

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Clare Donato (CD)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Clare recounts growing up in South Carolina, riding horses, college, early jobs, and arriving at Grand Canyon working with mules on trail crew

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TM: Today is Wednesday, November 18th, 2020. This is a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Clare Donato. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning Clare, how are you today?

CD: I'm well, thank you.

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

CD: You may.

TM: Thank you. Clare, what year were you born?

CD: I was born in 1957.

TM: Where were you when you were born?

CD: Charleston, South Carolina.

TM: Okay. How'd your dad meet your mom?

CD: In college.

TM: Okay. What were they studying?

CD: Well, he was a doctor and she was probably liberal arts, English literature, stuff like that.

TM: So there must be a med school there in Charleston?

CD: Yeah.

TM: When did they get married?

CD: Well, I think it was around '45. That's kind of a guess. My sister's much better at the family history.

TM: Did your dad serve in World War II?

CD: Well, I think he served. I don't know for sure, but I think he was in the Armed Forces at one point. But I don't really know that history. I know *his* dad—because my father was born in Germany—his dad was Italian and came over when he was 12 to New York. He went to war and met my grandma who was German. (chuckles) So my dad was born in Germany, and after 3 months I know they moved over here and I think they were stationed in Sullivan's Island, which is a barrier island outside of Charleston.

TM: Did you have any older or younger brothers or sisters?

CD: Yeah, two older brothers and one younger sister. My brothers are like 8 and 10 years older, and then my sister's two years younger.

TM: Did you grow up then in Charleston?

CD: Yeah, the Isle of Palms, really, which is another barrier island. So I was a beach bum.

TM: So did you learn to swim in the ocean there?

CD: Yes, pretty much. (chuckles) I probably actually learned in a pool but I swam in the ocean quite a bit.

TM: So in the 60s, did you all do the typical kids in the station wagon, we're going for a couple week drive around the country kind of thing or not?

CD: No, I don't really remember going. Mom took us a couple of places. They divorced when I was 10, so my dad would take me and my sister to see his family who lived in Columbia, South Carolina, his sisters and their family. Mom took us on a couple of trips. We went to Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian, and Six Flags over Georgia type of thing.

TM: So not much travel outside of South Carolina.

CD: No.

TM: On the weekends and such when you were growing up, were you pretty much get free-rein of the island there?

CD: Yeah, I pretty much lived in my bathing suit. We had a house right on a tidal creek, so we had a dock out there and I could crab and fish and play in the water. My father had a boat and we'd go to deep sea fishing.

TM: Oh, wow.

CD: So, yeah. I lived in the water pretty much. When I got my first horse I was 10 and...

TM: When did you first become attracted to horses?

CD: I was like six years old, I think. On the island we had a little carnival that would come every summer; rides, and stuff, and there was horse rides there. So my mom took me down, and I wanted to ride a horse and so I did. Then later that day I wanted to go back and do it again, so she made one of my brothers take me. And then after that I was down there every day. (laughs)

TM: Oh wow.

CD: So, yeah. I'd caught the horse-bug for sure.

TM: Cool. And then, you mentioned your dad got you your own horse when you were 10?

CD: Yeah. When they got divorced I guess he thought... I was always daddy's girl for some reason, and when they got divorced... I had been keeping money in a sock under my bed for I don't know how long to buy my own horse. So he bought one for me to I guess take my mind off of things. Unfortunately (chuckles) it made things harder for my mom cause we couldn't keep horses on the island anymore so I had to board.

TM: So that meant you had to leave the island and go to the mainland?

CD: Yeah. And so mom would have to take me.

TM: Yeah, cause you were only 10 or 11.

CD: Right.

TM: Were you able to keep the horse?

CD: Yeah, I kept him. We had to put him down eventually. I think I was 17 or 18. I had gotten another horse when I was 17, and so I made my sister get into riding so I wouldn't have to get rid of Oyster.

TM: Did you learn about how to care for horses during those years? Clean their goop out of their...on their hooves, and brush them down, and feed them? Did you get into all that?

CD: Yeah, I did. Like I say, I had to board but I definitely learned how to do that stuff. Before I got my horse, like during the winters when the carnival wasn't there anymore, my mother set me up with horseback riding. So I kind of got a formal instruction for riding.

TM: Okay, nice. In high school did you compete in any sports at all?

CD: No. I competed in horse shows. I got into show jumping and...

