

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

Interviewee: Richard Hanson (RH)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Richard recounts the start of retirement in Hawaii and eleven years of further work with the Park Service at Volcano and other Pacific Island parks

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Transcriber: Dannie Derryberry

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TM: Today is Sunday, November 29th, 2020. This is a Part 9 Grand Canyon Oral History Interview with Richard Hanson. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Richard. How are you today?

RH: Doing fine, thanks.

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

RH: Yes.

TM: Thank you. We left off in Part 8 where you had taken early retirement at Olympic and moved to Hawaii in 1999, early 2000. Can you pick that thread up?

RH: Sure. Yeah, we moved over to some property that we had bought I think in '93 or '94. Took that early retirement because the work we were doing over here was so physical. I was 50 already and I didn't want to... There was no way I was gonna get done what I needed to get done if I retired at 62 or 63, so my wife and I came over. We already had the start of a structure done and we had a little nursery full of coffee plants that we had grown from seed. Came over and then just got into it. Got into house building, got into learning about solar power 'cause we were totally off the grid, got into learning about catchment water, and roof angles and the type of roof you need to catch the most amount of water, and farming. We started planting under the canopy of the native Ohia trees, you know, bird friendly. We were learning every step of the way. We started a little addition to our 32' by 32' structure and just started making the place what it is today with fruit trees, avocado trees. Our whole goal was sustainability.

TM: Wow. Cool.

RH: We didn't have grandiose plans of becoming coffee farmers but we both love coffee and so it was something we said, yeah, let's get up in the morning, have a cup of our own coffee. Make a salad out of our garden beds in the afternoon. Smoke our own weed at night, you know. I mean, just sustainability.

TM: Right, make your own electricity.

RH: Make your own electricity, make your own pretty much everything. Grow a lot of your own food, which is huge when you live in Hawaii. People ask, "Isn't Hawaii just really expensive?" It depends on how you live.

TM: Interesting.

RH: I can live over here cheaper than I can live in the Mainland. So, yeah, we succeeded in basically not having any bills. And then along the way we just kept expanding and kept doing what we do. Had our own little coffee label called Canopy Coffee Company, and I would spread the word on the benefits of shade grown coffee and saving the native habitat. It's mono crop over here. The state of Hawaii says that you should be able to gross \$15,000 an acre, and it doesn't matter what you grow. It could be lettuce, it could be coffee, it could be papayas, but they really pushed mono crops. Mow everything down, thrown in on five acres... If I would have done it the way they suggested I could have had 7,000 coffee, about 1200 an acre, but we took the five and half acres and probably had...at our peak probably had about 1200 coffee trees, which would be one acre's worth if you were mono. We added the other stuff, the avocados, the lemons, tangelos, grapefruits, the soursop, the guava. You pretty much name it we're growing it. And then big garden beds and such. So we were rolling pretty good. After about two years I got a call from one of the guys that works in the regional office over in Seattle. We had our own satellite regional office in Honolulu but they were supervised by the Seattle office. He asked me if I could clear up some projects they were doing at Volcano. Volcano had been getting a lot of repair rehab money and site work money and really weren't getting the jobs done. I said, "Yeah, let me go check it out." You know, I'm pretty good here. I've been retired for two years, maybe two and a half years. Went up there and looked at what kind of jobs they were wanting to get done.

TM: What did they have going? So Richard, I have a couple questions. First one was what did you think about that, and the second one was what kind of deal were they dealing with there cause you seemed to have landed in a number of parks to clean up messes.

RH: Yeah, that might be too strong of a word, clean up messes. It was more to get some things going that they didn't have the staff to do or didn't really want to do.

TM: Hmm. Fair enough.

RH: Chew was fine with it. I mean, when we flew over here I remember sitting on the airplane and she just starts going, "Oh, man, retired. We're retired, we're moving to Hawaii." I said "Chewie, I'm retired. You're unemployed." "What?" Which is good. She's 10 years younger than I so she was 40 at the time. So she was back working at a restaurant in town and she was fine, she was fine with it. I went up to Volcano and talked to the Chief of Maintenance, had an interview with him, said, "What are you looking at, what kind of jobs?" A lot of them turned out to be just a lot of fun. Almost all of them was backcountry and a couple of things around the rim, crater rim. I said, "How long you thinking?" He says, "Probably two years to get them all cleaned up." I said, "Yeah, I can give you two years," This was 2002, I think, summertime, and I ended up being there eleven years.

