

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Mary Shevlin Ochsenschlager (MO)

Interviewer: Kristen Luetkemeier (KL) and Audience Members (AM)

Subject: Growing up at Grand Canyon National Park.

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KL: February 22, 2019 oral history interview here at the Shrine of the Ages in Grand Canyon National Park. I'm Kristen Luetkemeier, and I'm a board member on the Grand Canyon Historical Society. And today I'm going to be interviewing Mary Shevlin Ochsenschlager. I want to thank you guys for coming, and I especially want to thank Mary for agreeing to do this interview, especially since she agreed to do it exactly a week ago, when someone else was not able to make it. So I am really grateful that you're here and that we're going to have a chance to talk today about your childhood and your teenage years here in Grand Canyon, and the efforts later on in your life to record some of the stories of your classmates here at Grand Canyon School.

MO: Thank you, Kristen. I'm happy to be here.

KL: Thanks! So, just to help us place you in time and space, I wonder if you would tell us when and where you were born.

MO: I was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1943. My father worked in the regional office in Omaha, and we moved to Grand Canyon in 1952.

KL: I wanted to hear more about both of your parents, because I know that they both worked for the National Park Service. So let's start with talking about your mother, and I'll start just by asking you her name and what you know about where she grew up and the family she grew up in.

MO: Her name was Katherine Farrell. She grew up in a large family, graduated from Creighton University, and then worked in the Omaha office of the National Park Service. My father grew up in the Adirondacks of New York. It was a pretty hard-scrabble-type farm, and he wasn't even able to graduate from high school until he was 22. He had to work and board in another town. And then he went to Syracuse University and got a general forester's degree in 1928, and worked in the private sector for awhile. Then the CCC program was formed with the Depression, and one of his professors recommended him as a foreman-type person for the

CCCs. So, he began working with them. I believe they must have been funded through the Department of the Interior or the administration worked closely with the National Park Service. He worked on the East Coast between Maine and the Carolinas, just checking on CC camps, making sure they were set up right, and things like that. And then he got transferred to Isle Royale National Park to set up CCC camps there. That's in Lake Superior up in Michigan. There's a recording of him telling about that experience. The park service did recordings of many of their employees, and that's a real interesting story of what he did there. Then he went back to the regional office, and a few years later was assigned as superintendent at Isle Royale. I was three when we moved to Isle Royale. And then when I was nine, we were transferred to Grand Canyon.

KL: I want to go back to your mom for just a second, because I know that she had a real attraction to the place where she grew up. Would you talk a little bit about her feelings toward the Nebraska landscape, and the Platte River?

MO: She was very proud of her Nebraska roots. On my parents' first date she suggested they go to the Platte River-Missouri River confluence. Her father was a good birdwatcher, so she always showed us birds and enjoyed nature. I couldn't get her to remember the Dust Bowl. She was born in 1913, so she was an adult when it happened.

KL: Some things maybe are better forgotten. What was Isle Royale like for your family?

MO: It's very remote and pure wilderness. There are no cars; you can only get there by boat or sea plane. There were the three of us children, at that time, and then one was born while we were living in Michigan. There were four children in our family. We were our only playmates. All I have are wonderful memories of total freedom. My mother took us so many places on this little one-mile-long island in the middle of Lake Superior. The main island was much larger, but park service headquarters were on a one-mile-long island. It was a couple of blocks wide. We just went out for the day with a sandwich and a treat and went everywhere, except to the main office area. We were not allowed to go there.

KL: So, then your father came here to Grand Canyon in the early 1950s. What was his work here?

MO: He was assistant superintendent. As I became an adult and started coming back here, I realized I just didn't know what his duties were! He was very careful not to talk about his work at home. And I think that was probably very wise, because who knows who we would have told what he said. He was assistant superintendent, which is now deputy. I assume they do almost the same thing. I don't think he had a lot of interaction with the tourists. I think it was dealing perhaps with facilities, personnel – things like that.

KL: Would you talk about the one recollection that you have of an encounter with a visitor to Grand Canyon?

