

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Curt Sauer (CS)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Curt recounts his experiences as a seasonal ranger at Grand Canyon and Rocky Mountain (1976-1979)

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TM: Today is Tuesday, September 15, 2020. This is Part 3 of a Grand Canyon Oral History interview series with Curt Sauer. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Curt. How are you today?

CS: Morning, Tom. I'm fine, thanks.

TM: Good. May we have your permission to record this interview over the telephone?

CS: Yes sir.

TM: Thank you. After the interview last week we were talking and you mentioned a couple more stories about Rocky Mountain that were real eye-openers to me. I wondered if you'd be willing to recount those stories here for this interview.

CS: Sure. Which ones do you want to start with?

TM: Well, one of them was about couples in park housing. I may have the story wrong, but it was a lady friend you had at the time, and you were out at your ranger station, and you wanted an extra key for her for the ranger station. How did that story work out?

CS: The gal I was dating at the time, she and I were living up at Tokahe in our teepee. She would come up on various weekends to visit when I was staying in a one-bedroom cabin at Wild Basin. The rule was that you couldn't have members of the opposite sex staying in your cabin/in your ranger quarters. I think I mentioned earlier on the one gal by the name of Miss Cameron who stayed overnight at a male rangers government facility and was almost fired for violating that rule. You also couldn't have pets. So it was just more convenient when the gal I was dating came up for the weekend—I'd usually be out on patrol when she got there—and we decided the most convenient thing would be to get a second key. So I went to Larry and said, "I need to get a second key." He said, "Well, what for?" I said, "Well, let's just say that my mom likes to come visit." So he proceeded to get a key for Mom, and of course George Wagner knew about it, the district ranger. So we went merrily along our way. Then Larry informed me... The district ranger was coming down to visit Wild Basin for the day. So we cleaned up the cabin and off the gal went. George showed up, and we did our normal routine looking over the operation. It was time for lunch, and I said, "Well, let's go up to the cabin and have lunch." So we went up to the cabin. We're sitting there at the dining room table, which was also the kitchen table, which was also the living room table. We're talking and he said, "So, how's your mom doing?" "Oh, well, doing really well, George." He just had this smirk on his face, like "I know what you're doing and I want you to know that I know what

you're doing. But don't get caught." Fortunately, Wild Basin was a good 40 minutes away from headquarters and there weren't that many people from headquarters coming down to visit.

TM: It sounds like you had Larry kind of looking out for you.

CS: Yeah. Larry always looked after his people. That was another trait I learned from him.

TM: Yeah. Makes a huge difference. You also mentioned another story about George Wagner and how his career ended with the Park Service.

CS: Yeah, I don't know exactly what year it was. It was after I had left Rocky. Think it was probably after I left Rocky in '79 permanently. George was just an old-time ranger that took care of things. He was expected to go down to Loveland or Estes or someplace—no, it was further than Estes. So anyway, he had an evening meeting that he had to go to. Vehicles weren't in plentiful supply, so he just took his own Volkswagen bug. Apparently, everybody in my life at that time owned Volkswagen bugs. So he just drove down to the meeting and he came back. He never put in for overtime. Never took a day off because he worked too much. When he got back, he pulled up the Park Service gasoline pumps in the maintenance area and somebody saw him pumping government gas into his private vehicle. Well, in George's thought process—as I've been told, again, I wasn't there—was, "I'm not putting in for overtime. The government would have used this much gas. In fact, it would have used more gas, 'cause they were pick-'em-up trucks. So he just topped off his gas tank. Well, that was stealing government property, apparently. I believe the Chief Ranger was still Dave Essex at the time. George ended up—as I was told later—getting fired for that. So what he should have done is he should have put in for overtime. He should have taken a Park Service vehicle, or at least put in for use of his private vehicle and gotten reimbursed. Instead of doing all the paperwork, he just thought it was fair to use the gas that he would have used anyway in a government rig. As I understand the story, he ended up being fired. I don't know what happened to George after that, if he went to work for another federal agency, or he went to work for a sheriff's department someplace, or if he just said, "To hell with it. I'm done with you people."

TM: Did you have any thoughts on that? It sounds like—again, Larry was the sort of manager who looked out for his people and if he saw one of his people doing that, he might have gone over and maybe said something about it, and said, "You know, look, you can use your personal vehicle. Just fill out the paperwork and you can use government fuel if you have the paperwork in place." It also sounds like George might have had...not having that sort of relationship with his coworkers, when somebody saw him doing something, they might just want to report it with maybe an axe to grind against him. I don't know. I'm really speaking out of turn here.

