

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

Interviewee: Jim Corson (JC), Part 2

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: In this 8-part interview series, 96-year-old James W. "Jim" Corson recounts his upbringing in rural New Jersey. His B-24 was shot down over Germany in 1944 and his POW camp was liberated by General Patton in 1945. Jim graduated with a degree in archeology from the University of New Mexico, in 1950 Jim and his very pregnant wife Barbara moved to a woodstove heated cabin where he worked as a Seasonal Interpretive Ranger at the Wayside Museum of Archeology at Grand Canyon National Park, today's Tusayan Museum. Jim reviews his 30-year career with the National Park Service.

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TM: Today is Wednesday, February 10th, 2021. This is a Part 2 Grand Canyon Oral History Interview with Jim Corson. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Jim, how are you today?

JC: I'm still alive and still well and 96 and a half.

TM: I'm thrilled to hear it. You know, in Part 1 you and your new wife, your only wife, your beautiful Barbara Hand, you and her got a junk car and a junk trailer and managed to drive all the way across the country of Fort Collins to go to school to become a veterinarian.

JC: And discovered that wasn't likely.

TM: Okay. And then what happened?

JC: (laughs) Well, I decided that if they weren't going to do right by me, I'd do something different, and I disliked it at Colorado A&M and I did feel that it was a pretty

open society, but I got the word at least that they weren't gonna accept anybody from east of the Mississippi because they would go back there, and Colorado would get nothing out of it. So this is very much discrimination, but we were ahead of those days and the possibility did exist, in fact, I saw a guy get into med school that was not as smart, not as well educated and only had one thing going for him and that is a friend to help (sounds like). So I decided that it wasn't all aboveboard, it was (laughs), it was all done by human behavior. And went to New Mexico University at Albuquerque and changed my major to anthropology and archaeology.

TM: What attracted you about anthropology and archeology?

JC: Well, that's a good question, and it was about the time, you remember, that, maybe you don't remember, anyway, a lot of stuff was coming out of Egypt when I was a teenager and I decided that that's what I was gonna do, I was gonna go over to Egypt and find some ore and dig it up. And I couldn't have been more wrong because I had never been to Egypt, and I haven't dug up much. I did get my major in archaeology finished and it was Archaeology of the Southwest, Native Indians in New Mexico, Arizona, Southern California, that part of the world. And if I had it to do over again, I would be very pleased to do it all the same. I wish I'd gotten to Egypt somewhere along the line.

TM: Wow. Jim, did you get a chance to get into southern Utah and see some of the, oh, I'm thinking about Glen Canyon or Comb Ridge, some of the archeology that was happening out there at the time?

JC: I think we have to sort of back up a minute. I got a diploma that says I'm an archaeologist, but I don't have a job and if you look into it closely and want a job as an archaeologist you better forget that because there were 200 in the whole United States or something like that. Anyway, I got a job as an archaeologist, but it was a summer job at Grand Canyon, and the reason I got it had something to do with the housing which was primitive and had a wood stove and a water tank and an electric generator. These all sound fairly basic and they were indeed. And an archaeologist doesn't sound like quite the right sort of fellow to run a little museum and talk to the people twice a day and have a new baby playing in the yard, with a wood stove and a water tank.

TM: So when, this was 1950, the summer of 1950?

JC: 1950, and I had two other things that were more of a trouble. I had two wooden outhouses with two holes each and city people didn't know anything about wooden outhouses. A great many thought you would stand on the seat and leave muddy

footprints. Other people wanted to sit down, and my job was to keep it at least fairly decent. So I was busy cleaning the restrooms whenever necessary.

TM: So where was this museum?

JC: Well, it was called the Wayside Museum on Archeology at Grand Canyon. I think it's still there. They rebuilt and remodeled and did a lot of things to it a few years after I left. While I was there it was about the same as it was built in around 1938. Louie Schellbach, does that name ring a bell?

TM: Yes, sir.

JC: He was the Chief of Interpretation, and he was a very, how to say it (laughs), he was a man of firm habits, and his assistant was Chris Christiansen, and he was a man of loose morals, and they didn't get along at all. Chris thought that Louie had a way of being a spellbinding speaker and was right for the job so both of them were spellbinding speakers and took turns running things. I was just one of the hired help and brand new so I didn't know much, but my little ruins was a bad joke in a way. It had been excavated during the CCC days and they called it a, oh, dear, well, they called it a ruin anyway and it did have at one time about seven rooms, I think.

TM: Was this what would later become, oh, and now I'm messing up on the name,

JC: I think it was still called the Wayside Museum of Archeology.

