

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

Interviewee: Clare Donato (CD)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Clare recounts her time as a muleskinner at Olympic National Park in the 1990s

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TM: Today is Monday, December 7th, 2020. This is Part 5 of a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Clare Donato. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Clare, how are you today?

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

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

CD: You may.

TM: Thank you. At the end of Part 4 you told us about your river trip in Grand Canyon in 1984, and then it was back to Olympic to pack there. Can you tell me more about what was involved with packing at Olympic?

CD: Well, I came back to work, it was probably end of March/beginning of April of '85 after a pretty rough year to begin with cause I had the six green mules. But they were coming along. We packed a lot of lumber and because we were sort of fresh from Grand Canyon, Richard had boxes made up that were similar to the ones we used at the Canyon and we started hauling gravel. Come to find out that gravel was way heavier than the dirt that we were packing in the Canyon so we had to modify the boxes. At first we started out with just putting a piece of tape around; we can't fill over this line cause it was pretty heavy and wet. But it was good. The animals got easier to deal with. We started picking up a couple more here and there and things were going well. We had some youth groups that we packed, SCA groups and that sort of thing.

TM: That's the Student Conservation Association?

CD: Yes.

TM: And they were out there helping build trail?

CD: Yes, and they would stay out there for, oh, three or four weeks at a time so they always had a lot of stuff to pack. It was always several trips for us to get everything in and then we'd have to pack it all out.

TM: How far were you going out to their spike camp?

CD: Oh, well, sometimes it was way too far. There was a place called CB Flats, which was up above the Hoh ranger station, which would have been a nice place to roundtrip. So we would end up having to

spend the night. We got smarter as we went on and made it so that we could roundtrip them and not have to spend the night up there. We'd find projects for them to do that was fairly close. But, yeah, in the summer of '85, I think it was one of those groups, we were packing some boards in for a suspension bridge. The crew leader was working on a section of trail that we had to go through with the animals. I was usually riding a mule called Molly, but because we were packing these boards I thought she would be better at packing the boards than this little stocky quarter horse we had named Diva. So I rode him. We had dropped the boards off. I should have told the crew leader that we were coming right back through to not do any more work, but they kept working. I saw a big hole coming (laughs) as we were coming back through. We were empty now without the boards. My horse stepped in it and pretty much planted me like a lawn dart and I broke my collar bone. I didn't think so at the time. I was going "Oh, no." The guy, Che, who was working with me said "You broke your collar bone," and I said "No, I didn't, I'm fine." (laughs) But I could tell when I went to get back on my horse my arm wouldn't move up to grab the saddle horn. I managed to get up and we came on down and got back to the barn and took care of everybody. I went in and it was broken. So they just put me in a brace. There's nothing you can do about it really.

TM: Right.

CD: But I was out of work for a while.

TM: Typically that's something like eight weeks for that bone to knit up.

CD: Yeah, eight weeks. The first two weeks were miserable cause I just couldn't get in a comfortable position. And I had to wear a brace that unhooked in the back so whenever I wanted to take a shower I had to walk down to the ranger station and ask one of them to unhook me (laughs) and then hook me back up after the shower. But after the first two weeks, Richard put me on some light duty. There was a big project going on out at the ocean over these headlands trails with rope ladders and such; when the tide came in and you couldn't get around the points. So I was going to be camp cook. That was a pretty fun job actually. The first time we went in—I spent like three tours out there and a tour is eight days—but the first time the Coast Guard boated us in in a cutter and then put us in a Zodiac and hauled all our gear up to the beach. I was kind of one handed so I wasn't a whole lot of help with the gear. I remember having to like use my knees. I couldn't sit down on the bottom of the Zodiac cause it was just too bouncy for my collar bone. And then we'd hike out. There was a little kind of a shortcut trail from one of the logging roads down to Mosquito Creek, not the Mosquito Creek, where there was a shelter and that's where our camp was. Then the second time they flew us in, which was fun, and then we hiked out. And then the third time we hiked in. I was not really paying attention, following one of the other trail crew guys in and we kind of got off the trail. (laughs) We weren't lost-lost cause we knew we were in between two creeks but we ended up hitting that other creek and followed it down till we hit the beach. The tide was up so we had to cross Mosquito Creek. So it was quite the little adventure. But the weather was beautiful the whole time I was out there. I just had to cook breakfast and dinner and they were on their own for lunch so I had the whole day to goof around on the beach.

