tom. Thank you.

TM: Great. May we have your permission to record this oral history over the telephone?

CD: You may.

TM: Thank you very much. At the end of Part 5 you were lining us up to recount how you and Dave Weiss joined together. How the two of you were thinking about becoming tavern owners. Is there anything else about your first stint at Olympic that you would like to bring into this before we head off to be barflies?

CD: Well, I guess I had a couple of creeks named after me, and a couple of valleys. I'm sure it didn't make it on any maps but it was local knowledge.

TM: How did that happen?

CD: Well, one of them was up the Elwha Valley. It was early on in my time up here. We were coming back from Hayes River Bridge and we were empty and one of the ropes... After you've off loaded your loads off your mules you tie up your ropes onto your pack saddles. One of them had come undone and was dragging on the trail behind the mule. This particular mule, Amos, was kind of a scaredy-cat, he worried about everything, so this rope dragging behind him was pretty scary. He was at the end of the string and he ran into everybody else, which just squished everybody up into me. I was riding behind Che who had his own string. I was also riding a young mule. We were coming down this hill with a creek onto my left that we would be crossing soon and Jake, who I was riding, started bucking. So I went flying and rolled down the hill into the creek. It didn't really have a name until then (laughs). So that was the first Clare Creek, and I was fine and everybody was fine.

TM: So, wait, wait. So Amos runs forward into a string of three or four mules in front of him?

CD: Yes.

TM: And they all go crowding forward into your mule and you've got another string in front of you?

CD: Yes. So like an accordion, they all squished together and that upset Jake who was... I was just starting to ride him, so he started bucking, which I couldn't hang. I might have made eight seconds, but I doubt it, and went off down the bank into the creek.

TM: So two things are happening here at once. Let's follow you first and then we'll come back to Jake and what happened to him and the rest of the team there as they were applauding you going down the hill for points. How deep was the creek?

CD: Not very deep.

TM: A foot?

CD: You know, maybe calf deep.

TM: Okay, about a foot, enough to get completely soaked. Was it raining? Was it a sunny day?

CD: It wasn't raining that day, but I was wet. (laughs)

TM: And were you wearing chaps?

CD: I don't think I was that time. I didn't wear chaps too much up here because of the rain. I did have some chaps but they were more of a nylon fleece deal because wet leather just isn't pleasant.

TM: Right. I'm just thinking about everything else being wet as well. So you get up out of that creek. When you look up the hill what do you see?

CD: Well, everybody is still scrambling 'cause now I've upset them even further cause I've rolled down the bank. (laughs) So Che, who's in the lead, he's trying to stop everybody but they're all crowding up on him. Two of my mules busted loose of the string, so when I climb out... I'm trying to catch animals now 'cause Che tried to stop to help me but now we've lost everybody. So I'm running after them. I have two animals that are loose, and they're...

TM: One of them's dragging a rope.

CD: Yeah. And the one behind keeps turning around to look at me like "will you stop him." And I said, "I'm trying, Katie, I'm trying." So anyway, we finally was able to stop them and put everything back together and off we went.

TM: Was this before or after you broke your collarbone?

CD: Oh, that's a good question. I think it might have been before.

TM: Okay. 'Cause I would assume your shoulder wouldn't have liked that kind of off-of-mule extracurricular activity real well.

CD: (laughs) No. No. So that was...

TM: So when you're standing downslope you've got a string that's breaking apart, I'm assuming that a mule can make you run a long time.

CD: Yeah, I've chased them for a mile or more before.

TM: Wow.

CD: (laughs) Yep. Not always something I'm proud of but, you know, things happen.

TM: Yeah, absolutely they do, but then you have to put things back together and that might include a little, not a little but quite a long job.

CD: Yeah. My Amos, he was pretty much of a scaredy-cat and so when things scared him he wanted to leave. He was definitely a flight not fight kind of a guy. So I kind of chased after him quite a bit, but I persevered. (laughs)

TM: Mules that are tied one to another, do you tie them in such a way that when there is a wreck they kind of can get untied from one of the other?

CD: Yeah, we call it a pigtail. It's just like a quarter inch manila rope. Actually one of the mules knew exactly how to pop it. If there's enough force it'll pop so then they are loose, so you don't lose the whole string.

TM: Yeah, that makes sense.

CD: Yeah, they do it differently in different regions. I think down in Sequoia they run a rope around their neck and through the britching ring and to the next mule, so there is no breakaway there. But everybody does it differently. It's like regional sort of.

