

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Nancy Eileen Muleady-Mecham (NM)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Nancy recounts her work as firefighter in Sierra National Forest, backcountry ranger at Dinkey Lakes, and naturalist at Sequoia National Park, in addition to describing specialization within the Park Service.

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PART 2

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TM: Today is Tuesday, December 1st, 2020. This is Part 2 of a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Nancy Eileen Muleady-Mecham. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Nancy. How are you today?

NM: Hi, Tom. I'm great, thank you for asking.

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

NM: Yes.

TM: Thank you. We ended Part 1 where you had been offered a good government job working for the Department of the Navy, in some sort of thrilling something, I'm sure (*NM laughs*), in a job that put you in a basement with no window.

NM: Environmental Impact Specialist.

TM: Yes, I have EIS written down; I'm thinking, what does that mean? Oh yes, Environmental Impact Specialist.

NM: I sit at a desk and read reports and make analyses and don't go in the field.

TM: And make the big bucks in 1977.

NM: Yes, and it was a permanent job with benefits. Yes, not a lot of money, but it was the beginning of a ladder that you could climb up. But I'm an outdoors gal. I'm a nature gal. I'm not a sit-behind-a-desk gal.

TM: And you gave that good job up for a GS-3 firefighting position?

NM: Yes, I came home on that same day to my mom's house, and she said, "The U.S. Forest Service called from the Sierra National Forest. They have an opening for a GS-3 firefighter, which is just about the lowest of the low (*TM laughs*), in the Kings River District." And I said, "Oh, that's what I want to do."

TM: Had you been to the Kings River area before?

NM: I had been in the area, yes. I hadn't been where this station was. But it's on the way to—up Highway 168 to Shaver Lake. My station ended up being out of Dinkey Creek—which I love that name—and the training facilities were out of a place called Trimmer. But it's out of Fresno area, north of Sequoia National Park, which is where my family went a lot for camping, growing up.

TM: Okay. And this is the summer of 1977?

NM: It is. 1977.

TM: Okay. And how much firefighting experience had you had by then?

NM: Oh, no. I was a college graduate. I had zero. The jobs that I had before this consisted of the ones that I'd already outlined, while at university. And then as a kid I babysat, worked at a Taco Bell, worked at, I think, May Company, one Easter. And then I worked at that semiconductor factory I had already outlined. So really nothing to that, but my dream in all of this was to get out into nature. And this was one way to do it. I was physically fit. I considered myself a tomboy in that I enjoyed doing all kinds of athletic things and things that challenged the mind and the body.

TM: And so when you showed up there, how many other females were on your crew?

NM: Oh no. I was the only one.

TM: Only one, okay.

NM: I was the very first woman on the Kings River district. You show up, and you go through training. And they later added another woman, later that summer. And then the training is down at the foothills in a place called Trimmer. And it's book-learning; you're in a classroom. And you learn the three triangles of the fire—combustion is a part of oxygen, ignition and fuel. And you understand weather, you understand radios, you understand all kinds of things.

And then you have training outdoors, and you are working on fire engines, you're working with hoses, you're working with different tools such as McCloud's, Pulaski's, saws, things like that. And so that summer of 1977 I was assigned on a PTO—power takeoff engine—crew, which consisted of one leader, Eddie McMurtry—Eddie Mac, we called him—and three guys. And then I showed up as the fourth on the crew.

And three of the four guys were okay with me at first. They kind of were tentative, because I think when I first showed up the consensus was, their work was going to get a lot harder because they had to do their work plus mine. And within a short time, they saw my enthusiasm, they saw my athleticism, they saw that I learned quickly and I wanted to work as hard as any of them. And all of that worked out great after a while.

In fact, I ended up going to some pretty big fires, and they acted like my big brothers at that time. And big campaign fires. You get in line, for instance, to go get meals, and you're the only woman (*laughs*), and there's all these guys around. And my crew would stand in line in front of me and behind me and wouldn't let any of the guys give me any guff. So they became my brothers after a while. In fact, I still am friends with one of them, all these decades later. He still works at Sequoia National Park. He later went from the Forest Service to the National Park Service.

So I should say this is the United States Forest Service Department of Agriculture. You also had to do something called a red card, which means you had to qualify to be physically fit and to do all kinds of stuff. So in between fires and before fires and after you're qualified, that was a summer that I learned so much. I learned how to use and take care of tools, how to maintain tools, how to cut down a tree. And when you use a saw, the person using the saw is called a sawyer, kind of like Tom Sawyer. That's the profession—like the cooper makes barrels, a sawyer uses a saw. So I became a qualified sawyer.

And I learned to be a timber cruiser, because after fires you want to reseed an area. That was a policy back then. So you find trees. And I learned to climb trees with spikes and a rope, and then I would rappel down and bring down cones and cut branches off trees and top them and work my way down as I cut down a tree. So it was just magnificent, in terms of making my field skills really good.

TM: What's a PTO engine?

NM: PTO—power takeoff.

TM: Yep, and so did it run a pump, the power takeoff?

NM: Yes, it ran a pump; we had a pump. And trying to remember the name of the guy. He had a beard...Dave! It was his second or third season on there. And he was kind of a hippie type, philosopher kind of guy, but he knew how to run that pump. And when we had to go to a fire, when you could get close to the fire we would use water, but back then we had mostly tools. And to put a fire out you need to either take away the oxygen or take away the fuel. And by wetting it down, you help an awful lot by getting rid of the fuel and the oxygen by putting water on it.

But if you have to walk miles into a place—say you were a smoke jumper—or, like we were, when we would go in by ourselves at the coyote camp, which is an isolated camp, then you would just move the fuel away from the fire. And the rule of thumb is, when you would put line around the fire, that you wanted the line to be like a sidewalk around it. And that sidewalk's width was determined by the height of the flames that were near you. So it had to be one and a half times the height of the flames. So if the flames were two feet high, then your line around the fire was three feet wide, as far as fuels.