TM: Sounds like a nice way to fix up a hurt shoulder except that you were busy for breakfast and dinner.

CD: Yeah.

TM: And you got really strong in one arm.

CD: Yeah. (laughs) Well, it got better as it went along. That first tour was pretty gnarly cause I pretty much had to do everything one handed. And I think during that time, there was a fire over in the Staircase District of the park. So, of course, I wasn't on that but that's when Larry Lack sort of had to take my place and he started packing with the mules. Then we ended up working together for years after that.

TM: Cool. Okay. You mentioned the gravel and the difference between the dirt that you were putting in the panniers at Grand Canyon and the gravel, the wet gravel, versus dry dirt out at Olympic. What did you eventually do about that? Was it just a matter of you just packed...

CD: We made the boxes smaller. We were trying to make them smaller and lighter. Like I said, the first part we just made a tape mark, like don't shovel over this line.

TM: So it wasn't like you got in some different equipment to move the gravel or gave up on the gravel entirely?

CD: Well, eventually we did because we were getting the gravel mostly from riverbeds. That became a no-no after a while so they would helicopter loads of gravel in certain places and we would work out of that. It seemed like the gravel hauling pretty much stopped somewhere in the mid-90s I think.

TM: What did you use to replace it with? Did you just give up on it and just have a muddy trail?

CD: Well, there's wheelbarrows still. (laughs) They'd still build it up and try and find a dirt pit close by that they could haul in stuff. I'd packed in wheelbarrows before and they'd use that.

TM: Yeah, that's always a resource concern because you're basically mining in the national park to find material to build trail.

CD: Yeah.

TM: So, you know, how's that gonna work?

CD: And the Wilderness Management Plan was being written. That was very concerning to them.

TM: Uh huh, right. Yeah.

CD: I forget when that ended but we did a lot of it at the beginning of my time here.

TM: Okay. So it sounds like besides your collarbone this was fairly routine for you now.

CD: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, Richard planned some fun projects. We did a couple of climbs up Mount Olympus. The last three miles that you get to... There's Glacier Meadows and then you cross the Blue Glacier and go up and do your climb, but there's avalanche chutes right before then and there was always a lot of work to do in there. So he combined that with the climbing trip and we had some climbing rangers that took us up. That was great cause I had never climbed anything (laughs) and had never been on a glacier.

TM: With crampons and ice ax and all that kind of stuff?

CD: Yeah, we were roped up. Well, the two trips were different cause it depended on who our climbing rangers were. The first trip we just had to rope up across the glacier and then we would climb free, and then we had to rope up; there's a technical climbing spot that you go up through a crack. It's not very far but they have you roped up and on belay. The other trip they had us roped up from across the glacier and up the snow dome and all the way up. That's the way they wanted to do it. But it was a lot of fun.

TM: I would think that trail building in an avalanche chute is job security for life.

CD: Well, yeah. I know they did some blasting. I wasn't in on that trail work, I just packed supplies. There was some blasting they did, but since then... I mean, it was a yearly thing having to go in there and clear it out. There's been a big slide in there since then. I haven't seen it, but there's a big rope ladder now that people have to use.

TM: To get across?

CD: Yeah, to cross.

TM: It kind of reminds me of monsoon rains in the Grand Canyon. I mean, it's just kind of job security there where nature wipes away all the little things that people build and then you have to rebuild them.