TM: Was it, where was it located exactly? Was it in the South Rim village or did you have to drive out?

JC: It was about 25 miles out along the highway going east, the Canyon Highway.

TM: So this is heading out toward the Desert View Watchtower area?

JC: It was about three miles from the Desert View Watchtower, and, in fact, I could hear them chopping wood when I stepped out of my house. It was that quiet, and they, like me, had to chop wood because they were burning it. Anyway, I knew Freddie Bruhage who was the ranger at that tower, and they had something there. What did they have? Anyway, they were Indian stores, shops, in the park, down at park headquarters of the Grand Canyon Village, but there was something out at the gateway besides that, well, whatever, where you came into the park.

TM: Oh, the entrance station?

JC: Yeah. And there we were. We went to town on our days off to buy groceries.

TM: Where did, would you go back to the South Rim to the Babbitts Store, or did you go all the way into Flagstaff?

JC: We could go all the way to Flagstaff, but it cost money and gasoline, and we didn't have any money, and Babbitts Store was a delight and had everything. It was for tourists, but it was also for the local people. So we went to Flagstaff maybe once or twice and maybe not even that and just bought little bits of groceries at a time because that's all we could afford. We had, one other thing at that little house that was astonishing and that was an ice box. Where the hell are you supposed to get ice? At any rate, we had a seasonal ranger who was sympathetic, a man and wife and baby, and he brought us ice on his days out that way. And we had ice some of the time but not all of the time. And our generator, can you believe they told us that we were to turn it off at 5:00, it was for the tourists. I thought if I'm in charge of this generator we sure as hell aren't going to turn it off and spend the evening with a candle or a kerosene lantern. So we ran the generator all day and into the night. It had a wonderful feature, when you turned off the last light in the house or in the museum then the generator turned itself off, and at the end of the summer I had the delight of having a fella explain to me that they'd had a variety of seasonal rangers there at that museum but I was the only one who ever kept the generator in order to make electricity all summer without a replacement or repair. Only for two weeks but I could claim having been a professional mechanic because the guy who hired me was gonna teach me ignitions and carburetion and when he discovered that I already knew about as much as he did he didn't even come around. He just left the things in my hand and dealing with the Navajo automobiles you were dealing with a whole different bunch of cars.

TM: Do you know how big the generator was or what kind it was?

JC: Well, I do remember but I've got a problem now at 97, I got serious memory problems, but there is a standard kind of generator that you'll find everywhere and it was that kind. They go from one cylinder one horse to fifteen-cylinder diesels and make a lot of generators. This one was old when I got there, and I don't know what they did when it broke down, but I think they probably brought another one out and probably had several of them around the park because they did operate. All you needed was some gasoline and a little oil once in a while.

TM: Jim, when was your daughter, Paula, born?

JC: She was born on August the first, I guess, 1950 and born there at the Canyon.

TM: Was she born there at the hospital?

JC: At the hospital.

TM: And what do you remember about the hospital?

JC: (laughs) Well, it was a clinic. It had one doctor and almost everybody who went in there was a senior citizen who was at a high elevation and wasn't used to it, and so he got woozy, and he became concerned that a doctor's job was to tell him to get the hell in his car and leave. So we did go and talk to the doctor was it okay if we had a baby there and he said that would be fine. He had no problem with that. And later as we got acquainted around the Park, we discovered that nobody believed that but him, but nobody'd had a baby there either and just didn't seem like too red hot an idea. So if people wanted to have a baby in Grand Canyon they actually went down to Cottonwood and had a baby there with probably two doctors and a nurse or two. It was not a classic hospital down there either, but they had more help and they thought it would be better. But the story gets a little bit complicated because my wife was having her first child and she decided since we had days off that the thing to do was to have this baby on a day off and not interfere with the routine (both laugh). So she told the doctor she wanted to have it now, and I've forgotten but it seems to me it was Saturday and Sunday, but it might not have been. Anyway, it was a very bad idea. A first child is a little harder and this first child had 20 hours of labor and was born not breathing, which is enough to frighten a doctor who hasn't done this very often and certainly enough to frighten a father for the first time, and Barbara, after 20 hours of labor, for God sake, wasn't much aware of anything. It came out nicely except, and I've read, and I don't even know that this is true, that having to give oxygen to a newborn baby is liable to lead to nearsightedness. I have no idea whether this is true or based on fact or anything, but I do know that that first baby, who came around nicely, has been nearsighted all of her life.

TM: Oh, interesting.