CS: Well, that was my opinion. Somebody had it in for George and they caught him doing something. The powers that be... I think that Dave Essex, the Chief Ranger, and George had a very good working relationship. I don't know that for a fact, neither one of them ever told me that. I think the Chief Ranger got put in a position where there were enough folks in authority saying you got to get rid of him, that he just had his hands tied, so to speak. To me it was ludicrous, because George... I don't want to paint the picture that George pissed everybody off, but he was very outspoken. But he was very supportive of me. Like the story with my key for the cabin for my mom. Like, "I know what you're doing." But there's other times... George and I were on patrol one time. We're having lunch and he said, "So, what do you want to do when you grow up?" I just turned and looked at him and I said, "I want to be a ranger like you." I had a great deal of respect for the man. When I found out that he got fired for pumping gas into a Volkswagen bug, which wouldn't have held more than 10 gallons. In 1974 gas was 70 cents a gallon.

Seven dollars if it'd been empty, for four or five hours of his overtime. What it gets down to, I guess and now that I think about it, there were lots of rules that existed then and if you broke them you got punished. But at the same time, there were lots of people, like the backcountry rangers, that were pushing the limits for length of hair and whatnot. It was the 70s. It was the 60s and the 70s and by then it would have been the late 70s. The Park Service was an organization that had a lot of military-like history. You follow orders and you follow your commanders and you didn't argue with them. You didn't break the rules and if you did, you ended up getting disciplined. So it was just more of the change that was in the 60s and 70s, and continues today.

TM: That's very helpful to get that perspective from you.

CS: Were there other things going on? I don't know. Was it the straw that broke the camel's back? I don't know. But that one incident seemed sort of severe to me.

TM: It was interesting, you shared a memo from George. Clearly had troubles with women in the uniform. He had trouble with hair length. And yet, he was very dedicated to the Park Service and, as you just recounted, when he saw infractions he would let his employees know. "Hey, I see this infraction, and I want you to be aware that I know it's happening." So he was giving people second chances and yet in this case he wasn't given a second chance. There's more to that story that clearly I don't know.

CS: Yeah, and clearly I don't know. If that had been the only thing, I just think it was pretty severe. But George was dedicated to the National Park Service and its ideals.

TM: Well, thank you for recounting those incidences at Rocky Mountain. Can you recount again how you met Ernie Kuncl?

CS: I met Ernie at Wild Basin in 1976. I was riding down the trail after a patrol and a gentleman was walking up the trail in plain clothes. I stopped to talk to him just like you stopped to talk to all the visitors that were coming by you.

TM: Did he have a backpack? Was he just out there in his oxfords walking up the trail?

CS: Oh, I think he was probably in his hiking boots. In that time, I don't think rangers owned anything but hiking boots. (TM laughs) Some running shoes, maybe. I don't recall whether he had a backpack. He had come down to Wild Basin to meet me 'cause I had applied for a winter seasonal job at Grand Canyon. I think he didn't come to Rocky Mountain National Park to meet Curt Sauer 'cause he was thinking about hiring me. He came to Rocky Mountain National Park to see some other people and since he was there, he said, "I'll just go down to Wild Basin and meet this guy." So he's walking up the trail, and I stop and "Howdy. How's it going?" "Pretty good." He said, "Are you Curt Sauer?" I sort of looked at him like how would you know my name? I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "I'm Ernie Kuncl from Grand Canyon and I thought I'd come down and meet you and see who you were." So I dismounted and we had a short talk, maybe five/ten minutes, about working at Grand Canyon. I don't recall if he actually said at that meeting that he was going to hire me, but I ended up being hired. By that time my season ended in middle of September and I think I ended up going to work at Grand Canyon around the first of October.

That started my career of being a full-time seasonal ranger with a two-week break in between each assignment. In the winters I would go down to Grand Canyon and work the South Rim on patrol. Some place in April I'd finish up and then I'd have to be back to start work in May. Well, fortunately, I knew

Tom Doerr and the river unit people, and had met some more river unit people. So I'd work for six months at Grand Canyon, five and a half/six months; end my seasonal employment; volunteer for the river district/river unit; take a one-week or two-week river trip; get off the river, help clean up from the trip; get in my Volkswagen bus—I graduated to a bus by then. Yeah, it was a big deal. Had it set up so you could camp in the back of it. 1962 Volkswagen bus. Safari windows, ragtop roof, wraparound windows in the rear, a motor that I could work on. Then I'd drive two days and get back to Rocky and start work. I'd start work in May; work till September; have a couple week break; drive down to Grand Canyon and go to work on the South Rim. So Ernie was my supervisor.

TM: Had you heard about Ernie before you met him? Did he have a reputation that was in front of him, or did this guy just arrive out of the blue and said, "My name is Ernie Kuncl, and I'm looking to hire you maybe at Grand Canyon. Let's talk"?

