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Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)
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TM: Today is Monday, November 9, 2020. This is Part 11 of a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Curt Sauer. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Curt, how are you today?

CS: I'm doing very well today, Tom. I hope you are too.

TM: I am, thank you very much. Glad to hear it. Last time we were talking about some of the challenges that you faced in Joshua Tree. Talked about the fee demonstration program and how you were able to use that to your advantage with some problems you were having. We talked about the inholdings in the park and how complicated it was to track down the people that owned the lands and try to work out funding sources to recover those lands and get them back into the National Park Service holdings. I wonder if there were other things that you dealt with at Joshua that you would like to recount.

CS: I have been thinking about Joshua Tree. It's interesting, I guess this is the tenth interview, it's been a great opportunity for me to spend some time thinking about 35 years. I was thinking about Joshua Tree and some of the things that we worked on. Fee demonstration program I think we covered in the last interview. I thought it had become too gummed up with the bureaucracy of Washington D.C. That's just my opinion, I'm sure the Legislative Branch doesn't see it that way. Climbers. One of the things I thought about when I was there was there, there were no fees in the upper campgrounds of the Park and the Park had basically, in my opinion, been taken over by climbers. Well, not the Park, but the campgrounds had been taken over by climbers. I think I might have mentioned to you that one New Year's Eve I was riding along with the chief ranger, and all the other rangers were on duty, and we went through Hidden Valley campground. There were bonfires all over. A lot of partying going on and at least two beer bottles, empty beer bottles, were thrown at the chief ranger's patrol car as we drove through the campground. That was indicative of how out of control some of the climbers were. I think I also mentioned that many of the climbers from the 60s and 70s had settled around Joshua Tree and were quite respectful. But the new folks that, in my opinion, learned their climbing ethics on climbing walls in climbing gyms really didn't have much respect for the Park.

TM: You did cover that, yes.

CS: So we used the fee program to clean up long-time residents of climbers that were just hanging out in Joshua Tree. I think one of the issues that I wanted to bring up was during that patrol period, after I had gone home, the rangers responded to a fire. A climber had been drinking excessively and decided that he would climb up on top of a large boulder and pour a gallon of white gas onto the indentation on the

top of the boulder and then set it on fire. So the rangers responded, fortunately there wasn't a forest fire out of that. They ended up citing him and took him to court, Magistrate's Court, and he was found guilty. Took about two or three months to do that. After he was found guilty and fined whatever it was, $50 or $100, rangers brought to my attention that he had been an associate editor of Climbing Magazine. So I wrote a letter to the editor of Climber's Magazine and expressed my concern about the type of people that they were employing and how a lack of disregard in National Parks is not really what they want to be portraying. And credit to the people that run Climbing Magazine, they fired him which restored my confidence in the true climbers that have a great ethic about taking care of the places that they recreate in. While we had some issues with climbers and they still do, there are just so many of them and the impact to the environment around the heavy use climbing areas is significant, I just think that climbers overall, especially at Joshua Tree, are very interested in protecting the park and there's just a few folks that they need to self-police as the case may be. Throughout my time at Joshua Tree, it was frequently the climbers that showed up, especially on search and rescue, but also land use, recreational use issues, they showed up and wanted to protect the park, so their vision of what the park would and should continue to be would be realized. Another thing, I don't think I mentioned the Eagle Mountain mine controversy.

TM: No, I don't think so.

CS: On the southeast corner of Joshua Tree National Park, in the 1940's there's an area around Eagle Mountain that Congress passed some legislation that took it out of the Park so that it could be utilized for iron ore extraction. And this was a large open pit mine, probably, I don't know, 600 acres, 1200 acres, something like that. Interestingly, in the 40's/50's, that iron ore was extracted, shipped by railcar down into the Fontana area by Los Angeles to iron smelting plants. It provided a very large percentage of the iron that was used in the construction of Los Angeles and surrounding areas that expanded. Part of the legislation said that if the mine main operation ever ceased that that land would be returned to the National Park, National Monument at the time. There were two champions, Larry and Donna Charpied, that studied legislation and studied the history. They took on an honorable effort of trying to take that land and have it restored back into the National Park. Donna has since passed, but they were jojoba farmers at a Desert in Arizona, excuse me, east of the park in Desert Center in California.