TM: Yeah. And I'm also assuming that the mules that are more accustomed to people and wrecks and that kind of stuff, when something like this happens they just stand there, they just stay put.

CD: Yeah, they do. I mean, mules are really good about that generally. Amos was such a scaredy-cat that he would want to run. He wanted to leave the situation as quickly as possible. He was a good boy, he just was scared.

TM: Yeah. No, I'd be scared, you know, looks like a snake following me if I didn't know.

CD: (laughs) Well, this is early on and he's young and, yeah, "there's something following me." (laughs)

TM: Yeah. That brings up a question. You mentioned when you broke your collarbone, you were on a horse and a horse stepped in a hole. I was like, do horses have, maybe mules as well, have a depth perception problems with their eyes or, you know, how does it happen that they step in holes?

CD: Well, this particular little horse I never thought was very athletic. But there is a region I think from, sort of like cats, that right in front of them they can't really see till they turn their heads. And also, their eyes are like, let's see, sort of like glasses, progressive glasses, so they can lift their head up and down to

see. I can't remember, I think it's opposite of what we usually do when we wear glasses. So when there's something alarming, they raise their heads to look and see out of the bottom of their eyes, so that's their long distance. And then they put their head down to see the top, that's their shorter distance. And from what I understand, I don't know how actually true it is but I kind of believe it, is that mules can actually see where they're placing their back feet and horses cannot...

TM: Interesting. Hmm.

CD: ...and that's why they're a little more sure footed on gnarly trails. They can also go longer without water. That's why Grand Canyon uses them, 'cause they can go all day without having any water.

TM: All right. So that was the first Clare Creek.

CD: Yeah. And the other one was on the North Fork of the Quinalt, which is on the west end of the park. It's a rain forest and we had stayed at the trailhead, there was a little ranger cabin that we could stay in and corrals. It had rained all night and we were supposed to be going up trail. Again I was with Che. This was early on, too. We were going, "well, I don't know." So we just geared up in our raingear and we were headed up and we get to the little crick that was before Wild Rose Crick. 'Cause Wild Rose was the one I was worried about because it can be a gnarly crick anyway for crossing.

TM: Because it's slippery or there's a little bridge that's kind of narrow or why is it a trouble to cross?

CD: A lot of current and a lot of rocks.

TM: And no bridge?

CD: No bridge.

TM: Oh, wow.

CD: There's a log bridge for hikers; or was. So we were gonna go check it out and decide at that point whether we were headed up trail or not. We get to the little creek before there and it was going pretty good. So Che says "Well, let's just tie the mules up here and we'll cross it and walk up and see what Wild Rose looks like," and I said "Okay." So we're crossing it. He was in front of me, we're crossing it and I slipped and head down the crick. I grab onto a rock and I'm just hanging there. I'm in full rain gear and everything and so I'm not moving (laughs), I'm just hanging on. Finally I see a hand in front of my face and I latched onto his hand and he pulled me out of there. And, you know, I got the water out of my boots and all that. So he said, "Well, you're on this side now, let's go check out Wild Rose." (both laugh) We walked up and it was way high and way, you know, it's way boiling and it's like, nope, we're not crossing that. So we didn't even... So now I gotta get back across this little crick. He gets like a little log, you know, big stick/small log that we both held onto as we crossed and I was able to make it. But, yeah, so that was the second Clare Creek. The trail crew now probably doesn't know anything about it.

TM: Right, right. They got their own places after their own wrecks to...

CD: Right.

TM: Yeah, yeah. So besides terribly embarrassing, I suppose, you didn't get hurt and you just have to make it through the rest of the day totally soaked to get back into some dry clothes.

CD: Yeah. We just headed back to the barn, so to speak and, yeah, I was able to dry off.

TM: At least that day the mules got a chance to just hang out. They didn't have to jump up and down.

CD: Yeah. At least that wasn't a mule wreck; it was just me.

TM: Yeah, yeah. How did you get valleys named after you?

CD: Valleys?

TM: Yeah, creeks and valleys?

CD: No, just the creeks.

TM: Just the creeks? Okay. All right. I got confused there.

CD: There's a rock named after me, too, I guess.

TM: Is that during this same time period?

CD: Much later.

TM: After the tavern or before the tavern?

CD: I think after the tavern. On the Duckabush there's like a gnarly, you gotta climb up, kind of climb up this rock that's real exposed. It's not real large.

TM: Wait, wait. Where is this, on the Duncan Bush? No, what?

CD: Duckabush, D-u-c-k-a-b-u-s-h.