TM: Oh, my gosh.

RH: I know. It was fun.

TM: Can you describe the park, because I mean, I certainly haven't a clue. I've heard of Volcanoes but I know nothing about the lay of the land, how big. What's going on there. Didn't even know they had any backcountry there.

RH: Oh, yeah. They got a coastal strip that's, oh, if you were to hike it it'd take you three days. It's not majestic like, say, the Canyon is or Yosemite, but it's every bit as impressive. It's very raw, the lava flows, the ongoing eruptions. It really is just a spectacular place. It's probably, well, we just added a couple hundred thousand acres about eight or nine years ago, so I guess it's probably over half a million now. I'd have to kind of look at that.

TM: Wow. Cool.

RH: And, you know, it goes from the top of Mauna Loa, which is 13,400 feet, down to sea level so it's got just something like eleven of the thirteen climate zones. It was raw. A lot of fresh lava with no growth, but then you go a mile away and all of a sudden there's giant tree ferns and Ohia trees and pit craters everywhere.

TM: What's a pit crater?

RH: Pit crater is like a big crater eaten out by lava or an eruption collapses the ground around it. Yeah, it's just an unbelievable place. The first few jobs I had were doing some ADA work, building little ADA trails and stuff along the rim. I was tasked to... When there was lava flowing in the park, which was quite often, then you had to... The superintendent wanted access to the public to the lava, to a certain extent. He wanted them to be able to get up close and personal with lava. One of my earlier jobs lasted about three or four months, was going out early in the morning and seeing how the lava had changed the trail that we had up to it the night before. That was spectacular, some of the best times I've had in the Park Service. Out there before sunrise, walking around lava, right on the ocean, sitting right on the ocean right where it's pouring into the ocean, and putting cones out to provide safe access. I did that for a few months and then they hired an eruption crew and I had started hiring my crew. Good crew, a couple of native Hawaiian guys. The work that we were gonna be doing was fairly technical so I brought in five people from the Mainland.

TM: Who?

RH: Tim Onsaut who is right now at Saguaro; Shelly Lane who was at Mount Rainier and actually had passed the Bar and was a lawyer, and did that for a couple/three years and then just said, "F*** it, I want to get back to trails, I want to be down in the dirt." She was really handy to have, too. And a few other guys, Skip Ballard, a guy out of Zion. So we got to work and the job basically expanded through the years from Volcano to much of the South Pacific.

TM: Oh, my gosh.

RH: I was traveling quite a bit, going to Samoa, Molokai, Haleakula, Honolulu, just taking up projects throughout the Islands, throughout the Pacific.

TM: Wow. Cool.

RH: That's why I stayed eleven years. I mean, it was just dandy. I learned a lot about Hawaiian culture and worked with, like I said, I had a couple of native Hawaiians. Resource management, we were doing a lot of stuff with resource management. They were mostly flying local. Met some great people. Like I say, the culture was something else. I mean, it's just... You know, a hundred years ago when we got done killing the First Nation people over in America we set sail and put our friggin'...took over Hawaii. And it

was recent. I mean, it was like a hundred years ago, you know. So just an all-around incredible experience.

TM: Tell me some of the neat projects that you worked on besides putting cones out. I guess if the cones were too close they would melt and you'd know they were too close.

RH: Yeah. Or it had changed and the lava had done fingers around it. What was good the day before might not be good that morning. Yeah, that was fun. Oh, what did we do? We put in five composting toilets at five different camping areas, or six of them. We had to build the structure, compost, assemble all of that, and they were good size structures.

TM: So these are like not quite two-story, but maybe a story-and-a half. You have to walk up with a chamber bins down below to take the solid waste and then compost it and then you'd have to scoop...

RH: Right.

TM: ...scoop the stuff out of there and then go spread it out somewhere for it to go back into the land, I guess?