TM: What was that like?

CD: Oh that was great fun.

TM: How old were you when you first did your first show?

CD: Oh, I don't know. Probably once I got my horse, 10. I might have been in shows before that just riding the rental horses at the stable.

TM: You would have been nice and light, and I would think you'd have a chance, actually, to clean house.

CD: (laughs) I didn't do too bad. Then when I got my second horse, they were pushing me into getting a thoroughbred, which is a breed that was mostly doing the showjumping. But always off on my own little path. I got like a Appaloosa Quarter Horse. (chuckles)

TM: How'd that work out?

CD: It worked out okay. I got some prejudice, I guess, you know. Horse people can be kind of snobby.

TM: Okay. I know nothing about it. (CD laughs) Since I know nothing about this, I'm talking to somebody who's a horse show jumper. What else do I need to ask you about that?

CD: (chuckles) I don't know. There were some tumbles I suppose.

TM: Did that hurt you and the horse?

CD: There was a couple of times when the horse and I both went down, but we were fine. But yeah, mostly it was just me. He'd launch me over the jump. (laughs)

TM: So, the horse would head to the jump and then stop, and you'd kind of make the jump without the horse, is that how that would work?

CD: Yeah, pretty much.

TM: (chuckles) Okay. I'm assuming that happened enough that you were "comfortable" with that?

CD: Yeah, well, you know, I was a kid so I was fearless. I wouldn't be comfortable with it now.

TM: (laughing) Yeah, understood. Were you doing that then? Yeah, you were doing that through high school.

CD: Yeah.

TM: Did you travel the South doing that, outside of South Carolina?

CD: No, but we pretty much traveled the state.

TM: Wow.

CD: We'd go to Columbia. Actually probably Columbia was the farthest off and all around the blue oak country area.

TM: Did you get to know the other horse jumping people?

CD: Sort of. There was pretty much the same people.

TM: Same people going from event to event?

CD: Pretty much. The gal who was going to high school with me, and her parents owned the stable that I boarded at, she ended up getting an Appaloosa as well, and then we started going to the Appaloosa circuit. Then I was showing both English and Western so that was different. So I started getting into a little Western riding.

TM: So explain, could you please for me, the difference?

CD: Well, the gear, for one. The Western saddles have a horn and have a lot more material to them. Heavier. More like a cutting horse would wear. Then, the English saddles are the little ones that you can...sort of like a jockey's but a little bit more than that.

TM: And you wear with knee-high boots and a little hat and...

CD: Yep.

TM: Okay. And it seems as though the cutting horses, they're work horses. Their job is to have you lasso a calf.

CD: Yeah, or cut a cow out of a herd.

TM: Yeah. And so, were you starting to practice with a rope to do that stuff?

CD: No, I just pretty much did the walk, trot, and canter sort of a thing. It wasn't until, gosh, recently, like 2013, that I started getting into cutting cows out of the herd with my mules after I retired.

TM: (laughs) Wow, okay. So that means you had two sets of tack. Would you use the same horse for both the English and the...

CD: Yeah, I did.

TM: Okay, and your horse didn't seem to mind?

CD: No, he likes jumping. One of the judges told me that I should probably pick one or the other so that I could be good at one instead of mediocre at two. So I picked jumping. (laughs)

TM: Which is the English side?

CD: Yes.

TM: And did you get good at that?

CD: Fairly good. We were making the rounds. I collected a few trophies and...

TM: Wow, nice. Did you go to a high school there on the barrier island or off in Charleston?

CD: There was no school on Isle of Palms. There was an elementary school on Sullivan's Island and we went there. Then high school was in Mount Pleasant, which is before you get to Charleston.

TM: You mentioned that your elementary school was on Sullivan Island. Was there a bridge connecting the island you were on to Sullivan, or did you get on a boat every day to go to school?

CD: No, we had a bridge. It used to be a boat, but that was before me. We had one bridge, now there's two bridges. It was just one bridge off the island. (laughs)

TM: Then for high school, how did you make that work? There a bus that picked you up on the island?

CD: Yup, we had buses. Then later it was friends with vehicles. (laughs)

TM: Was it assumed in your family that you would go to college?

CD: Absolutely. Much to my chagrin, actually, because I had wanted... I had graduated high school a year early and I was getting my other horse. I wanted to take a year off and show him and then go to college with the rest of my class. That was, "no, I wasn't getting another horse unless I went to college." (laughs)

TM: How did you get a year ahead of the rest of the pack?

