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Herbert Evison's National Park Service Oral History Project, 1952-1999

Erik Reed
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ERIK REED

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[START OF INTERVIEW]

Herbert Evison: This is Herbert Evison, and today I am in the Southwest Regional Office of the National Park Service in Santa Fe. It is the 11th of December 1962, and with me is Erik Reed, whose title I think right now is Chief of the Division of History and Archeology - or do they turn the names around?

Erik Reed: No, that's right, Herb: History and Archeology, Southwest Region.

Herbert Evison: But who, until the reorganization or disorganization of the Service a little over a year ago, was the then Region III's Chief of the Division of Interpretation.

Herbert Evison: Erik, let's get this thing under way by getting a little account of what induced you originally to come to work for the Park Service, and then follow that up with a kind of summary of your career, what jobs you held and when and where.

Erik Reed: Well, first let me mention as a sort of prelude or prologue the first time I worked for the National Park Service doesn't really count. The summer of 1932 was my third summer as a blister ruster, and we happened to be working on Acadia National Park and were on the Park Service payroll. So, I can claim to have entered the Service for the first time in June 1932, more than thirty years ago. But, as I say, this was simply as a foreman in a blister rust ribes eradication crew.

Erik Reed: Then I went into archeology instead of forestry or forest pathology and came to the Southwest intending to stay in the Southwest, in the early summer of 1934. The following winter and early spring of 1934-35 I worked as an archeologist under Dr. Emil Haury, now at the University of Arizona, in the excavations at Snaketown on the Gila River south of Phoenix, Arizona.

Herbert Evison: Say that name again: at what?

Erik Reed: Snaketown, a very large and very important ruin, the key site in the archeology of that region, southern Arizona, not far from Casa Grande. And we visited Casa Grande and met some of the people there. Dale King showed us around, I recall, and Superintendent Pinkley and others came up and visited Snaketown while we were working there.

Erik Reed: I was very much impressed by the people in the National Park Service, and particularly above all Boss Pinkley. I am still working for a man that's been dead for twenty years; I'm working for Boss Pinkley, not for anyone else, really, at heart. Impressed by him; impressed by Dale King, who struck me as a very brilliant guy; by Louis Caywood, who was then at either Casa Grande or Tumacácori - I think Tumacácori - and I got acquainted with the Caywoods, and I remember seeing them here in Santa Fe in May 1935 at the occasion of a scientific meeting; Earl Jackson at Bandelier.

Erik Reed: The Park Service men I met struck me as pretty outstanding people that I liked and admired.

Erik Reed: After the conclusion of this dig at Snaketown I went to Tucson for about a month. I had my winter's payroll saved up, so that was a vacation during April. I then came to Santa Fe about the first of May, and I was, let us say, unemployed, rather than having a vacation, because I was beginning to run out of money. And, as with so many of us, I came into the Service partly because I needed a job and was offered a job. Actually, I was out working with Deric O'Bryan, then Deric Nusbaum, in June or July when, to my great delight, I got a telegram from the Southwestern Monuments headquarters at Coolidge asking if I would accept the temporary position for the summer of ranger in charge of Hovenweep, Yucca House, and Arches. I was delighted by this and of course accepted. I came back to Santa Fe, left my personal car, a little old beat-up Model A Ford, with Earl Jackson at Bandelier, and took a pick-up truck which the CCC people at Bandelier had repaired, and went to Aztec and reported in to Johnwill Faris. And while I waited for the truck to be fixed and things to arrive by mail from Coolidge, I put in a few days interpretive guiding under Faris as a volunteer, so to speak; I was supposed to go to work, but not on that job; and without a uniform. And that amounts to my Park Service training, really, in interpretive work: three or four days under the inspiration and guidance of Johnwill; and then spent the summer out in the wilds of southeastern Utah having a wonderful time in the Hovenweep area and the country between Hovenweep and Arches and back down toward Cortez, visiting not only the three monuments - Yucca House, Hovenweep, and Arches - but also areas that might be or should be considered for addition to the National Park System, some of which have since been acquired as additions to Hovenweep - Goodman Point, for example, I visited and recommended favorably in the summer of 1935, and it was added to the National Park System about 1955 or so - 1950, somewhere along in there.