And then often I walked at nighttime with a Fedco, which is the brand of the five-gallon water-pack on your back. The nickname for it back then was the "piss pump." And so you'd walk around, and you'd look for fires outside the line, which were called spot fires. And then we would spray them with our piss pump, Fedcos.

Another thing that we did, is we often backfired. So I had a container full of fuel with a long nozzle on it. And I would light the end of the nozzle, and I would walk along the line that had been created and set the forest on fire. So it would burn toward the fire and therefore the fire wouldn't go past the black that had already been burned and the line became even wider. But we learned to use tents—survival shelters. And you always have an escape plan.

TM: Were those—

NM: Shelters.

TM: Yes, little fire shelters had been invented by then and were distributed?

NM: Yes, we had little shelters. We wore them on our packs, on our packs and on our belts. And more to the point, though, we were taught little things, like, when you're walking along a hillside, you always carry your tool in the downhill hand, not the uphill hand, because if you drop it, it would roll down and knock your feet out from underneath you. So little things like that. And if you're really stuck, take a chance, run through the fire to the black. Run to where it was burned or find a water source. So I learned a lot that summer.

TM: What was it like, then, on your first fire?

NM: My first fire was not that spectacular. It was, interestingly enough, a fire that they had put out the previous fall. And it had snowed on the fire, and it had smoldered under the fire the whole winter long. Which, come to find out, that is not uncommon. And so, in the heat of the summer, it went from smolder to flames again, so by the time we got to it, it was just a couple of acres.

Yes, and we did a lot of other things. For instance, we would put slash piles together, and we carried this 40-pound roll of tar paper up and down the hillsides. And we'd rip off a piece, and we'd put it on the pile, because you didn't want to light them off until there was snow, but there had to be a dry spot. One of the things I used to do—which I think got me in good with the guys—is, there was a lot of cattle grazing the Forest Service. And every now and then you'd get a call that a cow had been hit by a car, or a truck, or something, was laying in the middle of the roadway.

And so they would assign us because we had lots of busy work to in between fires. And I remember going down there to all of the hit and killed cattle on the roadways. And there was no way you can haul off a 2,000 pound cow, so it had to be gutted first. And being a biologist, didn't bother me at all. I'd pick out a knife, slice it open, pull out its intestines, made it 500 pounds lighter, and then we could easily haul it off. And they just thought that was very cool—none of them wanted to do it—that I didn't mind the stink, and the pulling of all of that, and taking care of that. We always wanted to take steaks, but our supervisor wouldn't let us do that.

TM: *(laughs)* No eating the roadkill.

NM: That's right. That summer, I also met a guy that I became very close to later on. He was of Indian descent. And that winter I ended up living with his family at Friant and learning a lot about the Indians down on that side.

TM: Where did you live with them?

NM: Friant.

TM:TM: And where's that?

NM: Up from Millerton Lake—I think it's a state park. It's there. Unfortunately—I mean, it was beautiful, primitive area in the foothills, in the mountains, below Shaver Lake and that area—

TM: In the Sierras?

NM: Yes. I'm still in touch with the family that's left. And, sadly, they got the Casino contract, and the family that I lived with—it was on their land—they built the casino. So they got very rich very quickly. And it was sad to see how things have changed.

TM: Okay. And so at the end of the summer—this is a seasonal position, is that right?

NM: That's right. So after the end of the summer, I got a job working for a large animal veterinarian. He's got a great name: Dr. Bob Cutright. Isn't that a great name for a veterinary surgeon?

TM: Cutright, yes.

NM: Cutright. I was in Fresno and he was lousy at sending out his bills, and he needed somebody to do that. And I'm a certified veterinary assistant, so I got put in there. And I organized all of the medication stuff, because he, being a large animal vet, had a truck, and all the medications were on the trucks. And he had water tanks to fill, and he would go out on all these calls. Calls didn't come to him; he went to the calls. Horses and pigs, and cattle mostly. And the deal was, if I got everything organized and sent out and started collecting money, that I could start going on the calls. That was a real incentive. The calls were great. I learned how to castrate horses. I'd hold the head. Some of these stories are in my first book, *Park Ranger*. We would go up to the foothills to people who had lived there forever. And when you castrate a horse, that means you're taking their testicles off. And sometimes some of the testicles are up into the body, and that's called cryptorchid. And you had to get that down, and if you didn't, then the testosterone would still flow through the horse, and he would be an unruly stallion rather than a calmer gelding.

But in some of these places, after you emasculated the horse, you had to throw the testicles over the head of the horse. And then they wouldn't be proud, so they believed. That was a sure guarantee that there was no testosterone left. And if you didn't do that, you didn't get called back, because you didn't know the local folk ways. So kind of fun.

There's one time we went to a farm, and there was a cow who had just calved. And she had a prolapsed uterus. So imagine a cow standing there with this sac coming out her uterus, hanging out to almost the ground. So you need to spray that off, and you'd push it back in, and you'd sew up her vulva, and off you'd go.

We went to a place called Golden Genes out in Riverdale. And that was fascinating to me, because we would take embryos—they would take embryos from these million-dollar cattle, and they would implant them in rabbits and mail the rabbits back east. And then they'd put them in some \$200 heifer and grow this \$100,000 calf in there. So it was the very beginning of that embryo transfer stuff.

What else? Oh, I remember we went to Johnny Cuelo's Cutting Horse farm, (and I loved cut horses). And one time they were going to sell a stallion, and it was going to stand stud, meaning his job was to impregnate mares. And in order to prove that he had the sperm to do the job, you brought a mare over that was in heat. The stallion mounted her, and then you took something called an AV—an artificial vagina—which is a warm, water-filled sack, and you placed that over his penis as he mounted her. He ejaculates into that, you take the cup at the end, you look at it under a microscope, you count the sperm.

