

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

Interviewee: Richard Hanson (RH)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Richard recalls arriving at Olympic National Park as trail foreman in the mid-1980s and building up the pack string

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TM: Today is Sunday. It's November 8th, 2020. This is a Part 7 Grand Canyon oral history interview with Richard Hanson. My name is Tom Martin. Hey, good afternoon, Richard. How are you today?

RH: I'm doing well. Thank you.

TM: Thank you. May we have your permission to record this oral history over the telephone?

RH: Sure.

TM: Thank you. We talked in Part 6 about your river trips with Paul Winter and then the filming trip that happened. It was a series of four river trips that happened there. You had mentioned something about the CIA in Grand Canyon. Can you open that up a little bit?

RH: Yeah. It was...what year were we in, early 80s?

TM: Yeah.

RH: It was just one day I got a call, just a short story, I got a call from my boss. He said meet him over at the mule barn. I said, "Yeah, no problem." So went over there. There was a couple of Special Forces guys and a couple of I guess were CIA. They were all, you know, they weren't in uniform. Special Forces guys were. They said that they were gonna grab about 10 or 15 of our mules and take them down into the Inner Canyon and learn how to pack odd objects with them and just learn a little bit more about mules. We had probably 30 head, but taking 10 head or 12 head for a couple of weeks was really gonna make us short, but we didn't have any choice in the matter basically. So Dave Smith and I and I think Pete Howard, we showed them a few hitches, a barrel hitch, just real simple hitches, and hauled the mules down to the Hermit, and they just disappeared down the trail and we weren't allowed to go down there. They camped out down there for about a week. When they got back up about three of them were kind of lamed, I mean, nothing where you had to put them down or anything. We brought them back and I never saw those guys again. I'm sure it was because they had been to Afghanistan. It would be about the same time as the Russians had invaded, I guess, but they were learning how to pack mules because they were definitely going somewhere to use them. That was the CIA story, I just found it kind of interesting that they could come in and commandeer a bunch of government mules.

TM: That just sounds so odd that they wouldn't have asked one or two of you to come along to help teach them how to pack, how to handle large animals.

RH: Yeah. I think probably they had a lesson before they came down. They were more into the terrain, that this was gonna be the same kind of terrain where they'd be working. Yeah, I'm sure they definitely knew how to ride and they knew how to do some things but they needed to get experience in that kind of terrain. I'm sure that was the deal.

TM: Did they take feed with them?

RH: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. They stayed down in. They moved feed and, you know, even in the Canyon, man, there's really not a lot to eat in any one place.

TM: No, not for a week, not for a while there.

RH: Yeah. Yeah, unless you're just a burro, wandering burro.

TM: Yeah, yeah, but that means you get to move around from acreage to acreage looking for food. I don't know, maybe they were doing that but, huh, curious.

RH: Yeah. They moved. I think, you know, when they got back they were a lot more proficient in canyon country and rocky country than when they went in. But, yeah, it was just a kind of a weird side deal there that they could come in there and do that.

TM: Hmm. Very interesting. Yeah, well, I hope it served them well...

RH: Yeah, yeah.

TM: ...wherever they were off to. Yeah. Do you have any thoughts about your time at Grand Canyon now, sort of looking back?

RH: Yeah. Like I say, I might have covered some of this before, but it was a job that I was put into where initially I just felt over my head. When I got down there from Idaho, you know, if I needed something for the mules I just went to somebody and said, "Hey, I need some feed and I need this, I need that." I never had any employees under my wing, supervising. When I got to Grand Canyon it was, okay, here's your budget and if you need anything, make sure... They showed me all... Was pre-computer, so it was all these handwritten spreadsheets. If I needed something then I was the one doing the ordering. I was the one supervising the crew, as little as it was. It was a whole different scene and it was a whole different job than what I was used to, but I got through it. I did a good job there. I expanded the trail crew from about five or six people to when I left about four years later. Most of them were seasonal, but I did have some permanent positions also that I was able to fill. I expanded it to like the mid-20s, 20 people, and I think a lot of that was Howard Chapman. When we got done with the Pipe Creek wall and Bright Angel rehab and all of that, I think they saw that the money that they had recommended to us had been well spent, so when I came in for a request for yearly budget increases they were usually granted. I'm proud of the way that we kind of got the Inner Canyon trail trips going where we would go down for 21 days and like stop at Nankoweap and stop at Thunder, stop at a lot of places and have our archeologist with us and get those places a little fixed up, mostly resource damage. So, yeah, when I left there... I'm proud

of a lot of the friends I met there. When I went to Olympic I had four or five of the guys I had hired at Grand Canyon follow me up to Olympic after I'd been there for a year.