TM: It looks kind of like a date and you can get an oil out of it.

CS: Yeah, it's a large bushy plant.

TM: A desert plant.

CS: Yeah. The jojoba oil was even used in World War II for lubrication of machinery. There were many jojoba farms, as I understand it, supported by federal programs to continue to produce this jojoba oil. It's widely used in organic holistic medicines. It's also used directly for skin care. Most of those jojoba farms, after the government subsidies went away, went defunct but Larry and Donna moved out of the Los Angeles area and came out to Desert Center and made their living as jojoba farmers.

TM: It's interesting, because I would think, that when the mining stopped someone in the Park Service would have said, okay, we're taking the land back. I'm thrilled to know that Larry and Donna actually took this on to get it back, but I'm kind of surprised that the agency didn't do it before them.

CS: Ernie Quintana, the superintendent that I replaced, was extremely supportive of their activities, even

going so far as to be told by Washington D.C. that he would not attend a public meeting concerning that issue so he took annual leave for a week. He was off duty and didn't go over too well with the powers that were. Fortunately for him, the powers to be changed and Fran Manila and Randy Jones were able to put him into a position in the Midwest region as the regional director, I think I've mentioned. What was interesting to me was in the Coachella Valley at the time, Buford Crites who had had a successful career as mayor of the city of Coachella or one of those cities and was active in the Sierra Club, worked out an arrangement. The proposal became instead of returning it to the National Parks that it would be used as the Eagle Mountain landfill. This giant open pit mine would be converted into a landfill and the trash from the greater Los Angeles area would be transported by railcar out to the Eagle Mountain mine and dumped into the ground.

TM: Who came up with that proposal?

CS: The Eagle Mountain Mining Corporation with the support of the greater Los Angeles area folks that were trying to deal with large scale trash problems.

TM: Except that's a little outside, I think, of the legislative intent there to allow mining, not to allow the storage of waste, garbage. Interesting.

CS: Yeah, that's how they interpreted the law and how their supporters interpreted the law. At the same time that that was going on, the greater Coachella Valley had to do multi-species habitat conservation plan to meet the Endangered Species Act for all of the expansion that they wanted to have. You have to remember there's some eleven cities in that area. Population of about, at the time, 350,000 people expected to grow rapidly.

TM: This is like a bedroom community to L.A.? 300,000 people, that's a big chunk of folks.

CS: It started in Palm Springs. We all learned about Palm Springs because of Bob Hope. Then more and more people started coming. In the 50s, Palm Springs was a retreat area for the Rat Pack and Frank Sinatra and lots of Hollywood entertainers. In fact, Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin, part of their reimbursement for their work as actors they received large tracts of land in the Coachella Valley area that was converted into development. So, the Coachella Valley multi-species habitat conservation plan, which was put together by a couple of really good biologists and with assistance from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, they worked out a deal through Buford Crites and the Sierra Club that as part of the environmental compensation for the Eagle Mountain mine is that they would receive monies from the Eagle Mountain mine and the Los Angeles area participants to offset some of their environmental impacts. So the superintendent of the Park, with the support of my regional director and he became the director of the National Parks Service, John Jarvis, we found ourselves on the other side of the argument with the Sierra Club. Which, Sierra Club is known for being supportive of parks especially in the Grand Canyon dam era. I just found it highly ironic that the Sierra Club was supporting the Eagle Mountain mine so that the multi-species habitat conservation plan for the Coachella Valley could be implemented and be funded.

TM: Let me make sure I get this right. Buford in his role with the Sierra Club was in agreement with Eagle Mountain and the city of Los Angeles to make the Eagle Mountain open pit into a landfill in exchange for funding for the multi-species habitat conservation plan. Is that right?

CS: Yeah, it would have been mediation dollars.

TM: Where did Larry and Donna Charpied, where did they come down on this?

CS: They were the primary antagonists against the whole idea.

TM: So the park wasn't alone?

CS: No, in fact, I would have to say that Larry and Donna led and the Park Service followed along.

TM: What do you remember about Larry and Donna?