CD: I had good grades and then I found out, there was a friend who did it with me, that we could just take a senior English class over the summer and we could go right from sophomore to senior. So that's what I did because I was not a big fan of school. I wanted to ride. (laughs)

TM: I get a sense that you were really bright, I mean you weren't stupid, but that school maybe couldn't keep up with you to keep you challenged?

CD: I don't know, maybe. After school every day I went to the stable and rode. That's what I lived for.

TM: I'm assuming that from the stable, were you riding on the stable grounds or would you head down the road and over the hills?

CD: Yeah, we had trails. The stable was always far enough out...had to keep moving out because subdivisions would creep in. But, yeah, the last place I kept him was Gray Trails. In fact, it's a state park now. But, yeah, we could go swimming with the horses.

TM: Wow.

CD: Yeah, it was fun. (laughs)

TM: I bet the horses liked that.

CD: It was pretty hot down there so they probably enjoyed it. (laughs)

TM: So maybe there wasn't only an expectation to go to college, but was there an expectation to be a doctor? I mean, this would have been the mid-70s, I suppose, mid- to late-70s, and the whole concept was changing about women either being teachers, or nurses or homemakers.

CD: I didn't really know what I wanted to be. I thought about maybe an oceanographer, maybe a veterinarian. I didn't know. I didn't like school so I didn't want to spend a lot of time in school. (laughs) I started out going to the college in Charleston and it was like close to home. My entire family had gone to the College of Charleston so it was like everybody knew my family. Then there's that expectation to live up to. (laughs) So I managed to transfer to the University of South Carolina in Columbia. That got me a little further away, it was a bigger school and nobody knew me.

TM: Were you in the dorm then?

CD: I was in the dorm.

TM: What were you doing with your horse at the time?

CD: Well, I brought him with me (laughs) and he stayed at a stable close by. But I had to work because I was told that my parents were no longer supporting my horse habit.

TM: Oh wow.

CD: (laughs) So I had to get a job and that paid for his board.

TM: Yeah, but that had to be tough because you were now working a job instead of riding a horse.

CD: Yeah. But I could cut school a lot.

TM: Okay. (chuckles)

CD: USC was pretty easy because you could show up on the first day, you could get the agenda for that semester or whatever, and then I would just make sure I knew the material, showed up for tests, and I got out of there. But they had a little job service place and I would sit in there and I would flip through all the potential jobs that were out there. I came across a packer, an animal packer! In fact there was a job opening in Glacier in Montana. I said "Woah, I could do that!" So that got me interested in that line of work.

TM: So this would've been in '76 or so?

CD: Yeah, because I graduated in '78.

TM: And that packer job was a summer job?

CD: Yeah. Glacier has a pretty short season I think.

TM: Had you been out to Montana before?

CD: No. (laughs)

TM: And so, did you apply for that job?

CD: I think I did, but you know I didn't really have any experience. I could ride but that was it.

TM: Right. Did you get it?

CD: No. But that got me on that track of thinking.

TM: What were you doing for your summers there? Well actually, what you doing year-round, because you clearly were smart enough to... I was in college and I envied you people. (laughs)

CD: (laughs) My heart was definitely not in school. When I was at school, I was working in a sandwich shop to pay for my horse's board. My horse ended up dying. He got colic and twisted his intestines. I wasn't going to be able to afford another horse, so I was kind of horse-less there so I basically would lifeguard during the summer. Lifeguard and teach swimming. One summer I went off to Clarks Hill Lake, which is called Strom Thurmond Lake now. It's on the border of South Carolina and Georgia. There's two state parks there. I was lifeguarding there and I met another lifeguard who was from Greenville, South Carolina. We became good friends and sort of stayed in touch.

TM: What did you end up getting your degree in at USC Columbia?

CD: Sociology. (laughs)

TM: I mean, was that just to get a degree in something or did you actually have any interest in that?

CD: It was just to get a degree in something and it was material I didn't like to read. And the psychology and all that stuff.

TM: So this would have been '78. Was your family thinking, okay, Masters, PhD?

CD: Yeah, they basically were. (laughs) Because you weren't going to do anything in sociology without a Masters at least.

TM: Right.