TM: Oh, cool.

RH: I inherited the same kind of scene at Olympic as I inherited at Grand Canyon.

TM: Let's open that up. Was there any event or anything that sort of led you to leave Grand Canyon or did you just see the job? How did that come about that you ended up going to Olympic National Park?

RH: Well, I'd loved my time up in Idaho and the Northwest, and my brother had moved from San Diego to Seattle, opened up a little sporting goods store there. He had gotten married. Then my father had died years before and my mother decided to make a move from the Bay Area in California on up to Seattle, and I just thought it might be nice to get the band back together again. That was a lot of my thinking with it. I'd been to Olympic just on a couple of day trips and it stuck in my mind. I remember sitting up on Hurricane Ridge going, wow, this would be a great place to work. So the job came open and I applied for it.

TM: Was that for, again, the trails foreman job?

RH: Yes. Yep. And I guess it was a pretty good cert. Unlike the Grand Canyon... I think it was like two or three names on the cert at Grand Canyon, but it was a pretty good cert but I got selected for it.

TM: Did you get an interview? Did they take you up and interview you or they just said, "You got the job, come on up?"

RH: No, definitely interviews. Those kind of jobs they have protocol that they have to follow, job interviews with your supervisors and some of the people working with you and yada, yada. I think I got the job up there because Olympic seven or eight years before had decided that they were gonna get rid of all their stock, all their mules, all their tack, and they realized, I think, that that was a mistake. I think I got the job because of my experience with the mules and the horses. They were talking about maybe trying to get a pack string going again there.

TM: So when you arrived as the trails foreman they had no mules or no horses?

RH: Yeah. Had about seven people, no stock whatsoever, 600 miles of trail in the park.

TM: Holy cow.

RH: Some of the... I mean, if you could work trails in Olympic, I told people after I'd been there four or five years, you can do it anywhere. Had all kinds of different topography and such from coastal strip to alpine to glaciers to temperate rain forest, and rivers and creeks. Absolutely spectacular place.

TM: How many acres roughly?

RH: I think it passed a million, a couple additions. It's right at...

TM: So it's as big as Grand Canyon, 1.1 million, and no pack animals? Wow, that's kind of hard.

RH: No pack animals.

TM: Sort of rock you back on your heels there. Ponder that one.

RH: Yeah, I know, I know. I was like whoa. So, yeah, and six people. I was known as the Mormon Foreman because they figured if I was coming from Arizona/Utah I had to be Mormon. But I got up there and good solid crew, good solid crew, but only six or seven of them. Again, every time you take a new job at a different national park, I think you need to just keep your mouth shut and observe for months before you can start going, "We need to do this, we need to do that, we've gotta do this." That's the approach I've always taken until I'd been doing it 20 years I could kind of come into a place and go, "Yeah, we need to do this..." So the first year was, again for me, a hell of a learning experience. There was opposition in the Resource Management Division about bringing stock back to the park. They had decided that was too much of a chance to bring exotics in. It was kind of a bogus argument but there were some hard cores, you know, "No, we've been doing it like this for the last eight years we, don't need to chance it. It'll bring exotics in, we're against having stock in the park," and yada, yada. I think it was about four or five months in/six months in, and at that time I could see, man, there was no way we were gonna work 600 miles of trail in the Olympics without some support, without a way to get tools and such in there.

TM: Tools and food and camp supplies for spike camps and, wow.