CD: And then there's always these trees coming down. Every spring you're clearing the trails just to get to any project work that might need doing. Of course, there's lots of little puncheon bridges. They always have to be checked with the animals coming across them. So, yeah, there's definitely job security.

TM: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it just sounds like it's a never-ending task. Richard had mentioned, I didn't ask him about this, he had mentioned that the reason why there was no stock at Olympic when he showed up was because of resource management concerns. Did you ever get privy to what those concerns were and how they were mitigated?

CD: I think a big part of it was where we were going to keep the animals. Richard actually wanted a field, that actually they are in now but for a different reason, for them and they said absolutely not. That's also where the... It was an old homestead so it had already been damaged in that respect. I mean, the home was gone but you still had some apple trees and the big field. It was a beautiful spot, You could look right up to Mount Fitzhenry. I think that was a big concern so they stuck us back... We had three acres but there was no grass to speak of. In fact, we had to end up hardening it with gravel and take out hazard trees and stuff. But, yeah, they were always concerned about the damage that they could do.

TM: Umm hmm. Yeah, it's kind of a double edged sword. I mean, you need non-mechanized equipment and tools to work in a wilderness and mules fit that bill, but then they have their own maintenance and own requirements.

CD: Right. And mules are the original four-wheel drive.

TM: Yeah, yeah, that's right. That's right.

CD: So we had lots of projects like that. I think it was '88 when Yellowstone was on fire, Larry and I both went on a fire. My first and last. (laughs)

TM: What was that like?

CD: Yeah. It was in Kettle Falls/Sherman Pass area in Washington State. So many people were on the Yellowstone fire that they just needed people.

TM: Did you get a red card to do that?

CD: Yeah. I had gotten a red card previously, cause I remember I had to do a step test or something.

TM: Yeah, either a pack test or a step test or something like that.

CD: Yeah. It was a step test and they had a different size step for women than they did for men. I said "I'll just do the size the men use." So I got my red card. I think Richard was gone for some reason because he had always said "One of us packers have to stay. Both packers can't go on a fire." He was gone and the fire guy at the time, I think it was Rich Olsen, anyway he just sort of declared martial law, "I'll handle Richard, both of you are gone." (laughs) So we went. That was kind of a scary thing cause we actually ran from that fire several times. But I wasn't too impressed with the overhead people, I guess.

TM: Did you go up with your stock or were you just on a ground team?

CD: Yeah, I was just on a ground team.

TM: So making line?

CD: Yeah, making line. There was a lot of bees and Larry was allergic to bees so he was always up front at the beginning. He was also excellent with a chain saw so he was doing the front part and then we would come along behind and kind of grade it out.

TM: Having to run from a fire means that it's changed directions and is now heading toward you?

CD: Well, one of the times we were camped out. I mean, there was a base camp, too, but we were camped out and a tree that I was sleeping by caught on fire. So I got up and moved my... I was just sleeping on the ground with no tent just a sleeping bag and I moved down to the bottom of the hill. But I pretty much slept with my boots on after that. (laughs) Then there was another time where we were going up...we went over Sherman's Pass and they said there was some private property that was in danger so we were gonna set... Oh, our crew leader had chopped his foot with a Pulaski so now we had this other guy that was kind of a top dog. I also called him Mr. Pyro because he wanted to back-burn everything. So we get up there and we get off the bus. The fire is pretty close to the road and there's all sorts of wind currents and swirling and stuff going on. We're thinking, oh, we're not gonna set this back-burn. But we did and sure enough it did jump the line and we're all running for the bus. Then another time there was... Well, actually some packers came by and I was going "Hey, I'm a packer, can I come with you guys?" (laughs) They didn't believe me, of course, and I was still on the ground crew. They had brought in our supplies, some food and stuff. The next morning we were walking up right towards this big, black, billowing cloud of smoke. I keep turning around looking at the guy behind me going "Are we really walking towards that?" Then at some point they stopped us. They got a radio call and we had to

go back into the burned out area and we spent the rest of the day sitting there until we could get out of there.