MO: Yes. One time he walked out... The office was on Center Road there. That was the main administration office, and probably most of you know where that is. It's a small building. I'm not sure what it's used for now. He walked out of there once, just probably to go across the street to the store or something, and a tourist came up to him. She had just gotten off the train and walked that way. I don't know why she got on that side of the train. And saw the ditch there between the road and the railroad, so she thought that was the Grand Canyon. And she was absolutely incensed. That is one thing he brought home.

KL: One of the projects that I was really taken by and hadn't seen a lot of documentation on was the Catholic church project. What can you tell us about that?

MO: I was in college, but I heard some things. This he sometimes did talk about. So, there was a project for building homes over by the school. With these federal projects, it's a large contract for many buildings, and they all are the same. They're the same because so and so says: "Their house has more than mine," and: "How come she has two bedrooms and I have..." Those kinds of reasons. It was very strict, and the money was exactly right. I don't know if he or other people in the community who arranged with the diocese to pay for a Catholic church building. We were a mission parish. I don't know if he was the project manager. Anyway, was dealing with this project. And we had a priest called Father Frankowitz who was a Polish man, and he was the in-charge type. And he got his way. He would go to the site while the men were building and tell them not to do that, and to do this, and I want this here, and I want this to be like this... And I thought my father was going to lose his mind. He just couldn't get him to stay away. I don't know if there were ramifications of that, but... So, it finally was over, and it was built. And the priest moved in, and he brought geese and chickens and ducks. And let them loose. That my father didn't just resign or kill himself at that point! So, there may be more to the story. I don't know. But this much I know.

KL: It sounds like your mom's Catholic faith was really important to her, too. I wonder if there are any other recollections that you have about the church here, either personal to you or about what role it played in community.

MO: Yes. And it's been an interesting thing for me to do interviews with other friends, because I knew really nothing about the community church. I didn't know how the Mormons gathered and prayed. We had this very small Catholic community with the Verkamps and the Scheiers and Ellises. Mr. Scheier was the main mechanic for the park service. Mr. Ellis was either an accountant or in engineering, some sort of professional position. There were just a few families. But we did all the things that we were supposed to do, and we had a lovely priest who was a real shepherd for us, even though he had to handle Williams and occasionally some other places. We had mass in that lobby in the Bright Angel where they now have kind of a museum. But that used to be a big sitting room for tourists, and then we would set it up as a church. We had an altar that folded up. Actually, we had odd hours. Sometimes we were Sunday night, sometimes we were five in the morning on Sunday so he could get back to Williams. Sometimes we were Saturday night. But whatever, it was fine. We were our own little tiny community. Father Faustina would try to get us kids to sing. I remember being at Verkamp's one time and

we just – oh, I feel so bad, because he was trying so hard. He loved music. And we were being so silly. But it was a very nice little subcommunity. And now I've learned, in my interviews with other students at that time, how rich their experiences were in the community church and the Mormon community. So, it was all neat.

KL: I know you said your dad didn't talk a lot as you were growing up and coming of age about his work, but I did wonder if you had a sense for what his National Park Service career meant to him, or his feelings about his time at Grand Canyon.

MO: Yes. He believed in the mission of the National Park Service, and he was very proud to be in the National Park Service. He had come out of the CCCs, and many, many, many men that age at that time came out of it – just moved, almost seamlessly, into the National Park Service. Sometimes they didn't know who they were being paid by and who they were working for, it was so intertwined. I think many of the leaders were the same. And he taught us to be very respectful of plants and animals and the earth. It was a real issue for him, and he appreciated the uniqueness and the value of all of the parks, especially the ones he was involved in.

KL: Before we talk more about your experiences here, I wanted to ask also about your mom. She was the wife of the assistant, and sometimes the acting, superintendent, and I wonder if you have any stories or recollections about what that role was like for her, or what her time at Grand Canyon National Park was like.