RH: Yep, exactly. But the guys that I had, they were proud of their ability to go out. They were mostly local Port Angeles boys. They'd been running around the Olympics for years and they were able to get out there. An average deal would be like a 50/60 pound pack and then a chainsaw on your right arm, carrying, and whatever else in your...a Pulaski and a shovel in your other arm. We'd send them out in gangs of two and basically all they were able to do was open the trails. We've got seven world record size trees in the Olympics and thousands of others that are just almost as big and depending on the year... Like I say, the Hoh Rain Forest that's a pretty famous trail. It's on the west side of the park, gets about 130/140 inches of rain a year, maybe less. It's the approach to climbing Mount Olympus. That trail probably runs flat through the river valley for about 10 or 12 miles and then you start picking up elevation, and most of it all along the river and deadfall everywhere. You go out there in the spring and the opening crews would just work their way up the trail. It was slow, it was cumbersome. They could do nothing else but open the trail. They couldn't do tread work, they couldn't do drainage work. The trails were a mess. One day before a hitch started/the tour started we had everything out in front of our little shop there at the maintenance compound. I went over and I got the superintendent, who was Bob Chandler, who later became superintendent of Grand Canyon, and who I had met the year before on a river trip at the Grand Canyon. We had gotten along really good on that river trip, which is amazing cause I met him... Crumbo and I had hiked in, I think I told you this, through Thunder River and hiked down to like Upset and that little beach on the left. Just hot and all day trip. I went over and the boats were down... We could see the boats down there, got down, ran over to a boat, sat down and started popping beers. John Thomas come over to me and he said, "Hey, you made it." "Yeah." I looked up on the beach and I said, "Who's that guy?" He said, "That's Bob Chandler and his wife, Mitzi, superintendent at Santa Monica." They're just kind of looking at me and I said, "Oh, good, there's another superintendent that'll never hire me." We spent like three days on the river with them and then Crumbo and I hiked out Lava. But all of a sudden Chandler's the superintendent at Olympic. I went over and got Bob some coffee and asked if he could come over to the trails deal. He said, "Sure." I had my six/seven guys hanging around there with chainsaws, axe, everything just ready to go out for eight days.

I said, "Bob, pick up that pack right there." He picks up his pack and he just goes, "Ugh." I said, "Now, pick up that chainsaw." I was making my point to him that we definitely needed some help. I just told him, I said, "S***, we need stock. We need some stock." He said, "Okay, how many you need?" I said, "Well, let's just start small and work our way up." He ran it through. He just said, "Okay, I'm tired of talking about this. We're gonna do it." The resource people were a little pissed, and I was authorized to start with six head. So we went down. Yeah, right at this time I brought a lady from Grand Canyon down. Called her up, and this was the lady I'd met, she was a YCC, Clare Donato. Turned out to be the first female packer in the... You should maybe call her.

TM: Do you have contact information for her?

RH: I do, yeah, yeah.

TM: That'd be great. We'll talk about. I'll get that from you later.

RH: I said, "Clare, I got the okay to get a pack string going here in the Olympics. You want to come up and be a packer?" That's all she'd ever wanted. So she left the Canyon, drove on up. If you talk to her she'll tell you the story about the first day she was in the Olympics. We went over to North Cascades and borrowed a stock truck and something to pull it with.

TM: That was the national forest you borrowed it from?

RH: National park, North Cascades National Park. Headed down to Santa Barbara to pick out six mules and haul them back up to the Olympics. We were down there for a few days. Chamberlin was the guy, Chamberlin Mules. Checked out six, and these are just halter broke, you know, that's it, they're halter broke. I've always believed that you just want to kind of get your own young mule, do what you do with it cause you don't want somebody else's problems that maybe didn't do things like you would do them. We picked out six mules, hauled them up to Port Angeles, two and a half day trip, and started breaking them. And buying tack and riding them in the corral that we had to build, we built a corral and friggin' barn, and we were on our way. They made a huge difference, huge difference.

TM: Rich, sorry, got a quick question here. You mentioned you had a crew of six folks there. Your trails crew that you had, had they worked around mules before?

RH: No.

TM: Okay. So not only did you have to train the mules but you had to train your crew.

RH: Yep.

