

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Kim Johnson (KJ)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Kim recounts her college years, Grand Canyon research, and work as a river ranger

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TM: Today is Monday, October 12th, 2020. This is a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Kim Johnson. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Kim. How are you today?

KJ: Hi, Tom. I'm doing well.

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

KJ: Yes.

TM: Thank you. I'd kind of like to start off—what year were you born?

KJ: 1956.

TM: Where were you born and what were your folks doing there?

KJ: Huron, South Dakota. My mom was a homemaker and would become a teacher when I was older. At the time I was born, my father had Johnson Tractor, which was the Ford and tractor implement dealership in Huron, South Dakota. It was a business that he had with his father.

TM: Oh, that's neat. So serving the farming community there?

KJ: Yeah.

TM: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

KJ: No.

TM: Okay. Did you grow up there in South Dakota?

KJ: We moved several times, and then probably from the age of seven to high school I was in Florissant, which is a suburb of Saint Louis, Missouri.

TM: Alright. Did you all do the normal summer-holiday-in-the-station-wagon kind of thing?

KJ: Yeah, I think so, though now that you say that, it's not like we went to national parks or anything. When I was young, we went with the cousins to a lake in South Dakota. I have memories of that, outdoors. I think... That's a funny question. I can't quite remember where we went, but yeah, I definitely have memories of standing between my parents in the station wagon in the front seat. No seatbelt, nothing. And my father drinking beer. All those things that never would happen anymore these days.

TM: Right. Is that where you learned to swim, in the lakes in South Dakota?

KJ: I probably learned to swim in swimming lessons. I don't remember too much about that. I was in swim team when I was young, maybe seven/eight/nine? We had a country club and swim team was a fun activity for kids for summer.

TM: Yeah. Did you swim in high school?

KJ: Well, you know, I graduated 1974. We didn't have girls' athletics until my senior year of high school.

TM: Oh wow. Okay.

KJ: I got to be the announcer for the boy's diving team, and then our last year they finally decided to have a girls' swim team.

TM: Did you get on that team?

KJ: Yeah.

TM: Did you like swimming then?

KJ: Oh yeah. I liked it a lot.

TM: Great. On the weekends did you pal around with your friends out in the country at all? I mean, you're living in the suburbs, so...

KJ: No, it was very much of a suburban neighborhood. You know, living life. I was in scouts. I had started the outdoor club at my school. But my parents didn't hike or did any of that kind of stuff. So we did typical weekend... (laughs) Just pretty typical life but very suburban.

TM: But wow, you started an outdoor club in high school?

KJ: I did.

TM: That's pretty neat. How'd you get that idea?

KJ: Well, I'm not sure. I mean, we had clubs and I remember the electronics teacher was kind enough to be our faculty advisor. We did a bike tour from Saint Louis. It must have been either in the late spring or early fall. We all rode our bikes over to this campground near the river in Illinois and in the middle of the night it was so freaking full of mosquitos that our faculty advisor said—and it was hot—said, "See ya'. I'm leaving," and abandoned all of us in the mosquito-laden swampland there.

TM: Yikes. (laughs) Back in the day, no seat belts. Wow, no chaperones. See ya' later. Oh my gosh. Were you thinking about going to college in high school? Is that something you were thinking of doing? Was it expected, I guess, of you from your parents?

KJ: Oh yeah. There was no doubt that I'd go to college. That said, I ended up at Prescott College, which—you probably have talked to other Prescott College people that have a Grand Canyon connection, right?

TM: Yes ma'am.

KJ: Yeah, so I learned about Prescott College from the World Encyclopedia yearbook. It had a little article about it. I thought that was the coolest thing since sliced bread. What my parents should have done was, in the summer, sent me on an Outward Bound trip and then said, "Now, you come home and go to University of Missouri" (TM laughs) because Prescott, the semester I got there, by December was in bankruptcy. So I called my parents in December and said, "Well, I'm coming back early. The college is bankrupt." That was my segue to the Grand Canyon because one of the guys who had been a professor at Prescott ran one of the research labs. So in January, rather than going back to college, I went and worked and lived at Grand Canyon. That's probably why I lived in the hospital, come to think of it. I worked in that research lab. I had an unpaid internship set up. So I worked for them, and then by that summer we were doing a project. So this would have been 1975 and the Park Service was in the middle of working on the River Management Plan. The park really wanted to discontinue the use of the portable toilets which were buried on the beaches. So somebody said let's do an epidemiological study and try to decide if it's a health hazard or not to bury chemical toilet waste on beaches.