TM: What's that?

CD: It's a river. It's one of the... Yeah, there's lots of names. There's Dosewallips, there's the Duckabush, there's Staircase, there's the Hoh, there's the Quinault, the Queets. It's always been a gnarly little place and a lot of times I would stop and—well, I guess it was after this that I did that—disconnect everybody and just let them pick their own way across. I had come up and I had little Janice and I had Tia tied to her. Tia was a big girl and Janice was a little girl, and Tia was kind of lazy and so she was dragging on Janice. And Janice being the kind of girl she was, she was trying really, really hard to pull Tia up. Janice's pigtail popped and then she lost all of her leverage. And, of course, it was always my tool mule. Anyway, she started to go over and she just sort of pitchpoled over onto the beach of the river below. So I tied up. Well, I had to take them off the rock 'cause I can't lose anybody else. So took everybody off the rocks.

TM: Wait, wait. Clare, hang on. I'm confused. So you're trying to cross this Duckabush River.

CD: No, I'm just on the side of the river.

TM: You're on the side of the river. And Janice is pulling Tia and the rope between Janice and Tia lets go?

CD: Well, the rope that Janice is tied to pops. Between her and Tia eventually pops, too, when she falls off. But Tia's kind of a large so she wasn't going anywhere.

TM: So Janice is tied forward to your mule?

CD: To the mule right behind me.

TM: Okay. So there's a string of four there.

CD: Yeah, there was probably five but, yeah.

TM: Okay. And so this is position three and position four for Janice and Tia and when the rope from mule two to Janice pops what happens to Janice? She started to go over. I'm confused.

CD: Well, she has nothing holding her head anymore that was keeping her taut between the mule in front of her and behind her. It just all of a sudden released her so she just fell backwards basically and she basically pitchpoled off the rock. I mean, usually they'll like roll but she went over backwards and I'll never forget her little face.

TM: Like she fell back on her butt and then rolled over onto her back?

CD: Yeah, she pitchpoled over, head over teakettle.

TM: Okay, and Tia's right behind her?

CD: Yeah, but that rope is popped and Tia's not going anywhere. But I had to get everybody off of the rock, I didn't have any place to tie, so I could tie them up so I could go down and get Janice.

TM: And she's rolled down a hill then?

CD: Yeah, she's down by the river itself 'cause we were climbing up above it. So I went down and got her and I took all of her load off and her tools and checked her out.

TM: Was she okay?

CD: She was okay. I said, "I'm sorry, Girlfriend, but we gotta pack you back up." (laughs) So I put her load back on her and we came up and I just left her at the end. I didn't tie her back into the string, she just followed along behind us. We deposited everything and then when I came back to the rock I stopped and untied everybody except for who I'm riding and I was leading one. Then everybody picked their way over the rock to get back. After everybody made it across I stopped and tied everybody back in, except for Janice, I just let Janice be. When we got to the trailhead, I was spending the night there, and she was starting to shake. I think she was a little shockish anyway. I kind of put blankets on her and a canvas

mantle and tried to warm her up. She was fine in the morning. So that rock became Clare's Rock. (both laugh) Yeah.

TM: The things the tourists never know.

CD: Right. (laughs)

TM: Yeah, only the trail crew knows where Clare's rocks are, yeah. Oh, boy. I'm learning about mules. It sounds like they can be sociable enough so that if they have their head, they have a free rein, they'll stick around, they'll travel together.

CD: Yeah, and actually that's why a lot of the packers like to ride horses and have mules as their packs because mules love horses. If you have your horse staked down, you usually have your mules with you. If you're overnighing they might stake out their horse and turn out the mules loose cause they won't leave the horse. But I always liked riding a mule better than a horse just because I thought they were better on the trail.

TM: Hmm. Okay. Because they're a little stockier or a little more sure-footed?

CD: A little more sure-footed.

TM: Okay. All right. So were you the only one that was having wrecks out there?

CD: Oh, no.

TM: I didn't think so.

CD: Wrecks are a common occurrence really. (laughs)

TM: Like once a month, once every six months?

CD: I don't know. It depends. Bees wee a big wreck maker.

TM: Bees?

CD: Bees.

TM: How?

CD: You'd never think of a little tiny critter sending a thousand-pound animal into hysterics (laughs) but, yeah. So bee season was always interesting. I mean I could tell you all sorts of stories, I guess.

TM: Well, tell me one more.

