

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

Interviewees: Muriel and Mike Kanan

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Mike and Muriel recount meeting, getting married and working at the North Rim Lodge in the early 1960s

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Method of Interview: By telephone

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Keys: North Rim Lodge, dining room shows, interfaith marriage

TM: Today is Thursday, October 31st, 2019. This is Part 2 of a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Muriel and Mike Kanan. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon Mike and Muriel, how are you?

Mike: Oh, we're fine, thank you.

TM: Great. May I have your permission to record this oral history interview over the telephone?

Mike and Muriel: Yes.

TM: Thank you. Last time we had talked about how you two met in the summer of 1960. Do you have some more details about that to share?

Muriel: Well, I can't remember what all we told you, but as we said earlier Mike came to play the organ and I was... It was my second year and so I was a waitress in the dining room and that's really how we became acquainted. He would play the organ to open the dining room for lunch and dinner, not for breakfast, for lunch and dinner. The waitresses would all, and the busboys, would all line up on the stairs going down into the sunken dining room and we would sing an opening song and that would open up the dining room. And then, of course, we would see each other frequently because we worked in that close vicinity of the dining room, and then in the evenings we would, or in the afternoons, we'd get together, all of us, and practice programs to present to the dudes/to the guests.

TM: Muriel, when you opened up the dining hall for lunch what kind of songs would you all sing to do that?

Mike and Muriel: It was the same one every time.

TM: (laughs) Okay. Okay.

Muriel: It was "Getting to Know You."

TM: All right, nice. Do you remember how it went?

Mike: Yes. It's the song from South Pacific isn't it?

Muriel: Right.

TM: Got it. Okay, it's the common one then. There were no specific North Rim verses for that?

Muriel: Probably tailored to fit. When we send the other music I will write the words I remember and include that.

TM: That would be great. Thank you. Okay. So you'd sing an opening song and then you would work on the evening song. Now, was that also sung before or as the dining room was opened for dinner?

Muriel: No, no. We opened the dining room and then it was all business after that.

TM: Okay. All right.

Muriel: We would then present programs up in the Rec Center. What time did they start, like at 9:00?

Mike: I think so.

Muriel: Something like that. 8:00 or 9:00, I forget.

Mike: No, it was 9:00 because the dining room was open till 8:00.

Muriel: That's right, and there was a different program each night. Usually a park ranger or one of the gear jammers who would emcee it would tell a little bit about the Canyon and then we would do, what, about a 30-minute program?

Mike: Umm hmm.

Muriel: And sometimes it was just a simple variety. You might play the accordion, you might sing, you might play the violin, you might tell jokes, you might dance. But then the other, they were organized programs. It was the Grand Show which existed before Mike and I came. Mike may have done some adjustments to suit his understanding but the Grand Show had already been written and developed by other program directors. But he wrote and put together the Old West Show and an Old South Show. Those were performed the four years that he was there and as I said earlier, those last two years we were married. So he played for me when I sang, and we would have to practice and we just enjoyed each other's company.

TM: Fun. Tell me about the Grand Show. What do you remember about that? As you said, others had put it together but what do you remember about it?

Muriel: Well, I know the introduction was something to the effect that Mike or whoever was, when the show was first developed, would play the piano up on the stage and the waitresses, dressed in uniform and carrying their trays, would come singing from the back and walk up the sides and up onto the stage from both sides. "We're the show and we're here for you and we have our fun." I can't remember, we just sang songs and then just different people performed different acts.

TM: Okay. I wonder what those... I mean, gosh, it's only 50 years ago, well, almost 60 now but... (laughs)

Muriel: Yeah.

TM: What kind of acts? Do you remember what sort of different... Like little skit kind of things?

Muriel: Yes, there were skits. Shoot, can you remember the skits, Mike?

Mike: Here is the...

Muriel: Yeah. Yeah. We'll sing...

Mike: The waitresses did a song, and the bellhops did a song, and the busboys did a song, and the cabin mates did a song.

TM: Okay. All right. Great. So each work crew or work unit had a chance to...

Muriel: Perform.

TM: ...perform.