TM: Wow.

RH: Yep, yep. And this was happening, oh, midway through the first year I was there, I guess, when we picked up the mules.

TM: This is '83 or '84, '85?

RH: Yeah, I think. I've gotta look at my arrowhead again, it's got the dates I was in different parks. [pause] Yeah, this would have been probably the spring of '84. Clare would know better than I. But, brought them out and worked them for a good month in the corral, and then started taking them on little day rides and teaching them how to ford creeks, started with little creeks and then rivers, and got a good working string. Then I just kept adding to that initial six. Every year I would budget in for three or four mules. We ended up, I don't know, 26 or 27 when I left. It's bigger yet. But they were such a key to... One of the deals is we ended up packing more for Resource Management folks, guys going in to study fissures, or guys going in to do fisheries, or whatever. We just reached out, said, We've got a crew going up the Elwah, the Elkhorn, you guys need some food, equipment or anything packed in just have it at the barn by such and such a time." That's how we started with it. Then it was like more formal requests from Resources than just about anybody else.

TM: Wow. Yeah, well, absolutely, it's the same in Grand Canyon as well. You use the river as a way to get through a lot of the park for the Science Center, for resource folks looking at this and that, as well as the trails.

RH: Yep. Yeah. So it was a great move for me. Unlike Grand Canyon when I first got there thinking, shit, I'm over my head in this job and stuff, I was able to kind of hit the ground there in the Olympics and, like I say, would keep my mouth shut, listen to the crew. It was probably six or seven months before we got permission for the mules. Once we got that done it just made my job so much easier. The second year I was there I had a Hopi boy from the Canyon come up, Mike Tamichi, another guy by the name of Pat Hornig, and Clare, and a couple of others came up. Mike Tamichi, he'd never been off...he was a Second Mesa boy. He lasted two years and he just came and said, "I've gotta get home." "I understand." He said it was just such a great experience for me up here. I've always been a diversity kind of guy so when I started expanding the crew at Olympic, too, I really reached out to a lot of the tribes that were on the Olympic Peninsula, Makah, La Push, Quileute, lots of little tribes up there, Jamestown. I had the most diverse crew in the park, that's for sure. I mean, no doubt about it. Port Angeles, park headquarters, very conservative town, starting to get a little more together. Beautiful place, real conservative, and 99% white, you know. So you gotta try and do whatever you can to maybe involve other people. But, yeah, it was a great park, unbelievable park.

TM: Clearly your crew, before the first mules showed up, were some very strong people.

RH: Yes.

TM: Did they cotton on really quick to the increased capacity, basically, that they were able to pack and therefore increase their range in the field. I'm assuming they would have clicked into that like on day one.

RH: Well, they did and they didn't. Basically, out of the six that I inherited, within the first 13 or 14 months... It was similar to Grand Canyon, they were reassigned to different parts of the park, different jobs, because the foreman that I replaced there had been a local boy, born and raised. I went back and looked and talked to the old timers and stuff. I was the first trail foreman in Olympic National Park that wasn't born and raised on the peninsula, so that would tell you something. Before, it had always been filled by... Okay, Reome has been working here for 13 years and it's his turn, and then Reome would retire and it's Warner's turn. And so that caused... One of the guys on the crew had applied for the foreman's job, too, and when I got it he was crushed and he really never did anything to help me. I had to finally tell him, hey, I'm not expecting your help but just stay out of my way, so he was reassigned.

Another lady, Kat was reassigned. So I lost three, lost half of my crew which was good. Then I replaced them with people that I'd known and worked for. Clare came up from the Canyon and did just a magnificent job with helping me start that pack string. So no, they didn't take to it right off the get-go but, you know, by year two everybody was just friggin' excited and then you had to tell them, "Hey, man, one case of beer a guy." They'd show up at the barn, all this shit in their pack.

TM: Yeah, you know, Richard, let's stop here for a minute. I want to ask you about this. You pack in a bunch of people, a small handful of people for a week or two, are clearly not on the clock 24 hours a day, and so they want to bring in what they would normally drink or normally do to recreate for their off hours in a normal 9 to 5 job. How did you deal with that?