TM: Wow. At least you had a place to retreat to.

CD: Yes, yes. And I think those packers had made it out in the nick of time, but they'd been riding all night. That was the last fire for me.

TM: Is that something that, you know, you have a choice to say "Sorry, not going"?

CD: Well, probably but at the time I'd never been on one and so I was up for it. Something new I haven't done. But, yep.

TM: And the pay's good.

CD: The pay is good. I think after two weeks they give you like two days of R&R. They bussed us over to Curlew Lake, which was perfect for me. It was a warm lake and I could swim in it.

TM: What was the name of the lake again?

CD: Curlew, C-u-r-l-e-w.

TM: Thank you.

CD: Then it was right after that... Well we did a lot of mopping out, putting out the...after that and then they sent us home at some point.

TM: Yeah, it sounds like something good to experience and if it doesn't really gather your fancy it's like, all right, well, I've been there-done that.

CD: Yeah, yeah. (laughs) Well, if I had had more confidence in who was leading us, telling us where we were going...

TM: Hmm. Interesting. Okay.

CD: ...I might have enjoyed it more. I mean, there's guys who just love it but I thought it could have been a little better managed.

TM: Yeah, that's difficult because clearly a lot of the crews were away putting out fires elsewhere.

CD: Yeah, it was a big fire year. I remember that. Yellowstone was on fire and there was just fires everywhere.

TM: How does Olympic manage that because, you know, that's pretty thick forest there and I would imagine if it turned drought for any reason it would be a bad place for fire.

CD: Yeah, we've had a few. There's usually enough lakes or ponds to steal water from. We had one, actually, this past summer not too far from me and actually the road's still closed cause the bank's so

unstable. But, yeah, they dip water out of... Lake Crescent was right there, it was right next to Lake Crescent. Back in the wilderness area they just sort of monitor it and don't do a whole lot.

TM: Yeah. Yeah, fire does play a role in that ecosystem, so watch that.

CD: Umm hmm. It's usually lightning strike or dumb campers around here.

TM: I had a question about hauling lumber. Is that the sort of deal where you take one end and you tie it to the pack saddle and the other end just drags on the ground?

CD: Well, there's several ways you can go about it. It depends on how long the lumber is. Most of our puncheon bridges are four feet across, so that's a pretty nice manageable length. We had what we called lumber bunks. They're just sort of an L out of angle iron or two L's hooked together, and then we could put the boards onto them and strap them down.

TM: And would do kind of like two on one side and two on the other just like you did with the dirt and the panniers to balance a load either side of the animal?

CD: Yeah. There was usually more than two but, yeah, definitely. You have somebody on either side loading at the same time.

TM: Okay. So it's the same deal, you'd need four people, or two people...

CD: Two people, right,

TM: ...each able to hold a 4 x 4 or whatever the timber was and both people would put the load on the animal at the same time.

CD: Yeah. And the lumber bunks were nice because you could load the boards one at a time, whereas if you were just gonna sling them and you wanted to haul more than one board on each side we would mantle them up which is a canvas tarp sort of that you tie them up and then you have to put the whole package on a mule.

TM: And the mule wouldn't mind, in its visual field seeing the end of these boards not too far back?

CD: Well, they had to get used to it. One time we had like six-foot boards. We had them just straight across so this mule had to learn how to not move its head around a lot. At one point he had put his head down to get some grass on the side of the trail and brought his head up with his neck underneath the board and it freaked him out so he went bucking off. (laughs) But they start to get used to it and like I say, four footers were our preferred length. But also we could angle it so that it's not right next to his neck, it's more up, and then angle down for the longer boards.

TM: Umm hmm. And then I'm assuming you would fly in...you know, if you had glulams or fairly large timbers you'd either fly in or you'd make those on scene?