CD: I asked my mom, I said "are we getting good now? I've gone through college, are we good?" She looked at me and said yes. So I went out and got a landscaping job. They were developing the end of the island into what is now Wild Dunes Resort. I was in on the beginnings of that until my direct supervisor told me... I wrapped my shirt up. The guys had all their shirts off and I wrapped mine up like a bathing suit top. He told me to put a stay on it. I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because it's distracting." I said, "Distracting to whom because those guys have their shirts off." (laughs) He says, "Well you need to put it down or you can leave." So I threw my rake down and said, "Bye!"

TM: Good for you.

CD: Then that night, went to the bar and got a job as a carpenter's helper. He said all he wanted me to wear was boots. (laughs) He said as long as I had boots on, I had a job. Of course, I wore more than that.

TM: I want to kind of go back to the family scene for a minute. You had older brothers. Were they married by then, by the time you were done with college?

CD: I think Chris was. Chris didn't want to go to college either, so he ended up joining the army and then volunteering for Vietnam to get out of school. My brother got deferred because he was getting his PhD in chemistry, of all things. He was in Charlottesville and that's where he met his wife. Whether he'd gotten married then or not, I'm not sure. But they were pretty much gone from home, so it would just be my sister.

TM: At least your mom was good enough about it to let you go.

CD: Yeah. I had moved out of the house, too. I had moved in with some friends.

TM: So, you got a job as a carpenter's helper. Was this building houses?

CD: Well, we were renovating this restaurant. I hoped to get into building houses, but after we were done with this restaurant job he didn't have any more work for us. A friend of mine that I'd been living with, she was with me and we were both carpenter helpers. We were going, "Well, what do we do now?" (laughs) She said her mom was living up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina that maybe we should go up there. So we did. She got a job as a waitress and I got a job on a construction crew building. I was on the ground level of building a real big Bell Telephone building. That was a whole new phase of construction that I got introduced to.

TM: Which was steel girders and concrete blocks?

CD: Yup. I ran into a little bit of resistance on that job because I was the only woman there. But overall, my supervisor was wonderful. The rest of the crew had some problems and they had no problem telling me "too bad!" (chuckles) The first day, I got hired on with two black guys and we had to go down into where all this steel had been tied waiting for the concrete. It was delayed for some reason. And I never knew if this was a test or what (chuckles), but anyway, I had to crawl down into the cage and scoop up all the dirt that had sluffed down because it had to wait so long for the cement and then haul it up by the bucket-full to the people above. And I did that all day. At the end of that day they said they fired the two black guys and gave me a raise. (laughs) So, I worked there... I think I got tired of doing the commute. It wasn't really that far, but I was in sort of a party mood.

TM: What kind of vehicle did you have?

CD: A Volkswagen bug.

TM: (laughs) Okay. That was a popular car at that time.

CD: Yes, it was. That was my first car.

TM: Cool. Did you get good at pulling that engine out and working on it?

CD: No. I didn't start doing that until I got my truck. (laughs) But yeah, I ended up driving it out to Grand Canyon later.

TM: The little VW Bug?

CD: Yeah.

TM: Oh, okay. So you're on the job site, passed the first day of schlepping out dirt around rebar and they kept you on.

CD: Yup. And then I had to make all the mud for the mortar, for the brick makings. I learned how to tie steel but I was pretty slow. (laughs) Those guys are fast.

TM: With pliers and steel wire ties tying rebar together?

CD: Yeah.

TM: You know, if you're making mud for block layers you've got to make that right.

CD: Oh yeah. I had to hustle.

TM: Yeah. And then did you have to keep them in block, too, or just mud?

CD: No, I just had to keep them in mud.

TM: That's busy. Okay.

CD: Yeah. And it had to be the perfect consistency and I had to get there on time. I had to mix it and then wheel it over to them.

TM: As that building got higher, did you go higher as well with your mixer and sand and all that junk?

CD: Well, I didn't last long. I ended up quitting that job probably after about 6 months. And then I kind of just kind of bounced around a little bit. I got a waitress job, which I'm not fond of, and then I got another landscaping job. Nothing was talking to me. Anyway, I ran into this guy who had a swimming pool on like 10 acres of land with a little clubhouse and everything that he was letting church groups use and he needed life guard. I went well, there you go. He goes, "If you want to, you can set up your own swimming lessons." So I set up a schedule for swimming lessons for beginners from little kids to adults. So I spent the rest of the summer doing that.