Mike: Yeah. But it was a song. They didn't just make up a song. It was a song that was part of the Grand Show. It had words for working there at the Grand Canyon.

TM: Okay.

Muriel: And we'll send you a copy of this.

TM: Great. That'd be fun.

Muriel: It's called the Grand Show. "We work at the Canyon, Grand Canyon, Grand Canyon, in Arizona. We're a western throng here to sing our song for all of you out there. Won't you sing along. We work at the Canyon, Grand Canyon." We'll send you that copy.

TM: That'd be great.

Muriel: It kind of includes the various...like the ones who worked in the curio shop and as Mike mentioned the other areas of labor.

TM: Okay. Great. All right. So there was the Grand Show, but Mike wrote an Old West and an Old South show. How were those different from the Grand Show?

Mike: Well, both of the others were songs that people knew. We just strung them together for our show.

Muriel: That the guests would know.

TM: All right.

Muriel: I know one of the ones I sang in a trio with Mary Jane Broadbent and, oh shoot, Donita Hill, I think her name was. We sang "Nothing could be finer than to be in Carolina in the morning." So Mike picked out songs like that and put together this Old South show and like a trio might come out and sing,

two might come out and dance, three or four might come out and do something else, but it all hung together with mostly Old South songs. Like “My Old Kentucky Home”.

Mike: “Suwanee”, “Carolina Moon”.

TM: Okay.

Muriel: Yeah.

TM: Okay, okay. So this is helping me to think about a time before television when people would sing, would get together and someone would play an instrument and everyone would sing. I’m sort of thinking about evening entertainment.

Mike: Yes. That was part of the understanding when you were hired that you would participate in that.

TM: Nice. Because, you know, I mean today, people go get something to eat and then they scurry back and they get on their computer and they download their photographs for Facebook and they...

Muriel: Yes. Yep.

TM: ...you know, check what’s happening on Twitter or whatnot. The ability for a group of people to socialize and make music together still exists but it just is so rare (laughs). Doesn’t happen quite as much.

Muriel: Right. No, it’s... I read a little book back in the late 60s, early 70s, written by a sociologist called *The Pursuit of Loneliness* and that was before cell phones and computers and laptops (laughs).

TM: Yeah, yeah. Interesting. Muriel, you got to the North Rim the year before Mike showed up, is that right?

Muriel: Correct.

TM: And Mike, you showed up in 1960. Is that right?

Mike: That’s right.

TM: Okay. So at the end of 1960 it was time to go back home. Did you guys kind of spark up a friendship there in 1960 and then were you gonna leave? How did that work out? Did you stay in touch by letters?

Muriel: Yeah. It was just friends, all through ‘60, just good, good friends. Hiking together and cooking out together and sitting around and talking and practicing and working together. When we both left it was just “See ya next summer.”

TM: Okay. And, “Can I have your address and write you some letters over the winter” or just “See ya next summer?”

Muriel: No, we didn’t even do that.

TM: Huh. Okay. So that winter of 1960-61, Muriel, what did you do?

Muriel: I was in college at Brigham Young University, working part time at J. C. Penney's and going to college, living at home.

TM: All right. And Mike, what were you doing?

Mike: I was finishing my senior...I was doing my senior year in college at the University of Iowa.

TM: Did both of you think you were gonna go back for '61 or were you thinking other plans?

Mike: I was definitely going back.

Muriel: And I wasn't sure.

TM: Okay. Well, Muriel, were you kind of looking at options?

Muriel: Yeah, I might have wanted to have gone on through school for the summer and graduate in my field, which was elementary education, so I could... College was expensive even then, nothing compared to now, of course, and I just thought I need to get finished and start working. So I probably... My sister wasn't going to go back and she was getting married and so I thought, "I think I'll just probably not, I don't think I'll go back."

TM: What changed so that you did?

Muriel: Oh, just things kind of in my personal life changed. A person I had been going with, we broke off, and that was a good thing. And my father... My mother had passed away and my father had remarried and someone then was new in the home. I just thought you know what, give her a chance to be here without me. I was going to be a junior in college the next year. I said I think I'll just go back and work at the Grand Canyon. So I had not applied to go back. I called Lamar and asked him if there was still an opening. He said, "Sure, come back."