CD: Yeah. That started to become a hardship, too, because, well, for one thing a lot of the big trees...cause they would like to drop trees for stringers if they could, but there have been several bridges built there that was getting to be scarce. But, yeah, they started going to glulams and just flying those in.

TM: Right, right.

CD: But, yeah, they had an Alaskan chainsaw mill that they could mill up lumber on site.

TM: Okay. And then you guys would pack that in there or would that get flown in?

CD: I've packed a chainsaw mill in, but a lot of times when it's already that big they just go ahead and make it a helicopter ship.

TM: Right. Did Olympic have its own helicopter or did they... I mean, in theory its "own". Grand Canyon often...

CD: No. They'd hire.

TM: Hire? Okay.

CD: Yeah, they'd hire out. And then the big jobs come from the Air Force or Coast Guard or the military.

TM: Oh, okay. They must have been happy to participate in that I would assume?

CD: Yeah, except if they... Fires were priority so if they needed to go to a fire we were left holding the bag. (laughs)

TM: Right, you'd have to wait until they didn't have anything else pressing, pressing business.

CD: Right.

TM: That would make sense. Whatever kind of odd things did you pack that set you back to thinking a little bit about how to do it?

CD: Yeah, I used to dream at night about how I was gonna pack things the next day.

TM: Well, that's good, studying ahead. (both laugh)

CD: There was this thing called the blue winch and it had to be broken down in order to pack it, but it was heavy. There was about four of trying to get all of this... Luckily we weren't taking it very far. It was another bridge project.

TM: Was it some sort of a gasoline powered winch kind of thing?

CD: Yeah, on skids. So, yeah, we took it off the skids. I think it broke down in like three parts, I forget. But it was a beast. Those SCA crews, they would bring guitars, a library full of different books, little ovens and stoves and propane bottles. They had a lot of stuff.

TM: Well, the good thing about guitars, I guess, is they're light.

CD: Yeah, maybe a little too light. And, you know, aluminum lawn chairs. I mean, you cinch down on the ropes and you can bend things that aren't up for it.

TM: Oh, interesting. So you could break the chairs.

CD: Yeah, if I reefed down. I tried to put them on top. I tried to rig it so that I wouldn't have to reef on it. But, yeah, I mean, the boxes and stuff required taut ropes.

TM: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

CD: And at some point in there—I wasn't on that trip, it was Richard and Larry, they were up Hayes River area, and it must have been... I don't know if it was still on the Hayes River Bridge or not. They were empty coming out and they ran into these groups of guys that were packing rocks. Apparently they were like geology students from Yale. I don't know if they asked Richard or if Richard offered to take the rocks from them and haul out for them, cause they had some empty mules. Of course, they jumped at that. Richard said "Well, in order for us to do that I need, we need an honorary degree from Yale for Elwood." Elwood was the name of the mule, Elwood and Jake Blues. Richard liked to name them after musicians and stuff. So Elwood packed out the rocks and sure enough we got a diploma in the mail from Yale to Elwood Blues, Doctor of Portage Equis. (laughs)

TM: Wow.

CD: So we had a little ceremony at the barn. We had all the mules dressed in their saddles and we lined them out like a little procession and we had pictures taken. We were in the paper, our local paper. (laughs)

TM: That's cool.

CD: Yeah, and gave Elwood his diploma.

TM: Wow, the only mule with a diploma. Pretty good.

CD: Yeah, and I have it cause Elwood is not with us any longer. But, yeah.

TM: That's cool. Well, it does kind of beg the question of, you know, these mules do a ton of work and they don't get a lot of recognition for that.

CD: No, they don't. My big thing was always what to do with them when we retired cause I, and Richard too, because I just hated either selling them off as like surplus. I always wanted to try and find a home where they could live out the rest of their lives but that's a hard thing to do with the Park Service cause for one thing you can only give them to a nonprofit organization otherwise—and they're considered property—so otherwise they're excessed as property, which they go to auction. I always had a problem with that. And now the Back Country Horseman's a nonprofit organization so that helps a lot. But it's not my problem anymore.