TM: This is '78 or -9?

CD: It must have been '79 because my friend that I had gotten to know from Greenville, who was also a lifeguard, she had gone out to Grand Canyon and gotten on with the YACC. We kept in touch with letters. She wrote me and said the trail had washed out and they are hiring people out the yin-yang so get out here. I went, "Well, I have to finish my duties here at swimming, but that'll be over when the kids went back to school."

TM: August, something like that?

CD: Yeah. So I finished that up, moved back home. My oldest brother was out at SMU in Dallas. So my mother and I went—my sister must have gone, too—went out to Thanksgiving with him, and he's definitely married by then. Then from there I got on the bus and went to Grand Canyon.

TM: Was that your first time West?

CD: Yeah.

TM: And you didn't drive your little VW?

CD: Not yet. I ended up going back and getting it and driving it out. But right now, Carolyn picked me up in Phoenix and drove me to the YACC camp.

TM: So, gosh you would have taken the I-10, I'm not sure, yeah, maybe I-10 up through El Paso and over to Tucson and then up to Phoenix?

CD: Yeah, I guess so.

TM: And then she'd of picked you up and then you'd of left desert and gone up on the Mogollon Rim up to Flagstaff with pine trees.

CD: Yeah.

TM: What were you thinking?

CD: I was in culture shock. (both laugh) As soon as I got off the bus, it was like all the moisture left my body (TM laughs) cause I knew nothing but humidity. (chuckles)

TM: Right.

CD: I had the heat down, but this dryness was just...

TM: I bet. So, what was the YCC [sic] about? How did it work?

CD: You had to be under 24 years of age.

TM: I'm going to jump in again, is that the Youth Conservation Corps?

CD: Young Adult Conservation Corps.

TM: Okay, and who was operating that?

CD: But you could be a little bit older. You know, I can't remember his name. But he also cooked for us. We had our own camp there. The way it worked was they would farm you out to different... You could go backcountry ranger, you could go into maintenance. You could pick one that they had openings for. So, I was trying to decide what I wanted to do. I think Carolyn was a backcountry ranger. I thought that sounded pretty good, but then I found out about trail crews and they had mules and rode and packed. At that point, the trail crew packed all their own gear. There was a packer there, Dave Smith, but he mainly packed all the feed down into the Canyon where the trail crews were going to stay with their animals and then packed the blue goo from the toilets out.

TM: So they were actually packing. At that time this would've been '79, the fall, no, the winter.

CD: Yeah, I was there in December '79.

TM: And so they were packing out the blue goo from the bathrooms at the campground?

CD: Yeah. There was a bathroom station along the way, too, a couple of them. But, yeah.

TM: Huh. I'm assuming you had like 5-gallon jugs that would like fit into some sort of fittings with some kind of valve?

CD: Well, they had like dry bags sort of thing it seemed like. I don't know if they pumped it into that. I'm not sure how that worked. It was before the composting toilets.

TM: Right, and before the sewage treatment plant was built down at Phantom, eventually.

CD: Yeah.

TM: So, did they have an opening then on trial crew?

CD: They did and when I was asked... I can't remember his name, he said, "Well what division do you want to go into?" I went, "How about trail crew." I just remember him looking at me like he'd just eaten something nasty and he goes, "Bring a lunch, you can start tomorrow." (laughs) Because I guess trail crew was where you went if you were misbehaving (laughs) or you needed to be humbled.

TM: And you'd already done construction and you clearly liked it. And they had stock. I mean, gosh, what a wonderful combination.

CD: Yeah, I was in seventh heaven.

TM: Wow.

CD: So yeah. I had never been around a mule but...

TM: What differences did you see right away between the mules and the Appaloosas and the horses that you were familiar with?

CD: Well, most obvious the ears. Their body build was a little more donkeyish than a horse.

TM: So stronger, stockier, what?

CD: Yeah, they weren't all that different. The first day I started with another guy. A young skinny black guy. He was on trails because... I don't know he had done wrong (laughs), but he was on trails as a punishment. They gave us each a halter and told me to go catch that gray mule—because they wanted to see how we would do—and they told him to catch one of the other mules. He was scared to death of them. Big thousand-pound animals. But I went right up and caught the gray mule, his name was Cutthroat. So, I passed that test.