Erik Reed: Meanwhile, Jess Nusbaum, who was then the director of the Laboratory of Anthropology here in Santa Fe, had recommended me to Herb Maier for a Regional Office job or a field job under the Region III Office, which at that time was in Oklahoma City and largely concerned with state park CCC work in Texas and Oklahoma. This was with the dignified title of assistant archeologist for work at Goliad, Texas. So, in addition to this first bit of working at Acadia in the summer of 1932, I came into the Park Service twice, simultaneously, so to speak, in the summer of 1935, first as a ranger at Hovenweep, then at the State Park CCC project at Goliad, Texas, which was really a separate deal and not a transfer within the Service. That was only a temporary position at Hovenweep.

Erik Reed: And so, then the Goliad work under the Regional Office gradually became regional archeologist in the course of a few years. A year or so at Goliad, and the summer of 1936 archeological survey of the Big Bend area, which at that time was a - included a State Park and was a proposed national park

area. Ross Maxwell was there for the summer with a couple of student assistants making a geological study, and I had two or three student technicians working with me on a geological survey of the entire proposed national park area.

Herbert Evison: Were you on the CCC payrolls at that time, when you were doing that job?

Erik Reed: Oh, yes. While in Texas at Goliad and in the Big Bend, and through 1936, 1937, at some point, I don't recall when, between 1937 and 1940 I went onto regular funds, but specifically the Historic Sites payroll and was largely on investigation of proposed areas, before the war, rather than primarily concerned with interpretive programs at existing areas; and general historic site survey work as well as specific proposed areas; and some connection also with archeological research in the existing areas.

Erik Reed: My headquarters were transferred here to Santa Fe in March 1937, and six months before the rest of the general office moved over from Oklahoma City.

Herbert Evison: This building hadn't been finished then?

Erik Reed: Oh, no, it hadn't been started. And we were in the Federal Courthouse Building downtown. This was built after the office moved here. John Kell would be the one to tell you about that.

Erik Reed: He was largely concerned with it, one of the few that's still here who was here before the move from Oklahoma City, but I'm pretty sure the building didn't start until the fall of 1937, probably. And we moved in here I think during Hillory Tolson's regime as Regional Director, which was 1939. I believe we were still in the Courthouse when Hillory came out here, and I think we moved out here while he was in charge, while Hillory Tolson was Regional Director here.

Herbert Evison: Well, since then?

Erik Reed: And then, as I say, this work which was started out on State Park CCC gradually became the regional archeologist position in both title and function, although continuing to be largely concerned with proposed areas and historic site surveys and special investigations.

Erik Reed: Then I was gone to the Army from 1943 to the spring of 1946, and it was only after return from the Army in the spring of 1946 that the regional archeologist job gradually but fairly rapidly became very concerned with the entire field of interpretation of history and archeology at the southwestern areas, and primarily concerned since 1946 with the existing areas and with some proposed area investigations thrown in, not a great many. This, partly because of the move to Santa Fe of Southwestern Monuments headquarters from Coolidge, and virtual consolidation with the Regional Office, so that we were operating as all one organization.

Herbert Evison: For a while.

Erik Reed: Yes. And of course, we had no regional historian; for twenty years this region was without a regional historian.

Herbert Evison: No history down here!

Erik Reed: You're trying to get some bitterness put on this tape, aren't you, my friend? That's one of the topics on which you can get it from me. It touches a nerve easily; except that now I don't need to be bitter and scream and pound the table, because we do have a regional historian finally. Bob Utlley was recently - perhaps you didn't know this - Uttley has been transferred over from the historic site survey to a newly established position of regional historian, for work in connection with existing areas and actual definite proposed areas such as Fort Davis, which is on its way into the System now and on which he has done a great deal of work.

Herbert Evison: It already has a superintendent appointed.

Erik Reed: Yes. But until last spring, about May 1962, it had been twenty years that we had no regional historian, and so I had to function as regional historian along with regional archeologist to the extent that I could.