TM: Wow. Nice. Okay. And Mike, what drew you back to the Canyon? I mean, you were graduating now in college and what said, of course, I'm going to go back?

Mike: I was going on to graduate school so I thought I would just take that summer off, too.

TM: Okay. And what were you gonna get your graduate degree in?

Mike: Sociology. I had already been accepted into the program and was going to be working as a teaching assistant, a graduate teaching assistant, so I already knew where I was gonna be in the fall.

TM: Okay. Nice. So how did you apply for the 1961 season?

Mike: I just went back.

TM: Did you write them a letter and say, "Hey, can I come..."

Mike: No. They...

Muriel: I'm quite sure they contacted you if you were coming back and you said yes.

Mike: Well, I think, yeah.

Muriel: At the end of the summer, actually.

Mike: At the end of the summer I said I would be back and so they just... I assume they contacted... Somehow or other I got train tickets again.

TM: Okay. All right. And then you guys would have seen each other when you arrived.

Muriel: I arrived first and was in a dorm sitting with my roommates, cause we had all gotten in touch with each other toward the end of the school year who was going back and who we wanted to live with. I was sitting in the dorm room talking as we were and we knew the bus arrived with new guests and any employees who were on that bus and we saw Mike. Didn't we see you get off the bus, or did you come walking by our dorm room?

Mike: I think I went back, walked back down to the dorm.

Muriel: Yeah. And you crawled in through the window, do you remember? (laughter) Cause the window was wide open and we all just went, "Ah, Mike Kanan's back!" We all just, you know how exciting that is.

TM: Cool. Oh, that's fun.

Muriel: It was, it was.

TM: So tell me more about the summer of 1960.

Muriel: It was just more of just the same stuff. Working and having fun and singing and hiking and enjoying and welcoming. You're breaking in anybody who was new and remembering with anybody who wasn't and...

Mike: In the summer of 1960 I was living in a dorm, in the boys' dorm. Then when I got there in the summer of 1961 I had a cabin.

TM: Wow. Okay. Things were looking up.

Muriel: No, in '60 you didn't have a cabin, you had the dorm.

Mike: In '61.

TM: You know, I'm sorry. I said tell me more about the summer of 1960, I meant 1961 so that's my bad.

Muriel: Oh, okay. Gotcha.

TM: So there's Mike and he's walking past the dorm and you're like "There's Mike Kanan," up goes the window and Mike comes through the window and this is great.

Muriel: And that was the summer you had a cabin, Mike?

Mike: That was '61, yeah, I had a cabin that summer.

Muriel: All right.

TM: Okay. All right. And Muriel, this is now gonna be your third summer as a waitress, is that right?

Muriel: Right. Well second summer as a waitress. I became a waitress at the end of the first summer after being a cabin maid. But the second summer, then, was full waitressing and, yes, this is now gonna be the third experience waitressing.

TM: Okay. And, of course, by this time these big heavy trays are getting easier and much more manageable, I suppose (laughs).

Muriel: Exactly. Yeah. And there is a sense, as there is in most places, not necessarily of seniority but of experience. So you're more in a situation now where you're training the new waitresses and welcoming the new busboys and the new cooks. So you're an old-timer.

TM: Uh huh. Did that come with increased salary?

Muriel and Mike: No. (laughter)

TM: No? Okay.

Muriel: You know, the main advantage moneywise with the Grand Canyon, especially as a waitress where you did make good tips, there was no place to spend your money.

TM: No, but it's a good place to save money.

Muriel: It was. It was excellent. Room and board provided and you just sent home every check.

TM: Yep, yep, wonderful. Good. Okay. 1961, tell me more about the summer. Did you guys start then, you know, romancing a little bit then, were you still just good friends?

Muriel: We did. We did, yeah.

TM: Okay. Nice.

Muriel: Every 24th of July we had Christmas in July. We'd decorate the dining room and have a big dance/a ball, for the employees, anybody who... Mainly funded and supplied by the waitresses. That was their big deal.

TM: Oh, wow.

Muriel: Everybody could come and I asked Mike to be my date.