CS: I did not know Ernie. I had not heard of Ernie. But I got to know Ernie. (laughs)

TM: Well, good. At one point, I want to know some Ernie stories. So that fall—I get this right—you finished up. This is in '76. Finished up your summer season at Rocky Mountain National Park and loaded up your VW bug—it sounds like you still had the bug then.

CS: No, I had the bus then.

TM: Bus, okay—and headed to Grand Canyon. Now, you had been to Grand Canyon a couple years earlier, so you knew where to go and where to show up. What was different in '76 on your arrival? Or was there anything different in '76 when you showed up?

CS: I don't think there was anything appreciably different in '76 when I showed up. When I was at the Grand Canyon in '72, of course, I lived in the Canyon and on my days off I stayed at the ranger dorm. This time, when I showed up, the ranger dorm was full so I ended up being put in seasonal quarters which they had just created. You're familiar with the El Tovar and the Grand Canyon train station?

TM: Yes.

CS: My seasonal quarters was on the second story of the Grand Canyon train station. It was totally dilapidated. I was just there a year ago and went back up to the second floor and it looked pretty much the same.

TM: (laughing) Nice.

CS: What I remember about the train station, other than I'm living in this historic building, the trains weren't running at that time; the tracks were still there. I needed space so I opened a cupboard and it was full of woven Native American baskets. The museum at the time didn't have enough storage space so they had taken these artifacts and placed them in the cupboards on the second story of the Grand Canyon railroad station. So Native American pots in 1972, and then, I don't know, 10 or 15 of these woven baskets in 1976/'77.

TM: Was Bob Euler still running the archeological shop then?

CS: Yes. So, I went through some training. Forget the law that was passed that mandated a certain amount of training.

TM: Yeah, because in '72, it sounds like you went out to the range that afternoon, you got some food, and you were on your way to Cottonwood the next day.

CS: Three days later after mule training. Anyway, I went through some law enforcement training and more ranger activity. Dave, I think his name was—Dave Swickard was my immediate supervisor. At that time in Grand Canyon we had the visitors but you also have concessioners. They run the lodges and cafeterias and what not and they have a bunch of employees. Employees have housing. So we were basically the police force for Grand Canyon village. We were also the emergency medical response for the Grand Canyon village; and we were also the fire department for the Grand Canyon village. So Ernie—who, I think at the time he was a paramedic, certainly the leader of emergency response—made sure that I got some training in the medical field. I don't remember if it was the winter of '76/'77, or '77/'78. Must have been '76/'77; could have been the next one. I was enrolled in an EMT class, which you had to drive down to Flagstaff to attend two nights a week, and became an EMT. Then the next year I got additional training and became what was called an EMT-2 at the time, which was halfway towards being a paramedic. And we were...

TM: Sorry, I'm going to jump in here. Ernie was basically pushing this for his patrol ranger staff?

CS: Yes.

TM: Did you have any thoughts about that at the time?

CS: Seemed like a good idea.

TM: Yeah. I mean, out in the middle of nowhere you guys are the first responders, basically. That seemed like it was cutting edge training, above basic Red Cross first-aid course.

CS: Right. And Ernie also taught an EMT course at Grand Canyon, I guess certified through some hospital or agency in Flagstaff. So he was training not just rangers, but he was training other employees of the concessions and maybe even some local residents. To me at the time, it was quite a complete emergency response program. We had an ambulance. I think a good portion of the patrol rangers on the South Rim at the time were EMTs. They responded to heart attacks, which seemed to be the most prevalent call. Older people would leave the Phoenix area at 2,000 feet elevation and bring their medical conditions with them—their high blood pressure and other heart disease—and arrive at 7,000 feet after sitting on a bus for five hours, and end up having heart attacks. So heart attacks were a common response.

We also responded to plane crashes. Probably in '78, I don't really recall, at some point I started responding to river accidents, mostly broken bones and drownings. As far as Ernie goes, we'd be on shift together and he'd call me up and say, "Let's meet over at Bright Angel Lodge for dinner, or coffee, or whatever." I knew that, okay, I'm about to get another medical lesson. (laughs) That's all he talked about. "You need to know how many milliliters. You need to know which IV. And what do you do with this and what do you do with that?" He was, to me, totally committed to making sure that we were well-skilled. I forget the doctor's name at the time, but there was a doctor at the clinic and a nurse. We were

expected to spend some of our time up there if there was a patient, even if it wasn't our patient, just to get exposure.

TM: Nice. And at that time, the clinic would have been operating 24 hours a day/7 days a week? Is that right? On call at night?

CS: On call. The doctor and the nurse lived in the village. When the doctor went away, a fill-in doctor was brought in. So my recollection, there was always a doctor and a nurse available at the clinic. I don't know for sure, but my recollection is we never had any overnight patients. If they needed to be in a hospital, then they were transported. So how is it now?