TM: Hey, Kim, hang on a second. Let's back up a little bit. When I think of Prescott College, I think of the first few weeks of the first semester is typically some sort of, as you mention, an Outward Bound type of...

KJ: Exactly, yeah, and mine was in New Mexico. That's the big deal of what I was interested in and my folks should have just said, "Fine. Go out with them and come home and go to a regular college."

TM: How did that Prescott College in New Mexico... Was that like, see you later here are the mosquitos kind of thing? What was that like?

KJ: Oh, that was a great trip. I don't know, we probably had 10 students and a leader and a coleader that were just too cool for school. We backpacked—I don't know, 10 days maybe? Yeah, it was a great trip, exactly what I wanted to do.

TM: Was that your first time west?

KJ: Oh yeah. I think I had been probably no further west than South Dakota. It was the typical thing. You're very brave, and you really want to go to the big bad West. My parents put me on the bus, to ride the Greyhound bus out to Arizona to go to college. And, you know, you think you're all brave, and here, watch me go and the bus pulls away from the bus station and you're in tears. (laughs) I was barely 18. So, anyway.

TM: But it sounds like they bundle you up and took you out to New Mexico and you put on a backpack, and that was great.

KJ: Yeah.

TM: Nice. Did you make other friends that fall at Prescott College that you're still in contact with?

KJ: Yeah. Not in contact with. I mean, Prescott College is such a... I remember going there and it's such an unusual place and had very interesting people. I remember getting there and being one of the only people that was still shaving their legs. Very much of the hippie-dippie college. I remember meeting, I don't know if she was my roommate or what, but she had a boa constrictor that was her pet that was always wrapped around her neck and her very voluptuous bosom, which would just torture the guys whenever they saw her. (TM laughs) I remember being in downtown Prescott with her. She was from Wenatchee or somewhere in Washington and was a barrel racer, right? She was always walking around when we were downtown and spitting in the gutter. I'm like, what the hell? Then she finally showed me that she was chewing, you know.

TM: So it was a good beginning of an education for you.

KJ: Yeah, right? Well, I think that's the case when every kid goes to college.

TM: Yeah, that's true. I'm curious, who was the professor that you linked in with that was running the research labs?

KJ: It was Roy Johnson.

TM: What can you tell me about Roy? Would have been Dr. Johnson, I guess.

KJ: Yeah. He was a... I don't not remember his specialty. He had seen the writing on the wall with Prescott. He had a passel of kids. He took the job at the Park Service. He left it and went somewhere like NIH. I don't remember as much about him as the guy that... I ended up in the summer, I guess before we got really involved in the research, there was another guy named Peter somebody-or-other who was also in that research lab who was doing a lot of research on fire prescriptions and I worked for a field research team on the North Rim. He was quite the character. That research lab didn't really continue. I don't think it continued to be funded. We laid a ton of co-ax cable on the North Rim and did some prescribed burns, and watched the heat, and measured soil depths and stuff.

TM: So, I'm just trying to work out of the timeline and march along here. So you went through your orientation at Prescott College, a couple weeks out in the field, and then some didactic work. But the school was going to go bankrupt. They did recover from that.

KJ: They did.

TM: But it sounds like you ended up in the spring of '75...

KJ: Yeah. Living at Grand Canyon South Rim. I think I lived at the South Rim and worked in the research lab. And then that summer I got a seasonal job, went to the North Rim, worked that seasonal job for that research unit, and then I think I came back. I think I maybe got hired as a seasonal for the research... I don't remember quite. But that's probably in '76. I think that's how I first got down the river, 'cause we were doing the research projects. We went on a one-boat motor trip in January with... You've probably talked with Steve Carothers, right?

TM: Not yet, but that may happen soon here. What do you remember about that trip, besides being cold? (laughs)

KJ: Yeah, right? That was a great trip. I mean, now in hindsight, I never would have done a one-boat trip in the wintertime. We had a 22-foot snout boat which Steve let me row quite a bit, which was great. I had pretty lousy gear, I was wearing a raincoat. It was colder than hell, there's no light. And I loved it, right? It was a great trip.