And that horse that day sold for \$125,000. And this is back in the '70s. And so I just thought, "I can't tell the difference between a \$100 horse and a \$125,000 horse!" (*laughs*) But that was the game back then. And so being a veterinary assistant was just fabulous.

TM: Where were you staying at the time?

NM: I had a little apartment in—not Modesto; that was later on. I had a little apartment in Clovis, California, on Jefferson Street.

TM: Okay. And then, thinking about furthering your government career, did you apply for more seasonal jobs then?

NM: Yes. Every winter the government put out an announcement—and I think it was January back then. This was before the website *USAJobs*. This was before the internet. So you got to apply to two different places—

TM: Just two.

NM: Two different places. But I wasn't thinking about the Park Service at all at this time. I had broken up with my boyfriend at the time, and I was kind of sad. And I worked for the large animal vet, and then I got called back to Catalina Island. I think I told you that I did work there as a senior. But I got called back to work as a marine biologist. So after I worked for the large animal vet, I went to Catalina Island. I worked as a marine biologist and wrote that paper with Bob Givens I told you about, and would go back and dive with other people, and had a really good time. And then I got a form saying, "Would you like to work for the Forest Service again?" And I said yes. So the next summer of '78, this time the job was as a backcountry ranger. And then sawyer.

TM: Okay, so hang on a second. I want to go through this job application process, because it doesn't happen like that anymore.

NM: No, it was a form called an SF 171, as I recall. In fact, I still have my application. (*laughs*)

TM: Would you have to go to a Forest Service office somewhere to get the forms to fill out? How would you do that?

NM: You would go to almost any government office, anywhere, in any city. The SF 171 was a standard form for, I believe, almost any low-level government job at the time. This is for the Forest Service, this is for the Park Service, this is for Bureau of Rec, this is for the Department of the Army. So that was the form you used, and then you put in—you would look at the flyer that you had, and you'd put in the codes. And then you'd mail them off, and then they would go—it was all done by mail

TM: So they would mail you a flyer saying, "These are the jobs, and these are the places, that are coming up later this year"?

NM: No. In my particular case, the U.S. Forest Service—because you have an evaluation at the end of your season. And if you get a—trying to remember the terminology, "Highly recommended for rehire" is basically what it says, versus, "we don't want you back." And then if you're the "okay to rehire," and you want to come back, you get first pick of the job over a new hire.

TM: Oh, okay.

NM: So the Forest Service at the Sierra National Forest said, "We like what you did. You want to come back. We have an opening as a backcountry ranger out of Dinkey Lakes in what they called the Woodchuck Wilderness, which is now the John Muir Wilderness. And I said, "Sure. That'd be great," because I had all these skills now. And so I went back, went through the training, got the red card, and worked for...—I can't remember his name, but I remember he had this VW bus that he had cut the back off of. So it was just the cab and then the bed of it; it was really interesting. So that's when I learned to pack mules and horses.

I learned to pack mules and horses so we could take stuff into the backcountry, supplies and stuff. I learned the diamond hitch and the box hitch. And then I was with a crew of—there was three of us at any one time, but sometimes the crew changed a little bit—sometimes as many as four or just 2. There was one cabin that was sort of basecamp, and then we would go out and do trail work. So our main job was to build trails and water bars, and to make those doggone blazes on trees.

So I had an ax and a mallet, and I would make little rectangles and then long rectangles on lodgepole pines and stuff. And at the time, I was very proud. I look back now and go, "Gosh, I'm sorry. I hurt the trees." But then when I'm backpacking in a place that's not often used, I look for the blazes and go, "Thank goodness there are blazes."

TM: Somebody help me; I forgot where to go.

NM: That's right. So I guess that's the summer I also walked the farthest in one day—28 miles. And I did that because I came off of my days off, and I walked into the cabin area, 14 miles, sat on the front porch, bit on a piece of popcorn, broke off the back of one of my teeth, and walked all the way back out to go to the dentist. So I think that's my record—28 miles in one day.

TM: Wow. Well done.

NM: Yep. So that was with the Forest Service. And you fought an occasional fire, but for the most part I built trails, packed mules, did a lot of saw work—a lot of saw work. And there's one day I remember—we were at a camp we had made, because you can't just go back to your cabin every day. You have to make what we call coyote camps, you know, just little spot camps.

And we put up a little hammock, and I was laying in the hammock. One guy was over at one side, and one guy was on the other side. And we were all just sitting there, kind of chatting, and then there was a lull in the chatting. And I looked over, and walking into camp, not 15 feet from me, was the biggest mountain lion I had ever seen. His face was as big as a dinner plate, and he was walking in. And we all saw it, and we just all froze. And then he lifted up his paw to take another step toward us, and then he just froze in midair. I can still see this vividly. He just stopped and held his paw in midair, never moved his head. But his eyes moved. And then he slowly started walking backwards. And we never moved, we never yelled, we never said anything.

TM: Just sat there looking.

NM: That was my first wild mountain lion sighting, and he was right in the camp. It was amazing.

TM: Wow. And a big adult.

NM: Yes. And I have pictures of me cutting, being a sawyer and doing stuff. Oh, but the other fun thing—and I did this the summer before, but not as much as this summer—is, I would often hike out seven or eight miles at the end of my day to get in my car, drive down to Sierra High School to play softball. So I played summer softball in a league. And then afterwards I would get back in my car, drive up, and hike in before dawn the next morning so that I could work the next week. So I played once a week on this softball league. And if the games fell on my days off, then sometimes I played then. But I loved softball, and so it was worth it. And our team won the league that summer. And I was the MVP, and I've got the softball with it all signed by my teammates.