TM: It's a nine to five. I'm not sure exactly of the hours. It's a morning to evening, five days a week. If it's after hours, they're closed and you need to go to Williams or Flagstaff for the definitive care.

CS: So the rangers are now transporting people to Williams and Flagstaff that are in need of further care on the weekends?

TM: Or personal vehicles. There's an ambulance station in Tusayan now, which would be new, so I think the rangers transport from park to Tusayan, that transports halfway to Flagstaff to another ambulance and then on to Flag. Or by air if the level of acuity demands it.

CS: Right. Okay.

TM: I think that's how that's working there. I could be wrong. So Ernie was sort of 24/7/365 on-call as well and his focus was emergency medicine, it sounds like.

CS: Yep. He participated in law enforcement aspects. He was very good at writing search warrants. We'd find out that somebody had some drugs or what not and he'd write the search warrant. The magistrate would approve it, and we'd go and serve the search warrants. He taught me how to conduct searches in a building, in a residence. Very methodical, very thorough. People were always surprised when we found their drugs. "How'd you think to look there?" So, yeah, I don't want to say that he was only doing emergency medicine, but that was his passion. But certainly involved in the law enforcement aspects. And as far as firefighting aspects, he was a member of the fire team. But most of the time he responded in the medical capacity, in case one of us got hurt and in case there was a victim.

TM: Curt, you mentioned the magistrate. Who was the magistrate at the time? Do you remember?

CS: I don't recall his name, although it is in the *Emerald Mile* book so you can look it up.

TM: Yeah, I don't remember whether it was McKay...

CS: I think that's it. Yeah, McKay.

TM: That would be Thomas McKay. Older gentleman?

CS: Yep.

TM: What do you remember about him?

CS: Oh, let's see. What do I remember? He was an older gentleman. Large, cheeky jowls. Rather quiet. And, in my opinion, pretty much if you brought a ticket that was being contested to the magistrate's court, as long as you provided the basic details, the defendant was guilty. So wasn't a big deal to go to the magistrate's court.

TM: You mentioned if the details were provided, the defendant was guilty. Did he ever make any rulings that surprised you?

CS: None that I recall. But I think I've mentioned previously that, "You're guilty of illegal camping, \$25/\$50," whatever. So yeah, he didn't make any rulings that I found surprising. There may have been some when I thought the person was guilty and he said it was innocent, but I don't recall any.

TM: Do you remember who the fire chief was then in 1976?

CS: I think Dick McLaren was the assistant chief ranger and the fire chief.

TM: What do you remember about Dick?

CS: Well, remember I mentioned I was trained by second- and third-generation rangers? Dick McLaren was a son, as was Bert McLaren, as was third brother McLaren, whose name I don't recall. Bert McLaren worked at Rocky Mountain National Park. when I was the ranger at Fern Lake for the winter and for the next several summers at Wild Basin. Bert McLaren was the one that taught me how to cross-country ski.

All three brothers were raised on the west side of Rocky Mountain National Park, Grand Lake, I think. Not sure exactly the town. Their dad was a ranger. Must have been in the 30s, 'cause Dick was still '76 all the way probably up till 1980. So he probably started in '45/'46. Bert, same thing. And their third brother, who I never met, worked in Yellowstone. They were just old-time rangers. Dick had a hearty laugh. Was married to a gal—I think her name was Lady. Lady McLaren, or Lady D. McLaren. Just a nice couple. And again, an old-time ranger. You were a ranger, and he was going to take care of you and teach you what he knew. One of the things I remember about Dick was we were both in the ranger offices close to the El Tovar Hotel.

TM: And real close to the train station right there, too.

CS: Real close to the train station. I don't know if the ranger offices are still there or they've been moved up closer to the hospital by now. But, a fire alarm went off. I came jumping down the stairs and rushing up the hallway to get to my patrol car, 'cause I had to drive up the maintenance yard where the fire engine was. I'm running past Dick McLaren and he's just sort of ambling out to his patrol car. Drive up to the maintenance yard—I don't know; half-mile away—wait for enough of us to get there to staff the fire engine, drive the fire engine down to the El Tovar, come pulling up the El Tovar Hill. Dick McLaren comes on the radio and says, "This is a false alarm." He had gotten over the 20-year-old, 28-/29-year-old adrenaline rush and was like, "Okay, we're going to go respond." He got in his car. He drove over, talked to the people reporting the fire, looked around. By the time we got there in the fire engine he had already assessed that it was a false alarm. So this old-timer had this approach of, "Okay, here we go again. Let's go find out. There's no need to rush." That was pretty much the way he approached life, I think.