TM: Right, right. And I would imagine... I'm sorry, go ahead.

CD: It's a tough one, that problem. For me it always was.

TM: I'd imagine that, you know, after many years of hard work like that the mules would have arthritic joints just like we do. What's the typical average working life of a mule?

CD: Well, I think at Grand Canyon they like to rotate them out after 10 years. It seems like the guy that took over after I left was sort of on that same wavelength. When I was there, we worked until they really couldn't do it anymore and then I tried to find sanctuaries that would take them. My guy, Buddy, he's gonna be 29 here. He's been all over the park with me packing and riding. He looks a little arthritic (laughs). He's retired. I don't work him or ride him or anything anymore.

TM: Right. So it seems like mules typically live 30/35 years, is that right?

CD: Yeah. Maybe 40. They can go an average of 10 years more than a horse, and a horse can make 30 on average, depending on what kind of a life they've had.

TM: That's kind of tough cause they get well trained and they're good at what they do and then, you know, they time out.

CD: Yeah, and they actually like routine. They like having the same thing that they can expect to do and they get really good at that. In fact, one year Larry and I were sent over... In Montana there's a, I think it's called Nine Mile, the Forest Service has it, and they do a lot of training. We went over there for some trail grading experience where they use plows and little graders for the trail work, and it's being pulled.

TM: By a team?

CD: Well, one mule. It's a hillside plow so you can like flip it over to whatever direction you may be going. The mule's on the trail, and somebody's got to work the plow and somebody's gotta work the mule. The plow's on the side kind of plowing up dirt and then another mule comes along behind pulling a little grader, and then it grades the trail that way. It was pretty interesting. We never did do that up here. Oh, we did do...what was that for? We had to take these really long boards. What was it for? I forget. But we had to do switchbacks and everything with these really long boards. What we had to do was there was these things that bolted onto their Decker pack saddles that pivoted. And so we had two little mules with these things on and the boards spanned the both of them, and it would pivot so that as one mule went around the switchback the board just, you had to watch out, it could hit anybody close by, would pivot around and then would straighten out and then they could go around the switchback that way.

TM: Oh, very clever.

CD: We only did that once, (laughs) cause that was scary.

TM: Yeah, I would imagine it was scary for the mules as well to figure out...

CD: Yeah. They were pretty good little girls but...

TM: ...what was going on. But, yeah, talk about running over stop signs with a trailer, that's kind of what comes to mind...

CD: Yeah. (laughs)

TM: ...is the ability to get bound up against a tree or something like that.

CD: Right. And I had another little trailer accident in that time zone, too. There's only like two roads that go up into the high country. We were very much a backcountry park. One is paved and that's where all the tourists go, and there's another like single track road with pullouts. So I had the big trailer and like eight animals and it's real windy/switchbacky, too. Richard was with me. We'd had a really long day round-tripping this crew in, and I told him I want to get down that road before dark. But it was a long day and so it ended up being dark and, you know, it's just hard when you're coming around these hairpin turns and your headlights are shining off straight ahead but I'm gonna have to make a right turn. Those right turns, you gotta watch out for those right turns (both laugh). Anyway, the trailer cheated and just the back wheels of the trailer fell off the road. It was at a pretty good slant. Richard was still up behind me, he was in a pickup. So I get out. I get my horse out, two horses are in the back. I get my horse out and tie her up and the next little horse, Diva, the one that broke my collarbone—well, he didn't break it, but—he got his leg stuck underneath the trailer as he was trying to get out. So I had to work on that. Meantime, I don't know, I guess I only had six animals. There was four up front and I don't know what's going up there. All I heard was all this banging until finally things are quiet. I guess they found their spots. I finally get him out of the way and I open the middle door and they're all piled up on each other. I try to get the first one I can out. The last one was like laying down and she didn't want to move after I got everybody off the top of her. I'm trying to call dispatch and trying to deal with mules. Richard comes down, he starts working the radio. I think it was Curt Sauer came out to the rescue. They brought some hay and talked to a neighbor down the road that had a big farm, if we could overnight the animals there. They had a tow truck come out and get the... So anyway I was able to... I just got on my horse bareback and led the other horse, and the mules just followed down the road and Curt drove in the ranger car next to me. Made it down to this farm where we overnighted. But, yeah, that was my last accident. Knock on wood.