CS: Very, very intelligent people and they lived a very simple lifestyle. They had, I believe, 160 acres of jojoba farm, their own well. Desert Center is not an abandoned mining town, but the mining town at the time was a going concern. It made a lot of money, there were a lot of people employed, but then the iron ore ran out and the mining operation shut down and all the jobs were lost. There was an effort to bring a prison in to Desert Center as a way of sustaining some of the locals' ability to continue to live there. There were a couple of retirement communities that were started that never made it big just because of lack of water. Larry and Donna just did their farming and would go to farmers market to sell their products. They mobilized a large conservation movement against the idea and received probably all, certainly a large percentage of their monies, from private individuals donating to their cause. They did most of the work pro bono. But they eked out a living and were just totally committed to turning those acres back into the National Park Service area, part of the Park, and thought that it should be a historic area or an educational area. Just total crusaders. Unfortunately for them, with the advent of solar energy in the desert southwest, several large solar farms have been installed close to nearby Interstate 10 from Coachella Valley to Phoenix. One of them was built on BLM land and surrounded their property on three sides.

TM: And that would take out the jojoba.

CS: Their jojoba continued to grow, but again, from moving to Desert Center thirty years prior, being out in a remote area, they loved the desert, and to then ironically be surrounded on three sides by a solar farm kind of changes your view of the desert.

TM: Well, that changes the desert. A solar farm, it turns into a wasteland.

CS: Eventually, the idea of the garbage pit on the southeast corner of Joshua Tree National Park was defeated and Larry and Donna were quite happy and hoping that the Park Service and Congress would step forward and add those lands back into the National Park. But another company came up with an idea that they could drill some wells into the aquifers of the desert, pump the water into holding facilities during the night, and then during the day they'd use electricity from southern California Edison grid to pump the water up the hill. Then during the day time, when you can sell electricity for more than you pay for it, they would run water down turbines and generate electricity and sell that to power companies.

TM: Pump-back storage, yeah.

CS: Yup. That took on whole another story or saga of what was going to happen to the Eagle Mountain mine. The last time I checked on it, it was still being considered. After I retired in 2010, I just didn't track

that stuff as much as I was before. So there was the Eagle Mountain mine which I hadn't mentioned, there was Larry and Donna Charpied, Buford Crites. Buford was an ardent conservationist. He had worked on several other projects to make sure that they were properly mitigated. One of the most wealthy housing areas in Palm Desert, the developer came in—maybe he was mayor of Palm Desert, but anyway—the developer came in and he basically told the developer that "you're not building what you're talking about building. You're going to build it this way." But Buford had a successful, respectful career as a conservationist and then mayor. Buford and I actually became pretty good friends because of his conservation ethics. It's just sometimes you find strange bedfellows and sometimes you find that the Sierra Club is supporting one plan for the Coachella Valley at the expense of Joshua Tree National Park.

TM: And the Club has a long history… I don't want to defend the Club carte blanche because they do have a long history of doing things like this...

CS: For what they see as the greater good.

TM: Yes, I get that. I certainly understand it. I don't agree with it at times, but I understand it. But it is fascinating, you know, you take some land away from a National Park, you dig a big hole in the ground, you don't fill it back up with the dirt you dug out of it, and then you sort of leave it to the free market to decide what to do with it, pump-back storage or filling it with garbage. You would expect these things to sort of pop up and it would be interesting because you'd sort of stand back and say, wait a minute, that hole in the ground needs to be filled back in again, that land needs to be rehabilitated, and then we put the whole thing back in the Park.

CS: Similar to coal mining in the East.

TM: Yeah, except mountain top removal just totally decimates that whole concept. I guess the concept of superfunds, where the taxpayer ends up paying to have the lands reclaimed after extraction. It's a complex issue. Curt, I wanted to ask you, you mentioned something about the Magistrate Court when you were talking about the climber who built a fire on the boulder. I had heard about the Magistrate Court at Grand Canyon and I asked some people about how that worked. How did the Magistrate's Court work for Joshua Tree?

CS: Pretty much the same way. When I arrived there in 2002, the Magistrate's Court, I believe, was monthly. At Grand Canyon, I think it was weekly. We had a resident…

TM: Would a judge come out to the Park and would you hold hearings there in the Park buildings or was there a courthouse somewhere in Coachella Valley that dealt with that?