TM: How do you catch a mule? A mule is clearly in the pen, so you get in the pen. Do you just like walk over to it and talk to it. Say, "Hey Cutthroat! My name is Clare, how are you?"

CD: (laughs) Yeah well, you know, you approach. I usually approach at the shoulder so you don't threaten or intimidate them. Pat their head, and you don't push them too far to their butt. I come up to it, you know. I watch how she's reacting to me. She was used to getting caught, so. Then I went up and put my arms around her and put her halter on.

TM: Aw. Nice

CD: Yeah. Then the rest of the day I got to brush them and saddle them and we rode down to the dirt pit.

TM: So packing with mules is way different than jumping.

CD: (laughs) Right. There's quite a lot to learn.

TM: I was going to say, how do you keep from, I mean, just your load swinging around to the mule's belly? How do you keep from getting stomped on? It just seemed like it would have been a real different world. Who was teaching you? Who was mentoring you?

CD: Well, Pete Howard was running the crew and Stanley Sloan who was Navajo. These were my first Indians I ever met, too, because there was Stanley and Tilman and then...

TM: Sorry, was that Tilman?

CD: Tilman. I can't remember his last name. Stanley Sloan was his. And there was Candido Apodaca. I think his father was working in maintenance. They were a nice Mexican family. And then Dan Blackwell was on the crew who went on to be chief of maintenance at Sequoia-Kings.

TM: Right. Was Dan working as a packer then on trails?

CD: Trail crew, yeah. He had learned how to pack.

TM: What do you remember? Let's take these folks one at a time. You had mentioned Dave Smith. Was Dave the trail crew foreman?

CD: No, he was the packer. Richard Hanson was trail crew foreman.

TM: Okay. So Richard would have just shown up, is that right?

CD: I guess. And see, usually you work YACC for a year and then they decide whether they picking you up or not as a seasonal.

TM: Alright. So working YCC [sic], were they actually giving you like food and a place to stay, but no pay? Or were they actually giving you some sort of stipend?

CD: I think it might have been minimum wage. And then, yeah, we had a place to stay and there was a cook. There might have been a small expense for that out of our pay. But I'm pretty sure we were getting, like, minimum wage.

TM: Because you're working hard on trail crew. That's not going to be just out on a rove with a radio as a backcountry interp ranger or a backcountry trails ranger. It's much more physical.

CD: Yeah. Which I liked that part.

TM: Okay so, let's start with Richard then.

CD: (chuckles) Okay.

TM: He was a foreman. Richard and I have just been doing some oral history work. I'm trying to think, I think he had applied to be just on the trail crew and they offered him the foreman job. (CD chuckles) He took it and it took him a while, but he eventually got things figured out and started to excel there which was really neat for his story. What do you remember about him, that first winter when you met him?

CD: Mostly we would just see him at the very beginning of the tour. Then we would go usually into the Canyon. We were like nine days on and five off. So at the very beginning, it was basically Pete Howard was like my supervisor that I considered. I knew Richard was the foreman, but I slowly get to know him. He would come out sometimes and just check us out on the crew. He took a liking to me and usually, like I say, usually stayed on YACC for a year. He picked me up as a seasonal after like 6 months. That was pretty nice because that was a big boost in pay. (chuckles)

TM: Would you've been a GS-3 or -4, something like that?

CD: I was WG.

TM: Okay. Wage grade?

CD: Yeah, so I don't know if that was a 2 or a 3 at that point. I don't remember.

TM: Okay. And that would've been in the spring of '80?

CD: Yeah, or summer of '80.

TM: Those details as a seasonal, that's got a start date and a good fixed end date for so many months.

CD: Yeah, and at that point we were working 11-month seasons.

TM: Oh wow. So, was that two seasons back-to-back, two seasonal assignments I guess?

CD: I don't think so. I think it was just that this was before they really cut everything down so they didn't have to pay you (chuckles) after 6 months. But it was 11 months. I think my month off was sometime in the winter. That was probably one of those times I flew back and got my Volkswagen and drove it back out. But yeah, I don't remember when that was.

TM: Okay. So tell me about Pete Howard.

CD: Pete pretty much... He and Stanley both pretty much taught me about the mules and how to be around them and how to pack them. They were patient with me. Stanley sometimes he liked you to struggle. (laughs) I have a habit of asking a lot of questions and he would answer them. First off I was in the dirt pit, so basically I was just saddling my saddle mule and then the string, the dirt haulers, putting the boxes on them. Then I was the one left in the pit. Stanley and Tilman were the dirt haulers and my job was to mound up two big mounds of dirt where the mule would walk in the middle of them and Stanley and Tilman would shovel the boxes full. Then while they were gone dumping the string, I'd have to work my piles back up.