TM: Oh, good. (both laugh) What happened to the mule that wasn't wanting to get up?

CD: Oh, she finally got up. She made a herculean effort cause she didn't want to... It was pretty well tilted so she just... Once she got up she flew out of that trailer. But she was okay. The next day we went to pick them up and they were looking pretty haggard so we asked if we could keep them there one more night. But they ended up getting right back in the trailer, so.

TM: They were like, well, hey, those silly humans got that trailer sorted out so I guess it's okay.

CD: (laughs) Yeah. I was afraid about them not getting back in but they did. And then I think it was later that year that I became permanent status. (laughs)

TM: How did that work out?

CD: Well, I'd been seasonal up till then. I had had one of the guys, a roads foreman at that point, say "Don't worry about it, Clare, I put a snow machine off Hurricane Ridge and they made me work anyway the next year." (both laugh)

TM: So it's a rights of passage to hurt some vehicle and then that's the road to permanent.

CD: Yeah, I guess. I was happy to become permanent.

TM: Was that subject to furlough that there was some months off that you would still have with that, or how did that work?

CD: Yeah. I think when I started out I was ten months, nine or ten. I kept kind of whittling it down. Cause after the mules went to pasture then we ended up usually going out to the coast and doing boardwalk trails. There are boardwalk trails out there. But I finally got it so that when the mules went to pasture so that I. But that wasn't until much later. That was, yeah, that was much later. So that was the trail work part that I got to do before and after the mules went.

TM: So what were you doing... As a seasonal, what were you doing mostly for your winters off?

CD: I did a lot of traveling around to like San Juan Islands, Victoria, just touring. In fact, at one point, I think it was in February of '89, my friend Mary Ann Anderson and I took a road trip for a month down to Grand Canyon cause, you know, I have friends we can stay with there; and Death Valley and southern Utah. Oh, and I had some Hopi friends. We were invited out to the Rez to see a kiva dance. That was really interesting. I remember it cause you just kind of stand around and look down at the dancers inside the kiva. I remember them asking us if we could please stand back cause we were so much taller than everybody. So that was fun. We just putzed around the Southwest. That was during my furlough time. And also during this time my other friend, Debbie Roebuck, and her husband Dick owned Olympic Raft and Guide Service that was right on the Elwha River there. This guy started getting into rafting cause once their season was over, which was like the end of August, they always would plan a river trip somewhere for themselves and their guides and friends, whoever wanted to really. So I started jumping on those. We went to Idaho a lot, doing the Salmon and the Selway, the Lochsa, and started really getting into that.

TM: Did you have a boat by then?

CD: I can't remember when I first got my...cause we started kayaking. I had met my future husband at that point and we decided... In fact Richard got him on a river trip, I think that was in February like '91. That was a trails trip, but mainly we just planted willows trying to keep the beaches from eroding.

TM: Oh, this is in Grand Canyon?

CD: Yeah. When we got back from that we started looking into maybe getting into some kayaking.

TM: Did you give that a go? Did you work on roll practice, trying to like get out of that thing when you're upside down and all that stuff?

CD: Yep, yep. When we first got our boats we were just kind of following along with the rafts, doing sort of rafty things (laughs), you know, and then one day we saw a couple of kayakers go by and they were playing in the waves and rolling around. We said, well, that's how you do it, so we ended up taking some lessons in Seattle. We could learn how to roll in the pool and then do some field work on the Green River, I think. But, yeah, then we started kayaking.