TM: Oh wow. Fun.

NM: That was fun. When you're young, and you didn't need much sleep, and you could go, go, go, it was pretty amazing time.

TM: So this is 1978. This was in Sequoia National Forest?

NM: Sierra National Forest.

TM: Sierra, Sierra National Forest. Okay. What were you thinking for the fall/winter coming up, 1978/1979?

NM: I wasn't sure at first, but that very summer I went to Sequoia National Park on some of my days off. And I camped at a place called Dorst Campground in Sequoia National Park. And there was a guy maybe 55/60 years old who was the ranger there. And his name was Dave Thompson. And I went on his walk, and he was a very good naturalist, really could talk. And part way through I said, "What are the epiphytes up on the tree?" And he looked at me, and he said, "Well, those are staghorn lichen, and that's old man beard, and that's..." And I go, "Oh, thank you."

And at the end of the walk he said, "Just a minute, young lady." And I said, "Yes." And he goes, "Nobody ever asks about the epiphytes in the tree." And I said, "Oh, well, I'm a biologist—graduated from UCLA, working for the Forest Service now." And he goes, "Would you like to be a park ranger?" And I said, "Really? You think I could?"

TM: Woah.

NM: He goes, "Oh yes." So I—he invited me to his cabin, and we talked for a long time, and he said, "Here is a—here is an opportunity for an internship with the NPS. Because, at that time, in order to work as a permanent, you have to be a permanent for the U.S. government at that time. That give you status. Working as a seasonal did not give you status and you could not apply for permanent jobs.

TM: Wait. Say that again; explain that.

NM: In order to work as a permanent for the government, you have to have worked as a permanent for the government. Was a real catch-22.

TM: Yes.

NM: For instance, as a seasonal—let's say I worked 10 years as a seasonal for the Park Service. I still could not apply for a permanent job. It has changes some now, and somebody who works for, say, the

U.S. Army Corps of Engineer for three months in a permanent position could apply for a park ranger position, I could not apply, and they would get it, because I did not have status.

TM: Got it.

NM: Status is the golden key that gets you a permanent job, so this was one way out of it, this internship and that was having—they were just now starting to open up the doors to people who did not have status.

So Dave said, "I'll write a letter of recommendation from me for you." I said, "How can you do that? You've only met me a day." And he goes, "I know." I said, "Oh, that's great." So he wrote a letter of recommendation for me for this one particular job as an intern naturalist at Sequoia National Park. I did not get it, but it put it in my mind that maybe that's what I wanted to do, so that winter, I had—I applied for the National Park Service. You can only apply to two places. One was Yosemite, and one was Sequoia National Park. And I got offered a job in both places as a seasonal. And I went and talked to Dick Burns. He called me and he said, "I have an opening here at Lodgepole for a naturalist." But he says, "According to your SF 171, you're a sawyer, you're a backcountry ranger, you've done trail work." He said, "Are you sure you wouldn't rather be in the protection division?"

I said, "Oh no. I want to be a naturalist. I'm a biologist, and I want to do that." And he goes, "Well, okay." And he hired me as a GS-4. Whoo! A step up, you know. And so that year—1979—was the year I became a naturalist at Lodgepole and Sequoia National Park. And that was the beginning.

TM: Okay, so hang on a second. Because I'm kind of going back to when you were first on the fire crew, you were the first female in—another female came in later in the summer. For a 50-something year old park ranger to—he was ahead of his time.

NM: He was, but he was not a permanent. He was the seasonal Dorst ranger. He had been there for 15 years at that point. In the wintertime he was a teacher at Cali Poly San Luis Obispo in biology. Much more open-minded than a government employee.

TM: Got it. I was just kind of saying, how was it that Dave Thompson had the—because I'm doing all these other interviews, and it's like, well, good luck with that. We don't—

NM: No, he was a special, special person. And I knew him up until he died. Exceptional guy.

TM: Wow. What about Dick, because he clearly...

NM: Dick Burns was an interesting guy. He was permanent with the National Park Service. He had fought in World War II. And I didn't know the details, until I met and married Kent, about what he did during World War II. I said to Kent, "He packed mules and did something hush hush in Asia." And he goes, "Oh, no. He was one of the elite people that went through the mountains in Burma, or something, and went over the Himalayas." I don't know what he did, but he was with an elite marine corps crew that did all kinds of stuff. He was really something.

And then he started work at Sequoia National Park. And he was trained, I think, by somebody who was a park ranger in the '30s. So it's kind of neat that I was trained by somebody who was trained by some of the first rangers. Because he retired just a couple years after—two years after he hired me. So he was older, 60s, something or other. So he'd been there for 30-something years.

But he was so old-school that when they did their first burn in a Sequoia Grove—I was told this story—when they did their first burn of sequoia grove, which we now know was very important—at the time, his whole career was spent protecting the big trees—that he cried. He was so old-school that when he gave bird walks, in between talking about birds, he would recite from poetry from memory.

TM: But yet he was willing to hire females.

NM: I don't know that willing is the right word. I don't know if he was told to do it, because the Chief of Interpretation of was younger. His name was John Palmer, and he was a kick. Man, he was great. He got his status down at—oh, what was the story he told me—Big Bend National Park, right on the border of Mexico. And one time I had a conversation with him, and I said, "So, what did you do down there?" And he said—I collected illegal immigrants—basically said 'get in the back of the truck' in Spanish." He goes, "Right. That's all I could say." So his job was to drive along the border, tell people to get in the back of the truck, and drive them back across the border. *(laughs)*

But, no. I actually went to graduate school with his son. So you wondered what I did after that backcountry years? I went back to school and got my master's degree. So, '79 to '80—those winters I was at Cal. State University, Fresno—Fresno State. And I got my master's degree in biology. The thesis was in paleontology—"The Fossils of Maricopa," which was later published. But that first winter, when I got my letter saying I got accepted as a naturalist, and I said, "Oh boy!"—because it was one thing for Dick Burns to say, "I'm going to offer you a job," but when you got that letter, it was very special.

