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Randall Cooley
August 18, 2016

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
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My Narrative
The Administrative History of the National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office

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I was interested in what was going on in Lowell (MA). I had a friend who was in charge there and he took me through the place. I saw that the I&M Canal had been authorized as a national corridor. That was in '84. At the same time, in our area, in Johnstown, PA, (Congressman) Jack Murtha wanted to diversify the economy after the collapse of steel. He was trying a lot of different initiatives, one of which was tourism. In 1983 I met with the special assistant to the NPS director for tourism. A group of eight people that she put together, all executive directors of tourism organizations, came out and did a tour of the area and wrote a little white paper. It had very practical, down to earth, suggestions of how they could improve tourism. It focused on the flood story and a little bit on the steel and railroad story. As you can imagine, an area that had been predominately coal and steel five years before that were not too focused on tourism.

The design and implementation of the South West Pennsylvania Heritage Commission:

Mr. Murtha funded a natural resource study called the "Reconnaissance Survey of Western Pennsylvania Roads and Sites." That was done by Denver (Service Center) with the idea to create a parkway like was done for the Natchez Trace. Regional Director Jim Coleman was not thrilled with that idea. He said, Randy, come up with something, anything but that. On advice of DSC Project Manager John Albright, I requested a team from DSC to do a Reconnaissance Survey of Western Pennsylvania Roads and Sites. John Albright, Rich Giamberdine, Mike Spratt, Keith Dunbar and Ron Johnson were on it. They toured around on their own for about three days and came back and said, frankly we don't see very much here. I said, OK, if you follow this route you see the coal story, you come over here you see the steel story, and the railroad story. I started describing those stories in more detail and they asked, but how would you link all of that together, because it was nine counties and several hundred miles. I said I thought we should put together some sort of a tour route idea. That's what we did. They essentially wrote it up as a linking of these different stories as a sort of a marked tour route.

Out of that they recommended the creation of an action plan. The action plan identified several things. 45 different major projects that could occur as well as the creation of a federal commission to oversee those projects. So, we proceeded with getting legislation established for a commission to oversee the projects outlined in the action plan. The commission was created as a separate agency of the Department of the Interior with a two-fold mission, oversee the completion of the projects and creation of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Industrial Heritage Tour Route. Later designated the Path of Progress in Interior Appropriations bill language.

In the meantime, with all this going on, Blackstone had been designated. Jim Pepper was running that. Jim and I had basically talked back and forth all the time. He essentially wanted to create a national heritage corridor but wanted it to be a unit of the NPS system. I argued that they should not be units of the NPS. It was a friendly discussion. We exchanged a lot of information but that was the essence of the debate.

At the same time, I was working with Larry Williamson who was running the Bureau of Recreation and Community Development for the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources in Pennsylvania, helping him get the state heritage park program going. We visited

the state heritage park program in Massachusetts, and the Urban Cultural Parks initiative in New York. Out of that he created a state heritage parks program for Pennsylvania.

I was superintendent at Alleghany Portage and Johnstown Flood until 1986. Then I switched over to project director for what the action plan had designated America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP). The AIHP was the designator for the work leading up to and including the initial phase of Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission. With that work underway, there was a major discussion within the commission, which was made up of people from all around the region as well as state and a couple of federal officials, that they didn't like the name America's Industrial Heritage Project because it, quote, "Seemed too much territory." They also were unhappy with the logo because it was sexist (no females represented on the workmen portrayed on the logo). The graphic artist who worked very hard on that logo was extremely upset. She wanted to know at the meeting how they could accuse her of being sexist. She said that she had worked very hard at making those gender-neutral silhouettes. I loved that symbol, but we were outvoted by the commission.

We were working on the tour route which included the nine counties. This involved designating, by committee the 430-mile-long route, and county loops along the route. Establishing that took about two years. Once established, the need for marketing came together, and the Path of Progress National Heritage Route was born.

The commission was never intended to be a heritage area. The commission was designated with a ten-year life. Although everyone knew that ten years wasn't going to do it, the goal was at 15 years for the commission to go out of business. That was the way we set it up. We wanted to make sure the commission did not extend too long. As it turned out it was 18 years.