TM: And you'd have to find a pit somewhere. This is in the Grand Canyon where there's lots of cliffs and big rocks and not a lot of dirt. And they were taking this dirt down and dumping it on the trails to keep the trails kind of smooth?

CD: Yep. We would also put a base of rock down.

TM: Like a base full of crushed rock?

CD: Yeah. When we were doing the crushing. (laughs)

TM: This is you and a 3-pound sledge hammer or a 5-pound sledge hammer and a large rock that...

CD: I always picked the 8-pound. Yeah, so there would be people below the trail throwing rocks up and then there'd be people smashing them. Making small rocks out of big ones. (laughs)

TM: My sense is that this was a year in-year out operation that went forever.

CD: It did.

TM: One kind of stands back and goes, hmm, is this standard practice for trail building? Isn't there a better way? but I guess there isn't.

CD: Well, it was like as soon as you're done you're starting over because the Fred Harvey mules are coming down. They were doing, gosh I can't remember, at least one trip to Bright Angel or out to the point there.

TM: Plateau Point?

CD: That was the day trip. And then they did overnight trips where they'd go down the Bright Angel and up the Kaibab. Yeah, there was quite a bit of mule traffic going on and then us.

TM: Right. And I the foot traffic is probably not that hard on the trails but the mule traffic would be.

CD: Yeah.

TM: So, lets back up a little bit. What do you remember about Tilman?

CD: He was quiet. He and Stanley were both quiet. But he was very accomplished with the mules. He was somebody that I definitely looked up to and watched how he worked around them. I think Tilman left and it was just Stanley at some point. Then we had different Hopis on the crew.

TM: Okay. And Candido, what do you remember about Candido?

CD: Candido was just the sweetest thing. (laughs) I think I had dinner with his family one Christmas which was pretty interesting. I loved all those guys. (chuckles)

TM: Cool. So do you think you were the first trail crew female working at Grand Canyon?

CD: I don't know. There was a couple more after me I know, because Richard was very open to hiring women.

TM: And first nations people, people of color. He was not trapped in the color-bar land.

CD: No, he wasn't, so he would hire women. They usually didn't last all that long (chuckles) that I remember. My friend Sue was on for a while, but she ended up getting a maintenance job and decided she was going to do that. Then there was a gal named Chris, I think. She ended up going to nursing school. I was the one that just liked busting rock, I guess. (chuckles)

TM: It's a temperament kind of job and if you have the right temperament, boy it's a wonderful job.

CD: I just learned so much about building these trails up and building rock walls. Then we did some pavement stuff on the rims.

TM: Sorry, can you talk to me about what it means to fall in love with a rock?

CD: (laughs) Well, you know, you look for special rocks for walls. Then even if you were doing these... We would have a pionjar with drill and feather and wedges and split our own rocks sometimes. But it was just fun. I had fun doing that.

TM: How do you work a feather and a wedge? Can you describe the tools that you got for that and how it works?

CD: Well, the pionjar had a drill attachment, so you'd drill holes, say, in a line of where you wanted the rock to crack. And then you would put the feathers in with the wedge in-between them. I'd fill up all my holes and then I kind of go down the way hitting the wedges with the sledge hammer until it started cracking open.

TM: Were you looking certain types of rock? I'm thinking maybe Coconino Sandstone.

CD: Yeah, it was mainly sandstone. That busted easiest. (chuckles)

TM: Okay, yeah. But the sandstone, that's only up in the upper third up there, and if you needed it down canyon...

CD: Yeah, but there was some red, like in the red and white switchbacks.

TM: On the Kaibab Trail.

CD: But there was a dirt pit. Is that Windy Ridge in the Kaibab?

TM: Top of the Redwall?

CD: Yeah.

TM: Around the corner out of sight?

CD: Yup. That was my first dirt pit. So we would haul out of there. Then when we got down far enough, we had to have moved somewhere down closer to Phantom and then we'd start working out of there.

TM: Yeah, it's a funny deal to actually run a mine for dirt in the Grand Canyon to put on the trails.