I ran into the lab that I shared with another graduate student. And his name was Dick Palmer. And I said, "Dick, Dick, I got the job at Sequoia!" And he goes, "That's great. You'll be working for my dad." And I said, "Dick Palmer, John Palmer. John Palmer! Your dad is the chief naturalist there?" And he goes, "Yes. And he goes, "Well, why didn't you tell me? You could have pulled some strings!" *(TM and NM laugh)* He goes, "They would have figured it out, that you were okay anyway."

TM: I just find it interesting, though, that Dick Burns was clearly—wanted you to consider going into protection.

NM: Absolutely, because of my background. I had only a little teaching experience,—well, I had thought maybe I wanted to get my teaching certificate, at one point. So when I was at UCLA I went parttime to, I almost forgot about this. I went to Cal State University Long Beach State and took some night classes to get my secondary teaching credential. And so I went and taught at a local high school a couple of times and stuff. And I thought, you know what? I don't want to be a disciplinarian.

TM: Oh, interesting.

NM: And that's what you did half the time in High School. So I thought with a master's degree I could teach other things. So I never did get my secondary teaching credential. So I had limited public speaking experience because of that, and almost all my stuff was, I can use a saw, I can use a this, I can do this, do that. But I did have a degree in biology.

TM:TM: Well, it's an interesting time for the Park Service, because they were trying to get females into protection—

NM: Back in the '70s, no. Well, maybe—

TM: Well, but there's Dick Burns, so somebody was telling him—

NM: Oh, no. He was not trying to get me into protection. He was not trying not to pick me. "Wouldn't you rather apply to protection." He had no pull in protection.

TM: Oh, I see. He was trying to get you to apply someplace else, somewhere else—

NM: Yes, so he could go pass me to somebody else, because you are—he has to offer it to different people in a row. And I soon as I say no, he could go to the next person.

TM: Thank you. I misunderstood that.

NM: Yes, no. He didn't want me. (*laughs*) But later on we became great friends, and up until he died—and after he retired, I'd go visit him at Three Rivers. And I ended up living in the cabin he and his wife Peggy lived in at Lodgepole in Sequoia NP, where they raised their kids in in the summertime. And so after he retired I would go down to their home in Three Rivers. And I actually did an oral history of Dick Burns before he passed away. And so that was a lot of fun. So after he realized that I knew what I was doing, I had a good mind, and a good memory—and one of the things I could do—and I think it's the Irish in me—is tell stories—that I became, with his help and everybody else's, I think a top-notch naturalist.

TM: Yes. Okay, so going to get your master's in '79/'80, and working as a seasonal in the summer—is that how that worked?

NM: Yes. So I actually was a seasonal for 14 total summers. I worked at Sequoia National Park in the summer, and then in the wintertime I either worked at a winter national park, or I went back to school. Let me backtrack a little bit. There are national parks where their greater visitation is in the wintertime—Everglades, Hawaii, Texas, Death Valley, things like that. Almost all the other parks, they get their greater visitation in the summertime. I worked at Sequoia National Park all summers, and then I would work the winter—I worked at Death Valley several winters. I've worked Everglades a winter. I worked at the *USS Arizona* Memorial in Pearl Harbor for winter, which now is called War in the Pacific, but my first season in Death Valley I also learned there was a need for EMS (Emergency Medical Service)—I had become an EMT while I was at graduate school, and I took other classes, and it was frustrating not to be able to do more, so after my first—was it my first season? Yes, my second season at Sequoia, my first after my first of Death Valley, I put myself in paramedic school at Stanford University, which does not have a paramedic school anymore, but the reason I picked it is it was accelerated; it was six months. So I could still go back and be a paramedic and naturalist at Sequoia National Park.

So my boss at Sequoia at the time was a man named Bill Tweed, and he would let me have particular days off in August when the class started, so I could drive to Palo Alto, live in my van, go to school, drive back, and be a naturalist, and the school allowed me to make up stuff, so that was good.

TM: I was thinking, did Bill see the need for this? Because the Park Service was struggling with this as well, going, you know what? We need our people to know more.

NM: No, not at all. He was just being supportive. It was not my job to do EMS at all at the time. In fact, you will see as the story progresses that it became—not a problem, but it's the protection division, which we will talk about, which is what—I did both protection and interpretation at the Grand Canyon. But the protection division is emergency medical services, search and rescue, structural fire, wildland

fire, research management, and law enforcement. Within the protection division is where emergency medical services is. If they need a little bit of extra help, they would call anybody else who had the skills. So, when I was at Death Valley in the wintertime, I was a naturalist. I was only one of two EMTs in the entire national monument, at the time; it's now a national park. And so if they needed help, they often called me out after hours. And I would go to car crashes and different things and stuff like that. But that was not my job. I was a naturalist.

TM: Nancy, when did this change happen, from everybody helped everybody else, to sort of a—

NM: Specialization.

TM: Specialization. Thank you very much. I was going to say kind of boxing things up. Where, you're just an interpretive ranger; you can't help us in protection with this search and rescue or with this accident, because you're just not in the right department.

NM: That began after the riots in Yosemite Valley. I can't remember the name—

TM: '74. Stoneman? The Stoneman meadow riots?

NM: Yes, and what happened there is, they realized that the generalist rangers who were friendly and all that kind of stuff—it wasn't working out. They were supposed to be law enforcement, but the old-school people wouldn't let them carry their guns. Kent was a park ranger protection at Death Valley when I first met him. And it was so old school when he first started there, he wasn't allowed, by the superintendent, to walk into the visitor center with his gun on. He had to leave it in his glove compartment.