MO: She's the type that would get right involved in a community. One thing she did that I look back on with admiration is she took correspondence courses to get a teaching certificate, and then became a substitute teacher in the school. She did her share of entertaining, but what she liked to do more in the places we lived was to explore them. So, she took us down in the canyon as children a number of times, one time walking across from the North Rim to the South Rim. She took us to Supai. You know, the places that we're talking about in this history with the trails that were not open at the time, we didn't go on those unmaintained trails or anything, but she made sure we experienced everything that we could at Grand Canyon and at Isle Royale. We were lucky enough that when we first lived there, in the summer, my father would go to the North Rim for a month or so. And we just loved that. And I don't know why. I guess it was just that it was different. But it was just a wonderful experience. I think one of the things was, there were so few people there, park service people, but the naturalist was there. And so sometimes he'd take us butterfly catching. Or we could learn how to do the mounting. Have experiences like that, that we really enjoyed.

KL: We don't have as much coverage of the North Rim in these interviews, so can you say anything more? You liked that there weren't as many people there, but how did you spend the rest of your days there?

MO: There must have been a couple of other children. I don't remember who they were. But we would play endless games of tag, go in the woods. Where you go into the park service area, probably many of you have been there, there were two houses on either side of the road. And

we would have the one on the south side. It was two bedroom. And then there was forest around us. Now it's very open. It seemed forever to get down to where the campground was when I was young, but it's not that far, from what I'm told. There was a tree that you would climb to look for fire. What do they call those trees? They put ladders up them.

KL: A lookout?

MO: Yes. There was one in there. And we found it, and of course climbed as far as we dared. That was thrilling. And last year when I was visiting my friend Kim, who works over there as an interpreter, I found it, but it was fallen. But the ladder was still attached. It was neat to see.

AM: It was a tree tower.

MO: Yes. They just took large trees, put ladders on them, and then they could watch for fires.

KL: So I was thinking more about the sound when we were starting, but I wanted to point out that you moved to Grand Canyon National Park in 1952 and you were about nine years old at that time, and I wonder what your first impression of Grand Canyon was, or what you thought of this place?

MO: When I was in about third grade, in Michigan, I saw a picture book of a Navajo woman weaving, and I was just completely taken with that. And I saw that it was in an exotic place called Arizona. And then when we were going to move to Arizona, I was so excited. And I loved the canyon. I recognized its awesomeness, but what I was really interested in were the Native Americans. And that hasn't changed to this day – I am just fascinated by their culture. And then I found out that many Native Americans were wonderful athletes, and many were wonderful artists, and I couldn't do any of that well! So, I wanted to be like them. I really envied them, and felt very grateful and blessed to make many Native American friends.

KL: You attended Grand Canyon School from later elementary school up until you graduated from high school. What are some of your strongest memories of Grand Canyon School?

MO: Well, it was small. We were really pretty average, normal kids, playing jacks on the playground and things like that. One of my memories is of a wonderful teacher named Mr. Clark, and I was lucky enough to get him when I first moved there. He made a difference in a lot of youngsters' lives. I found that out in these recordings I've been making. One time, somebody I'd met told me that Indians were not allowed to speak their language in school. So, I heard someone in the bathroom. Well, busybody me, I reported it. I'm ashamed to admit it. So, I told Mr. Clark, and he was so kind to me, but he let me know, very clearly, that was not a bad thing, that it was a good thing, and I didn't need to worry about that.

KL: We were talking some, too, about one of the ways that you spent your spare time, which was in Girl Scouts.

MO: Yes.

KL: And I wanted to hear, and wanted others to hear, about the leader of your Girl Scout troop.