JC: So anyway we had a new baby. She was perfect and she started breathing quickly after they administered some oxygen. So what do we have? We have a brand-new baby, living in the cabin in the woods. We had a wood stove and dirty diapers and we had grown up understanding that you boiled diapers, which means you boiled diapers every day unless you got a whole bunch of them. But one of the rangers had a

nurse for a wife who was off duty that summer coming to Grand Canyon with her ranger husband, and she cheerfully and immediately volunteered a couple of weeks of advice and help and came and lived in our little cabin, which had two rooms and already had three people now, and she stayed with us until we got into the swing of things.

TM: Do you remember her name?

JC: I do, and I don't. Let me think. (pause) Well, that's gonna have to slip in from outside somewhere. I'll think of it in a minute.

TM: Okay. No worries.

JC: Anyway, we did diapers, boiled them every night, and we did bottles, boiled them every night, and so we kept that stove pretty busy, and there's something I haven't mentioned about the stove. The Maintenance Division and the Interpretive Division hardly had anything to do with each other. They held the interpreters in some contempt and vice versa, I guess, because Louie Schellbach was not a realistic fellow. He was kind of a dreamer and a very nice one. He spoke so well that he did create a spell and his subject, of course, was the archeology at Grand Canyon and the geology of Grand Canyon, and he had this helper who was, well, deserved to be shot occasionally and he, too, was talented and bright, and they hardly would speak to each other, and every year Louie did a, oh, two or four pages maybe of suggestions for what they needed to do out at the Wayside Museum, which was considered nothing by the maintenance folks and they did nothing. They didn't even supply firewood. They had the place surrounded by juniper and pinyon and lots of dead wood around and all I had to do was go out in the woods and carry back an armload, but I was a little disappointed that they didn't consider me part of the staff and treat me accordingly. Anyway, it was fun being out there and it was okay being alone, but I didn't feel that I was getting equal treatment, and I might have been. They might not have had anybody who spoke to anybody there. I wasn't in on the inner workings and national parks had lots of things going on that didn't show. They usually had people for years and years at one location who got pretty sick of each other. Anyway,

TM: So, Jim, I wanted to ask you, today the Wayside Museum of Archeology is called the Tusayan Museum.

JC: Yeah.

TM: Does that, do you know when that name change happened?

JC: No.

TM: Okay.

JC: The name of the nurse, by the way, was Rodie.

TM: Rodie? Okay.

JC: Rodie, I presume for, well (laughs), I don't know whether I can tell you her last name either, but she was lovely and she was our age, and her husband was a ranger. She did everything and taught Barbara anything she needed to know and livened us up by being charming, pleasant, witty, efficient. She was absolutely necessary to us having our first baby.

TM: Very nice.

JC: Anyway, what else?

TM: Did you get a chance to ever meet the superintendent, I think was Harold Bryant?

JC: It was Harold Bryant. We thought of him as a bull moose cause he loved to go to campfires, and he loved to sing, and he couldn't. (Both laugh) So he was the grand old man of the Park Service. He was one of the founders of the Park Service and got a choice job there at the Grand Canyon, which he loved, I think, and ran a town which had a railroad station and a railroad with a train every day and had lots of employees compared to other parks. They did have lots of employees compared to how many they needed but they had more, more visitors, more of everything. And Harold Bryant was a kind of a natural leader. He looked like one, talked like one and had lots of experience before the Park Service. So we all admired him, and he drove a big blue Cadillac and that was kind of striking, too. Nobody else had a Cadillac. And he came to all the public affairs to be seen and to be in charge and the Park was well run, I believe. We were a little short of entertainment. Everybody in the whole darn park, except me who was 25 miles away, would come in in the evening to see the train come in. Now, I ask you, is a train coming in (laughs) any kind of a national ceremony? I don't think so, but it was exciting and that was where the life was so everybody came down to the station and watched the train come in. And if we were in town, we did that, too, but we were only in town on our days off, and only one of those days, but we always got a meal at the El Tovar because the rangers got a discount, and the discount wasn't from the total price. The discount was from, even intelligent thinking, because I believe we got our meal for

a dollar twenty-five or something like that. It was a, a workers' compensation of sorts. We were eating what other people were eating but they were paying three or four times as much. And our baby became a major attraction because wealthy people traveling don't usually have new babies. If we were in the El Tovar we had, we had kind of a focused spotlight on a couple and a baby, and usually we had somebody else along. We didn't eat there regularly but we had visitors. My aunt and uncle and cousin came from California and stayed a week. My aunt and uncle from New Jersey came and stayed a week, and they had a ten-year old boy who decided on that visit that he would become an archeologist. He didn't, but he came to every one of my talks, listened intently, and I was sure that he could give my talk after... And they, both of those groups stayed long enough to get into it completely. They were sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags and enjoying it, and that was the entertainment for the summer. Everybody liked to see a new baby and we were doing it right. We had kind of reverted in history but keeping the wood in the stove going and raising a new baby wasn't that much different a hundred years later, so we were doing it the old way.