TM: Let's go back a little bit. That summer of '75, or I guess the spring of '75, you leave Prescott, you go to the South Rim. The research lab... I'm just thinking of the Science Center. Did Roy set up some sort of a lab somewhere on the South Rim, or were you working out of the Science Center? How did that work?

KJ: You know, I don't remember exactly where our facility was. I want to say it was in some of the offices in the visitor center. That's where we hatched the research plan to do the research on the portable toilet sites.

TM: Did you get on the river to do that?

KJ: Yeah.

TM: So was that your first river trip, then? Would have been in the summer of '75, to look at the portable toilets?

KJ: No, my first trip was January of '76. Yeah.

TM: January, okay. So that spring, looking at... Oh, gee, back at the time we're talking about 15,000 river runners a year, how does their solid waste impact the Canyon?

KJ: Well, to them it was big deal. Well, you've probably talked to Steve, and you talked to Curt. I think you said you talked to Marvin, right? Marv Jenson.

TM: I did, a little bit, but we didn't do a full interview like this.

KJ: The Park Service really wanted the motors off the river, and nobody could wrap their hands around—well, maybe they could—but nobody could wrap their hands around the idea of things like that. What everybody did at the time was they put a chemical-based portable toilet, and then the effluent from that was put in a hole every day at every beach. So, theoretically, every beach had a load of effluent buried on it. I think we were kind of like getting up to see how we justified, saying, "No, no, no. You've got to carry all the solid waste out of the Canyon." I think what was happening at the same time is everybody else is sort of saying for the motors and for the rubber rafts, it's no big deal. The only people in the commercial side that would have had a problem with it were the dories and the dories figured it out. They just added in a baggage boat that carried then the ammo cans. Everybody kind of easily shifted over so the study was really kind of not a lark, but we didn't exactly need it to make that requirement be palatable and well-received by the commercial outfitters. But, got me a lot of river trips.

TM: Yeah, did a really nice interview with Steve Martin and he talked about that transition and how that was a simple thought for a while. "Hey, we're going to use this chemical toilet, and we're going to dig a

hole and we're going to bury it." But with Glen Canyon dam upstream, the seasonal scouring flows were gone and the beaches were turning into piles of blue goo.

KJ: Well, it wasn't that bad. If you knew where to look and where things were typically buried, you could uncover them. But the research study was really pretty hilarious, because we were going back... Every trip we'd go back and we'd revisit these sites and we would pull out core samples. We would test for a couple of different kinds of bacteria, one of which was an anaerobic—I want to say anthrax. Anthrax? Doesn't matter, a fairly deadly bacteria. But to test for it/to culture for it, we would have to use these canisters that would create an anaerobic environment. The only reason why I sort of got on this project was 'cause in high school I'd had enough classes in microbiology. I went to kind of an advanced school, but you could do a fairly intensive... So I had a fair amount of microbiological technique and I could handle this lab work. So we'd sit down there on the river with our pipettes. The river raft guys just thought this was hilarious. If you go way back... Did you ever talk to Richard Ochs and the publication Sama?

TM: No.

KJ: Wow, you should run him down. He was the publisher of a newspaper for guests and for employees called the Grand Canyon Sama, S-A-M-A. There's a picture of my friend and I sitting on the beach, doing our little science thing. That picture might also be in one of Butch Farabee's books. You've talked to Butch, haven't you?

TM: Yes. Yeah. So Richard was running this microbiotic experiment? He was kind of overseeing that, or was he...?

KJ: No, I think Richard worked for the Grand Canyon Historical Society or something, or the Natural History Association, I don't remember. He published that paper. That paper was a general paper and covered everything from what's going on in the park today, or I don't know—highlights of Richard Euler's research. I don't remember too much about it.

TM: So what you're trying to look for, it sounds like, is the biohazard breakdown of solid waste buried with a bunch of chemicals to take care of the of odor, mostly, in sand that has water inundation going up and down because of the dam, I suppose.

KJ: Well, no. The levels had dropped. They would have been involved... Everybody was camping by the tamarisk line and in 1983 there were no releases that were over the tamarisk line.

TM: Right. '83 was the exception to prove the 1975 or '76 rule there when everything went belly-up for a little bit. Okay. What were your parents thinking about this time? (laughs) They're like, "Wait a minute. You're supposed to be in school." Were they supportive of your...?