CD: Well, okay, so I was coming down from Low Divide, which is up in the high country, and there is a particular bridge, Glacier Bridge. It's pretty exposed so I always would stop before I crossed it to make sure all my loads were good. I had passed a couple of hikers and they go, "Oh, that looks like a great job." I said "Yeah, pretty good job." I get down and I stop, there was a load I wanted to adjust before I

crossed the bridge. I was doing that and there is my Katie May again and she... I tied her up and apparently I tied her on top of a ground nest of bees. So here come the bees and they're stinging her and she's... Everybody's kicking and carrying on. I'm losing loads and I had to take everybody and move them out of the bee's range and then go get my loads and put them back in. Here come these guys again, and I said, "Think it's a great job now?" But, yeah, so anyway I made it. I finally got everything back together and we went on.

TM: Wow.

CD: Yeah, well. (laughs)

TM: Is it the same with a load, if a load starts getting into trouble does it have kind of breakaway or how does that...or do you have to actually undo that strap?

CD: I just try and... I watch. They rock and you can, particularly when you're going downhill, you can watch them rock. If they're rocking evenly then it's pretty well balanced. If it starts rocking heavier to one side then you know you're gonna have to make an adjustment. So you always put the heavier side higher than the lighter side. You just raise them or lower them to make it balanced.

TM: Hmm. All right.

CD: I didn't always have a scale with me so I would just basically try and pick things up that weighed the same and load the two boxes at the same time.

TM: Match them, yeah, yeah. Well, after a bunch of dunking in creeks and fighting bees I can appreciate why you might want to run a tavern.

CD: Well, it just started getting to be lackluster, I guess. I had asked Richard if I could help him with the NOVA grants 'cause he was real good at getting funding and he was doing these NOVA grants for different projects. So I was starting to learn how to write grants and do that. But then when David Weiss approached me I said "Oh, this might be a good out."

TM: Let's stop a minute at the grants. NOVA, is that N-O-V-A?

CD: Yes.

TM: And what are they?

CD: It's an off-road vehicle thing, association. I don't know what the N is, off-road vehicle.

TM: National.

CD: National Off Road Vehicle Association, something like that.

TM: NORA, N-O-R-V-A. Off Road Vehicle. No, just NOVA. Okay.

CD: NOVA, yeah. They gave out a bunch of money for different projects and you just had to make a presentation to them, which Richard did pretty much every year. He was gonna let me help on a project that was up the Hoh but I ended up buying a tavern before I finished doing that.

TM: Okay. So what attracted you to running a tavern?

CD: I don't know. You know, it was a tavern that I had always gone to. It was a nice little community spot and I knew most all the people. Having my own business kind of appealed to me at the time. I don't know, we thought we could make it work. It was for sale and we thought we could make it better. It was just beer and wine at the time but, yeah, we just thought we'd give it a go.

TM: And this is in what little town?

CD: Port Angeles, just west of Port Angeles.

TM: Where is the nearest like liquor store where you can go wholesale to buy?

CD: It would be in downtown Port Angeles.

TM: Okay, so not far away?

CD: Yeah, about five miles away.

TM: Okay. And were you thinking about, well, maybe we should put some hard liquor in there and some food in there or what?

CD: Well, we were gonna have to do hard liquor if we didn't sell out—you know, we sold it at the end of 2000—but we did have food. I was doing the food. We didn't have a real nice kitchen. We had a pizza oven and a toaster oven and a microwave and a sink and a nice cooler. So we just did sandwiches and soups and pizza, you know, salads, potato salad, pasta salad and that sort of stuff.

TM: Okay. And how big a place are we talking about?

CD: It wasn't big. I don't know, 1400 square feet or so.

TM: So might be able to seat 30 people max maybe?

CD: No, it seemed like we, what was our thing, it was like 70 people was maximum. You know, that's not all sitting...

TM: Right, okay.

CD: ...'cause we started bringing in music. We had a nice deck outside, I mean out back, that looked over the Straits, Strait of Juan de Fuca, that had a nice water view. So David started getting in these bands from Seattle, blues bands, who were quite good. We started getting quite the music scene going on weekends. People were really enjoying it but then I would hear that, you know, "I'd come out there if it wasn't so danged smoky." So I said, "David, we gotta stop the smoking," (laughs) which I had wanted to do anyway 'cause I didn't smoke. I hated... It had a low ceiling in the one part. We had a pool table and

dart boards and that sort of stuff. I said, “We gotta stop the smoking,” and he goes, “Well, I don’t want to do that full time” because we had our morning clientele or, you know, early afternoon clientele—we didn’t open till 11:00—was all smokers. I said, “Okay, well, we have music at 9:00 so how about music nights we stop the smoking at 6:00.” It was like we had a deck. People could take their beer and smoke out there. We were, I think, the first ones that started with the nonsmoking before it became mandatory.