TM: This is amazing. So basically, they gave you the job and you came out and they said "Okay, your cabin's out there and give talks to people."

JC: I don't really know how the decisions were made but I do know that I had neglected to tell them we were gonna have a baby (laughs). I think that mattered a lot because when we got out there everybody was pretty shocked to see that my wife was nine months pregnant and gonna have a baby any minute, but it worked out nicely. And part of the reason they gave for hiring me was that I indicated that I was used to rugged conditions, and they did consider the conditions out there a little different, a little more rugged, and I guess through the summers they had had a variety of people there and not everybody loved it, but we did.

TM: Yeah. Gosh, I think it would be pretty nice and quiet for the most part when the people weren't around.

JC: At 5:00 the world dried up and went away. There wasn't a sign of a visitor. Once in a while somebody would drive through. We had a loop to come in and you drove in, and you could see the Museum and you could see the cabin but there wasn't any place to park except over at the Museum, which was a short walk from the cabin. And one night, one night I saw a camper who was a single woman by herself, wearing army boots and bumming, and I looked out the window and for God's sakes, here's this woman bedding down within sight of our cabin. She wanted that assurance, but she didn't knock on the door, she didn't get acquainted, she just was bumming. Anyway, I read a few days later of a lady who fit that description being killed on the highway by an

accident and I never knew her name, I never knew if it was the same woman, but I assumed it was. And the other big surprise, astonishing surprise, was that I went up one morning and there was a bicycle parked beside the Museum and a fellow just walking around. He had come 96 miles the day before on his bicycle, riding from Chicago to Alaska.

TM: Wow. A little lost.

JC: He invited me to come along, and I thought 96 miles, for God's sake, I had ridden as far as thirty miles in a day but this guy, 96 miles, the last 75 of them was all up hill and it was quite clear that he had gotten some muscles I didn't have. I was not tempted to pitch my job and join him, but I thought it was a neat idea.

TM: Well, it sounds terribly dangerous in 1950.

JC: Everything that he had, he had a little luggage carrier behind the seat. He didn't have a trailer or, well, he did have a backpack I presume so he had a tent, and he had a knife and a couple of cans to cook, and I did get a postcard from him when he got to Alaska, but I didn't think he was gonna go the whole way, but he did.

TM: Wow. That's great.

JC: Yeah, it is. And so we were a way station along the way and had some interesting people there but mostly I was giving a talk that was prepared. When they made the Museum back in the 1930s I believe it was probably built by the CCC and I believe that the little ruin that they had back there was the whole attraction so that if it stayed empty and nobody ever came back there it wouldn't have made much difference to everybody but the idea that the Anasazis had lived along the Canyon edge and sometimes stayed for possibly weeks at a time suggested there were things to eat, things to hunt and things to find, things to do when the Indians were in charge there, too. And we would go out walking along the edge of the Canyon and there were campsites everywhere. Still are, I'm sure. Because the average tourist does not get down at the edge of the Canyon twenty-five miles out. There's lots and lots of people at the edge of the Canyon in town and one of the things you can do is walk down, I think it's a seven-mile trail to the bottom of the Canyon, but I'm not sure about that. Anyway, I did it one time. Barbara, with the baby, did not do it, but my aunt and uncle and cousin from California were eager to see as much as they could of Grand Canyon, so we all arranged to go to the bottom and stay overnight down there and then come back up, and the aunt was in her 60s and a good hiker. She'd been an outdoor person all her life. The daughter, who was 17, and she didn't think hiking down the edge of Grand Canyon

and then hiking back up was such a wonderful idea, and I had two cousins to come from New Jersey at the same time and they wanted to ride the mules down. Nobody told them that riding the mules down was more uncomfortable than hiking, but they found it out. Anyway we all met again down at the bottom at, oh, dear, what's the name of the place? Anyway, there is a, let's say an overnight lodge down there.

TM: Yeah. Jim, was that Phantom Ranch?

JC: It sounds about right.

TM: Okay. And there was a swimming pool there.

JC: Phantom Ranch, right. Okay. And the most interesting thing that happened to me there was that it was so novel, so interesting, and all of my relatives were there, and I forgot that I was entitled to an employee discount (laughs), paid the whole price without even asking, and I've been feeling stupid about that now for 70 years. Anyway, I never did ask for it.