KJ: Well, yeah, I think they were supportive. I think they were a little bit both relieved and horrified. It was a private school and I don't know how sending me to four more years of that would have been affordable. I think they were kind of like, "Oh. Yeah, well, you do what you want to do." (TM laughs) I mean, in hindsight, I did what 18-year-old's do which is like left and never looked back. But I was the only child, and now I'm parent, well grandparent age, and I'm sure that just left a huge hole in their lives and I was pretty oblivious to it as 18-year-olds are.

TM: Yeah, very good point. So the spring and summer and into that fall, so basically most of 1975, you were working out of the South Rim then?

KJ: I think in the summer of '75 I was working on the North Rim on that fire project. Then I think by the summer of '76 I was working for the South Rim research—whatever the heck its lab was—yeah, research lab.

TM: What did you do over the winter of '75/'76?

KJ: Good question. I think I was working for the Park Service as a seasonal for that research lab, I think. I might have spent some time... I ended up back going to college a little bit at University of Washington. I might have spent some time in Seattle, but I can't remember when that actually was.

TM: Do you remember any of the other people that you were working with at the time then '75/'76?

KJ: Well, Nancy Whiteman worked with me on that research project. That was her maiden name. We ended up, probably in '76/'77, starting to be close with the river guides who worked for OARS. I eventually ended up cooking for them. You know, I think I was probably friends with a lot of people that were in the park at the time but nobody really stands out in particular.

TM: So in '76... Let's go back to that January one-boat trip with Steve Carothers. Was that a couple-week-long trip then?

KJ: Yeah, it was probably 12 days, 12/13 days.

TM: So fast enough. To Diamond Creek?

KJ: I think we had a small motor on that. It was a 22-foot snout. And I think we may have also had a small motor. I just can't remember completely.

TM: Do you remember who else was on that trip?

KJ: A friend of Carothers who was quite the character. He might have been a boatman for somebody. I don't remember his name, though. Roy Johnson was on that trip, and I don't remember who else.

TM: What do you remember about Steve?

KJ: Steve Carothers was kind of a larger-than-life character. I don't know if you know him. Well, it sounds like you haven't talked to him yet. Steve was—still is—one of the preeminent avian biologists in the Southwest and ended up...I think he ran the Museum of Northern Arizona. I think that's who he was working for at the time. He was extremely charismatic. Led a lot of people, led a lot of people into science, led a lot of people into their PhDs and their careers in science. Yeah, he was a very impressive person. I felt very privileged to work with him and felt like I had his respect somewhat. He let me row his boat. I was rowing one day and took a stroke and I broke the handle off the oar. He was pretty impressed by that. I'm sure that was just...

TM: (laughs) Oh my gosh. That makes me think two things: you were very strong or the gear wasn't that good.

KJ: The gear was probably pretty good. I'm pretty good size. I'm sure it just was a point of weakness. I've never seen it happen since then. No, the stuff was good. He had a good rig and good equipment. He always had good equipment.

TM: Good. What was the purpose of that trip, again, in January?

KJ: I think Steve had some research. He was doing quite a bit of natural science research. The Park Service was about to let out a lot of contracts to scientists all over the country that was needed science that was to underwrite the overall carrying capacity of Grand Canyon. He may have had biological research that he was doing. There was a lot of basic science. We ended up, over several years we took down I want to say all kinds of scientists in the world. From guys that were doing research on the sand migration and beach stabilization, botanists. We took archeologists down. We took a guy that was a herpetologist which was just hilarious. Funny story on that. The guy was as bald as a lizard, not even any hair on his arms. At that time, in natural science, you had to catch a specimen to verify your data. Eye sockets... You had to kill it so we had a chest full of dead animals. That trip we were down on the lake, Lake Mead. They'd been collecting rattlesnakes and all kinds of stuff. The rattlesnakes in Grand Canyon were the little Grand Canyon skinks, and by and large they're kind of small, right? Sort of like after dinner or something the herpetologists go out. They'd been looking for a snake bed, as they do. We were all gathering around and these guys take the snake bag and they dropped it all in the sand. It's not a little tiny Grand Canyon pink. It's a huge Mohave diamondback. The thing's like six-and-a-half-feet long. It comes out snarling. They're laughing their asses off. We're running for the hills. It was really hilarious.

TM: Oh my gosh. (laughs) How many trips did you get a chance to do that, that year of 1976?