TM: Oh, my gosh.

Muriel: Do you remember that, Mike?

Mike: Yeah, kind of.

TM: Good for you.

Muriel: It was a waitress ask and we just had such a good time.

TM: Fun. Tell me more about the Christmas in July. So it's the 24th of July. It's six months out, or five months out from Christmas there.

Muriel: Right.

TM: Would you like...

Mike: Well, the 24th of July is a big holiday in Utah.

TM: Okay. All right. Sorry, I thought...

Mike: So they made that into Christmas in July at the North Rim.

TM: Okay. All right. Fun. So I'm thinking of like candy canes and red hats with little white pompoms and sort of things?

Muriel and Mike: I honestly can't remember. (laughter)

TM: Okay. I'm trying to think of how you would have tried to change that a little bit. Fun.

Muriel: And my sister came back that summer, married, and brought her husband. He worked in the kitchen. What was that called, Mike, when you were in the kitchen?

Mike: A steward.

Muriel: A steward. He was the kitchen steward and she was a waitress and they worked there. They had just gotten married in June and it gave them a job, you know, room and board and a job for the summer. He was headed to California. They had both graduated from college to be a physical therapist, he was going to school down there. They stopped and worked for three months at the Grand Canyon first and then drove on to California. So the four of us, Mike and I and Mariba and Paul would play cards together in their cabin and visit a lot and have a lot of fun. But really, everything in the beginning with the intention of getting married because we were of two different faiths and cultures.

TM: Yes. So, how did it all work out then? When did you all...? Did you start getting maybe serious about a life together next year in '62?

Muriel: No, we were married in February of '62. By the end of the summer we both realized we really wanted to pursue it so we stayed in touch. We talked on the phone and wrote letters. By somewhere in September, end of September/October, we made arrangements for me to take the train to Iowa City and then he could show me around Iowa City. Then we drove down to his parents' house in Missouri and had Thanksgiving dinner together. Then he came out at Christmastime to meet my family and we got engaged and were married between semesters. That was back in the day when semesters went through Christmas, through the winter holiday. Then we were married at the beginning of February on a Saturday night in my house, just a small gathering actually. Then we took the train to Iowa the next day and started... Arrived in Iowa City on Monday morning, or was it Tuesday morning, Tuesday morning, Monday morning.

Mike: Monday morning.

Muriel: A friend picked us up in his car and we registered on Tuesday and started classes on Wednesday.

TM: So if you don't mind to talk a little bit about this. Muriel, your faith was Mormon?

Muriel: Yes.

TM: Yes. And Mike, yours?

Mike: Presbyterian.

MT: Okay. I think you guys may have told me that already. But love is stronger than these things and how did you both sort that out?

Mike: Hmm.

Muriel: Well, one of the things we said to each other was that each of us could practice our own faith as was comfortable for each of us. But Mike was good enough to have the understanding that children could be raised Mormon.

TM: Okay.

Muriel: Then we worked a scale out from 1 to 10. If there was something I wanted to go to, and Mike could go if he wanted to, you know, an activity, a church-based activity, or he wanted me to go to, and you assigned the value of a 1, a 2, or a 3, the person could choose whether or not to go and there wasn't an issue. But as it approached 7, 8, 9, or 10, especially 10, "This is a 10, Mike," or "This is a 10, Muriel," then you had to act like you really wanted to go, in fact, it was your idea. You had to really be comfortable and it worked. We tried, first, going to each other's services every other week and it was too different.

TM: Yeah.

Muriel: So we didn't pursue that, but we've always been totally supportive of each other's religious beliefs.

Mike: But it was a small branch there in Iowa City and so I ended up playing for their services for a year or two.

TM: Oh, fun. Nice. In a way both communities would have gotten a chance to know the other in a way.

Mike: That's right and that has been true all these years.

Muriel: Yeah. We go to a lot of Presbyterian things and a lot of Mormon things, and we're both extremely politically active.

TM: How fun is that.

Muriel: We're both Democrats and we were very active in the Democratic Party and organization in Flagstaff and in.....

Recording abruptly stopped mid-stream with no continuation as the memory card is full. Part 3 completes this interview.