TM: What do you remember about the ranch down there, the lodgings and the layout?

JC: Phantom Ranch was fairly basic. They had a nice place, and it was built of stone, and Indian style so that you felt that you were roughing it, but as I remember they even had a swimming pool, and it was right on the edge of the Canyon. You could look up and down the Canyon. And to get there by mule you had to go through excessive torture. Riding a mule for the first time is not that much fun, and these girls, two secretaries from not New Jersey but Philadelphia, and my cousin from California, these three girls were riding a mule for the first time and they had some lumps and bruises and abrasions, and our boast there was that we'd never lost a mule but that summer we had cause to regret that boast because a trail crew riding mules that were very much used to going up and down the trail, but one mule had a blind eye and somehow they pushed him close to the edge and he fell off and had a maintenance man riding on him and the maintenance man fell faster than the mule so that the mule landed on him and the mule actually was not killed so our claim up there for losing a mule was still good but we lost a maintenance man and that kind of spoiled the whole story. Anyway, the trail was narrow, poorly maintained, and hot. This is mid-summer, remember, in July or August, and the sun beats against that South Rim every day so that I presume the temperature was something like 90 the whole way up the trail, and my 60-year-old aunt, as I say, was athletic and good, but she was a little slow and so instead of moving right along we were edging our way up to the top. We had a nice man fall in with us for a little while, but he couldn't stand that pace and went ahead, and we made it up to the top in

good order but totally exhausted. So I suppose that I could have gone faster if I didn't have her along. A 60-year-old lady is an astonishing person to hike up out of the Canyon. She waited for me to get off that day cause we hiked down after 5 and we finished the hike in the dark with flashlights, for God's sake. And there are places to fall off there and tumble down 5 or 6,000 feet, it was a little more exciting in the dark than you would think. But no problems. And she had only stayed behind to be company with me. I didn't have the 90 dollars to ride a mule down and they didn't want to offer me the 90 dollars to ride a mule down. I had my pride. Anyway, we walked down, we walked back, and when we got to the top we were pretty darn used up. But Barbara had stayed behind and the uncle, who was a fisherman and liked to go out and fish in the streams but did not like long, hard hikes, had stayed behind with the young wife and baby and that helped me feel perfectly good about going down. And since I was working there, had planned to work there unknown summers, why, it was a good thing for me. Anyway, that's the exciting time of our two years there.

TM: What do you remember about the talk that you gave? What did you talk about?

JC: We talked about the Anasazi Indians and, you know, they're everywhere in the Southwest, and those at the Grand Canyon were not exceptional. They didn't have large houses. They just came to the Grand Canyon to look at it, I suspect, as a thing of amazing wonders, and so we didn't meet many Indians there. They didn't like to come up and visit just for fun, and what we saw was everywhere you looked proof that they had been there and camped and hunted a little and found it interesting. So my talk was about the Indians who had lived there, and they were just ordinary pueblo-free, I think, it was a long time ago. Anyways, while there were periods of Pueblo Indians that were in at that time, the ruins that you could see at towns and places like that, and the little houses that they built up there they weren't many so that there's no reason to think that they wanted to live up there any length of time. And as I say, all of mine had fallen down rooms and this was an excavation project for the CCC, and Louie Schellbach, the Chief of Interpretation came at about that time, I think maybe even with the CCC. So that was his subject and his favorite, and when he gave a talk on the Grand Canyon, he always said a few words anyway on the people who had been there before us and so it was an easy summer except for the rugged living conditions, and it was an absolutely pleasant summer with very few people bothering me. The people who came to hear my talks all wanted to hear my talk. If they didn't, they didn't have to drive in. And always they were interested and always they asked questions and we went out in back and looked at this seven-room ruin. I was a little apologetic for delaying them for another half hour to look at something that wasn't exciting at all, but it was sort of fun. And my 10-year-old cousin liked it so well that he was there for every talk and eating it up, and I had a thought, and I didn't ever have the nerve to do it, but my thought was to ask him if he'd mind giving

the talk one day. I thought that would be a big hit with the tourists and I thought he would enjoy it, but I, I was a little nervous about palming off my job. So anyway, they stayed, and they enjoyed it enormously and they went home to New Jersey remembering it forever, and this 10-year-old boy later was going to school in Philadelphia and at a bus stop they had been tearing down and rearranging things and so there was raw earth showing at the bus stop that he rode home to an area in New Jersey. Anyway, in this disturbed earth was an arrowhead and I think that was the high point of his archeology because he became a chemist instead. Imagine finding an Indian arrowhead 200 years after to the town was established and carrying it home in your pocket. That's pretty exciting.