So they didn't want the rangers to look like cops. They wanted to be friendly. You can go, probably even today, and talk about what government employee is the most revered and the nicest. It would all come out park ranger. But now, today, when you met me, I wore body armor. I had an M16 rifle. I had a SIG Sauer, 9 mm, or a .45, or whatever it is I had. But that changed beginning with the Stoneman Riots, because they didn't have the skill. People started to go to the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in the '70s to learn these skills—land management agencies. They later were combined with others. When I went to FLETC it was Department of Defense, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Tennessee Valley Authority—all these land management agencies that had law enforcement regulations and needed somebody to enforce them were in my class. So it began in the '70s, slowly began the division then. For instance, state parks, California state parks—up until about two years ago, the guys and gals that carry the guns also are supposed to give evening programs. They haven't made the hard separation, but they are starting to in a lot of places. It started in the '70s. That is not to say that park rangers did not carry weapons earlier. But the push came then.

TM: So if you were queen of the world, and you had a magic wand (*NM laughs*), would you change things? And if so, how?

NM: In terms of what?

TM: Well, in terms of what became a specialization.

NM: Well, when I was at Grand Canyon, there was something they wanted to have, called stovepiping. And a stovepipe goes straight up and down, right? So they wanted somebody at the very top to be able to tell the next person in line, to tell the next person in line, to tell the next person in line, what to do.

That was the chain of command. But what happened at Grand Canyon and every other park, is that the superintendent, and then if there was a deputy superintendent, may have had no law enforcement background. Maybe they came up as somebody who worked in management, somebody who worked in maintenance, somebody who worked in interpretation. This is before and after the Senior Executive Service, and maybe they were SES, and maybe they had no, zero, protection background. They were the superintendent, and ultimately they told the chief ranger what the policies and procedures would be, and if they decided that they didn't want—like they told Kent not to walk on the visitor's center with their gun on—they had to do that. I mean people have no idea that Charles Manson was caught in Death Valley. That there are bad and evil people in our national parks that the world has changed. And so—so that was an interesting—and if I could fix it, I would have every single law enforcement ranger—protection ranger, because I hate calling them law enforcement, because they have so many other duties, I would make them all be naturalists for two years first. I'd make them get people skills, I'd make them know about the resources they are in, and then they can go off and start doing investigations for the murders and rapes and arsons like I did at Grand Canyon. But I thought of my job at Grand Canyon—we're skipping way ahead—I thought of myself as Andy Taylor. I'd go to different places, and I'd walk in with a smile on my face. I felt good about knowing everybody everywhere. I was a people person. I'd go on the El Tovar, and I'd go into other places. And so there were a lot of people, though, that wanted to be big cop faces in the window. They wanted to wear the mirrored eyeglasses. And that has nothing to do with training but everything to do with personality—who they hired.

So I'm going to jump way ahead and tell you, one of the things that made me eventually leave the Grand Canyon, was, there was openings in the supervisory chain. And here I'd been at Grand Canyon now for—I forget what it was—nine, ten years at this point. And I was an assistant shift supervisor, and many times an acting shift supervisor. And somebody left, and I was the acting shift supervisor for a long time. And a new guy came in, and he had come directly from the California Highway Patrol. He was not an EMT, he did not know structural fire, he did not know resources, he could barely spell "Grand Canyon."

And he applied for the permanent shift supervisor, I applied for the permanent shift supervisor, and another guy did. When the other guy, who I'd worked with for eight years, saw that I had applied, he went, "Oh! You're the best person for the job. I'm going to pull my name out." I said, "Great," because at this point, I was a paramedic flight nurse, I was a captain in the engineer on the structural fire brigade, I had a master's degree in resources management, I was a medical unit leader on wildland fire, I was on the search and rescue—not only high angle rescue, but river rescue, and short haul qualified. I was the highest in every single category you could be in protection. I did not get the job. The guy who was the cop got it, because they wanted a policeman.—I was told that the guys would not pay attention to me—remember, there weren't any other gals on my shift, very few at South Rim— that I didn't have leadership skills, and that they would not do what I asked them to do. And I said to this particular person, "Well, they have been for quite some time. One person withdrew his name because I was a leader and so well qualified, and I would like to know who said that they would not follow my orders, because I don't order people around; I tell them what's needed to be done, and it gets done." We had all this kind of biased stuff. The average call—and this was given to me by Barb Brutvan, who was the head dispatcher. Every year they tallied all the calls. The average calls and reports that were made per ranger was 150. I averaged 400. So that is when I said—I was giving 110%. I was ready to give more. But it was an old boy's club. And I left—and I don't mind talking about these circumstances when we get to that part of the conversation. But the whole point is, there was, and there probably still is, a "we want the guys to be the cops, and that's the mentality we'll vaunt here." So that began in the '70s, and I have been discriminated against my entire life and career.

TM: When I think about this as a citizen, not an employee of the Park Service, that was working with Park Service employees, you always just brought—you know, the sunshine on your shoulder, and I was just like, why is Nancy like this, and why are those guys over there like that? And looking at the fracturing—you're talking about specializations, but really it appeared to be fracturing in the Park. And I'm like, okay, in the next hundred years, how's the Park going to come back around to being people that have to deal with rapes and murders and just this very difficult real-life stuff—poaching and being shot at or killed—versus—

NM: Which I have—which you know I have been both.

TM: Yup.

NM: I mean, not killed, but I have been attacked.

TM: Right.