Herbert Evison: In other words, you were drawn into planning of such places as Fort Union and, well, Fort Davis of course, and other historic sites in the region.

Erik Reed: Yes, investigation of historical areas or - well, whatever historical work got done had to be done, obviously had to be done by me or by my division after we gradually expanded, and following the normal trend, working more and more people instead of a one-man or two-man unit.

Herbert Evison: Well, then, what was it, about 1954 that a division of interpretation was set up in here?

Erik Reed: Yes. And I was Regional Chief of Interpretation from about August 1954 to August of last year, which was when the reorganization was announced, as you know, and that amounted to breaking up the interpretation organization, although it wasn't formally officially put into force on paper until sometime this spring.

Herbert Evison: There are really quite a lot of questions that I would just love to ask you that you probably wouldn't want the answers to put on tape; so, dodging that, I would like to go back to one or two of your earlier chores. I remember having been down in Goliad myself in the summer of 1935, and I was also in the Big Bend country in 1935 with Connie Wirth. I am particularly interested in getting on this record something of what you did there in Big Bend in connection with your archeological - I suppose you would call it archeological - exploration. How did you go about it, what did you do in there, what did you find?

Erik Reed: Well, we made an archeological site survey, starting by simply asking people who were already there and who knew the country, about localities where they had seen any arrow points or other specimens on the surface.

We also covered the area fairly thoroughly - or large parts of it fairly thoroughly - and other portions rather sketchily. I had three young men with me, extremely good workers, one of them an outstanding archeologist now, another has dropped out of archeology completely and I don't know what has become of him; the first one I mentioned is J. Charles Kelley, head of the Department of Anthropology and the Museum of Anthropology at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, and at that time an advanced student or possibly an instructor at the University of Texas; and William Pearce, who was primarily a student of history rather than anthropology, actually, but put in quite a bit of field work in archeology, and he has always been connected with Texas Technological College at Lubbock, and is now vice-president of Texas Tech.

Erik Reed: These were pretty good boys and we got quite a bit done back and forth across the country, working partly in pair teams, two teams of two men, and simply looking for surface things, specimens on the surface, in likely spots.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, that word “likely” is one that I would like to dwell on a little bit. I have been thinking as you talked: here was the Big Bend proposed national park; I think by that time the ultimate boundaries had been pretty well defined, something over 700,000 acres. And I am sure that an archeological reconnaissance or exploration doesn't consist of walking back and forth at intervals of ten yards of twenty yards over that whole 700,000 acres. There must be in such an area as that certain likely places that practically cry out for you to take a look at them. Now, what are the characteristics of a likely place, Erik?

Erik Reed: Yes. And you are quite right: we didn't attempt to cover it on hands and knees, every square inch. If we had covered it more thoroughly, we would have found undoubtedly a good many more sites than we did, and sites in places where we didn't expect them. That happens. But a big wide-open flat with no living water anywhere in it, there is not likely to be anything there and something like that we might even ignore completely, probably just ride through once, horseback or Jeeps - well, we didn't have Jeeps then, but pick-ups or something like that. We might ride through, traverse it once, sort of looking around, just in case we were wrong, and we might happen to hit on something.

Erik Reed: The places we would search pretty carefully would be primarily any place where there are springs now or where it looks as if there have been springs and seeps in the past; you are almost sure to find evidences of prehistoric occupancy at just about every water source of that kind.

Erik Reed: Secondly, along streams and junctures of streams, in localities where there might have been continuous flow at some time in the past of better climate and more rainfall. Thirdly, caves. And that doesn't mean every cave, because quite often it would be possible to tell, at least with field glasses from below or from across the canyon or so, that there was no floor to the

cave, - a steeply sloping bottom in which there would be no remains surviving and in which people wouldn't have wanted to live, anyway. But a great many of the small caves in the Big Bend did yield indications of occupancy and a few of them contain - a few that have been excavated contained – remnants of basketry and sandals and other perishable material like that, which doesn't survive out in open sites. The sites in the open around springs and so forth consist of nothing but stone - points, knives, scrapers, and just chips. There were some sites which we put down as sites - habitation sites - where we didn't actually find any genuine artifacts, so to speak, but merely the scraps from Indians having sat down there at some time in the past and chipped some arrowheads, and all that is left is flakes, or utilized flakes where we can give a definite name to it, like a knife or a scraper, but a flake which isn't a natural formation and presumably had been used for skinning a little animal or something like that.