TM: Wow, that's pretty neat. So a seasonal ranger means exactly that. You're only working for a certain number of months and then you have to leave. What, how, were you able to stay over that winter of 1950, 1951?

JC: No.

TM: What did you do?

JC: That Museum was only open in the summer. And it would have been very hard to heat, a good reason for not having it open in the winter, but the other reason is that travelers fell off, you know. They, that's the wrong expression to use at Grand Canyon, but travel went way down and only a few people came to Grand Canyon to see it in the winter so that was one of our attractions for people who were trying to see the whole park.

TM: So what did you do that winter of 1950, 1951?

JC: I was a schoolteacher in Farmington, New Mexico. And the third summer we loved it so that we agreed to come back and be there a third summer. And then I hung up the phone and thought about it, for God's sake, I was building a house and I was building a house so we could live in it and I'm proposing to take the whole summer off and just leave it stand there, and I called them back and said much as I wanted to come, I just couldn't do it and that was the end of my seasonal rangership almost. But it turns out that Farmington, New Mexico they got a great, giant Anasazi ruin only 15 miles away in Aztec. Aztec Ruins was largely complete, lots of buildings had fallen down but lots of buildings that stayed up, too, and digging into a three-story pile high you could actually find an empty room or a roomful of artifacts or even I think maybe a burial or two in those great mounds, and here again I probably owe it all to the CCCs because they were doing anything they could find to spend money and employ people.

So I don't actually know when Aztec was dug, but I do know they had an old man there who was a kid, and they were digging, and it had become his life. He was blind so he was pretty retired. He wasn't totally blind, but he was too blind to work, and he would just come over and sit and if invited would talk about the digging and about his being a boy there, and he was a charmer, he was the best of all. And I was giving a talk to the tourists and so we got to be friends. I was a seasonal ranger for quite a while in Aztec Ruins and one Sunday I was thinking about it and I realized that the people who worked there, the other people that worked there, were all employed five days a week and the only one who was working seven days a week was me, and I thought to hell with it so I like my spare time as much as anybody and just because you have to buy groceries was not a good enough reason. So I did quit. But I was an employee at Aztec for probably a couple of winters, only on the weekends. Anyway, I stayed on the list looking for an offer of a permanent job and was on that list for six years and one day, by God, comes a telegram from McKinley Park Alaska. The ranger who had the job fell off of Mount McKinley, went over a cliff and died, and was so far bad off that they didn't even get him back. They left him. And this telegram from McKinley had two pages of very good reasons why I didn't want the job. It was the first offer in six years, and it was to be a permanent park ranger, and I wired back immediately saying that I was burning with interest. They had sent a telegram to eight people, no, to ten people, and they wired the next morning you can forget this. And two had wired back saying they were interested, and one of the things I had that they didn't want was little kids, three of them, but I sent my telegram back with the heading "burning with interest" and they told me later that that was the right thing to say. And so I was the ranger at McKinley Park for two years, and I might add not any of those dangerous difficult jobs that they talked about that were gonna kill me happened in two years. We had a dangerous job. We had demonstrations of dog sleds every day and (laughs) it turns out running a dog sled is dangerous and you wouldn't immediately suspect it. The danger comes from the enthusiasm that the dogs put into this, and because it's a limited little job it doesn't have any outlets except running. Sled dogs don't get along. They hate each other and so your danger is by hooking them up. You had to get in the middle of them. You had to keep them tamed and quiet long enough to get them all hooked up and then you set out across the ice and snow just to exercise them, and that was fine exercise and not usually dangerous. But if you fell over, and that was easy because the trails were basic and might have a rock that would tip you or a bank that would tip you or anything that would tip you, and the dogs didn't know about stopping just because they should. They would stop and using signals you'd call to them, but they were verbal signals, and the dogs could choose not to hear if they were excited and running good. So they would stop when they hit a tree and the usual thing to hit the tree was the person sitting in the sled. The best way to avoid this was to not have anybody sitting in the sled and we usually didn't. So you pitch up on a tree and the dogs would have to catch their breaths