NM: I had a guy with seven guns go after me and all this stuff. The point is, they were going to eliminate them at the big parks. They were going to eliminate park ranger protection, and they started to do that when they brought in the paramedics, and they were going to have park police do all the protection. The park police who are in Washington, D.C., who were at the White House and the Capitol and the Mall. There was a point in time—and I—being out of the business now for 10 years, I don't know what came of that—but they were going to replace protection rangers with park police, and then they were going to have an ambulance crew from—you know, you know, the—the medics, and then there would be naturalists, and then there would be firefighters, so there was going to be a five-point division of personnel, not a generalist anymore, which really is—I'm so glad I was a park ranger in protection when I did, because I was lucky to have the brain that I had and the skills that I had, because I loved it when the phone rang, or my radio went off. I had no clue what it was going to be, but I was ready. I loved the variety and the diversity of it.

TM: But you were also able to say, "You know, that's an epiphyte up in that tree." And that's what the majority of the visitors to our national parks are looking for.

NM: I was doing horse patrol one time and met up with Ronnie Gibson one time. And we were in the circle in front of the El Tovar Hotel. And I said, "Don Pedro De Tovar was a Spaniard, and he came here in 1540." And I was telling him all of that. He goes to me, he goes, "I didn't know that." And he had been there, what—15 years at that point?

So I really think that if you're going to keep the park rangers as they are, doing all these different jobs, that they really—you know, they should be—they have to be naturalists for at least a year or two—*(laughs)* you know, but on the other hand, you don't want somebody—and I'm going to say this as a descriptive, because you'll never know me as a pantywaist. You don't want somebody who is a naturalist who cannot transition to taking somebody down. I did not like being a law enforcement ranger, but damn, I was good at it.

TM: Right.

NM: You know, I walked into a situation where I had a guy who probably had 100 pounds on me. He was drunk. I turned him around, I made him turn around, and was holding him while I was doing a pat down. I found a 10-inch knife in his boot. He knew I found the 10-inch knife in his boot. My backup wasn't

there, and as soon as he reached down for it, I grabbed the bottom of his jeans, and I pulled straight up in the air. And he fell flat on his face. I was able to wrestle him down and put him into handcuffs and secure that 10-inch knife away. So you can't be a naturalist—you can't be a nice person sometimes. You have to be a capable person.

TM: And I guess that's asking a lot of everybody.

NM: It is. I think I was special in that I was able to switch things off and on. I don't know; switch is not the right word, but it's how I went into the job. I didn't go in as a big cop, which is what a lot of people do. They look at the job as a cop, and they don't want to be firefighters, they don't want to be EMS—most of them don't want to be EMS, and most of them don't want to be EMS. Some of them aren't—so I remember short haul flying with the—the chief SAR person, and he hated shorthaul flying, but he had to do it to qualify, and he screamed when we took off together. This was—you know who I'm talking about. So he was scared to death, but in order to do it, he had to do that. Some people wouldn't do that if they had a choice. If you give your typical male that was on South Rim patrol a choice, when I was there, they would rather just do law enforcement, especially the night shift in the summertime.

TM: So do you think there's a possibility ever—I mean, just looking ahead going, you know what we could do, is, actually work toward people's skills of interpretation, of protection, of EMS, of medical services and understanding that, of fire and search and rescue... Thinking back about the 1920's and '30s, where the ranger did it all, and might not have done as good as we can do today—

NM: And tell me how many people came to the national parks then?

TM: No, understood. I get that. But—

NM: 55,000 people a day came to the Grand Canyon when I was there. That is more than came in a year 50 years before.

TM: Yes, in 1956 the first million showed up. And so I understand that a lot of people are there and the needs are great.

NM: It's a personality thing, Tom. We had a guy—they said, "We would like to hire this person on South Rim." And I was asked this by the district ranger—yes, the district ranger Dave Brennan, and he says, "He's a paramedic, but he's got this personality issue, this and this in his background." I said, "You know, we can teach anybody to start an IV, but you can't teach somebody to get along with people."

TM: Right.

NM: Well, they hired this person anyway. And he ended up trying to kill himself later on, two years later.

NM: And so they hire people for their skills and not for their personality. That's a huge thing, and let me tell you what the number one problem was. It was, half of our calls—if not more than half of our calls—were amongst the concessions. We didn't call Victor Hall Victor Hall, we called it Victim Hall. You know, guns, drugs, everything. Nobody vets the people that want to come and live in the middle of nowhere, have nothing else to do but to get drunk and to use drugs. It used to be, when I started as a seasonal, that they would bring in kids from college, Christian group kids and stuff, who would get together every night, have singalongs and have bonfires, back in the '60s and '70s. That's not the case anymore. The

world has changed, and I'm not sure I have an answer. We can't go backward. The world has changed, and I'm not sure I have an answer.

TM: This is a personality thing; I think you've really nailed it. And that's difficult. It's easy to hire for skills.

NM: Yes.

TM: Oh, this person's done this training and that training and that training. Great. Hire. And it's much more difficult to hire a person with skills and a personality that can judge a situation and go, "Hey, this is a stand-down situation. This is going to be great. Oh no. This is stand-up. Oh, you know what, I bet there's a knife in that boot"—and roll with those punches or the blessings of being able to sit down and sing a song with some people, cause they're—they're really having some really good harmony over there at that—at that campsite over there in Mather campground.

NM: Right. And I have to tell you, I truly—there are some people like that, but they're not usually in the hardcore South Rim patrol. People like Cale Shaffer, people like Brian Wisher, you could probably name five or six of them that have that quality, but what do they not want to be? They don't want to be cops. And when you had to bring—oh, who was the man who had cancer, colon cancer, (Marty McCaslin) and still worked? He worked in the corridor.

TM: No, I'm drawing a blank.