CS: No, when I arrived we were still holding court in one of the Park Service buildings on the east end of the park, just north of the town of Yucca Valley. But that's since changed and Magistrate's Court, I'm not even sure where it's held now, but it's held probably every two to three months. So all the tickets that are written that aren't paid, people want to go to Magistrate's Court, are delayed by two or three months and then Magistrate's Court is held. The testifying rangers go down to the Magistrate's Court, as do the defendants, and the magistrate rules. That's the way it is.

TM: Who was the magistrate when you were a superintendent, do you remember?

CS: No, I do not. It could have even been on a rotating basis.

TM: Were those rulings for the most part, the kind of rulings that you would like to see or were there times when the magistrate ruled against the park and you had to deal with that?

CS: Most of the time the magistrate ruled in favor of the Park Service because the evidence that was presented was clear. You have a dog in the backcountry; people don't come in and say, "I didn't have a dog in the back country." They come and say, "Well, I just wanted to go hiking with my dog." Pretty hard to argue that, "No, I didn't climb up on a rock and pour a gallon of white gas on the boulder and set it on fire," when the Park Service presents pictures of the can of white gas and the fire and the destruction of the fire. By far and away, the citations written for environmental protection are pretty easy to prove. It's the more complex cases which can end up, just like Bill Keys' gun fight, which ends up with the Sheriff's Department and County Court 'cause there's concurrent jurisdiction in Joshua Tree National Park and the more significant cases are usually taken by the county.

TM: Thanks, I just wanted to kind of clarify how that worked there. It's interesting, it sounds like as superintendent, you probably tried not to take sides in these sorts of things and yet you did when you needed to. You mentioned between Buford and Larry and Donna.

CS: The job of a superintendent is to protect the National Park at which you work. So I guess it's taking sides, looking out for the greater good of the park according to the policies of the National Park Service.

TM: That's a good side to take, I mean that's your job.

CS: Yeah, that's what people pay you to do.

TM: Right. I'm surprised, it would be interesting to do a Google search and just see what was the outcome with that land, the Eagle Mountain land.

CS: I imagine it's still going on, but I just don't know. And then there's all kinds of stories in the desert about water issues. Fortunately for the park, we didn't have accessible water underneath the ground of the National Park, but just like at Eagle Mountain on the north side of the park, north and east, is the Cadiz Valley which has a huge aquifer. I'm sure that you're familiar with all the water issues that surrounded Los Angeles and the Owens Valley. Southern California just doesn't have water, they import water. There's another issue with companies that wanted to pull the water out of the Cadiz Aquifer and transport it...

TM: So that aquifer had good potable water, but the aquifer under the Park lands wasn't potable?

CS: It's not accessible.

TM: Oh, not accessible, okay.

CS: Yeah, Bill Keys, and the Keys Ranch is at the head of the small valley and it just happens to be a place that when it rains, water flows into that drainage and his ranch actually sat forty to seventy feet above bedrock. So forty to seventy feet of sand, which has eroded over the geologic time, water flows into that area and seeps into the ground and then settles by the bedrock. So when he built his dams it just increased the height of where the water was naturally held anyway. I think I mentioned he had about seven wells which were all hand dug, six or seven. His hand dug wells were forty feet deep. But if you go

outside of that valley where all the other miners had their mines, they didn't have water in the ground. They couldn't access water because it was too deep because the bedrock was gone; well, it wasn't gone, the bedrock was much deeper. So they relied on rainwater and they relied on spring runoff, and they built small catchment basins just like the cattle people had for their cows. That's one of the reasons that the cattle were moved by Big Bear was because lack of water and lack of rain in the summer, except for the monsoons. And of course, the heat, when it's 115 degrees cattle would rather be up where its 80 degrees. It's the same reason that you can locate Native American concentration points when they were traveling through with metates next to rock outcroppings that have oak trees growing in them. They knew to go to there because the oak trees would still produce and they could grind the oak acorns for their grain. Water in the Park, in the Monument, was hard to come by but if you drill deep enough you can access water, but it's not going to be economically viable to transport and you're not going to have enough in the Park. Cadiz, on the other hand, is a huge aquifer. There's been a successful farm in the Cadiz area for decades. They just have decided that they can make more money by selling the water out of "their aquifer". In many cases aquifers interconnect and if you pump water out of Cadiz, you're going to affect the water flow from the north side of the Park into Pinto Basin and many of the springs will become depleted and that will change the vegetative type in that area of the park. All these efforts on the outside of national parks, you've mentioned a couple on the north side of Grand Canyon, north side of Yellowstone, all have potential impacts to the national parks, which is something that the superintendent and his resource management staff have to deal with. So those are some of the things that I thought about from the time of our last interview.