TM: I was gonna say that must have gone over like a kind of lead balloon I would think.

CD: Well, it increased our band clientele because they didn’t want... It was a whole ‘nother clientele than say our locals that were in there early afternoon. So we let our locals smoke until 6:00 (laughs) and then it’s like, no, now you can just smoke out on the deck which, you know, you could bring your beer, too. It wasn’t like... I didn’t see it as a hardship. So, yeah, we were doing a pretty good business that way with the bands.

TM: Okay. And was that like a summertime band thing and in the winter, you know, I’m assuming it rains there at Port Angeles.

CD: Yeah. No, unless the roads were too icy or snowy for... We did it year around but one year we had like three foot of snow or something. We couldn’t... It was gonna be for New Year’s Eve, we had had a big to-do planned and, yeah, nobody was going anywhere. It was funny because we were open but, you know, hardly anybody could get out. It was like the following Thursday, I don’t know why I remember Thursday, but everybody was starting to get out and it was like that was our New Year’s Eve. We didn’t have the band but... Yeah, I had to get somebody to grade the parking lot and I couldn’t get out of my place. I bought my place in 1990 and I have like a quarter-mile long driveway. So I couldn’t get out and I walked up to the highway to hitchhike into work. That was before hitchhiking got too scary, I guess. That’s, you know, that was like end of ‘96/’97.

TM: I’m assuming that when you bought the tavern you bought the building and the land, too?

CD: Just the business.

TM: Oh, so somebody else had the...

CD: Yeah, so that was part of the overhead. There was actually a lot of overhead on that whole deal.

TM: I bet.

CD: And the State, and then you have the B&O taxes in Washington State. I always said the state made more money on my business than I did.

TM: Yeah, yeah. So is that beer and alcohol tax?

CD: Business and occupation tax is what it’s called but, yeah, any resale. And we had to pay it every month. That was a pain. And that was all new, too, for me. So another new learning experience. Then it was like, let’s see, I don’t know, it was ‘98, maybe ‘99, the blood alcohol level, they lowered it so then people got scared to come out. But they hardened up to it and started coming out again but... And then there was another tavern that opened up down the road. So we started kind of losing out on business

and Dave and I started to have to lay a couple of people off and start bartending ourselves. That became old (laughs) so we decided we were either gonna have to add hard liquor or sell. So we decided to put it up for sale and luckily it sold not too long after that.

TM: Wow. Okay.

CD: By the end of December of 2000 we had sold it, and I didn't know what I was gonna do now. Like, okay, well, what do I do now? I was thinking that I would do drop camps. I had my own animals and just take hikers or fishermen or whoever wanted to go into the Park.

TM: While you were doing the tavern work, which sounds like it ran for almost 10 years, is that right?

CD: No, from '96 to 2000.

TM: '96 to 2000. Okay, thank you. Were you staying abreast of what was happening in the Park with regards to packing?

CD: Yeah, pretty much. And in the meantime I was able to take my mule, Jake, from the Park. I don't know how Richard organized that but he did, bless his heart. So I had Jake, and then I had a friend's horse that was staying with me, and then I bought another mule in '97, and I picked up another horse who was gonna end up going to slaughter so I went and got him. So I was sort of acquiring these animals and I was thinking I could do a drop camp. I knew that Richard had left at some point in there and Larry Lack had become acting trails foreman. Then the packer I had been packing with, his name's, well Mo is his nickname, Lester Moses, he was sort of doing most everything by himself and Larry was trying to do both pack and be acting trails foreman.

TM: Ooh, that's hard.

CD: I know that they had some older animals so I knew they were kind of having a rough time, so I went to Larry after we sold and I said, "Well, how about for the summer of 2001 I come in and help you and I'll use my animals to help, too, but I just work intermittently. I just want to do the trips. I don't want to do the barn time. I don't want to shoe. I just want to come in. I'll take care of the trucks and the animals, you know, in and out of the trips, and I'll do the trips." He said, "Sounds good to me." So I got back on as a seasonal and just worked intermittently and basically had the summer off except for a trip basically once a week for anywhere from one to three days. That worked out nicely for both of us. And then the next year...

TM: What did you do that winter?