CD: Yeah, I don't suppose they're doing that anymore. (chuckles)

TM: I'm not so sure they're not. I don't know. It was going on for a long time. (laughs)

CD: Yeah. Then when Stanley and Tilman went on their furlough, I asked Pete if I could do the dirt hauling and he let me. He would haul dirt with me just to kind of show me the ropes and then... So, I was getting pretty good at shoveling. (laughs)

TM: So you were shoveling in the pit. You're digging up the dirt, and that's with a pick and a bar, and you're trying to build up these piles as quick as you can because those guys are going to come back. Now, you're one of them which means you bring your string in in-between these two piles of dirt, and you shovel one pannier full and go around the mule and then shovel the other side full?

CD: No. There's two people, no. You'd be in big trouble. (chuckles) You got to shovel at the same time.

TM: Okay, so the load is uniformly distributed on the mule.

CD: Yep. And then you got to pull the pins at the same time, too, to dump it.

TM: Oh, okay. So you'd stand there and look at each other and say, "ready, set, go?"

CD: Yep, pretty much.

TM: And then you'd have a bunch of dirt at your feet. And then you'd go mule by mule by mule and do that down the line?

CD: Uh huh. We'd unhook them, they're all hooked together. The last mule loaded is the first one dumped. Like if I was riding drag, which I usually was, I would be back a strings worth and then I'd come up and we'd take the last mule and usually turn him sideways in the trail, perpendicular, so that all of it would land in the middle of the trail.

TM: That makes sense, sure.

CD: And then go and once he was empty, tie him to my ride. And then we'd get the next one. We'd go down like that until everybody was dumped and then whoever was riding drag on the way in was now hauling the mules back to the pit, and the one who had brought the mules in is now riding drag and he's doing a quick rake, raking the dirt out. And then we go back for another load.

TM: How many mules in a string between your mule you were riding and your partners mule they were riding?

CD: There was five dirt haulers, generally, maybe six sometimes, and then our two rides. So, 7/8 mules altogether.

TM: So, the lead becomes the drag and has to knock down the dirt that was dumped out of... That's a lot of work there just trying to knock that down a little bit while you're trying to keep up with the string as they head out toward the pit again.

CD: Yeah, but you had a little bit of time because you go into the pit and tie up. Then you get the last mule and start it all over again. (chuckles)

TM: Right. So was there a fourth person? I'm thinking there's a digger in the pit.

CD: Yeah, a lot of times there was two diggers.

TM: Two diggers in a pit. Were there any spreaders out working out with the crushed rock or did you all just leave the dirt spreading and all go and crush rock for a while?

CD: Yeah, we try and get the rock crushed; have an area ready for dirt and then we'd haul the dirt over it. Later on we had a machine, a rock-crushing machine, but it seemed like it was always breaking down.

TM: Yeah, and you had to get rock into it, which was bigger.

CD: Yeah. And it was noisy and then we had to get it off the trail for the dude strings to come by. It was actually more of a pain than helpful. But we'd have the pionjar in the pit and kind of blading down dirt off the banks.

TM: That's a gas-powered, vibratory monster that weighs probably 50, maybe 60, pounds I'm thinking.

CD: Yeah.

TM: It's got a gasoline engine. It's like a mechanical pick, if you will. It's just got a sharp tip on it.

CD: Yeah. So we would use it... Because, you know, we also ditched on the inside of the trails. We would line the border with rock. The trail was four feet wide, the length of our shovel handle. Then we could take the pionjar and blade out the dirt for an inside a ditch. Somebody's using the pionjar and somebody's digging out the ditch and throwing it on the trail.

TM: Okay, because that was good dirt that you could recycle.

CD: Yep.

TM: Alright, well I've got a ton of questions but we've been at this for an hour. (laughs)

CD: Okay.

TM: I'm wondering If this is a good time to put a comma on this and we'll come back and pick it up again because I'll want to know about your housing, and I'll want to know about other types of wall work; what happens when the hikers got in trouble, did you break away to help them? Just the other parts of the job. And what was your family thinking. (both laugh) So, if that sounds like a good idea then maybe we'll just put a comma here and pick it up again.

CD: Okay, sounds good.

TM: Alright, well with that, this will conclude what I'm going to call part one of a Oral History Interview with Clare Donato. Today is Wednesday, November 18th, 2020. My name is Tom Martin. And Clare, thank you so very much.

CD: You're welcome.