RH: Yeah, we definitely came to the point where we had to put limits, especially when we were doing... On the opening crews... I increased the opening crew size when I finally started getting more people there. It used to be two people heading up a river valley and I increased those to four so they could cut the trees, they could do tread work, they could brush the trails, they could do this and they could do that. We did definitely have to put some limits on how much alcohol, how much of this, how much of that. Most of them were really good about only bringing one change of clothes, say, and leaving a pair in the rig so when they got out they could friggin' change into dry stuff. And, you know, tents, we were able to say, "Okay, everybody can have their own tent." But they still had heavy packs. It's not like they walked up the trail with a daypack with 10 pounds in it. They still had some pretty heavy packs. When they were going into camp they were taking tools and that kind of stuff. We would maybe work five miles up the river valley and that's all the farther we'd get that week. So then the next week everything was packed that five miles in and they would work out of there to nine miles up the valley. Then the next time we would pack in nine miles, and that's how we progressed up these valleys. They would work in front of the mules most of the time and get the trail cleared and then we could roll in with the pack string. We had some major bridge jobs that we did up there that we'd have two or three packers going to the same place with 12 mules on a bridge job, had a crew of six or seven working at the same place. There was shelters up there that had been built. A lot of times if possible we would try to camp at a shelter. There was backcountry ranger stations that we would use to make things better. You'd go into a place that already had pots and pans in it, had a wood stove, a couple of bunks, you know.

TM: Were you using helicopters for resupply at all?

RH: Towards the end we were using helicopters for not necessarily resupply of the crews but for... We did a lot of, like I said, bridge work. I got into a deal with the military over in Tacoma and they would come over and do training exercise in their Chinooks. We could use those guys for free and they would fly like big bridge stringers and that kind of stuff. We had a little Hughes 500 on contract that could bring us in incidentals but, no, helicopter flying was, I won't say frowned upon but if there's no way else to get it in there, okay, you can use them but, you know, it wasn't a routine thing like when I got to Volcano. You know, if you're going seven miles there, you can call the friggin' helicopter and go helicopter beach camping for a week. (laughs) Like I'd never camped in my life but, yeah.

TM: So what kind of bridge spans were you making, how far were you spanning?

RH: Oh, the biggest was probably 110 feet.

TM: Whoa, so that would need a couple of center pillars along the way, or was that one span?

RH: Yeah. A couple of them were one span. The first one I ever worked on was a place called Graves Creek. That was 90-some-odd feet. Originally, and I didn't like this, we were using native materials. Like I say, it's home to seven world class trees. We would take down usually big fir for the stringers and then learn how to yard those things across, and take down a cedar or find a dead cedar for the deck and the handrails. You could be on a job like that for months.

TM: Yeah. I mean, just getting an 80-foot long fir across the creek and into position, that's a huge amount of work right there.

RH: Yep.

TM: Then you've got to do it again for the next one, and then you've gotta deck the thing and then put on some railings. That's just huge.

RH: Yep. That's huge, it's huge. We built a 60-footer/65-footer, 17 miles into the backcountry. That was the first big job for the original six mules. They learned a lot on that.

TM: It would take you... How many days would it take to pack in there 75 miles?

RH: No, not 75, 17.

TM: Oh, 17, I'm sorry.

RH: 17, and we'd do it in a day. I mean, to gear up, a lot of times during... The crew would be out there 8 days, 8:00 to 6:00, and depending on the job and stuff, there would be times where we might go up that valley two or three times. You'd go in 17, you'd get up in the morning, you'd pack out the shit from the tour before, all the garbage and all that other stuff and all the tools that were broke, go back down to the trailhead and drop all that shit, pick up another load and come back in on the third day.

TM: Wow.

RH: So, yeah, it was fun. I mean, it was fun. It was more like Idaho. I was in the saddle a lot, I had a couple other packers. I don't know how many thousands of miles I frickin' rode up there.

TM: Did you have an office person to help you with budgets and that kind of stuff, purchasing and keeping supplies going?