Erik Reed: We excavated a couple of little caves; didn't find very much material in them. Other caves in the general Big Bend region, most of them not within the park boundary, I think, had been excavated at various times in the past, and there are some published reports on the basketry, sandals cordage, other materials of that nature.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, there are two certain kinds of areas that I would be interested in: specifically, along the Rio Grande and up in the forested section of the park, up in Chisos Mountains.

Erik Reed: Quite a bit of more or less scattered material along the Rio Grande, as I recall, but hardly any up high in the forested part of the mountains. I remember scrambling up and down two or three of the partly outlying peaks on the semi-detached hills on the northeast side particularly of the Chisos, and trying to get my horse to go up ridges where I didn't want to bother to walk and thought he ought to go with me, and he didn't want to. We got out of all these places all right, including the horse; thought once or twice I might have to change off and carry him, coming down some of these nasty spots. But I found very little up in the higher part, and I think we found nothing in the highest part, the heavily forested upper sections of the Chisos.

Erik Reed: Now, of course you realize I am remembering this from twenty-five years or so and I have been a lot of different places since, and I am not sure on the details.

Herbert Evison: But, specifically, about that, wasn't it rather surprising to you to find so little up there in the cooler, shadier part of the area?

Erik Reed: No, not particularly, because it is generally true throughout the Southwest that we find very little in the highest, most heavily forested; very little in the yellow pine, even, and probably none, no pueblo ruins at least, in the quite high, the spruce-fir-aspen and so on, which in the Southwest is easily

understandable, because they were farmers - still are today - and they were living in areas with a long enough growing season for corn, which means something like 120 days between the last frost and the first frost.

Erik Reed: The Chisos Mountains and the Big Bend Indians did have some corn, but they weren't settled farmers, and you would think they would have gone off into the mountains quite a bit, so that I don't really know why this is, but we found very little in the higher part; and a rather surprising number of sites - 250 or 300 campsites - in, as I say, incomplete reconnaissance, not a thorough coverage, in what looked like rather barren, inhospitable, forbidding country. I can't help wondering if, at the time they were living there, it might have been a slightly milder climate than the present. By milder I mean cooler, slightly cooler, not as hot and dry as now. And there must have been a little more in the way of water supply than at present; so, with slightly different conditions, the desert might not look so terrifying and might not have been as inhospitable at that time, and the higher mountains might have been chilly rather than a pleasant escape from the heat.

Herbert Evison: Has there ever been any associated - what's the word? - dendrochronology on any of that area down in there?

Erik Reed: No. There has been what we might call unassociated, non-associated dendrochronology, in that Schulman of the Tree Ring Laboratory at the University of Arizona did quite a bit of study of living conifers in the Chisos Mountains, and at least one bulletin published on climate and hydrology in connection with tree rings; but it hasn't been connected up with, hasn't been associated with, the archeological material as has been done in the Southwest.

Herbert Evison: Were you able to reach any conclusions as to how far back in time any of that stuff extended?

Erik Reed: Only estimates; I'd rather say estimates than guesses - it sounds a little more scholarly - estimates based on comparison with other regions, rather than anything inherent in the date, the material itself; no real basis for dating the finds themselves. But presumably this occupation which very much resembles the early San Juan Basketmakers of the Southwest, presumably extended on up much later than Southwestern Basketmaker, probably not to historic times but probably may have extended to the beginning of the historic period, the Spanish Period, 400-and-some years ago, possibly up to the arrival of the Apaches, who occupied the general region in the American Period, the last couple of hundred and some years. These people weren't ancestors of the Apaches, who came in very late; and how far back the other end of the - how far back in time to date the other end of the occupation, the beginning, no very good basis for saying; a few thousand years would be as—

Herbert Evison: A few thousand years: it could be that?