By 1989 I had gone from project director of the AIHP and was appointed by the NPS regional director as his appointee to the commission and the commission asked me to serve as acting executive director. The NPS didn't want the responsibility of directly overseeing the work of the projects of the commission. The AIHP had identified 45 different projects with an estimated budget of a little over \$100 million. By that time Congressman Murtha was demonstrating that he was going to make at least \$10 million a year available each year for ten years to make that happen. The NPS was beginning to express concern at how much money that was, just under the annual budget for Yellowstone National Park. So, there was a growing concern from within the Washington office. The one person who was totally supportive at the Washington office level was Deputy Director Deny Galvin. He saw this as the way to leverage the money for other areas of the NPS. If Murtha supplied \$10 million a year for this then he might be able to leverage an additional for other critical projects.

Three people were in the room for the writing of the commission legislation. It was Peggy Lipson, of NPS Legislative Liaison Office, myself, and Richard Healy, of the House NPS Authorizations Committee. Peggy was a legislation writing genius. I would say we wanted to do this, and she would write in the clause. There was one thing Healy insisted on and that was that the commission not be tied to the NPS. A rough draft got cranked out in a day. We all looked at it and made comments. Peggy wrote out the final draft, sent it to Congressman Murtha, who was the chair of the House Authorizations Subcommittee. Murtha then called a

hearing in Johnstown Flood Museum in Johnstown and had all sorts of people come in and testify about the legislation from the House and the Senate. Deputy Director Deny Galvin came in and testified. The legislation passed the House and Murtha called somebody in the Senate and it was signed into law by the President in 1988. I had always had an ambition of creating a national park. This wasn't quite it, but it was close. It was definitely something to be excited about.

NPS support: We received great support from Jim Coleman who was Regional Director and as long as he was director, we received support from everybody else. We received support from Deny Galvin the Deputy Director in Washington, as long as he was Deputy Director. Both of them got other jobs and suddenly people who had been opposed to this came out of the woodwork.

Someone had filed a complaint about abuse of funds with the commission. They were going to be accountable for the funds is the way they talked about it. The person in the NPS who started this discussion with the IG (Inspector General) told the IG that we could not account for the money. The IG came out and started asking questions. Asked how much was spent and we produced purchase orders and all the necessary documents. This went on for about four days. He called me into the room and said, "Close the door." He said, "I have one question for you Randy. How come you can account for every single dime in this project and the budget person in the region and in the Washington Office don't know where any of it's gone?" I said, "I guess you'll have to ask them that question. I only know that we account for the money."

At that point I went to GSA because I had heard that GSA did accounting services for other government commissions. Our legislation had given us authority to seek support for our programs from wherever in the federal government we saw fit to do that. The region had been charging us \$70- 100K a year to manage the administrative side of it. Obviously, the IG showed that they had failed to account for that. GSA said that they would manage the whole thing for \$25K. So, we signed a contract with them, and it turned into a tripartite agreement between the NPS, GSA, and the Department of the Interior. After about two months we got it signed. From that point on the warrant for funds that comes from the Office of Management and Budget went to Interior and Interior would send an authorization to the NPS and the NPS would turn that authorization over to GSA who released the funds to us. By that point, 1990 I would say, we were essentially separate from the NPS Washington and Regional offices.

Overall the people in the region and the people in Washington liked heritage areas in a general sense but when it came to specific expenditure of funds that's when the arguments began. Fortunately for me I knew the NPS development system pretty well and so we did all of the same procedures that we would do for the development of any project in a national park and historical resources studies there. Everything and anything that needed to be done we did it.

We made a contract with the Denver Service Center, \$500K a year to set up what they called the Western Pennsylvania Group run by Fred Babb. Deny Galvin had been the Director of the Denver Service Center and he helped us set that up with the wise and expert assistance of John Albright who by then was the DSC Project Manager. Fred used the money to lease offices in a different building than the Denver Service Center and hired 45 people who worked full time on

AIHP projects, now the commission. They worked for about six years. Then the commission funding got radically cut and the projects dried up and the Pennsylvania Group dried up as well.

We got \$2.5 million a year but it wasn't enough to continue doing things at a \$10 million dollar a year rate.

Accomplishments: The single most documented region in the nation. Historic resources with engineering drawings, National Historic Landmark designations, National Register designations, Historic District designations, and about eight years of oral histories from iron, steel, coal, and railroad workers. The first management plan and new visitor center for Fort Necessity National Battlefield, the rehab and complete renovation and development of Friendship Hill National Historic Site, new visitor center at Allegheny Portage Railroad, new visitor center and renovated museum at Johnstown Flood National Memorial, huge new discovery center at Johnstown, and visitor center at Horseshoe Curve and Railroaders Museum. Miles of rails to trails developed. Established three state heritage parks.