KJ: You know, I want to say I maybe did six or eight.

TM: Alright. Which is a lot.

KJ: Yeah.

TM: Were you meeting the other people working for the Park Service? Curt hadn't shown up yet. I'm trying to think of who else would have been...

KJ: I think Marv and Steve were running the river unit, I think.

TM: Right. I think that's right. What do you remember about Marv Jensen?

KJ: Marv was a very gracious, lovely, considerate, incredible leader. I remember him as little talking, but very much in charge, very wise. Great family man. I remember we were in the kitchen (laughs), we were cutting dinner. "Do you want to cut the broccoli?" "Yeah, Marv, thank you." I don't know. He was just a giant of a man. I have wonderful respect for him.

TM: Nice. Any other things you remember about those river trips in '76?

KJ: Yeah, I think by that time they had started to put us out on commercial trips. We went down with OARS. And then Whiteman ended up dating one of the boatmen, Terry, who she married. Then I got

pulled into the OARS organization, and that's where... I think you probably read Kevin Fedarko's book, and the famous Georgie "they don't make passengers like they used to" story. So Carrie was in on that. You know, Matt's just got this very famous Grand Canyon story. I started doing a lot more rowing on those trips and then I ended up, in '77, working as a commercial guide in California for OARS. Somewhere along the line they trained me with OARS. So I started working as a boatman in that era.

TM: For OARS?

KJ: Mhm, hmm.

TM: And then, '76/'77, it sounds like you might have gone back to a little bit of schooling in there.

KJ: Somewhere in there I stuck my head in college at University of Washington, but I just cannot remember when it was.

TM: Okay. And then back to Grand Canyon for another summer season in 1978?

KJ: Yeah. And then somewhere in there I started working both as a commercial guide for OARS and then by that time, the Park Service...the research trips were really kind of starting to pick up and we were starting to do trips that were both patrol trips and then we took every kind of dog-and-cat researcher down the Grand Canyon to do that work. So we were kind of like the raft company for the researchers.

TM: Who else were you rowing with? Who else do you remember were some of the other guides you were working with?

KJ: Yeah, you know, some of these people... Sam West was a commercial guide for OARS and then came to work for the Park Service.

TM: What can you tell me about Sam?

KJ: He was a very interesting person. He was very kind, very much a student of Buddhism. Kim Crumbo was around at that time, I think. Sam and I ended up—somewhere in there—we talked the Park Service into letting us run kayak patrol and Sam and I did a couple of solo trips in kayaks, which he didn't have much experience kayaking. I had a fair amount. So we ran two or three kayak trips, I think.

TM: Okay. Wait, wait, wait. Let's put this in reverse and back up a little bit. How did you get introduced to kayaking?

KJ: Yeah, I must have gone to college in there somewhere, because I learned to kayak after we moved to Washington. It must have been winter. University of Washington had a pretty big kayak club. And yeah, it must have been '76/'5/'-7, those years in there, 'cause I learned to kayak and did some boating in Oregon and Washington State and then started doing... We did patrol trips and started throwing kayaks on the patrol trips and stuff.

TM: What was that like? So there's just two of you, two kayaks? You're doing self-support.

KJ: Well, that was a horrible cause of... We went down and we cached food and...

TM: So Kim, it's getting kind of hard to hear you. Is there something happening? Don't abandon the phone, I guess.

KJ: Is that any better?

TM: Yeah.

KJ: Yeah, so we cached barrels all through the Grand Canyon of food, but at that time, Park Service probably had 15 outfitters. And the way those concessionaire contracts are constructed, the commercial outfitters have to be inspected by a Park employee every year. So from the kayaks, we would go and inspect the commercial companies. Now most of the owners were very smart, and they knew that it was good to get that inspection done, and it was also good to be nice to the park rangers. So we had this ridiculous situation where we'd go down the river, and we'd see a commercial company, and we'd go, "Hmm, Tour West. Well, steak night, they can't cook very well, but we know that menu's usually pretty good. Let's see if they'll let us stay with them." So basically, we most nights stayed with a commercial company. We'd do a little dog-and-pony show about the Park Service and eat with them. Start breakfast and then go off and try and figure out who we wanted to eat with the next night. It wasn't a scam; we really did do the inspections and stuff. The guides usually got a bonus if they had a good inspection. So we'd be boating along, and the motor outfits could carry blenders. I remember one day one of the boatmen hands down to me a blueberry smoothie, like "Hey. Here."