and that would give you a little time to set the sled up and if it was still workable turn them around and go home. Anyway, I did manage to tip it over and the boy riding in it, because I felt that this boy deserved the experience, he was living at McKinley Park with his father, who was the postmaster, and he was going into the army and he's an 18-year-old or very basic joiner of the army. He had no real experience anywhere with anything, and he's gonna be coming from Alaska, for God's sake, and everybody's gonna want to know about dog sleds and gold mining and things that he didn't know a thing about, and I thought we could give this kid a couple of experiences anyway at night. I promised him a ride in the dogsled and a walk on snowshoes and so we set out very nicely in the middle of the day when we didn't usually run dogs and did manage to tip over. And you're wearing a seatbelt when you're in this dogsled because it is adventurous. So he's strapped in, going about, what fifteen or twenty miles maybe, going faster than you would normally be, and you don't stop until you get to a tree (laughs), and the tree stops you by hitting you in the head. It wasn't a very good experience, but luckily this boy was 18 and alive and well and didn't break anything, but the next morning he had, oh, dear, he had a bump on his head the size of a soup bowl and he, it didn't improve his looks a bit but he was game and the next day we took our snowshoe lesson and he went off to the army having been on snowshoes and having been in a dogsled but I'm sure he wasn't anxious to go for a dogsled ride the next time. Anyway...

TM: Right, right. So, Jim, I want to go back to Grand Canyon for a minute.

JC: It's hard to connect McKinley Park to the Grand Canyon, but there I was anyway. I was now a permanent park ranger, and I was there, not there, but I was a permanent park ranger for thirty years and went to about six different locations. I really did love the Park Service. I think I was as lucky as you can get, except financially. They didn't pay well, and we lived in wild places all over. We were two years in Alaska and because of the size of my family and the size of the ranger station, I was in charge of the end of the park road for two summers and a part of a third summer. That cabin out there had been built by the CCC. They insulated it by pouring sawdust into the space between the walls, and this is a perfectly good idea, but they had to go back later and pour more sawdust because it piled down and hardened up and there was a gap in the sawdust about a foot high, and so no insulation at all. It just..

TM: Hey, Jim, can we go back to Grand Canyon for a minute?

JC: Oh, I think we should.

TM: Your second year there, was it the same job?

JC: Same job, same location, and a baby that was only not even two years. She had her second birthday while she was there.

TM: Okay, so that was 1951?

JC: Yes. That wouldn't be her second birthday; that would be her first birthday. So she didn't have her second birthday there. It was my second year, but it was her first. Anyway...

TM: What else do you remember about that year, 1951, at the Grand Canyon?

JC: It was certainly 1951. We had the same program, the same artifact, the same museum, and the same lack of sympathy and communication between Maintenance and Interpretation. Louie was really quite steady in his habits and his thinking. He was a neat guy, and he had a little disadvantage. He was about four inches shorter than he should have been. So anyway, we admired him, but he came out and gave the talk to let me do all the inner secrets and I presume he came out once more in the summer just to be sure I was holding up, but my supervision consisted of nothing. The assistant, as I say, was a man of some moral turpitude and he would chase women if there was any kind of a possibility whatsoever, and had a wife and three kids, and it was fairly sad. But he was a good speaker and there wasn't any suitable reason to fire him. His wife was pitiful and later he claimed that his daughter was molested and my theory that if she was, I know who but that's just a theory. We haven't discussed it. Anyway, he went on to become the chief naturalist at Everglades in Florida. And there were others who came in behind to fill that vacancy that I didn't get acquainted with. So I had Louie Schellbach, and I had Ernest or Ernst Christiansen, and those two summers. I've been back twice, I guess, since then and I'm sorely distressed at what Grand Canyon has become because they have three times as many visitors now, and a big trailer camp right at the entrance, and a helicopter tour that comes every twenty minutes, I think. Their tour is twenty minutes long and they fly down the Canyon and then fly back and land right there near the trailer park and I don't say that you shouldn't have a helicopter on standby to rescue people because there are people down in the river in rafts and you better take a minute to suggest that one of those people in the rafts was my third daughter. She decided when she was just coming out of college that she really, really, really liked the Grand Canyon so for thirty years she was a raft runner through the Grand Canyon. Just lately she's gotten old (laughs) and didn't go down at all this summer because of the Corona Virus and we're all wondering, including her, whether she's gonna do it anymore or not. She's over 60 and can reasonably quit. She has a job

back in Wyoming. She's her husband's cabinet making apprentice and they have a fine cabinet shop there near Wilson, Wyoming. Anyway,

TM: Hey, Jim, in 1950 for, well, that summer into the fall, there was a guy running helicopter tours out of the Tusayan Auto Camp. Does that ring a bell at all?

JC: No. I couldn't afford the flight, so I've never been in a helicopter, and I don't approve of them. I totally and completely don't approve of them.

TM: Yeah. No. Neither did Harold Bryant. You know, he was basically at war with that guy.