NM: I am too. But anyway, they decided they were going to rotate everybody in on South Rim patrol, at one point in my time, 18 years there, and that they were going to get—and they hated it. The backcountry rangers often hated coming in and working South Rim patrol, because they didn't want to do that. It takes a special person. One of the reasons I liked South Rim patrol was not for the protection but the EMS, SAR, and fire, and that was the price I had to pay to do the rest of it, but my personality was, if I have to do it, I'm going to be damn good at it, and I'm going to make sure everybody comes home alive after it. Because you know, having lived there—I hope you know this—that we got threatened by people in our own community, that we were ostracized. You know, you go to a picnic with everybody else. "Oh, you're the one who arrested my husband last week on a drunk driving charge." It was a difficult situation to be a part of the community if you're a protection ranger, because the community is there.

I remember when I was first going to short haul training, and Mike Myers, who was my supervisor, said, "You're going to go to training today?" And I said, "Yes." And he goes, "Well, you know, we arrested the pilot of the aircraft for drunk driving two days ago. Maybe he'll just drop you to the ground 'cause he doesn't like you." You know, he was kidding around like that, but that was the true case. And it made me think twice. "Do I want to be under the helicopter with a guy they arrested?"

And it was a whole change of your attitude. So you can see why people get hardboiled when people look at you from every angle and the only ones you can trust are the other people with the gun. And yes, that's become a good old boy club, because nobody else wants you in their club. But I made a point to have singalongs with Marker Marshall and Lori Rome and all the others, and to do other things. That was my choice to just be that, because I've had 75 kids at my houses on Halloween, 'cause I decorated.

TM: Yes, and had good treats. And the word was out.

NM: I did, I did. Real candy bars, not these little things. I think it's just really hard to judge people not by yourself.

TM: I think this topic is going to come up again as we move forward, because I'm thinking of a couple things, too, but I'd like to wrap this interview up by going back to your first summer as a seasonal interpretive ranger at Sequoia National Park. What happened that summer?

NM: I loved it. I gave walks, talks, evening programs. Wasn't an EMT at the time. Every weekend I went backpacking somewhere overnight. They also gave you something called backcountry days, because at the time we wrote backcountry permits as well. We worked the front desk, answered questions, went out and gave geology talks and giant sequoia talks and stuff. And so they gave you what they called backcountry days.

And so we were assigned three days. We could go wherever we want to, put our other two days on it, and then we would go—one time—are you ready for this? This is how young and healthy I was. *(TM laughs)* I was with another ranger and we went after work at five o'clock, left out of Mineral King, went across the Sierra Nevada, crossed to Mount Whitney in four days, and came back around.

TM: Whoa.

NM: I know. 70 miles.

TM: Wonderful.

NM: I went to places nobody ever dreamed of. I've hiked on every trail in that park. I loved it. And the next summer, 1980, I was walking to work from my little cabin, going across the Marble Fork Bridge—and I'll remember this moment forever—and I smiled, and I looked at the river going by me, and I said, "This is the happiest moment of my life. I'm doing exactly what I want to do in exactly the place I want to do it. I'm a naturalist." This is before they called them interpreters. "I'm a naturalist at Sequoia National Park, and I get to tell people about all the wonderful things here. And I'm getting paid to do this. And I love my life, and I love my job." That was the moment of my life. Still, there was no moment ever better than that moment.

TM: Did your folks click into that? Did they get that?

NM: Oh, my mom did for sure. My dad, took him a little while to come around.

TM: Okay. But he did.

NM: They all came to visit. One time my dad came to visit. This was probably '85 or something. All my family would come up at different times, different place. My dad rode a motorcycle, much to my mother's chagrin, and he came and visited with my brothers. And I slept outside on a screened-in porch that faced to the east and the Watchtower. And the cabinmate, she slept inside. She was Mary Anne Carlton. That's how we became friends; we shared the same cabin together.

But I slept outside. And so we had a bear in a bear trap, and they hauled it to the maintenance area so people would come look at the bears (before they were released). So I took my two brothers down to show them the bear. And my dad said, nah. He's going to sit on my bed on the porch and just look out at

nature. So we came back and said, "Let's tell you about the bear." He goes, "Don't tell me about a bear. One walked right by your cabin door right after you left" (TM and NM laugh) and, no, no, he got it.

And I had, at one point, to borrow money from him. And that was the day he said, "You know what you are?" He said, "I really think you're happy doing what you're doing, and the \$1,000 you owe me—don't worry about it." And so he forgave my loan. But that was—that was pretty—for somebody who was pretty poor—'cause I had to buy health insurance, so he helped me buy that. It wasn't for school or anything else, but I had to buy health insurance, and he helped me do that.

TM: Wow, so he got it. He came around. Very cool.

NM: Kind of.

TM: Yes. In maybe the best way he could.

NM: Yes, oh yes. So they loved Sequoia National Park. We went there all the time as kids. Sometime I'll tell you about a great story about when we camped there as kids. But they loved that they could come and visit. And my mom would say that he was very proud to say that his daughter was a park ranger. And so was she, even though every now and then she would say I was a forest ranger, which drove me crazy. But I used to be. I used to be. And when I went to the park, it was a different—Department of the Interior, Department of the Agriculture... Wow, the hour went fast, didn't it?

TM: It did, didn't it? Maybe this is a good place to put a comma in this series, and we will pick it up next time in the summer of 1981. You've graduated now with your master's degree. Does that sound like a plan?

NM: Yes. It sounds good. We probably should backtrack just a little bit, if I can fill in a blank for you. But yes, '80/'81.

TM: Okay. Very good. Cool.

NM: Thanks, Tom. And I won't hang up this time.

TM: Alright. Very good. And so with that, this will conclude Part 2, Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Nancy Eileen Muleady-Mecham. Today is Tuesday, December 1, 2020. My name is Tom Martin. Nancy, thank you so very much.

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