Bert was pretty much the same way, too. One time I was packing mules or horses with Bert and had a couple of propane tanks on a horse called Pinto, I believe. The packsaddle slipped when Pinto was going over some rocks. Pinto laid down/fell over, was laying down on his side, and there's a steep, it's not a cliff, but steep hillside down below the trail. I jump off my horse and pull out my knife 'cause I'm going to cut the cinch. Bert's like, "Hold on, hold on." He gets down next to Pinto and talks to Pinto and very slowly and methodically undoes the cinches. Then he gets Pinto to stand up, walks him over and just sort of settles him down to make sure he's okay. Then he's like, "Okay. Let's do this again. Put the packsaddle back on Pinto, put the propane tanks back on Pinto, and proceed up the trail." You know, calmer heads.

So what else do I remember about Dick? Just a nice man, quite mellow. That's what I remember. I think at the time there was a fellow there also by the name of Dave Stiglmeier. I have no idea how you spell Stiggy's name. He was the lead firefighter. I think Dick was still considered the fire chief, so Dave was fire and search and rescue.

TM: What do you remember about Stiggy?

CS: Very happy-go-lucky guy, always laughing, cracking jokes. But when it came time to fighting fires, he was a good leader. Unfortunately, Dave responded to too many fixed-wing aircraft crashes and ended up having post-traumatic stress syndrome.

TM: This is Stiggy?

CS: Yeah. From Grand Canyon he transferred up to I think Lake Roosevelt and had to take medical retirement. That was not uncommon, post-traumatic stress syndrome for some of the rangers, and maybe even for me, although we all handled it differently.

TM: Can I just step in here for a minute and stand back and maybe vault on up to 30,000 feet and look around a little bit because you're touching upon a couple interesting things. One is adrenaline, which the older, seasoned rangers, it sounds like, had a little better control of. One was adrenaline, and the other one was post-traumatic stress disorder. There were no after-incident briefing, no way to talk about the traumas of life that Park Service rangers are exposed to that the average citizen isn't, or rarely is. How did you handle those things?

CS: Poorly. Let's see, what was the first one? The first one was in '75, maybe. I had gone over to a couple of volunteers' house, where we had cookies and cake and looked at slides of their park visits. The gal was very nice; she was an interpreter. I don't really recall what they were; maybe they were campground hosts. But just nice folks, probably in their 50s and she was kind of like a mother image. They were hiking up to Bear Lake and she had a heart attack. So word came over the radio. Tom Powers and I lived together at Mill Creek ranger station, so we were the closest to Bear Lake and we responded as quickly as we could. We decided we'd take the shortcut trail up to Bear Lake, which was straight up, because it would be quicker. I'm in the lead, and I hear Tom breathing not quite as hard as I am and he's like two feet behind me. I said, "Tom, can you go faster?" He said, "Yes," so I got out of the way. Got up to Bear Lake, and we found her and her husband. Her husband said, "You've got to do something." So we did CPR. We had an oxygen tank and an oxygen mask so I cut the oxygen mask off of the tube and put it in her mouth while I did ventilations and Tom did compressions. That was the first person that had ever died on me. I don't know about Tom, maybe his first, maybe his third. So, since I'd just been over to her house and I knew her, thought highly of her... By then there's probably six/seven other rangers

there. We load her up in a wheeled gurney—gurney's not right; rescue sled—and transport her out to the trailhead. Then I'm escorted down to headquarters by another ranger and taken into the downstairs coffee room. Dave Essex is there. He said, "Let's talk," 'cause I was a basket case. I remember a dispatcher by the name of Cassie walking in to get some coffee and she's like, "I don't think I should be here right now." So that was my post-incident debrief with the chief ranger. And then you're done. So you're just expected to handle it, or maybe at the time people didn't know that you were traumatized to a point where you needed additional counseling.

TM: Did Dave give you any good advice at the time?

CS: He had been around several homicides at Hot Springs National Monument, I think it is. Dave has an interesting history, too. I think he moved out of Hot Springs 'cause he was taking on the mafia and what was going on in the Hot Spring hot baths at the time in the late 60s. I don't really remember much that he said, but it was comforting. Then of course Larry was like... In fact, when Tom and I and a couple other rangers, whose names will come to me, when we lived in Mill Creek ranger station we lived a hundred yards above the house that Larry and Gail lived in. I'm sure that Larry was as supportive as he could be.