TM: (laughs) Wow. Okay. So it was self-support without the food.

KJ: Yeah. We probably could have made it going from our cache supply to cache supply. But we didn't have to.

TM: But didn't need to. When was the first time you did that? Do you remember?

KJ: You know, I don't. It might have been more like in the 80s when I was actually a seasonal as part of the river unit or the river subdistrict, whichever it was.

TM: Yeah, that would make more sense, 'cause I think Sam... When did Sam transition to start working for the river unit at the Park?

KJ: I don't remember. I don't remember. Crumbo, Mary Lou, Sam. Then JT, John Thomas, later. I just don't remember where all those people started with the Park.

TM: Was that J.T. Reynolds?

KJ: No. John Thomas worked both as a river ranger and then moved into resources management, as I recall.

TM: So in that time now—we're sort of talking '79/'80/'81—you mentioned the Park Service back in the mid-70s with Marv Jenson, were looking at the spectrum of commercial use and the type of use that they wanted to have on the river, which...

KJ: Yeah, Marv—not Marv—probably the person who probably—well Marv may have... So what happened was the River Management Plan, as the Park wanted it with commercial allocation,

commercial and non-commercial use, and no more motors, that plan was voted on all the way through Congress, I want to say '80 or prior. And then there was an amendment authored by Orrin Hatch that was, as I recall, a funding amendment that said, "...if this management plan as is is allowed to be effectuated, there will be no funding for the entire Department of Interior." Which was effectively Orrin Hatch's way of saying, no, you take that management plan and shove it. Motors weren't banned. Did Steve talk to you about that at all?

TM: I don't think we talked too much about it.

KJ: Yeah, well, I'm sure the people in the Park who were very much for the let's-get-all-the-motors-off-the-river plan, they were very disappointed by the political nature of it all. And the non-commercials were pissed 'cause their allocations didn't get increased. That's a real defeat when you're carefully crafted public hearings, and so on and so forth, and management plan gets derailed by a political movement from the Senate. That's a big deal.

TM: Right. It's an issue that the Park Service is not free of at all kinds of service units all across the country, is political and financial pressures from the business community. Did you have any personal thoughts about it at the time? What were other people thinking? Do you have any thoughts on that?

KJ: You know, I think in some ways the commercial allocations—some of that should have been shifted back over to the private sector. I think at the end of the day there was an awful lot of research that said, "Yeah. That really doesn't have anything to do with the number of people down here. It's how the heck they behave that has an impact." The thing that might have been pivotable on keeping the overall numbers of users down would have been the social experience. Bo Shelby out of Oregon, his research didn't support that. Nobody was saying, "Yeah, two people a day is fine, or two other commercial parties a day is fine, but three? That's too much." So there wasn't any research support for it. As far as the issue of motors, one of the things that... Yeah, I should have been for getting motors off the river. But effectively, when you've got whatever the split is from motors and oars, you've got a way for commercial companies to space themselves out. So had they shifted everybody to oar-powered... You know, there's some places in the Grand Canyon where everybody wants to go to the same place. And so 4:00/5:00 everybody's starting to look for the same campsite. Well, if you've got a motor company, the boatmen can all get together and say, "Okay. You can motor 10 miles. We can't. You go get that campsite." Logistically it helps, in my mind, smooth out the use of the river. You know, people ask me, "What kind of trip should I go on?" I always try to push them to a two-week-long oar-powered trip. But, on the other hand, some people, if their only experience is a five-day motorized trip through part of the Grand Canyon, it's better that they had that experience. So I wasn't terribly unhappy, in general, with how all that turned out.

TM: Then at what point did you start working for the Park Service? So you'd been working seasonally.

KJ: I think in 1980, somewhere along the line, I got hired as a—I want to say a 10-month Park Service technician. That was probably 1980-ish.

TM: Was that NPS technician with the river unit?

KJ: Yeah.

TM: What was your job with them? Do you remember what your duties were?

KJ: Yeah, you know, I ended up doing a lot of... We all worked as a team to sort of do raft patrol. I remember one of my big objectives was to take the stinking non-commercial river permit application and make it go from nine pages to three, and get rid of all the gobbledygook and stupid questions that were really none of our business that would evaluate whether that person should be given a permit. So that was some office work. The other thing I did that was super fun, I organized a training seminar for commercial guides and pulled that off for several seasons. That was fun to pull together, it was fun to do. Felt good about that work. And then...