RH: Yeah. You had to have the building up on top of everything that you could actually sit in and do your business. Those were good jobs because each one of them took us, I would say on the average about three weeks to a month. We were camped out on the coastal strip, a place called Keauhou. Beautiful, big sea turtles, whales, the Hawaiian guys throwing nets. I mean, fresh fish every night for dinner. Lobster nets. We would put our lobster nets out at night and have lobster the next day. And the camps were all helicoptered in so...

TM: Okay, I was gonna ask you, did they have any stock at all or was it all by air?

RH: They did have stock. I wasn't in charge of it. I was more doing special projects. They did some packing for us but most of the stuff was just too bulky. And lots of food. I mean, we would fly in four or five hundred pounds of ice in coolers, and then all our camp gear, and all our food, and all our tools. Some days when we were gearing up it might be nine or ten sorties to get all our stuff in. Those were fun. We put in new catchment water tanks all through the backcountry, took out the old ones and put in new food grade ones. We did...

TM: Those water tanks, are they... Sorry, I'm jumping in there on that one, are they for people who are walking through the park or were they to promote water for wildlife?

RH: They were for hikers because there's no streams and there's no running water. It's almost impossible, especially along the coast, to carry enough water to make it. We had, at the three coastal camps that are each spread out about...they're spread out about four or five miles apart, we had catchment tanks there. Then we also had tanks at a place called Red Hill, which is at 10,000 feet, and then the summit that's up on Mauna Loa. We also did composters at those two places. Working at 13+ thousand, was hard work.

TM: I bet. Living at sea level. Yeah. No hematocrit in your blood to carry oxygen. That would have been tough. Oh, my gosh.

RH: Right. Right. So that was good. Then an old Canyon friend of mine, Tom Workman, had just accepted the superintendent's job at Kalaupapa.

TM: Where's that?

RH: That's on the Island of Molokai. That's where the people with Hansen's disease were sent back in the day. Leprosy is Hansen's disease. He was having some problems with some rockfall and stuff. They ran mules in there. Steepest, it's the steepest sea cliffs in the world. They rise up a little over 2,000 feet just vertical.

TM: Wow.

RH: The only way you could go into the Colony, because there was still... When I started working there I think there was like 70 patients still living there. The only way that the public could go in there was if they were on a day tour. Couldn't spend the night, just a day tour, and those were run by a mule string up topside. They had probably 35 or 40 mules and it was owned by a guy by the name of Buzzy Sproat, who was just a friggin' legend. I mean, he was something else. But anyway, Workman called me over. He said, "Why don't you come over to Molokai and give me some advice." I said, "Sure." I went over there and it was an unbelievable trail. Hadn't been worked. It was built back in the 1800s as a way for people to supply the Colony and it hadn't been worked on much since. So I went down and checked out one of his problem areas, which was right on the ocean. I hiked the trail and I came back. I said, "Workman, this is the least of your problems. The spot we're looking at, you're gonna lose this whole friggin' trail." He goes, "Yeah, I know, I know." Anyway we set some stuff up. I filled out a bunch of stuff. We started getting funding to... It was the first dedicated funding to work that trail in quite some time. We did a hell of a job over there on that.

TM: Cool. So this was like rebuilding retaining walls and stabilizing upslope debris kind of stuff?

RH: Yep. And putting in drainage, doing some rip-rap. I got ahold of some reports and some photographs and such of how... It was built by the patients. They used for a lot of it round rock, rip-rap, stuff from the ocean. Just hauling rock from the ocean down there and bringing it up. I told Tom, I said, "We should try to put a lot of this back together like it was."

TM: What did they use to hold the rip-rap? I mean, round rock without something to hold it, it just falls all apart. Did they use wood for that?

RH: No. It was done like regular rip-rap. You start at the friggin' top and just tie everything together. I mean, a lot of digging, a lot of everything, and it worked. It was still a lot of remaining rip-rap that used to be maybe a hundred foot and there might have been ten or fifteen foot left in different sections of that hundred foot. So that opened up some historical rehab money. What became a day trip over there, or a two-day trip, to go over and see Workman and stuff, turned into eight years of going over there two to three months a year. I would take my crew, I would bring people in from the Mainland—guys I'd worked with in the past and guys from Yosemite, guys that knew rock. Don Sharlow, he was at the Canyon for quite some time and also Mount Rainier, a couple of Olympic guys, and we would hit it hard. We were usually over there mostly January, February, March with a big solid crew. Could be up to eight or nine guys, just taking one switchback at a time. I mean, that's all you could do. There was twenty-seven switchbacks on this trail and they were steep switchbacks. That's twenty-seven over two miles/two and a half miles.