JC: That makes sense. And I would be if I was in his position. I would have considered it perfectly reasonable to shoot the goddamned helicopter down cause it was a wilderness area when that thing was flying down there but they did have the capability to rescue people who needed rescue and that sort of gave them an entrée and they didn't think they were doing anything wrong, I guess. But they were pretty goddamned obtuse to be able to think that. Don't forget they were the enemy (laughs). I didn't have anything to do with helicopters then or later. And, yeah, I'm afraid I wouldn't have accepted a ride down the Grand Canyon for free and I guess I might have been able to talk my way into on if I was working there but it seemed, what's the word, it seemed immoral for sure. And if I was there in the campground, as I was one of the times I came back, and this goddamned helicopter was coming in and landing every twenty minutes it would have seemed entirely reasonable to go over with a machine gun and cut them to pieces. It was sacrilegious, that's what it was. Anyway, I never disturbed the peace by threatening anybody or even voicing my opinions. That was the way it was.

TM: Do you remember, well, let's see, that's tough because you were out there all on your own and the community center, the sort of the hub of entertainment was there at the village with the Babbitt Store and the park headquarters and you were a long way from all of that.

JC: They gave talks every day, I think twice a day, once in the morning, once in the afternoon and there was always a roomful. Most of these speakers were spellbinders and most of the topics that these guys hadn't heard much about and so it was easy to get a crowd. I think it even cost a little extra to go to the talks. I'm not sure about that.

TM: They didn't decide to like give you like a week's holiday, and have you and Barbara and Paula come into town and spend a week at the Village, and you could give

the talk in there and they'd send somebody else out to where you were to cover for you?

JC: They had somebody to cover for me two days a week and that's when we could go to the store and get our groceries and things. And so we were not tied up out in the wilderness all the time, but the guy who came to replace us, what can I say. His name was Frank Smith, and he was giving the same talk I was. There wasn't anything to distinguish mine as being a lot better. We were both giving an old talk from old Don. The visitors were getting pretty much the same stuff. So that was the talk, and we did have to ask if there were any questions and then we had to try and cope with whatever anybody came up with, and I suppose that made it more interesting for all of us.

TM: So your duties were to clean the bathrooms and to give the talk and to, did you...

JC: To hang around and answer questions whenever they asked them.

TM: Okay. So your job during the day was to hang out at the museum and wait for people to show up and then talk to them.

JC: You could even get a little bored because from 1 to 3 in the afternoon everybody had gotten tired because of the elevation and everybody took a nap, and you could sit there for two hours with no visitors at all, or one or two. And they'd come in in a kind of a slow fashion. They were tired and hot, so it was not ever a hard job, and the best part is that none of these senior citizens that were passing out from the elevation ever made it into my area to do that. I think that they were sticking to the main roads and feeling it and so we didn't have a medical emergency any time in two years there.

TM: Well, good for you.

JC: Astonishing. Yeah. And in the front yard we had a baby in a playpen (both laugh). I was talking to her the other evening, and we agreed that the fact that she had developed an appetite for juniper berries deserved to come into this story because she would lay down on the floor of the playpen and reach out her fat little arms as far as she could get them and scramble around trying to get juniper berries, which she ate. And this is a baby who is only less than two years old, so she loved it, but we discovered something important in that is the sun does not stay where you think it is, the sun moves all day. So we'd put the baby out carefully in the shade and we'd come back and find her in the sun. And she didn't seem to mind a bit. She seemed to absolutely love it and even got sunburned the first time we were discovering this secret about the sun. She's 70, well, 71 this year. And a lot tougher from her early beginnings at the Grand Canyon,

except that she has loved the out of doors and loved living in all sorts of places and actually married a man in construction, so they kept on moving and go to interesting places. He died of a brain cancer and unfortunately his job was cleaning up radioactive sites and I think that his job undoubtedly had a hand in his early demise. The company treated him well. He was not out in the yard doing the work; he was in the office keeping the books and never had a complaint really with the company. They treated him wonderfully well all the while, and he was with them for twenty or thirty years. So we all miss him, and he died in his 50s, for God's sake.

TM: Oh, my gosh. Oh, that's tough. Okay, you know, Jim, we've been happily talking for over an hour here.

JC: And wandered in all directions.

TM: We have. That's okay. Maybe it's a good time to wrap up this Part 2.

JC: You got other questions?

TM: I do but let's, I'm gonna need to run so let's call it good now.

JC: Okay.

TM: So this will conclude a Part 2 Grand Canyon Oral History Interview with Jim Corson. Today is Wednesday, February 10th, 2021. My name is Tom Martin and, Jim, thank you so very much.

JC: Well, thank you. It's fun to be recalling all of this.

End of interview.