MO: There was a Girl Scout troop when I got here, and my sister and I joined right away. Our leader was a young woman who was a nurse at the hospital. Single, and just one of those giving, community-minded people. She took our Girl Scout troop on and led it. Her name was Ellen Gosa. I wasn't present for what happened, but I heard this story. All these stories are told differently by different people, but here's her story. She was young and single and the only real place for young, single people to go for any entertainment was the bar at Rowe Well. It had a bowling alley. And there was this wrangler named Jay Gosa. And he was a hard-partying young guy, and so they were out there one night and he had too much to drink, and he got a chip of wood and put it on his shoulder. He said: "I dare anybody to push that chip off my shoulder!" So, Ellen walked up and pushed the chip off his shoulder and that was the end of his partying life. They fell in love and eventually they got married. When she got pregnant, she told us that she was going to be too busy and was sorry not to be our leader. That family turned out to be just such a gift to Grand Canyon. I knew they were a neat family, but I didn't know until I did these interviews how much they did, how much they meant, especially Jay, who was the head wrangler, to the young men, the young teenagers, in town. He was at every sports game. And then I would hear them tell me: "Oh, Jay invited me to do this," or: "Jay Gosa did that." He took one young man whose parents he had hired to work at Phantom, and brought him into his home during the school year. A teenage boy. The Gosas had two toddlers and Ellen was pregnant with the third. They lived on Avenue A – Apache Avenue. Just the goodness of that family. So, I knew he was a great guy. My youngest brother was killed in Vietnam, and my parents lived in Tucson at the time. He'd moved to Denver. He came all the way down to Tucson to go to that funeral. Just such a caring, giving, important, community person, but always under the radar.

KL: Something else that happened when you were a kid here was the Lowell Thomas came to visit with a video project. I wonder if you would introduce that. This was something that we were hoping to be able to show today, but it's a little challenging sometimes to go back and forth with equipment so we're not able to, but this video that Mary's about to talk about is something that is in Grand Canyon National Park's museum collection, and so, if after hearing her talk about it, it's something that you want to see, you're welcome to make an appointment with Kim or Colleen and go and view this. But Mary, would you tell us about the Lowell Thomas project?

MO: Well, he was filming the seven wonders of the world – kind of a travel piece. He'd been all over the world, and then came back to the US to finish up. He actually hadn't, I don't think, done much of the United States. So, he came back and he decided to do Grand Canyon. My father was probably in the position of being given the charge of helping him, facilitate him doing this, and he needed seven children. So, we had four in our family. Preston Schellback was our next door neighbor, and a little older than my sister and I. If you see it, he's the first youngster that comes. My mother is having a picnic, and Lowell Thomas comes up and asks her what she thinks the seven wonders of the world are, and said: "Oh, that's easy!" And then the camera pans to these seven children coming kind of up out of the canyon. So, me and my sister Kathy

and brothers Tom and Hugh, and then the other three are Preston Schellback and Vince Ellis and then Sandy Leding. Her father was an outstanding ranger and did most of the photography from that era that the department of history here has. So, it was kind of just a little fun thing. It would have been a fun thing to show it.

KL: Yah, you'll have to go and check that out, if you have that interest. One other memory that you had, that kind of makes me think of Chris Clark's presentation earlier, to talk about is of a hike that you made with some friends on the Kaibab Trail.

MO: When we went down in the canyon, we always came up the Kaibab. There was only one bridge across the river at that time. When you crossed the bridge, there was a sign saying that if you went up the Kaibab it was seven miles to the rim, and the Bright Angel was 11 miles to the rim. By that time, you would have already walked a mile. It was hot. It was easy to pick seven miles over 11, so we always came up the Kaibab Trail. I always wanted to go down on a mule, and my father said: "No. You've got two good legs, you do not need to go down on a mule." It didn't take long before I was tired and hot and whining. And so, I decided that I just couldn't make it and he would going to have to send a mule down to get me. At that time there were two telephones on that trail, and one was maybe a couple miles from the top. I don't remember where it was, but I decided I'm going to call him, and I'm just going to tell him: "I'm not going another step. You have to send somebody down to get me." He was kind of a scary guy. You didn't really talk to him like that. So, I must have been really tired. So, finally that phone came into view, and it was broken! So, I think I was disappointed, but also relieved. He wouldn't have come. And I made it.

KL: So, your father retired from the National Park Service in 1965, and I wondered what the rest of both your father and your mother's lives were like.

MO: They retired to Tucson. My father liked to play golf, and so that was great, and my father was from the Adirondacks, so they would go back there for the summer. So, it was a very nice retirement. They enjoyed that. Came to Illinois every year to see me on their way east.