CD: What did I do that winter? I don't know. Probably... See, one of the bartenders that we had was also a good friend of mine, Debbie White, and she had basically been bartending at that tavern on and off for three years, but anyway, we had been riding buddies together so we rode a lot together on off times. I don't know if I went anywhere that winter. I might have done... The bad thing about being partners with David was we weren't being on river trips together. One of us needed to be at the tavern.

TM: Yeah. I mean, it's a full-time job that...

CD: Yeah, I don't know how sole proprietors do it because it was like if I didn't have a partner, you know, so I could have actual time off... So by 2002...I can't remember, there was another guy before they gave Larry the position of trails foreman and I can't remember his name, but he didn't last long. It seems like he was gone so much that Larry was still doing the acting and I don't know why they brought somebody else in. I mean, they should have just given it to Larry anyway. But, they finally gave him the position of trails foreman and so they were gonna need another packer. So there was my job just right there waiting for me when I needed a job. So they made me permanent in 2002 again.

TM: Did you kind of negotiate that out, you know, not doing shoes, not doing barn work or...

CD: No. Once I got back into it... It was just that time I wanted most of the summer off. So when I got back I was on full duty but, you know. Ten-hour days, shoeing and whatever else. But I said I want to go out, when the mules go to pasture I want to be done. So I had a seven-month season. That's what I negotiated. I said I'll come back as permanent but I'm just working when the mules are working.

TM: So that was permanent but subject to furlough, is that what that is?

CD: Yeah, yep. So I could be on unemployment every winter and play.

TM: Okay. Nice. Yeah, very nice. So hard work in the summer again, packing and shoeing and doing trail work, or were you doing trail work or were you supplying the trail work people?

CD: Right. Yeah, I didn't do too much trail work anymore, just supplies. And then in 2004, in February, I went to Belize and married my husband after 14 years of living together. Didn't want to rush into anything, I guess. (laughs) So we got married then and came back and started building our house. When I bought this property in 1990 it just had a trailer house, five acres and a trailer house. So we built our house ourselves. It took three years but...

TM: Wow.

CD: Yeah, but we got it done eventually.

TM: Who did you end up marrying?

CD: Mike Hammel, but his nickname is Flo. That's what I call him.

TM: Where did you meet Flo?

CD: At the bar. (laughs) He was born and raised here but when I moved here he was on an extensive road trip going around the country; Key West and Montana and...

TM: What was he doing when you met him?

CD: He was bartending, bartending at the tavern that I later bought and also at another place in the little town of Joyce. And then...

TM: So did he help with that when you bought the tavern?

CD: Yeah, he would bartend for band nights but at that point he was building fiberglass kayaks and doing some tours with taking people out on kayaks. But, yeah, he would bartend for the bands, help bartend.

TM: Umm hmm. And you know, I didn't ask you, what was the name of the bar, the tavern?

CD: The Junction Tavern, 'cause it sat at the junction of 101 and Highway 112, which are the only two highways on the peninsula.

TM: Okay. Did it have a nickname?

CD: The Junction. Yeah, I had my 40th birthday there. It was a knockdown/drag-out affair, too. It was a lot of fun.

TM: So when you went back to work what did Flo do for the Park, when you went back permanent?

CD: He was still working... Well, no, when we came back from Belize he wanted to work for a golf course. He kept bugging all the golf courses in town and he finally got on with Peninsula Golf Course and then he eventually became superintendent of greens there, so he got what he wanted. When I had the tavern he was building kayaks. Adventures Through Kayaking was what they started and now some friends of ours bought that and they're doing trips.

TM: Are those like sea kayak kind of things?

CD: Yeah, um hmm.

TM: Okay. All right. So back working for Olympic now and Larry is your boss. What kind of projects were you working on?

CD: Just basically the same old thing. I mean, packing and we always had the SCA crew every summer. I know one year we had just gotten some new mules and we were packing them in. My friend Chris Williams was packing with me at that point. I don't know what happened, I thought that something fell out of a tree and hit me in the head. It was like all of a sudden I just knew there was a thud and then the little mule I was riding, Ellie, she started bucking. I think I might have blacked out for a second or two, but when I came to I'm trying to control her to stop the bucking. I guess I'm gonna tell you another wreck story (laughs). She lost me, I fell off. We had all these new mules—I had a string of five, Chris had a string of five—and they're all just looking at me on the ground and I see that... Socks was the one I was leading and I was trying to get his lead rope before they all ran off, but I wasn't able to quite grab it and they all ran off. Chris was able to keep his string so he tied his string up. I'm going, "Oh, crap, what do we do now," cause we're like four miles in for a 22-mile trip. Of course, because they were new they didn't know where they were, the first time they'd been up the Hoh Valley. So they ended up coming back to us and we were able to fix their loads and get them all set. And I had gotten hit in the head.