TM: Hang on a second. Before we go any further, let's open that one up a little bit. Had that been done before, or was this the first time that that was happening?

KJ: I think I started that, or we started that. I don't know.

TM: What do you remember about it?

KJ: Well, we had a hell of a party at night and we got Robert Euler mad 'cause all the river guides were out partying and he couldn't go to sleep. (TM laughs)

TM: Was this at the South Rim or was it on the river? Where was this?

KJ: Yeah, on the river. It was a good deal. I got somebody to come and do a first-aid refresher. Think we might have done a public health refresher, like, how not to give everybody giardia. Then I got everybody and their brother to come on the river and give lectures. It was just a thrill. At the time I was pretty into geology, and I remember I got Ivo Lucchitta who was this very charismatic plate tectonics researcher for the USGS, who had one of the more interesting formation theories about Grand Canyon that was very controversial and very like, "What?" He came down. So I had every kind of rock, bird, archeology... 'Cause when you say, "Hey, you want to go on a river trip to see some stuff?" "Uh-huh." (TM laughs) So yeah, we would run it as a river trip. It was great fun but I also thought that it was real good level education for guides.

TM: Yep. There were a couple old-timers that came out to those. One of them was a guy from Indiana named Steve Fulmer. Actually, at the time he might have been living in Phoenix. He had a film that he'd put together with some high-water shots from 1957. Does that ring a bell at all?

KJ: Vaguely, but I don't remember it well. You know, during that time, or maybe overlapping with it, I worked with Kim Crumbo. He wrote a history book on Grand Canyon. He was so strong on history, human history, and he was very much into it so a lot of that I kind of left to him 'cause he did so much research. He had so much more knowledge.

TM: What can you tell me about Kim?

KJ: Well, Kim Crumbo is truly a larger-than-life person. He was kind of a boatman's boatman. Have you ever met him?

TM: Oh, yes.

KJ: Right, so you know he's about five-foot-seven tall and about five-foot-seven wide, and unbelievably strong but also extremely kind and very smart and very passionate about natural history in general and Grand Canyon in specific. And fascinating to talk to the extent that he would about his life as a SEAL. And, gosh, just feel super privileged to have worked with him, bluntly put.

TM: So you and Sam West are doing kayak patrol trips. Were you in the river unit when they were still running the dories, or was that just before you?

KJ: No, we bought the dories in my tenure, yeah.

TM: Can you tell me about that, about that story? How did that work out, or not?

KJ: You know, I wasn't really all that involved with them. I don't even think I ran one very much. We worked on them a lot.

TM: (laughs) You mean like repairing them after they got broken?

KJ: Yeah.

TM: They're kind of fussy, aren't they?

KJ: Oh, yeah. Have you been down the river very much?

TM: Uh-huh.

KJ: Have you ever watched dory boatmen park in Havasu Canyon?

TM: Don't touch my boat.

KJ: Yeah, exactly.

TM: So that must have been a learning experience.

KJ: Yeah. I don't remember—maybe it was Kim, maybe it was Sam—somebody really liked to hang out in the boat shop and just work on boats all night, all day, during the winter. I don't know who that was, but everybody kind of got to do what they liked, so that was fine.

TM: And the boat shop at the time was... The Park Service has gone through three maintenance yards. The original maintenance yard wasn't far from the Babbitt's Store and the Ranger Operations Building. And that's where the boat shop was. Is that right, in there? Is that how you remember it?

KJ: Well, the Ranger Ops building was where our offices were, and then the boat shop was a smaller, single, free standing building and it was across from something that had been... I just don't remember if it was like a very old maintenance building. But yeah, it was kind of in that—yeah, don't remember.

TM: Okay. And by this time as a technician, are you on permanently?

KJ: I got on permanently somewhere in that transition. Maybe '83, maybe before, maybe after. But I was a 10-month technician.

TM: Did you think about going to law enforcement training? Did that happen?

KJ: Oh yeah. I got on permanent status, and I got sent to FLETC for the law enforcement commission.

TM: So that's the Federal Law Enforcement Training Academy in Georgia, is that right?

KJ: Yep, in Georgia. Yep.