TM: Yeah, it sounds like you had your hands full.

CS: It kept us busy.

TM: At one point, retirement must have been looming large. Were you looking forward to that or were you not looking forward to that?

CS: No, I would say I was looking forward to it. After 35 years, I felt that I had reached a point where I was ready to retire. At least that's what I though. So in October 2010, I retired from the National Park Service, from Joshua Tree National Park as superintendent. Another fella, whose name who will probably come to me once I think about it, transferred in from Yosemite and became superintendent. Interestingly, just as I had mentioned in the past, that the chief ranger of Olympic National Park that was hired instead of me when I applied for the job, as superintendent as well, came as a GS-13 from Yosemite as a landscape architect, promoted to GS-14, and two years to the date that he was assigned at Joshua Tree, he also retired. Maybe it was three years, with his high three as a GS-14, didn't have to pay for his travel expenses, government picked that up, and off he went.

TM: Let's talk about that for a minute because I've heard of this before. The high-three concept where an individual is getting close to retiring—and they may be aware of it, nobody else may be aware of that—and they accept a job and get an increase in salary, and after three years they can retire from that job with that higher salary, and their retirement will reflect that higher pay. Is that right?

CS: Yep. Your retirement is based upon your last three years of salary. Depending on how long you've worked, whether or not you've been in law enforcement or firefighting, you either get 2% or 2.5%. So you could retire at 30 years and get 2%, so that's 60% of your salary. Or you can work for 35 years at 2% and get 70% of your salary. Or you can work for 30 years at 2.5% and whatever that is, 70% or 80% of your salary. If you were earning $5,000 more on average, then that increases your retirement.

TM: It sounds like kind of, I wouldn't say a Catch-22, but people wouldn't necessarily be the right people for the job. They would be looking at the job as a way to help their retirement.

CS: Well, you know, yes. I'd have to say that every promotion I got I looked at as not only an opportunity to go do something challenging, but I'm going to go from a GS-7 to a GS-9, -9 to an -11, -11 to -12, and you work your way up. Some folks that were more aware than I, were aware of the SES program. I have to say, by far and away, the people that get into those positions are highly motivated and some of them, no doubt, came for three years or four years not only because of the salary increase, but because they were committed to protecting the parks. So I don't want the picture that everybody's taking their high three and calling it good and coasting along. I think I expressed it, but I would stress it that Park Service employees that I worked with and socialized with were very high quality people, for the most part. I can't say that about a few of them, but by far and away, they were. I believe by far and away they still are. You just shake your head after you've been some place for eight years, and somebody comes in and… Well, been some place, at Olympic for seven years or whatever it was, and somebody else comes in and takes the position that you thought you could do a better job at and then two years later they're gone. Part of it is you've worked so long with the people at the park you have a great deal of respect for them. I just don't see two or three years as an adequate amount of time for a new person to come in and support the programs and make sure that what the park is working on is furthered.

TM: Right, and it seems as though it takes a while to pull together people in maintenance, people in interp, people in resource management, people in administration to make a team of people that you've worked with in the past that you would love to work with again because you know that they're good people. Good people for the resource and good people people in general. But nothing lasts forever.

CS: Right, and to sustain your relationships that have been built. Ernie Quintana built an amazing support for the National Park at Joshua Tree. I was able to come in and continue that support. Even when certain congressmen lost, we had new congressmen coming in, we knew the committee staffers and we knew the congressmen's people and so we were able to continue those relationships. But you don't do that in just two or three years. Not that I'm vindictive or anything.