TM: Wow.

RH: Yeah, twenty-seven switchbacks and then you got down by the coast it was another three-quarters of a mile to get to the Colony. So it was incredible job. Brought in a lot of good people on that one.

TM: And they must have loved it because in the winter, places like Yellowstone or Yosemite or, you know, a lot of places are kind of shut down then, and so this would keep them working and get a chance to go to Hawaii in the winter. Not bad.

RH: Yeah, exactly. And my crew enjoyed the change, also, so it was great. We worked through... Workman left and a guy by the name of Steve Prokop became the superintendent. We picked up right where we left off with Workman with Steve. He loved us, he saw what we were doing. It was an amazing place to work. People ask me about Kalaupapa and I said it's like being in the Grand Canyon and Arlington National Cemetery at the same time because it is absolutely stunningly beautiful, and on the other hand, it is emotionally just an incredible place when you learn about the history and what we did to the people, Father Damian, Sister Maria Cope, both saints in the Catholic Church now. Just the whole history of it. The Park Service has done a really good job of preserving it. Damian's church, of course they did a major upgrade after he was beatified, or I guess that's what you call it, declared a saint, and put some money in there. It's just spectacular. I was telling Workman one time, we were hiking the trail, and I was thinking about doing a book for the hundredth anniversary of the Park Service. It was gonna be *A Hundred Best Places to get High in the National Parks*. It'd be a coffee table book. And getting high can mean anything, you know. It could mean anything. I was on natural highs just most of the time. He looked at me and he said, "By God, we better not be in that book." I says, "F***, Workman, you guys are in it nine times." It's just such a spectacular, spectacular place. I mean, absolutely one of the top places that I've ever worked. The park itself is maybe a couple thousand acres now. It was jointly run by the state and the feds. The state ran the cafeteria and the hospital for the patients down there. They had a hospital, they had a cafeteria the patients could eat at. They did the maintenance on that, they did the maintenance on the patients' houses. The Park Service took over basically the churches, the group meeting areas, and the interpretation of the place. Whenever a patient died, then that house came back to the feds and then they would do rehabs on the houses, also, trying to match up the colors and trying to... A real big historic preservation area.

TM: Cool.

RH: Yeah, it was unbelievable and so many wildlife sightings down there. I set out on the point, probably one of the most spectacular whale shows I've ever seen. I saw one whale give birth there, first breath, real lucky to see first breath. Not a lot of people have. And monk seals hauling out on the beaches. It's a remote, remote spot. I mean, that's why they put it there so that they could put these people down there with Hansen's disease and make sure they couldn't get out. Yeah, yeah, it was great. And so that kept me going also cause like every year I would go over there. Just a lot of things, man, a lot of different places. American Samoa, I went over there. They wanted to redo a trail that was used from one side of the island to get into Pago Pago, which is their big city; big being, I don't know, 15,000 people maybe. They had a trail before they put a road in over the path into a little town called Vian Pia. I got up there and I just had a Samoan guy out in front of me swinging a machete. Spent two days looking at it and went in and saw the superintendent, "What do you expect us to do with this?" He just, "Well, we just want to... We got some money and we just want to try to get it cut out and nothing elaborate." But it

was insane. Just nice, rich kind of stuff and going down through little canyons and back. The total length was probably only seven miles but that was also a fun job.

TM: That just sounds so amazing. It's the sort of stuff, you know, when I think of Knife Ridge is the closest thing I can think of in Grand Canyon is like Ooh Aah Point, you know. You come out to the ridge, you look over the edge, you get back on big, fat ground. I just like holy cow, you work on something like that you try to cut the ridge down to a kind of four-foot wide width, how do you do that?