TM: When did you go through that training?

KJ: That might have been '83/'84, somewhere in there.

TM: So that should have gotten you into a better paygrade.

KJ: You know, we were kind of not... The river unit fell under the detective side of things, right? So I came back on commission and supposedly we were supposed to be running backcountry patrols and then supplying the NPS nine requirements for where the backcountry rangers were going to be. Defensive weapons and stuff. I mean that was kind of a joke. I remember we had a lot of backcountry rangers who would hike down and meet us, ride with us for a couple of days and then hike out and do their patrols that way. The spiel was, they'd come down, they pick up the pack. We'd pack all their stuff in river bags and the last thing they would pull out of their backpacks was this little snub-nosed .38 service revolver, right? Which you're required to carry, but it's at the bottom of the pack 'cause it's heavy and it's covered with Gatorade powder.

TM: It's a fascinating public relations journey when you are in the backcountry and you show up with a sidearm exposed on your hip versus in the bottom of the pack with the Gatorade all over it.

KJ: Well, you know, I think most of those backcountry guys were sensitive enough to the fact that in Grand Canyon, in that time, those are a couple qualifiers, on a backcountry trail having your .38 on you would have been a little inappropriate. But I do remember—hang on a minute. Let me go put my phone on a charger. You know, Dave Patillo at that time was running Phantom Ranch and he had a little bit higher profile law enforcement-wise. He was a backcountry ranger in Phantom Ranch and he was always wearing his weapon. I remember doing a... I got sent down to Indian Gardens one night for a couple... "Hey you, go do a detail. Go be a ranger at Indian Springs," which was great. There were some guys, came to my little ranger house and knocked on the door like eleven o'clock at night. You know, they looked like something out of Deliverance. They had mustard flavored sardines all over their faces. They were scary and I thought, "Yeah, good thing to have a service weapon on you. You boys go away now." So anyway.

TM: Yeah. Interesting.

KJ: This is a little bit offside. I have a funny Larry van Slyke story. You've talked to Larry, right?

TM: Not yet.

KJ: Many years later we went to see Larry van Slyke. My husband was alive at the time. He was district ranger at Canyonlands. At the time, militia people were threatening to kill park rangers and were leaving threats that, "We're not leaving here until the Virgin River runs bloody." Larry's a pretty slight guy. He's in his office and he's bringing me on a handcart what looks like a bunch of books in boxes. It was obviously very heavy. I said, "Larry, don't you have underlings to do stuff like that for you?" 'Cause the Park Service was pretty militaristic in a lot of ways. He said, "Oh, well, it's not books." He picks one out and shows it to me and it was ceramic core flack jack barriers. So if you were shot by a militia guy, if you had your ceramic core flack jack barrier you're not going to get dead. 'Cause they're coming after the park rangers with hollow points. So it's kind of a flipside of... Well, that's the other side of the "Why are park rangers armed?"

TM: Yep, that's right. What do you remember about Curt, Curt Sauer?

KJ: Curt was a wonderful boss. Curt taught me a lot. Curt and I were boss and employee, but we were also friends. Are still friends. I just went to his wedding 18 months ago, whenever. Curt was very ambitious in the Park Service, destined to do well, and did, and was just intelligent and grateful. Good with people. You know, it's hard to talk about the living. Curt came to the river and at that time, the river unit was kind of made up of river people that are hired as guides out of the river businesses and Curt was a Park Service person. At the time, not everything was sort of hunky-dory bringing in outside Park Service people to our sacred little river unit. Curt fit in really well and learned to row and also was... The Park Service had to deal with the outfitters, which was a huge part of that job, but also flexible enough and mentioned enough of the guides to fit in and work with the river community, in general. Ton of respect for Curt. Great friend. I was very—not crushed, but very sad when he left. He, like all good Park Service people, applied for and got a promotion for a better job—I think it was Olympic at the time—and ended up having a very prestigious Park Service career, as he should have.

TM: We've been going about an hour here. Is this a good time to wrap this up, and we'll come back and...

KJ: Sounds good.

TM: ...give it another shot on another day. Well, with that, let's go ahead and wrap up what will be Part 1 of a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Kim Johnson. Today is Monday, October 12th, 2020. My name is Tom Martin. Kim, thank you so very much.

KJ: You're welcome, Tom. It was a pleasure. You're a good interviewer.