So that was the first traumatic incident. And you respond to plane crashes. One time I was at Phantom Ranch and there was a plane crash up on the Tonto Plateau. The helicopter happened to be at Phantom Ranch, so I jumped on the helicopter without any jump kit/EMT kit and was the first responder. Fortunately nobody—well, there was only one person that was about to die. He was an Italian gentleman who had taken his granddaughter on a scenic flight. A wing broke off and came through the fuselage and hit him in the head. And it must have also—so it hit him. He was unconscious, still with labored breathing. So I get there and Mike, who was the second paramedic after Ernie—I don't remember his last name—Mike's responding from the South Rim on another helicopter. So I commenced to do CPR on this fellow that's unconscious and labored breathing. Stops breathing, so I commence CPR. Kneeling right beside me is his granddaughter who is speaking—I don't know if she's speaking in Italian or something—just pleading for us to do something. Fortunately I was able to get a pulse back, and then Mike showed up with the necessary equipment. They bundled him up and put him in the helicopter, flew him up to the clinic. They may have even flown him directly to Flagstaff. But he survived. And it was good to know that he survived. Of course, when I went down to see him, they gave me a hard time because all of his ribs were broken.

TM: Yeah, from the CPR.

CS: Eighty-five-year-old fellow. Well, you know, you got your choice. You can either have broken ribs, or you can be dead. Choose one. And Stiggy, I don't know how many air crashes he responded to but there were a lot. There was bodies strewn all over. When a plane flies into a cliff, not much left. So he was exposed to a lot of it. There was a fellow at Meadview that ended up having to shoot somebody after they tried to shoot him. He didn't get any counseling. I don't know when counseling actually became the in thing. Certainly, by the time I got to Olympic we had several people killed in a helicopter crash that were all on our rescue team. We not only counseled all the people on the rescue team, we counseled everybody that wanted to come from the entire park. I just don't have a recollection as to what the progression was for post-traumatic stress syndrome counseling. But there were probably several rangers throughout the Park Service. Think back to the ranger that was shot at Gulf Islands. All the people there probably didn't get counseling. Don't remember what year that was.

TM: And then the adrenaline. It seemed as though that's an easy trap for young rangers who want to show that they're... It's a couple different things. One is you want to show that you're a team player, that you're willing to jump up and run down the stairs when the alarm goes off. But then adrenaline is its own... What am I looking for? It can have its own difficulties as well. It can hurt people.

CS: Yeah. The adrenaline rush is fine for the first five minutes. Fortunately, I think most folks got used to what you were doing, especially when you did it frequently. The first several heart attacks at Grand Canyon were full of adrenaline rushes and then it became more of a routine. I would think that paramedics today on fire departments and working for hospitals, the emergency room docs and nurses, when you first start the adrenaline's there and then it's, "Okay, this is what I do." It's like Dick McLaren.

TM: Well, it's training. I've seen this before; I know what to do. Yeah, like Dick. So that winter of 1976, working road patrol, South Rim—did you get a chance to get into the backcountry at all during that winter? I mean, it's kind of snowy and cold up on the rim, but not too bad down at Phantom.

CS: I don't recall. Well, yeah, there were a few day hikes. Go out to Hermit Rest and go down to Hermit Rapids. Hike from the top. Think I tended to stay away from Indian Gardens and Phantom Ranch. We also had horse patrol. In the spring I'd ride on the South Rim, but I don't remember taking any mules into the canyon during that time.

TM: The horse patrol was around the village area there?

CS: Yeah, for the most part. A lot of it was on time off. Just ride out towards Desert View. You didn't get to the view, but you'd ride out toward Desert View, or you trailered the horses and "patrolled" on your day off the South Rim boundary. Which is another interesting thing that just popped into my head. You could go halfway to Desert View/a third of the way to Desert View and go down the south boundary of the park a week before hunting season and you could literally watch the deer and the elk jump the fences and come into the park. They just knew that it was hunting season and hunters didn't come inside the park, for the most part. It was uncanny, at first unbelievable. Then a month later, or whatever it was, they'd go back out. Of course nowadays the elk live there year round. There weren't nearly as many elk in the Village as there are now. In fact, it was a rare sight to see an elk in the Grand Canyon Village in the 70s.

TM: Interesting. So I think that would be a nice way to sort of try to maintain your mental sanity in an otherwise what could be a very stressful job.

CS: Any time out in the wild, whether it's wilderness or just undeveloped, is soothing to the soul. I think that's why so many people come to parks and national forests and Bureau of Land Management lands. There's a lot of beauty out there, it's the solitude and the quiet. Folks would come from LA and go to Joshua Tree. Even though there are around 60 to 100 people at a Parker Dam, to them it's solitude. I think they even get invigorated. I think the rangers mostly like to hike alone.

TM: Yeah, it's the only chance they get to be by themselves, on your time off.

CS: So I peaked your interest when we brought up Ernie Kuncl. What else do you have question-wise?

TM: Well, I'm just trying to think about who else was there. Somebody I remember was George Von der Lippe. He may have been gone by the time you showed up. Does that name ring a bell?