KL: And you had a career of your own, but before we get to that, I think one thing we wanted to talk about that was important to you and to other teenagers and young adults in Grand Canyon was summer employment.

MO: Yes. Jobs were a big deal. In fact, when you talk about what we did in school, that was sort of ordinary, but the job you got, and we all either wanted a job or our parents wanted us to have a job, so you got a job. My first job was helping the summer program, when I was 14 or 15, the summer children's program. My next job was at Babbitt's, which was really a good place to work, because you met everybody. Everybody came through the Babbitt's store, especially if you were a checker or at the fountain. Well, I got put in dry goods. But I had a really interesting experience there. One year, and Cindy Verkamp, you might remember what year this was, there was a huge pinyon crop. Huge! And the Navajos just poured in from the reservation. And they camped out in the woods, and nobody seemed to mind where they gathered, but there

was plenty of Forest Service land where they camped. In fact, I don't ever smell a camp fire without thinking of this, because they came into the store a lot and smelled like camp fire, and it just has stuck with me. It was very exciting. And the women, the matrons, at that time, still wore the velvet dresses and the velvet tops with the coins sewn on their sleeves. And, so, I was in dry goods, and this older Navajo woman who, I don't think, spoke English, came over, and she was very stern, and she went like this. So, I reached down, and I pulled out the first bra I came to. She grabbed it. It might have been a 32A, I don't know. I couldn't get it back from her to try to talk to her about size, she simply bought it on the spot, and off she went. So that was a really fun experience. Then I worked at the newsstand at the Bright Angel during the school year. But my best job was at the Verkamp's. There I got mentored, and mentored in a subject I was interested in – Indian arts and crafts. I worked there all through my college years. I'm very grateful to have been able to do that. It was fun, and I had good bosses. Peggy Verkamp, their aunt, was a real mentor, and I look back and think I could have gotten a lot more if I hadn't been so self-centered. I could have learned a lot more from her, but I appreciate what she gave me. She never complimented you if you didn't deserve it, but she did compliment you if you did, and that felt really good, and when she did that it was a real boost to me. I just loved that job.

- KL: And you did continue with that interest in Indian arts, I think, so talk to us a little bit about your education and your career after you left Grand Canyon.
- MO: Well, I did major in anthropology at the University of Arizona, but like my husband said: "Now where are you going to work?" You have to get a doctor's degree, if you want to work in that field! I think a lot of people who are interested in archeology and Native Americans are also interested in nature. I was. I went back and got a master's in outdoor ed, and spent 16 or 17 years teaching and managing land in Illinois – little pieces of wild land. There are no large acreages of wild left in northern Illinois. You treasure a 30-acre piece. And original prairie, you might find one acre, if you're lucky. So it's very, very precious there, but it was fun to do. And I've spent a lot of money on Native American pots and baskets. I have this wonderful husband who doesn't say anything.
- KL: A way to take a little bit of Grand Canyon country with you. I have just a few more questions related to your work with oral history at Grand Canyon, but before we get to those, I did want to offer you all a chance to ask Mary some questions if you have them. And I think I'll run the microphone so we can get it on the recording. Does anybody have any questions that you wanted to ask Mary?
- AM: Just a quick question. Did you ever get a chance to go down on a mule?
- MO: I finally did! I took my husband and two older children in the '80s. It wasn't nearly as fun as I thought it was going to be. It was kind of a disappointment.
- AM: What is your favorite place to hike to? Your favorite trail, or your favorite destination?
- MO: I love Supai.

KL: What makes Supai your favorite? What do you love about it?

MO: The Supai people and the water. You know, I've always loved – well, people love water. And when you live here, water's pretty scarce, so I was drawn to water. I did go to Phantom Ranch when there was a pool. There was water in that pool. But it was so cold! We did go in it, but...

KL: I know it's the end of the day, so I'll just wrap up with those few more questions that I had for you. So, you conducted oral history interviews with many of your Grand Canyon School classmates, and I wonder what inspired you to start that project?