TM: With what?

CD: Well, I'm not sure. I mean, like I said, I thought something fell out of the sky and hit me, like a branch or a limb or something.

TM: Yeah, like a log, like something out of a tree. Sure.

CD: Yeah, but I didn't see any evidence of that on the ground, so it might have been Ellie's head. I still have a dent in my head from that. But anyway, so it got to be a big lump but we had to carry on. I mean, we still had all this gear that we were dropping off. So we dropped off the gear and came back out like, you know, I had 18 more miles to go. I wish I could have just gotten on and ridden to the couch but I... (laughs). But I made it and then by that time my lump was starting to move down my face. It was weird. I ended up having two black eyes and, yeah, my concussion.

TM: How did your shoulder handle that one?

CD: The shoulder was the least of my concerns. (laughs) And then 2011 is when I broke my leg.

TM: What happened there?

CD: Well, we were at the Quinault. There had been a big old cedar tree that came down across the trail, which became, you know, a nice mine for cedar shakes 'cause we had a guy that was rehabbing all the backcountry shelters. They tried to do it historically and so any time we could get cedar shakes was a good time. They were splitting up the shake bolts and we were going in to pack them all out. The first week we packed out like 121 of them, I think, and it rained the whole time. Then the second week—it was the second week, the first day, the first mule, the first load (laughs)—I was going up to undo her ropes. It was Chris and I and then two trail crew people who were kind of weighing out the bolts and putting them alongside the trail so we could just bring the mule in, and then we had the shake bolts that were already weighed out and we could just put them on the lumber bunks or tie them on however we were packing it. We each had a string of five. So there's shake bolts laying all over the place. We had Ruthie, the mule, ready to get her load and I was walking up to go on the other side of her to undo her ropes and get her ready for her load, and I started to stumble. I've always kind of been a stumble bum, that's why I always like to ride. (laughs) So I started to stumble and I had a feeling I was going down. I put my arm out cause I was kind of gonna use her to maybe keep me up, but she was a fairly young mule and that scared her so she was trying to get away from me. In doing so her foot got on top of one of those shake bolts and slipped off and just nailed my leg and I dropped. My foot actually was facing towards me. My brain just went that's not right and I just reacted and moved it back where it should be position. I heard everybody going, "Oh, my God, oh, my God." I went, "Chris, I'm broken," cause I just knew it immediately. One of the trail crew said, "Where's the radio," and I went, "Yep, start the radio show." We had just finished a refresher for wilderness first responders...

TM: That's handy.

CD: Yeah it was. ...so they were gonna splint me up, but I was starting to like shake. They were giving me their clothes. It was lucky that it wasn't raining that day, it was sunny. And not only did I have those three other people there but there was a whole crew up trail clearing trail, so there was about six people up there. I was getting cold or shaking or shock or whatever and I asked Chris to take off a couple of saddle blankets from one of the mules to put on me. That warmed me up, that stopped the shaking. They got on the radio and they splinted me up, which was very painful, but they did a good job. They brought a wheeled litter in and wheeled me out of there.

TM: How far?

CD: It was only two miles. That was the other lucky thing. But, yeah, there was an ambulance waiting. It was just basic life support. I had to go like, I don't know, like 20 miles or so on a dirt road. Actually that was a worse ride than the litter was. They were gonna take me to Aberdeen instead of Port Angeles. I said, "I want to go to Port Angeles," and they said, "Well, we're closer to Aberdeen." They offloaded me at a little town to advanced life support and then they were able to give me some drugs. They X-rayed me there. Anyway, I spent the night there and Larry and the Quinault ranger arranged to get me back home. So I got back home the second night and then the next day I had an appointment with an ortho guy in town.

TM: Port Angeles?

CD: Yeah, in Port Angeles. I finally get in to see him and he X-rays me and goes, "You horsewomen are tough," and I'm going "What's happening?" He goes, "Well, basically your foot's not connected to your knee." I had four breaks, one of them being a spiral. So he admitted me to the hospital and I had surgery the next morning. They put in a rod and a plate and screws for my spiral break. It was supposed to be like a three-hour surgery and it ended up being like six. I guess I had some of my dad's muleskinner vernacular going coming out of that anesthesia (laughs). It felt like I'd been drug behind a truck. So I was out of work for the rest of that year, 2011. Then I had my father die in July and then my mother followed him in October. It was quite the year for me. They eventually put me on some light duty doing some computer work once I was able to walk.