CS: It rings a bell, but I never met him.

TM: Okay, he was probably gone. I'm trying to slowly think now about the river. I get thinking how did this work now? You would do a winter seasonal, and then it sounds like you would volunteer for a river trip in the spring before loading up and going back to Rocky Mountain. Do I have that right?

CS: That's correct.

TM: Okay. And you had met Tom Doerr in '72, doing the same thing. You'd volunteered for a river trip. You mentioned that Horn Creek story with the hole in the boat. So Tom was still there in '76?

CS: Yeah. He was still there in '76. At that time I think he was in charge of the fee collection program.

TM: Oh. So he was not doing river patrol anymore, or was he doing... In the winter he would do fee collection and in the summer he would do river? I'm curious.

CS: You know, I don't know. Maybe in '76 he was still river and... No, 'cause we had seasonal trailers. Some place '76 through '78 he became fee collection and I don't recall who was running the river operation at the time. You know, back then it may well have been Tom. "Hey, you know, do fee collection and also run river. Then, while you're at it, do this and do that." So yeah, I would do the river trip.

TM: What do you remember of that 1977 river trip?

CS: Having a good time. Nothing specific. Nothing specific.

TM: Still running the...

CS: You've interviewed Steve Martin, right?

TM: I did.

CS: So do you recall when he started with the river unit?

TM: I don't. I could look that up, but I don't have that on...

CS: Sometime in '77/'78 the river unit was run by Steve Martin and Marv Jensen. What I remember about those river trips was they were oar-powered and they were two weeks long.

TM: Right. That was just what I was going to ask you was when do you think the transition happened from the Jack Curry J-rig to the oar-powered craft?

CS: I don't recall the exact year. Sometime around '77/'78. Steve and Marv and crew were working on the Grand Canyon River Management Plan, which was a very contentious time for the river and the Grand Canyon.

TM: What do you remember about that?

CS: Well, I didn't pay a whole lot of attention to it until 1979. I was South Rim patrol and doing what we did. There was a river unit and I knew the guys well enough to know that I was going to get on a river trip that fall. My recollection is, I don't think I paid a lot of attention to what was going on politically. So that's what I did from '76 to '79. I'd work at Grand Canyon in the winters; take a patrol trip in the spring; go work at Rocky at Wild Basin, and then was moved up to the Mill Creek area; and then worked into the fall for the hunting season; and then get in my bus and head back down to Grand Canyon. Repeat.

During that time many of the backcountry rangers in Rocky Mountain were trying to get on permanently. I don't know if you want me to jump ahead to that, but in 1979 I got on permanent after about six years of trying to go from seasonal to permanent.

TM: Well, I'm curious, because it sounded like you had something that was working. I was going to say a good gig, but maybe it wasn't so good, which was working Rocky in the summers, which is pretty nice, that's a nice time of year to be there, and working Grand Canyon in the winters, which was totally different working village road patrol, totally different than, I think, Rocky in the summer, especially if you were working at a place like Wild Basin. And that might be pretty workable. What was it that was driving you to become permanent besides that you'd have a permanent position with the park and wouldn't be working on a seasonal/temporary basis?

CS: Just the permanency of it. As a backcountry ranger you were a GS-4, and if you were lucky, then you became a GS-5. And you weren't actually a park ranger; you were a park technician—the 026 series. Then, if you were really lucky, which I was, you became a GS-6 backcountry ranger.

TM: As a seasonal?

CS: As a seasonal. The highest you could go in park technician is GS-7. I think the park technician series is actually gone now. So, you're absolutely right. It was a beautiful time of life. You worked the backcountry of Rocky Mountain National Park; then you drive down to Grand Canyon and work the South Rim patrol and do emergency response and law enforcement and firefighting, wildland firefighting, structural firefighting; take a river trip; and then in the later years, '77/'78, you had two days to get back to Rocky to start working. Here's a quaint story for you 'cause you've got 12 minutes left.

TM: That's right. That's good.

CS: I don't know when it was, '77/'78, doesn't matter. I'm in my Volkswagen bus; I'm driving from Grand Canyon to Rocky Mountain; I've got two days; and I'm going through the Navajo reservation. I think it was Kayenta. I need to get some gas, and I've been driving with a headwind. Headwind's coming out of the northeast. I'm heading northeast in this square-faced Volkswagen bus, maybe making 50 miles an hour, probably more like 45, thinking to myself, "You're not going to get there, you're not going to get there." I pull into this gas station on the Navajo reservation. I'm all stressed out 'cause I'm behind schedule. I'm pumping gas and there's this old Navajo guy, leaning up against another gas pump. Got his cowboy hat on, boots. He's pumping gas. I walk over to him and say, "How long is this wind going to blow like this?" He just raises his head and looks at me and said, "Till it stops." (both laugh) I got back in my bus, and I thought about that for probably the next hour. Just the difference between the cultures. "Yeah, it's windy. It'll be windy until it's not windy." That's his time frame. My time frame is "I got to get to Rocky Mountain National Park." Two different cultures. I think that helped me almost immediately

and later on in life. You can set your goals, but there's going to be things that come up that you have no control over and you just have to deal with it.