RH: I did. I did. There was a secretary that took care of the road foreman and myself. I spent a lot of time doing it, especially in the early years when I was building it up, but it was the kind of deal where I liked to be out in the field. If I had to go in on a day off or something to take care of all that shit, you know, I was fine with it. Then I met a woman and fell in love and made the big Park Service mistake of marrying a local girl, you know. Not a mistake, scratch that. It wasn't a mistake at all. It was the best move I ever made. So then I kind of realized that, okay, I'm here, this is where I'm gonna work and I never regretted it. I think it was 1991—I would then have been at Olympic for seven years, six or seven years, things were rolling pretty good—and I got selected to go to facility managers development training I guess was the formal name for it. It was gonna be three months at Albright, which I was kind of looking forward to, go stay at Albright and go to class every friggin' day and then you go to... Well, after that three months I got sent to Washington, DC.

TM: Whoa, that's a change. Gee.

RH: That's a change, yeah, that's a change.

TM: So the facilities management development training, what was the concept of the training?

RH: The concept was to train the new up and coming managers of the National Park Service, that they were gonna spend a lot of time and a lot of money training new guys. And that's what it was, too. I think there was 18 of us in class and we were all White boys. I think there was one female in the class. That was the concept, and it was... I have a hard time sitting still so that three months at Albright was like, God damn. But they would go through diversity, they would go through public health kind of stuff, they were definitely a big deal on supervision, and just everything that a park manager friggin' needed to learn. And then the assignment...

TM: They didn't give you this training before you took the job, which sounds...

RH: At Olympic?

TM: Well, yeah, it sounds like this would all be good stuff to know before you took the job.

RH: Well, this was gonna be... What they were teaching you was basically as a supervisor and doing that. I was mid-level management, you consider that mid-level. This was gonna be for management, this was management training.

TM: Okay, as in chief of maintenance kind of positions.

RH: Chief of maintenance, superintendent, you know, all of that kind of stuff.

TM: Got it. Okay.

RH: I don't know how the f*** I was selected for that.

TM: Who was the superintendent at Olympic at the time? Was Chandler still there?

RH: Yeah, I think Dick Chandler was still there.

TM: Do you think he had something to do with it?

RH: Might have been Maureen. No, Chandler was there because while I was at Albright, he left to go to the Everglades and a lady by the name of Maureen Finnerty came in as superintendent.

TM: She came in as the new superintendent at Olympic?

RH: Yeah. I remember doing a video for her because I wasn't gonna be around, I was gonna be at Albright and I was doing this other stuff. I wish I had that video. My hope was to try to get their ear, so I made this probably half-hour video of some of the problems we had in Olympic, and what we were doing, and what the needs of the trails were there. I did it all out on different trails. I had a cameraman

who was a well-known poet/environmentalist by the name of Tim McNulty. We went around. I shipped that off to her and when I first met her after being gone for...I was three months at Albright, I was gone for like five months. When I got back and the first time I met her she says, "Oh, I know you, man, I watched your video three times," and then she started laughing. But now I'm getting a little turned around on time.

TM: Let's go back. So the facilities management development training for three months at Albright. Then it must have followed on after the training with a workplace kind of jobsite, on the job training if you will. Does that make sense as to how you ended up in Washington, DC?

RH: Yeah, that's it. Exactly right, and that was an eye opener.

TM: So, DC. I mean, we're talking about like marble statues and lots of grass, way different than trails. Before we go there... (laughs)

RH: Yeah, this is a good place to wrap it.

TM: Yeah, 'cause I want to know a little bit more about Albright and what you saw was going down at Grand Canyon when you came back after being away for a while and...

RH: Yeah. And then I had my eyes opened in DC, so, yeah, this would be a good place to pick it up next time, start on that.

TM: Awesome. Let's do that. Well, hold on a minute. This will conclude Part 7 oral history interview with Richard Hanson. My name is Tom Martin. Today is Sunday, November 8th, 2020, and Richard, thank you so very much.

RH: Yeah, thank you. This has been fun and makes me think and remember. So yeah, that's good. So, yeah, we can pick it up.

TM: Cool. All right, hang on a second.