MO: So, I heard about a project doing recordings. I think that had to do with the school. And, so, I contacted the park service and asked if I could volunteer. And one of the reasons I did was, I figured my friends and I would volunteer to record, but I didn't think any of my Native American friends would. So, I started off with that in mind, but I quickly branched out to others, and I'm so glad I did, because there are so many stories, so many wonderful families, that had wonderful times and sad times that I was oblivious to. Everybody's story is so interesting. It's been fun to try to get railroad people, mine people, Fred Harvey people, contractors that come in and maybe stay just a year or two. I got somebody whose father worked on the pipeline. That was really interesting. Just all these different people, and asked them how they felt about the community as a whole, and all of us felt like we were together in school, but then when I started thinking about who do you play with after school and on the weekends, it turned out it was mostly people who, but this would be any place, who were in your neighborhood. And our neighborhoods were separate. We had Fred Harvey here and railroad here and park service here, and so I don't know if that's a good idea or a bad idea, but it was just something that occurred to me. At first I thought it was something negative, but I don't think so. I think it was just who was close by.

KL: We talked about a couple of interviews that really stood out to you. Would you say more about a few of those?

MO: Well, there's one man named David Beatty, who was a very interesting man. He was bright, and curious, and he had been given, for a number of reasons, a lot of freedom when he was young, right from early age, and he lived here from a very early age. He lived at first right down by the cowboy dorm, and that is across from the mule barns. And, so, he was aware of all the mule activity, the wrangler activity, the powerhouse, the laundry, and he's electronically gifted. In fact, he invented the collars that go on the animals that people use for research that will send signals to the satellites.

AM: Radio telemetry.

MO: Yes. He invented that. He invented it because a professor who was studying the Kaibab squirrel on the North Rim was having trouble keeping track. He would catch them and spray their tails so he could keep track of who was who, and it wasn't working, and he was so frustrated, and

somebody told him to talk to David, and Dave developed something to put on them that helped him be able to find them, and figure out which ones they were. And from that, David developed that into a business. And he has a business called Telonics that's extremely successful in Mesa. And he told all about the details of every place in Grand Canyon Village. All the buildings. All the workings. It's hours and hours long. I transcribed it all, but good reading, especially for individual places you might be interested in, like the mule barn or the saddle shop or the power house – those kinds of things. And he got around. He delivered the newspaper and was curious, asking people questions. If somebody asks a question about what you do, you're delighted to share it, and so he was really an interesting study. And then another one was a guy that ended up being kind of the last real cowboy. He managed the second largest ranch in Arizona, in Prescott. He had a college degree, and it was a very big job. But he worked at the general store when he was young, in the butcher department. And when he went out on roundups and things like that, he said he used those skills he learned in the meat department at Babbitt's store over and over again to feed the men. He'd kill a cow, cut it up, cook it over the fire. He had stories about being a Grand Canyon wrangler, interesting stories of what happened on the trail sometimes. Not a lot of them, but a number of them. So that would be a fun one to read. But you find something interesting in any of them, and then stuff you want to skip over, but none of them have been boring.

KL: And that second person was Wayne Word?

MO: Wayne Word. Yes.

KL: Just to wrap up, I wonder, as someone who has this real interest also in oral history and hearing people's accounts, did your work with that oral history project change some of your thinking about your experiences at Grand Canyon? And if it has, how?

MO: Well, it's made me realize, hopefully I was normal, because I was oblivious to all these other people having these life issues. For instance, several Native American families lost several children during that time. And I knew – see, I saw these children every day, and didn't know brothers and sisters had died. But it makes me more tolerant of the adolescents in my family and that I deal with now. They are self centered – just as self centered.

KL: Mary, thank you so much for coming and doing this.

MO: Thank you for asking me.

KL: This has been a third really wonderful account, I think, of a very different side of Grand Canyon, so thank you so much for coming. Thank you guys all. Before you get up out of your chairs, I think Dave has an announcement to make, but I just want to thank Mary one more time.