TM: No, this is the reality of what it is. I see that here at Grand Canyon as well. New superintendent has been in the job six months relying on his administrative assistants. There were two actings before him and another short-term superintendent before that. As you say, it's demoralizing for the staff and it's really difficult to keep the resource from all the threats it's dealing with. Maintenance issues, I mean that's not Grand Canyon specific, it's got to be all the park service units themselves.

CS: Actually, the medium size and smaller parks, unless they have the congressmen and the senators in support their parks, they have a hard time getting appropriations. Which harkens back to the fee collection program and the distribution of funds for the smaller parks which I think has been highly beneficial for them. It's an interesting web.

TM: Does Joshua Tree have any concessions?

CS: They have climbing concessions. You're familiar with Grand Canyon, and probably other parks as well, other than roads and campgrounds and trails there's no infrastructure in the National Park. There's no hotels, there's no tramway, there's no golf courses, it's just desert. The surrounding communities have done a pretty good job of providing those types of amenities. Folks that come to Joshua Tree stay

in the local hotels, or the bed and breakfasts, or the Airbnbs and then they go up into the Park, or they stay in the campgrounds. There's one or two folks that provide commercial horseback riding, very small scale, into the park. But, mostly it's the climbing permitee or concessioner. It's on just a totally different scale. I believe that one of the things that has helped protect Joshua Tree is no water, there's no electricity, few roads, very limited cell phone access. It's pretty much just like Mojave Preserve and a lot of Death Valley; it's a desert. You go and visit the desert on its own terms.

TM: I'm curious about the climbing concessions, thinking about the Tetons out of Jackson there, where the do-it-yourself folks would be up some route and they wouldn't be moving fast enough and the climbing concessions folks would just sort of climb right through them. How did you sort out those use issues between different use groups? One for pay trying to look at a time schedule and one for enjoyment on a little different time schedule. Are there just so many places to climb in Joshua Tree that that wasn't a conflict?

CS: Yeah, there's so many different places to climb. Joshua Tree is, what do I want to say, the routes are shorter. When you go and climb in Yellowstone, you're recreationally climbing El Capitan, it's a long climb. But there's an ability to get around the ones that are climbing slower than you. If you've got a 180 foot two-pitch climb in Joshua Tree it's not going to take all that much time to wait, and there's usually a route that's fifty feet over to the right or fifty feet over to the left.

TM: So lots of routes. It's not like there's choke points on one route up to the summit of some mountain somewhere. That's a help, that's a plus.

CS: There's a lot of bouldering as opposed to climbing. A lot of free bouldering. Actually, there's a lot of free climbing too, but it's not a 1000 feet, it's 100 or 200, 250.

TM: Changing the subject here for a minute, I think the first female just free-soloed El Cap in a day. It's just remarkable.

CS: Yeah, free climbing is something that I find amazing. To have that much confidence, it just amazes me.

TM: Yeah, me too. I'm just blown away. Anyway, sorry, I digress. I was just interested in use group conflict which sounds like Joshua has very little of. What was the percentage of your climbing concessions? Thinking about overall use of climbing, how much of that was concession based? That's ten years ago so I'm sure things have changed since.

CS: Yeah, climbing use was estimated at 15% when I was there, I left in 2010. I've heard that it's 20-25% now. I don't know that for a fact. The amount of climbing concessioners, or permitees, is basically the same companies. How many folks they're actually taking up versus total climbing, I'm just not sure. There's so many different areas to go. Take your day client two or three different routes. Two or three different areas that you can go to and just not run into anybody.

TM: Which is really nice. It would be nice for the clients, nice for the guides, and it'd be nice for the climbing public who doesn't have to worry about someone else breathing down their neck all the way around.

CS: I've mentioned before that it's easy… If you go away from the visitor use areas, you can hike all day and not see anybody or see very few people. The same with climbing. The folks that make their living doing climbing, they know where they can go and not be stacked up.

TM: What was it like as an individual to retire as a superintendent from a national park and then suddenly find yourself as an ordinary citizen again, just like any other tourist?

CS: Well, it was an interesting transition.

TM: How so?