I toured the country helping groups in Iowa, South Carolina, New York, Yuma, Arizona. Anywhere that someone was interested in establishing a heritage area they asked me to come and speak to the communities about how to get it done. I spent at least a third of my time doing that for about four years. For the longest time the joke was that wherever I went I talked about my grandchildren and Dan Rice is the one who coined the phrase, "Randy Cooley, he's not the father of heritage areas, he's the grandfather of heritage areas."

We got the steel heritage program going, thanks to our cooperation with Augie Carlino, because we had Steel Heritage overlap with AIHP in Westmoreland County. Both of us for whatever reason were to work in Westmoreland County, so Augie and I sat down and he was still struggling to figure out what he should do and wanted the NPS to come in and help him do it and NPS didn't want to, so I helped him work through the maze of that bureaucracy and he and I worked out a cooperative agreement between us for AIHP and Steel Heritage.

We did a lot of preservation work at the East Broad Top Railroad.

Keith Dunbar and I traveled around the nine-county region to have the commission work smoothly. It helped immensely that Jack Murtha would call them and say, pay attention to these folks if you want money from me. That tended to help. I can't discount that as a possible motivator. Especially for the first three years of the commission we would have these very spirited discussions for four or five hours at meetings. We set up county committees because it got so burdensome. Each county heritage committee would be assigned by the commission with certain duties each month. The funding of the efforts was predicated on them accomplishing the work the commission assigned to them. That was a help. We had myself or, my partner in all of this, Keith Dunbar, or one or two other staffers attend literally every county heritage committee meeting. Be there not to run it, but quietly answer questions as needed. We tried to maintain as low a key as we could at those meetings. Once every three months we would organize a bus tour of a particular county and work with that county's supporters to get themselves organized and able effectively to entertain the commission in their county as they highlighted the things, they

thought were important in their county and why they thought those things should be included in the commission's work.

Those were most effective because the chair of the commission at that time was a man by the name of Rick Mayer, publisher of the Johnstown Tribune-Democrat, owner of the local NBC affiliate, and owner of a string of radio stations in Pennsylvania and owner of a real estate development corporation. He was an absolute fanatic supporter for conservation efforts and historic preservation efforts all through the regions. He put a TV reporter and newspaper reporter on each bus tour. They reported extensively on all this work. He had a TV reporter and newspaper reporter at every meeting of the commission. He had somebody at every county heritage committee meeting. So, we had press and it was a highly effective tool to get done what we did. The articles were accurate but not always positive. When there were disagreements in the commission, and it was reported that caused people to talk. We never got an inaccurate article from the Johnstown Tribune-Democrat.

The Altoona Mirror, on the other hand, we had a constant battle with them. We had pretty good coverage out of the CBS affiliate in Altoona but the paper, not so much.

Challenges: Trying to keep track of it all would probably rank right up there at the top of the list. To put that into perspective. If you look at the 195-page index of what we have put into the archives at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), you can see how extensive our work was. We paid IUP \$30-40K a year for about ten years to set that archives up to store all information related to the commission. We had a lot of really, really good help from within the community and from staff. That was certainly the challenge, trying to keep track of it all.

Other challenges; we were talking about something so completely foreign to the NPS that I spent a whole lot of time talking to people in the regional office and Washington and other regions as well about what it took. Why it was important. I always emphasized the positive benefits that accrued to the NPS as a result of this program.

But the main challenge was trying to explain heritage areas to people who barely understood the word heritage. That is not intended as a slight to those folks. Today, everyone understands the word heritage. There is a common understanding of the word. In 1988, the word heritage meant ten dozen things to ten dozen people.

I think the most difficult challenge was to get people to understand that this was about stories, not about landscapes or buildings. It was about stories. NPS loves to deal with resources, land, water, buildings, documents. They have had, over the years, more of a struggle to deal with stories. At Gettysburg they can tell a colorful story. At Washington Monument they can tell a powerful story. But that interpretation for many, many years put the emphasis on the facts. Just the facts ma'am. I was chief ranger at Independence Park for four years. The chief of interpretation had laid out the interpretation each ranger would make at each station. If they varied from that very much, she got very upset with them. I used to tell her that this needs to be more about the story of the fight for independence. She told me to stick to protection and leave her alone. She had a very successful interpretive program going and I couldn't argue with that.