Erik Reed: Oh, yes, quite possibly.

Herbert Evison: Well, Erik, I am a little at a loss to ask you very definite questions even after listening to this thumbnail sketch of your career, but I wonder if you, thinking back over your years with the Service, don't recollect some other interesting chores or interesting events in which you were a participant, that we might get on this tape?

Erik Reed: Well, staying in the field of archeological research, field work, there is one rather unusual project which it might be well to mention.

Erik Reed: About twenty-one, twenty-two years ago Jess Nusbaum set up with the Bureau of Indian Affairs arrangements for the first highway salvage archeology. In the last few years, last several years, there has been a great deal of activity in the highway salvage program, particularly in New Mexico, on State highways. This is a sort of precursor of that.

Erik Reed: It came about because the Indian Service started to put in a road in Mancos Canyon just below the Mesa Verde, on the Ute Reservation, and they cut into and partially destroyed half a dozen small ruins. Don Watson heard about this, or else just happened to see it; anyway, made a rather detailed and rather indignant report on this vandalism, bulldozing of ruins, illustrated with photographs to substantiate it, and brought up the fact that something ought to be done about it.

Herbert Evison: Now, who was this addressed to?

Erik Reed: Within the Service; the report by Watson from Mesa Verde probably was addressed to this office and then forwarded to Washington; it may have been addressed directly to Washington; I don't think so. It went on to the Director's office, anyway, and so Jess Nusbaum got hold of a couple of BPR men and went up and inspected this on the ground with Ute Reservation Indian Service officials, and finally prevailed on them - the negotiations and arrangements on this went on for about a year, as I recall - but he finally worked out with them an agreement for archeological salvage of these ruins that were already damaged, at Indian Service expense for labor and material, supplies, and everything except the time of the archeologist, and the National Park Service to supply the technical supervision of the work.

Herbert Evison: I take it that the labor would have been Indian labor, as a rule?

Erik Reed: Yes. And so, Jess sent me as the project archeologist to actually carry out the work when he finally had it set up. That was in the spring of 1942. And I spent two or three months with a small crew of Ute Indian and Navajo Indian laborers working together on some of these excavations in - oh, six or eight sites, I have forgotten now just how many - small ruins which either had been damaged already by the road construction but of which there was enough left to be worth fooling with some, and a few that were in line to be destroyed with continued work on the road. And the

project worked out fairly well. The Indians were a good crew. And I wrote quite a detailed report on it which finally got published a year or so - about four years ago, after an unusually long interval.

Herbert Evison: Published by whom?

Erik Reed: By the University of Utah, Jess Jennings' outfit. It had been kicking around in manuscript form for quite a while, and the Museum of New Mexico here had wanted to publish it and they had it for seven years and hadn't published it yet, so I took it back from them, and Jennings had expressed interest in it, so I sent it to him.

Erik Reed: That was a quite interesting and rather unusual little project, not a great big job, a rather small project.

Herbert Evison: But it had pioneer character, didn't it?

Erik Reed: Yes. It was the beginning of Jess Nusbaum's - or the first implementation of his arrangements with the Indian Service for survey and salvage on Indian Service roads.

Herbert Evison: In our off-the-record conversation, Erik, you mentioned a Guam assignment, and since that was an official assignment for the Department, I think it would be interesting to get something about that on the record.

Erik Reed: That was an extremely interesting trip, interesting assignment, even though not purely Park Service or directly Park Service.

Erik Reed: The Division of Territories of the Department, and the government of Guam asked the National Park Service to send a specialist or a team of investigators to make a study of park needs and possibilities - recreation - and survey, and of historic and archeological sites and monuments in Guam. And a recreation planner, Irving Root, a city planner actually, by trade and training primarily - Mr. Root and I went out ten or eleven years ago - yes, we spent January 1952 on Guam, and while he looked into city park and recreation needs and other local and the equivalent of state park possibilities, I ran around the island and looked at the archeological sites and historical remains, and was quite surprised to find what there was and how much there was on this little island; very interesting things, some in the historical field as well as the archeological remains. Not a great deal left from the early Spanish period, but quite a few interesting old structures. Of course, the Spanish period on Guam ran up to 1898 instead of 1846 as here - or 1821 here.