CS: As I frequently told people, as the superintendent I got invited to a lot of events, but they weren't inviting Curt Sauer. They were inviting the superintendent of Joshua Tree National Park. When you are the superintendent of a park, here's a funny story, everybody in the park knows who you are. This funny story is, after I had been at Joshua Tree for a while, one of the rangers told me, "You know that every time that you come in the park, we announce it to our entrance station people and the rangers that are on patrol." I said, "You gotta be kidding me." "No, you're the superintendent. We need to know where you are." That could either be good or it could be, oh my God, I hope he doesn't go over here. So now, you're retired and for the next six months it's like, "I think I'll go in the National Park." You drive up to the entrance station and there's Bob and there's Jane and "hey, how's it going." You go through the campground and there's the maintenance workers that you interacted with and they're all, "Hey how's it going, how are you doing." "Everything's good." And then a year later, I think I'll go up into my National Park and you pull up to the entrance station and it's like, I don't know these two people. They're first year seasonal, they have no idea who you are. It's about that time, that you kind of go, "You know what? I think I need to buy an annual pass," because it's just easier.

People have this concept that if you're a park service employee that everything's free; you can camp for free, you can get in the park for free. That's not the way it is. If you're an employee of that park, you can get in for free. Well it used to be that you could get in free, now if you're an employee of the park, and you're not on duty, you need to have a pass. You certainly can't camp for free. It's just different. You still knew a lot of the people, and you still ran into the folks in the community that still viewed you as the former superintendent, but you just, at least in my case, you became your own private citizen. I was still involved, I was heavily involved in the local community. We created the Mojave Desert Land Trust. I was a part of that, not a large part of it. It was several local conservationists that created that. They still wanted me to speak, but over the years—and I had lived in that community and was well-known in that community—and over the years that just sort of faded away. I continued to get invitations to... The general on the base would have an annual law enforcement appreciation dinner, and the county sheriffs and the park rangers and the highway patrol and other agencies were invited. I continued to receive those invitations as the retired superintendent. That's just the way the military does it. But again, it was the retired superintendent not Curt Sauer. That was interesting. I knew that that was the case, that I was invited to these places because I was the superintendent, but over the course of the next several months those invitations faded. And people in the conservation group, or the people in city governments/town government still expected me to show up, but it was as retired superintendent not as private citizen Curt Sauer. That was an adjustment. In my case it was a good adjustment. I found myself sitting out on my front porch at 10:00 in the morning having a cup of coffee and a fellow stopped by, he said, "How are you doing this morning?" I said, "I'm doing really well. It's 10:00 in the morning, I'm having a cup of coffee, I got a good book here, and I'm just enjoying myself." So it was a relief and it was a transitional period which, in my case, didn't last all that along.

The retirement process… Actually I've told many people this, on that morning, several other mornings, I could actually feel my brain rewiring. It was a weird physical feeling. I didn't have to deal with all the stuff that was going on, didn't have to be thinking strategically. You could just go out and tend to your garden, take care of your cats. It was quite a relief, actually, now that I think about it. That lasted for about two months. Then I received a phone call from the Deputy Regional Director of the southeast region, I think it was in November. I retired in early October, so late November I received a phone call from the Deputy Regional Director of the southeast region—which the southeast region was at the time dealing with the Deep Water Horizon BP oil spill—and he asked me if I could come down to the oil spill based out of New Orleans to represent the Park Service, actually initially as a liaison officer, and ended up on the BP oil spill for 2.5 years, initially as a liaison officer and then as the incident commander for the Department of Interior in a multi-agency unified incident command organization led by the Coast Guard, which is another thing I thought about in the past. When I was at Olympic, maybe we'll get back to that some time, and the Tenyo Maru Oil Spill.

TM: You know, Curt, we've been going for about an hour here and I would like to hear more about this. About the Olympic oil spill and the Deep Water Horizon oil spill by British Petroleum. Would now be a good time to wrap up this part and then come back for yet one more oral history to talk about those two events? What you learned from the first event and what it meant to be incident commander for the Department of Interior for the second event.

CS: Sure, sure. Then I'll quit coming up with stories.

TM: Well, I don't know, if you keep coming up with them, I'll keep recording them. All right, well great, with that, this will conclude Part 11 oral history interview with Curt Sauer. Today is November 9, 2020. My name is Tom Martin. And Curt, thank you so very much.

CS: You're welcome. Thank you, Tom.