Now people say, of course, we should be telling stories in the parks all the time.

Reauthorization: The Southwest Pennsylvania Heritage Area was reauthorized in 2000 but you have to go to the Appropriations bill to find it. Jack Murtha was an appropriator not an authorizer. The most important thing I think he ever said to me was, “Randy, the authorization side of the Congress was set up to give a few more congressmen a little bit more power. The Constitution of the United States doesn’t grant Congress the power to authorize. It grants Congress the power of the purse.” He said, if I get it passed in the Appropriations Committee it’s law. The bill essentially extended the commission for five more years.

By 2005 I had retired from the Department of the Interior and I think he (Murtha) did the same thing for another couple of years, after which the commission no longer existed. It was disbanded and what continued was primarily the Progress Fund, the loan fund that had been set up.

The commission had been given the authority to create a grant & loan fund. The loan funding wasn’t being handled very well. We really didn’t know what we were doing. By that time, we had loaned out about \$150k. We had a couple of minor successes, and a spectacular failure in the Altoona area. We recouped the money but that told me that we couldn’t go on this way. We were going to get into trouble with this loan fund. We set aside \$300K to establish a small business loan fund and my contribution was to hire a guy we had been using as a marketing guy, Dave Kahley, and the commission provided on loan to them my administrative officer, Karen Post, who is now the co-director of the fund. Dave and Karen took the program and ran with it. The commission funded it each year with basic operational funds, so they didn’t have to dig into reserves to pay for office space and salaries of three people. Dave and Karen went out and got grants from the state and federal government and anywhere they could find it and literally made it a success. It is The Progress Fund which is still in operation today. It loans money to recreation, historic preservation small business projects throughout the region.

National Coalition for Heritage Areas: They were the organic beginnings of the NPS program for heritage areas. We were putting that together to have a meeting two or three times a year to share information. It was essentially an information sharing activity. The NPS was still struggling with how to deal with the heritage areas. Some of the heritage areas wanted to be included in the NPS. All of the heritage areas wanted to be at least a partner through a cooperative agreement with the NPS. All of them except the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission were looking for a solution for long-term sustainability, long-term support. There was all this discussion about how do you fund it? How do you work through the maze? The NPS Washington Office specifically required cooperative agreements because it did obligate them to do things. So WASO was very particular formulating these agreements. Some took two to three years to get developed. People were getting frustrated and say to me, what can we do, what can we do? I told them they just had to keep persevering. They had to recognize that this was something so completely different from what the NPS has dealt with before. The NPS was struggling too in learning how to deal with this, the birthing and growing pains of heritage areas.

The National Center for Heritage Development: It was my biggest failure. The reason to set up the National Center for Heritage Development, I think, came from Dan Rice getting fed up

with me saying that these things (heritage areas) had to become sustainable to be successful. They, quite frankly, got sick of me saying that at every single meeting. Alvin Rosenbaum was a consultant who had specific ideas about how to make that happen. Some of them practical, some of them real grandiose, and all of them involving him getting paid to make them happen. So, he (Alvin) had a vested interest in it. Dan agreed with me that if we were going to make this successful, we had to find the way to make money. The National Center for Heritage Development was set up specifically to try to figure out ways to make money for the heritage areas so that the heritage areas could be self-sustaining.

My contention was that you cannot call yourself a partner to the NPS if you are dependent on it for your daily existence.

They did not want to hear that. We came up with a bunch of ideas, some of which are still good ideas but ... I would call the Center for Heritage Areas an idea ahead of its time or just a bad idea. We couldn't get enough people to participate in the development of the proper income generating strategy. Folks were just not interested. And, by the way, that includes the folks out here who I was saying the same things to. I couldn't convince them either as long as there was money coming from the government, why is Randy talking about this. So, basically, we had to close the doors on that after about three years.

After about the second year it involved making the annual reports to the IRS more than anything else. It failed. Yes, it was mostly focused on tourism.