Erik Reed: I was quite interested to realize that Guam, like New Mexico, Texas, California, was formerly part of the Spanish Empire and with some physical traces of Spanish culture, and a surprising and quite unusual kind of archeological sites from shortly before the arrival of the Spanish.

Erik Reed: Oh, another very interesting point about Guam: it was Magellan's first landfall on the first crossing of the Pacific Ocean. After he came out from

the Strait of Magellan at the tip of South America, he happened to miss all of the island groups all the way across Polynesia and Micronesia to Guam, or Saipan, rather, the Marianas, the island group of which Guam is the largest and southernmost. There is a monument on the southern tip of Guam saying this is where Magellan hit, but apparently the opinion of historians who have looked into this seem to favor the islands of Saipan and Tinian just to the north of Guam as more likely. However, the point at which this Magellan monument stands was also, in any case - and this is not a debatable matter, controversial, like Magellan - it was the one place where the Manila galleons stopped on the way from Mexico to the Philippines.

Erik Reed: For 250 years every year, or virtually every year normally, regularly, the galleon would sail from Acapulco on the west coast of Mexico practically straight west across the Pacific at about 13 degrees North and stop in at the southern end of Guam to take on water and fresh vegetables, and then continue to Manila, returning by a northward course swinging up past Japan far north and then hitting the American coast around California.

Erik Reed: But the archeological sites: stone pillars which evidently are the supports of houses made of bamboo and so forth, plant materials that have disappeared completely; pile houses, which instead of being on bamboo piles or some other perishable wooden column, were on these quite surprisingly large stone posts, which are two-piece: a cylindrical vertical post anywhere from two or three feet to several feet high, and then a cap, a hemispherical stone cap balanced on the top of this post, the hemisphere with the face up, and the houses were lashed on these stone caps of the stone pillars. The damnedest thing I ever heard of. (Is it all right to say that on your machine? We're not on the air.) But that was really a surprising thing, and some of them extremely large - a very few extremely large ones, most of them the entire support including the stone head or cap only about three or four feet high, but a few standing nine, ten, twelve feet high.

Herbert Evison: And you actually found some of those in which these hemispherical caps were standing there on the curved side, curved face?

Erik Reed: A few are still in place. Practically all of them have fallen off, and the hemispheres are beside the posts, which also are partly fallen. Earthquakes and typhoons and what not knocked down most of them but there are a few that happened to stay put.

Herbert Evison: Well, did they sit on there on a flat surface or on a kind of a socket? slightly dished?

Erik Reed: Yes, but just a little, not a ball-and-socket effect.

Herbert Evison: Tell me, Erik, do you know whether there has been any follow-up over there in connection with any of these studies?

Erik Reed: I don't know. I gather that not very much has been done, or the last I knew there had been practically nothing. It's a difficult situation in many ways, and they may have set aside a few reserves, but I am not sure, and I haven't happened to encounter anyone who has been on Guam recently for quite a while now, so I don't know what the present situation is.

Herbert Evison: Incidentally, was Carlton Skinner governor over there when you were there?

Erik Reed: Yes.

Herbert Evison: A fellow that I used to work with in Washington when he was head of the Department's division of information, so I was interested. Did he indicate any interest in this undertaking? Was he responsible in any way?

Erik Reed: Yes. I don't know whether he initiated it or not himself. I think the project was initiated in Washington in the Division of Territories by Emil Saudy, but I am not quite sure; it may have been simply that they were setting it up in response to a suggestion from the government of Guam. And Governor Skinner was definitely interested, yes.

Herbert Evison: Erik, it is quitting time and I am not going to hold you here anymore, but I am much obliged for your help on the making of this tape. Best of luck.

[END OF INTERVIEW]