TM: Yeah. And you got to Rocky Mountain on time.

CS: I got to Rocky Mountain in time. Had another great summer, summer of '79. I was going to get married on July 29th, 1979. Started work in May, and my bride-to-be and I were living at the Mill Creek ranger station—where she couldn't be there—with Tom Powers and maybe another ranger. I got a call from the chief ranger of Grand Canyon. Said, "Hey, we want to hire you as a dispatcher. GS-3. It's a permanent position." I'm a GS-6 backcountry ranger and I have an opportunity to go to work permanently as a GS-3. I said, "Yeah, I'd like to take that job, but I'm supposed to..." This is May, right? "I'm supposed to get married July 29th. I was wondering if I could report after that." The Chief Ranger, Miller, very nice man. He said, "You know, I think it'd be okay if you reported on the 1st." I'm thinking, "August 1st. That's good." I said, "August 1st?" He said, "No, June 1st." (laughs) So I packed up my gear. The gal I was going to marry moved in with Gail and Larry, and off I went, 'cause she couldn't live there if I didn't live there. She wasn't supposed to be living there anyway.

TM: What was her name? Who were you going to marry?

CS: Gal by the name of Connor.

TM: So this is the same woman who George had talked to you about your Mom for?

CS: (laughs) Oh, yeah. And that was my Mom coming up to visit.

TM: (laughs) Right.

CS: Yeah, that was the same gal that lived with me at Tokahe.

TM: What was Connor thinking about all this?

CS: I think she was thinking that, "Now I'm going to have to organize the entire wedding?" She and her best friend Pam did a great job, with a lot of help from Gail. The wedding was held in Hallowell Park, which is about a mile away from Mill Creek ranger station, and the reception was held at Mill Creek ranger station. There were about 50 or 60 people there. Charlie Logan and a couple other rangers built some small bridges to go across some creeks so we could get to the right meadow that we wanted to be in Hallowell Park. We had the wedding, and then we went to Mill Creek and had a reception with a bluegrass band from Fort Collins, friends from Tokahe. It was a gala event.

TM: And then you had to boogie back to Grand Canyon.

CS: Yeah. So we got married on the 29th. We stayed in a VIP cabin the night of the 29th of July, just a couple miles down the road from Mill Creek ranger station. Which, of course, the rangers had gotten ahold of. There was Saran wrap on the toilet seats. (TM laughs) There were pinecones in the pillow-cases and starch in the bed. Some of my ranger brothers went out of their way to make sure I had a good first night. We drove down through Farmington, New Mexico, saw a mountain lion run across the road, and got back to Grand Canyon two days later. Went to work the next day.

TM: Back to dispatch.

CS: Yep. Back to dispatch at the time.

TM: With Connor, and you've got to sort out some housing 'cause now there's two of you.

CS: Yep. And a little animal called Black Dog.

TM: Aha. Now, wait a minute. No pets. (laughs)

CS: (laughs) Exactly. Which was not the first time the Black Dog had been with me at the Grand Canyon. Yeah. I got Blackie out of the veterinary clinic that I worked at in high school. Came back my first year out of college and worked there again. Black Dog had been hit by a police officer car on Christmas Day. Police officer knew Dr. Sunshine. Brought him into Dr. Sunshine. Dr. Sunshine fixed her hip as best he could and then kept her in the back kennels. He refused to euthanize or anesthetize any animal. This was the original, as far as I know, no-kill shelter. So I ended up taking Blackie on hikes on the weekends, and during the week she'd stay in the kennel, and then I'd come get her for the weekends and we'd go hiking. So '69/'70, something like that, she went with me to college. She'd been with me since '69 so there's no way I was going to leave her. She was going to the Grand Canyon with me when I worked there seasonally.

TM: Nice. Well maybe this is a good place to wrap up this Part 3 and we'll pick it up again and you'll tell me everything there is to learn about being a dispatcher at Grand Canyon.

CS: Yeah, with the PBX board where you actually take the wire cords out and plug them in.

TM: Oh yeah. I want to know all about that. (laughs) Oh my gosh.

CS: Yeah. Sounds good.

TM: Alright. Well, with that, this will conclude Part 3 Grand Canyon Oral History with Curt Sauer. Today is September 15, 2020. My name is Tom Martin. And Curt, thank you so very much.

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