TM: Cool. Did you get pretty comfortable in your roll and in good chop, in good water?

CD: Yeah, I did. We did the Rogue River. I think the first time I was just in a raft and then the second time I was in my first boat I bought, and then I bought a shorter one. But we always had raft support and so if I did go swimming, I always had somebody in the raft to scoop me up. So we did a trip, it was four of us, just kayaks. There's a couple of lodges along that river so we were gonna stay there. It was really high and I was kind of worried cause there wasn't many eddies on the bank side, so if I went swimming I was swimming for a while. I flipped a lot and I made it back up every time. There's one place, it's called Mule Canyon, where it really narrows down and they call it the Coffee Pot or the Percolator or something, it just boils in there. That grabbed me and like flipped me. I would flip up and it would flip me right back over and it was like I'm starting to get tired (both laugh). I was gonna have to make it up and stay up this time, so I did. It slammed me into the wall and I just sort of used the wall to inch my way out of there, but I made it. I think that was like '95 or sometime. It was after that that I started getting out of the river kayaking.

TM: Why did you get out of it?

CD: I just stopped doing the river and just went out on the sea. I had friends with rafts so I would still get invited after Dick and Debbie sold. They sold it to another friend of mine, Dave King, and he changed it to Olympic Rafts and Kayaks, and he started doing kayaking as well. They would do the same thing. In September after the season ended they'd do a big river trip, so I would just make sure I tagged along. (chuckles)

TM: Cool.

CD: Yeah. In fact, he's the one that we ended up doing the private trip down Grand Canyon in 2015. So that was my days off. Days off on the water, riding for work. It was pretty good.

TM: At one point, then, things are gonna start going a little south at Olympic, kind of 1996-ish.

CD: Oh, yeah.

TM: What was going on there?

CD: I don't know. I guess it just started to become a real job (laughs). At that point we had a small crew, not a lot of animals, and the crew was all older. The thing about Port Angeles, I mean, the Olympic National Park being in Port Angeles, is that you can have a real home, you know, and family life and community, whereas most of the parks are out in the boonies. I mean, at Grand Canyon, Tusayan is there but that's all because of the Park. It's all employees, all geared for tourists and stuff. I mean it's gotten a lot...

TM: Yeah, it's not like you can go home and sit on the porch and see if they're hiring at McDonald's because when you're out of a job you have no housing.

CD: Right.

TM: Port Angeles is real different because it seems like the Park Service employees can actually integrate in a community by owning a home and knowing who the barber is and the hardware store.

CD: There's not a lot of movement when they get on, particularly in the maintenance. I think they encourage the rangers to move around from park to park, but there's not a lot of movement in the maintenance, so we were having a pretty old trail crew. And it's pretty much a young person's job. But anyway so they were kind of grumpy. I called them the grumpy old men. I didn't know what I was gonna do but I kept thinking about I wanted something. Then one of the guys I would raft with, David Weiss, approached me about going in on... And the tavern was for sale, our favorite tavern. He was kind of in a limbo situation and so, anyway, I thought this might be a good idea. So maybe I'm done being a muleskinner.

TM: In order to do that would you lose your permanent status with the government? How'd that work?

CD: Yeah. I quit so I lost all that. I had to roll over my Thrift Savings Plan into an IRA, that sort of thing. And Mom to the rescue. She financed me and we became tavern owners.

TM: I wonder if this would be a good time to put a comma in this multipart interview because I'll want to know about how you got to thinking about that and what seemed good about it at the time and then what happened. (both laugh)

CD: Okay.

TM: Does that sound like a plan?

CD: Sure.

TM: All right. Well, then, let's conclude Part 5 oral history with Clare Donato. Today is Monday, December 7th, 2020. My name is Tom Martin. Clare, thank you so very much.

CD: You're quite welcome.