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NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817)  
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**Bruce Kaiser**  
**June 16, 2010**

Interview conducted by Michele Hartley

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Interview with: Bruce Kaiser

Interview by: Michele Hartley, NPS Employee

Interview Date: June 16, 2010

Release form available: No (NPS employee at time of interview)

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M. Hartley:	00:01	We should interview you.
Woman:	00:02	I don't want to be interviewed.
M. Hartley:	00:03	I thought you didn't but, all right. And then Don because then we have to wrap it up.
Woman:	00:07	Okay.
M. Hartley:	00:07	Yup.
Woman:	00:09	Okay, I'll tell Don to be around.
M. Hartley:	00:10	It's going.
M. Hartley:	00:13	Whenever you're ready.
Audio Tech:	00:14	We're rolling.
M. Hartley:	00:14	Okay. I'm here with Bruce Kaiser and Bruce, I just want to confirm that you're okay with being recorded.
Bruce Kaiser:	00:23	Yes, I am.
M. Hartley:	00:24	Okay. Thank you, Bruce. If you wouldn't mind, if you could please tell us your name and then your title, position here at the Harpers Ferry Center.
Bruce Kaiser:	00:37	Name is easy. Bruce Kaiser, and I'm an exhibit specialist. Last I heard, I was the senior wayside production manager.

- M. Hartley: 00:49 What does that mean?
- Bruce Kaiser: 00:51 Well, wayside exhibits are produced, excuse me, in three phases which we refer to as planning, design and production. Each of those segments of the process is somewhat divided up into who performs those duties. I've been involved with production as long as I've been at the center, and so once the planners and designers have finished completing the content of a wayside exhibit, it's turned over to me and I go out and I actually purchase the panels and the bases.
- M. Hartley: 01:29 How long have you been here at the center?
- Bruce Kaiser: 01:31 Just over 23 years.
- M. Hartley: 01:34 Can you tell us when you started?
- Bruce Kaiser: 01:36 It was 1987 and at the time I was working for a contractor to the National Park Service, located locally about 20 miles from here over in Shepherdstown, and we were at Specialty Binding at the time and doing wayside exhibit, what was called, film preparation. In those days, wayside exhibits were screen printed, and to that end, before a screen printing takes place, you create a set of full-sized, color-separated, burn-ready film positives and negatives.
- Bruce Kaiser: 02:10 So, we had the contract to provide those films. For about two years, I labored to produce the films for screen printing, and through that of course made contacts here at the center. Was in and out of the IDC building delivering things, getting instructions, and going back and forth.
- M. Hartley: 02:33 What was it about the Harpers Ferry Center that appealed to you? I don't know if you're from around here, or what? How'd you get here?
- Bruce Kaiser: 02:40 Originally I'm from New Jersey, but I came to West Virginia to go to college and decided this was the place to stay. So I stayed, and it's mostly a story of good luck.
- Bruce Kaiser: 02:51 Because in my college experience, when I studied design at Shepherd College, we took a tour of the IDC building here. And at the time there was a hiring freeze on, which has probably been true of about fifty percent of the time I've been here. And they suggested that if any of us students

wanted, really badly, to be involved and work here at the center, the best thing we could do would be to become a maintenance person at some park, and hang on until the day came that we could transfer over.

- Bruce Kaiser: 03:20 Of course as college students we, I'm ashamed to say, turned our noses up a bit at the idea of being in maintenance. I realize now that, of course, was the way to go. But I wrote it off as somewhere you couldn't get into because it was such a desirable place to be.
- Bruce Kaiser: 03:36 The story continues that then, when I found myself working at the contractor who did work here, it still didn't occur to me that I could actually get a job here. But I started talking to one of the people, Phil Myerly who was running wayside production at the time, about how I could become a contractor.
- Bruce Kaiser: 03:56 I had a little bit of an entrepreneurial spirit, and I thought "wouldn't it be great to be a contractor and get one of these government contracts". In fact, I thought through, if I went to the bank and told them I had a government contract surely they would lend me the money to buy a process camera.
- Bruce Kaiser: 04:11 Well, it doesn't work that way. Phil was generous enough to show me what an IDIQ contract looked like, and how it was two inches thick, and how it required three years of financial records from your corporation before you can even get through the gate to be considered.
- Bruce Kaiser: 04:27 That was a pretty good dose of cold water, and I stepped back and didn't think too much more about it. Then one day, Phil asked me if I would be interested in working here. Unbelievably, I said "You know, I'll have to think about that".
- Bruce Kaiser: 04:50 Well it only took me a day of thinking to think that, "Wow, sure of course I'd like to work here, I didn't think it was a possibility". And he said, "Well, we've got a position opening up in a couple of months. Why don't you apply for it?"
- Bruce Kaiser: 05:02 And I did, and here I am.
- M. Hartley: 05:04 Wow. What made this place so desirable?