My position: I was both a NPS employee and executive director of the commission for a few years. But it got to be way too much of a conflict. In 1992, it became obvious that I was not going to be able to do justice to the commission or to the NPS by remaining an employee of both. By that time, I was so invested in the heritage area movement that I resigned from the NPS and was a DOI employee because the commission was a DOI Commission. I just officially became a DOI employee. Among other things I went from a GS-12 to a GS-15 and I wasn't going to argue with that. Most importantly I was no longer serving two masters. A lot of people in the NPS were unhappy with me for doing that. A lot of people in the NPS were thrilled that I did it. It depended on whether they supported what we were doing or not. Keeping in mind that I had decided that I was going to be a park ranger when I was fourteen and from then on did everything I could to become a park ranger; worked in Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Washington DC, Everglades, Yosemite. I did what I loved and making that decision to switch was not an easy one. But, to this day, I'm very glad that I did.

I resigned from the commission about 2003 to basically pursue the revenue stream approach and went to work for what we called the Westsylvania Approach and stuff that was much more revenue focused. I left the government because you can't be in the government and engage in revenue generating strategies.

I then retired from all of it in 2006.

Training: After 1997 I was on a training committee with NPS and Alliance (of National Heritage Areas) people. The Alliance people by that time knew what training the heritage areas staffs needed. The NPS was still not really training for staff to work in partnerships.

The NPS staff at the Directorate level were focused on finding ways to take what the NPS does so well, e.g., evaluation of resources, evaluation of stories and translation for the public; to take all that knowledge and take it to the surrounding communities. My argument was, every park superintendent's success should depend almost as much on how effectively s/he works with the surrounding communities as it is how effectively s/he works within the park itself. That was almost heretical at that time. But that is what I thought the training needed to be.

My area of focus on the training was to try to get the NPS managers to understand heritage areas and then clearly define the parameters for their participation in heritage areas.

Alliance of National Heritage Areas: At its founding I was a DOI employee. At the time of the organization of the Alliance the NPS wanted to dictate. They didn't want to coordinate. The Alliance absolutely refused to allow that to happen. Probably the most outspoken one in that regard was Augie Carlino. He made sure everyone understood, you're not going to kick me around. He was a very effective advocate in that regard. The Alliance by not allowing the NPS to, *kick us around*, did what they do well, harness political power. The politicians love the heritage areas. The politicians love the heritage areas almost as much as they love the NPS.

Ultimately political pressure, as well as citizen pressure put on the NPS by the Alliance and its membership, convinced the NPS to re-evaluate the way it looked at partnerships. The Alliance specifically and partnerships with other areas in general. That's how I think the Alliance contributed to what the NPS has become as a partner, much more cooperative and helpful.

Beginnings of NPS partnerships: When the guys came over to NPS from HCRS (Historic Conservation and Recreation Service) nobody knew what to do with them. They were doing community engagement and partnerships that were amazing. Amazing work that was so different from the NPS that they kind of got stuck to the side. They didn't get mainstreamed for a lot of years. Then they got in the cultural side of it through the heritage areas and rails/trails. Then they started getting mainstreamed in the NPS. The point is that the NPS is a very conservative organization in the government which is important given it's charged with resource preservation. But as a result, it takes it a long time to incorporate new ideas into the mission. You'll know it has been accepted when there is no special office for it, like a partnership office, but rather it permeates all the operations. It's not there yet, but it will get there.

Benefit of NPS to heritage areas: Oh, my goodness. The deep and abiding understanding of the importance of the resource as the basis for the story. Nobody in the world understands that as well as the NPS. The heritage areas are all about the story. In the beginning very few of them were quite as concerned about the resource. The Commission was very focused on understanding the resource as the bases for storytelling. But that was an unusual effort. I spent a lot of time and a lot of speeches telling people they needed to focus on the resource as their basis. That was number one absolutely necessary contribution at the early stage. The heritage areas couldn't have gotten off the ground without that grounding, the NPS understanding of resource.

NPS brought an enormous amount of expertise in the political machinations of Washington. How to work your way through the system, both the political and bureaucratic system. The NPS was happy to help the heritage areas work through that. That was an enormous contribution.

The very early ones who were getting, like us, substantial funding, the NPS was able to serve as a funding conduit and was an enormous kick start. They were happy to do that. Deny Galvin would say over and over again, Randy, as long as you get Murtha to give us money, I'll be happy to pass it through. After, of course, they took away a slight portion. We paid for every service we got from the NPS. They provided us with the help of getting the money moved through all the offices from the appropriation to our account.

Resource importance, political support, bureaucratic support, all important, but I would say the importance of the resource was the most powerful one.