TM: Did your folks ever, did they get a chance to tell you how proud they were about what you'd done with your life?

CD: Yeah. My father and I kind of lost a little contact but, no, Mom was always proud. She didn't like it when I quit my government job the first go round, but she was happy when I went back to it. So it was tough and I had been trying to get back there every couple years to see them. I was able to come back to full duty the following year, which was 2012, so I made a full season working my full job. I did lose a little confidence, got a little shaky about being by myself because luckily I was with people. But if I had a radio and I had a first aid kit but they were on my mule and I wasn't gonna be able to get to it. I had my friend, Debbie White, who used to bartend at the tavern, volunteer and so she went with me on those trips so I always had somebody with me.

TM: Cool.

CD: And after that I went, well, I'm getting to my early retirement age and I think I'm gonna take it so I can still do stuff before something else happens to me. So I officially retired in February of 2013.

TM: How old were you at the time?

CD: How old was I, 56. That was early as I could retire so I went for it.

TM: All right. And was there a little party there? Did Richard get a chance to come over?

CD: Richard didn't come over but they did do a surprise party for me at the Junction Tavern.

TM: Oh, cool.

CD: Yeah, 'cause I came in and my husband Flo's distracting me and I'm going, "What are you doing?" He says, "We're gonna stop at the tavern." I didn't really want to and I said, "Man, it is packed. I don't know about this." I'm going, "Wait, that's So and So, Park Service, Park Service. I'm seeing a lot of Park Service people here." (both laugh)

TM: You knew something was up.

CD: Yep. So anyway, it was a lot of fun.

TM: Oh, fun.

CD: Yeah. Then I started playing for a living.

TM: All right. And what have you been doing in the last seven years?

CD: Well, right after I retired I bought a mule. It was gonna be my project. I started doing some hiking. A bunch of girls and I got together and would hike every Thursday. We called ourselves the Olympic Mountain Beavers. The mule I bought, Russell, he ended up getting a chronic disease that I just had to put him down this year. But, in March of 2015 we went on a private Grand Canyon trip with Dave King and his wife Abby, and that was a lot of fun. My friend Sarah Woodard and I did all the cooking and the vacuum packing and froze it. We did all the cooking for that.

TM: Wow. Oh, you did that ahead of time, froze it and then took it on the trip?

CD: Yep. We had a big tote of ice that we kept all the meals in until we got to the river. Then we had gotten, with one of the commercial companies, their big coolers that they freeze a bunch of water on the bottom,. We had two of those. We labeled everything and, you know, we taped one of them up and nobody's getting into this cooler until we say. (laughs) Yeah, we did pretty good with that and we were on the river for 24 days. We didn't pull out at Diamond, we pulled out at Pearce Ferry. Pearce Ferry?

TM: Umm hmm, yeah, that's right.

CD: It was a great trip. And then shortly after that something went awry with my leg and it's kind of given me problems ever since.

TM: Oh, my gosh.

CD: Nobody knows what's wrong. They tell me I'm structurally sound but something's wrong. I've done physical therapy and physical therapy and physical therapy (laughs). But, basically, I haven't been riding. My older mule is pretty arthritic. I'm gonna let him be retired. With my leg I'm not all that confident anyway, so I've just been crabbing, and clamming, and fishing, and kayaking, golfing. That sort of stuff.

TM: Very cool. Well, not so cool about your leg but...

CD: No, but it is what it is, I guess.

TM: Yeah. So looking back now over this amazing journey with large animals, if you could have done something different what would you have done?

CD: Hmm. I don't know. I'm pretty much happy with my life. I would like it if my leg hadn't of gotten broken. But, I mean, it was nobody's fault. It was just sort of a freak accident. I don't know, I'm pretty happy with everything. You know, after the tavern and when I went back I had kind of a renewed perspective so I was a lot happier and then, you know, it started to be a lot more people on the trail crew, a younger crew, we had more animals so...

TM: It sounded like it was busy.

CD: Yeah, it was busy.

TM: Well, Clare, maybe we should put a period at the end of this interview and call it good. What do you think?

CD: Yep, that's pretty much my life.

TM: Okay. Well, I want to thank you so very, very much for participating in this oral history series. With that this will conclude Part 6 oral history interview with Clare Donato. Today is Thursday, December 10th, 2020. My name is Tom Martin and, Clare, thank you so very much.

CD: Well, you're quite welcome. Thank you.