RH: Yeah, you try to cut back into it where you can. But, you know, I don't know how long it had been really before anybody worked it. And then there was some just real steep kind of stuff where we hung sand ladders, hung some ladders that we would make. We ended up hiring a crew over that that I went back and checked on maybe two or three times during a couple of year period when they were building it. So, like I say, the whole job just morphed into something more than it was gonna be. And there was always stuff at Volcano to do. The visitation there was just absolutely insane. It was the largest single gate in the Park Service. We only had one gate, but more money came in through that gate than any other gate. Yellowstone's got five or six gates; Olympic's got nine or ten gates: Everett River Valley, the Elwah, the Sol Duc, going to Hurricane Ridge, you got a gate there to pay your fees. But this one at Volcano was the only one in the park. So they kept generating user fee dollars and they kept putting new projects out there. A lot of them were starting from scratch. ADA trails that might take you four or five months to complete. A new campground with ADA tent sites. I think we put in nine sites and then the whole trail around it had to be ADA. So just a great way to cap a career, I guess.

TM: Yeah. All kinds of stuff all over the place and not kind of Pacific Northwest forests or desert canyons but ocean landscapes.

RH: Ocean landscapes and then, like you say, raw landscapes in the park where there's just lava flows and nothing growing. I describe Volcano as raw, but probably one of the most alive places that I've been. There was a spirit up there. There was just an energy. When Pele was... Madam Pele, she's the goddess of fire/goddess of volcano. When she was there it was just alive. Forests, I used to always love hiking full moons. I did a lot of it at the Grand Canyon and I got back into it at Volcano. Go down in that crater at night, steam coming from everywhere cause lava was just a hundred feet below your feet. All these cracks and steam coming out, auras everywhere and just very alive. Then when the eruption stopped I went back up. The eruption stopped about three years ago, two and a half years ago. It had been going on for 25 years. I went back up to Halemaumau, which is House of Pele. We had done a bunch of work up there along the deal building a really nice trail out to a viewpoint and a beautiful overlook, and that got sucked in probably two or three years after we built it when Halemaumau itself started erupting. After it stopped the crater was five to ten times bigger than when it started. I mean, it was just an unbelievable landscape change. I was with a friend that worked up there and I said, "Man, this place feels empty." He said, "Pele's gone, Pele's gone." And that's what it was. I mean, all this energy that she had pumped out through the years and all the changes that could happen on a daily and weekly basis, all of that kind of energy was gone. But still a beautiful place to go up to. Took Chew up there a few weeks...er, it's been a few months now. She used to come up all the time when I was working up there, too. I had my office they put into a residential building so I could not have to commute and that worked out pretty sweet. Yeah, I don't know what else to say.

TM: It sounds kind of amazing. Like you say, it's an amazing way to wrap up a career.

RH: Yeah, it was. It really was. It was unbelievable. Now, here we are.

TM: Yeah. When we started this interview you were talking about the Yellow Brick Road and how amazing it was that things kind of opened up for you. I sort of think of this as another one of those as well, just another eleven years in amazing country doing amazing things.

RH: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, it worked out really well for me. When I went back to work, I went back as a, what do they call it, civil service annuitant so I could time what I put in. When I got done they recalculated my retirement and it basically doubled or better 'cause all the time that I went back to work counted towards retirement. So instead of 50 with 20 years in when I retired, I had 30/31 years in and I was 64 or something, 65.

TM: Cool.

RH: Yeah. Yeah, it was a good deal for me and I think we got some good stuff done for the park, so that was kind of a win-win.

TM: Yeah. Good deal for the public.

RH: Yeah. And now I don't know what that Yellow Brick Road was that when my wife went thud, but we're on it and we're making it work, just different, you know. So you want to finish off next week?

TM: Yeah, let's do that.

RH: I wouldn't mind since we're getting into this kind of detail and we're gonna have a transcript, I wouldn't mind talking about my wife's injury and our life now and maybe read a couple of things into the record.

TM: That'd be awesome.

RH: Yeah, yeah.

TM: That'd be awesome. Okay. Let's do that. I'll wrap this up and hold the line for a minute.

RH: All right.

TM: So today is Sunday. It's November 29th, 2020. This will conclude Part 9 Oral History with Richard Hanson. My name is Tom Martin. Richard, thank you so very much.

RH: Hey, thank you. Thank you for being so professional.