- Bruce Kaiser: 05:11 Primarily, I have to start with what goes on here. As a designer, this was a place to do wonderful design. Designers largely wind up working in print media where what you do is thrown in the trash can either the next day or the next month.
- Bruce Kaiser: 05:28 To be part of something that created design work, and then put it out in the public for decades at a time--in front of the whole public. I've always thought, "this is better than being in the Museum of Modern Art". I'd much rather have my work on the edge of the Grand Canyon for thirty years, than in that New York scene anyway. So what's not to love about that?
- Bruce Kaiser: 05:52 And it was in my backyard. This is also the place I had just chosen to stay, and liked the area. So to find that I could work in the Eastern panhandle of West Virginia and be involved in all National Parks was just great.
- M. Hartley: 06:09 So now you're the only wayside producer, but could you paint a picture of your office? What the wayside's group, that you were in at one point, looked like?
- Bruce Kaiser: 06:24 Sure. I got here just after waysides became a division, which is what it was called in those days. It had broken off from exhibits. Exhibits was doing more and more waysides. They recognized that that was a discipline unto itself, and so they created, first a branch of waysides, and then it became its own division of waysides. Which, quickly multiplied into a three branch division on its own, with planning, design, and production as the three branches.
- Bruce Kaiser: 06:55 At that time, I was a designer but I had been involved more in the production end of things. So I wound up more involved with the production aspects. Maybe two years after I got here, one person left and they decided they needed a new chief of the branch of wayside production, which I applied for and once again was blessed with getting that job.
- Bruce Kaiser: 07:25 I rose extremely quickly, and I've never forgotten that either. So I try not to complain if I haven't risen as fast ever since. But boy it got me up to a grade level and a position that I, well I wasn't terribly young--I was about thirty at the time. But I felt like I'd really arrived. You know it's not a bad paying job either.

- Bruce Kaiser: 07:47 I've had three children, and it was sufficient to support me and them, so that worked out. I was a branch chief for about two or three years. And then they got rid of the divisions, and they flattened the organization. This is prior to any of the reorgs. This was a flattening in like 1993 or so. And they got rid of the branches.
- Bruce Kaiser: 08:12 There was still a division of waysides, but there were no longer three branches. At that point I became a senior production manager and worked for another five or so years in the wayside group until we were reorganized into not having a wayside group.
- Bruce Kaiser: 08:32 At which time, I continued, and have continued to this day to work on wayside exhibits because that's where my expertise now lies. So I continue to do that, even though we don't have a specific media branch. But the media design cartography production group that I'm now a part of is applied to all the different disciplines and I've been able to stay with waysides.
- M. Hartley: 08:57 One thing that I forgot to ask Betsy, that you'd probably be able to speak to, is that I'm very ignorant on the wayside design specs. I know we talked about Vince Gleason and the unigrid. It seems that through time, waysides has also moved into some template type design standards. Is that an actual offshoot of Vince Gleason's work in the unigrid? Or how does that come about, because you do have the band and all of that.
- Bruce Kaiser: 09:34 I think you would be safe to call it an offshoot. It was a little circuitous in how it happened. The first thing that happened, before we got involved in the unigrid aspect, was that we had a couple planners here--Dave Guiney, Dick Hoffman--who really created a specialized art for waysides. They recognized early on that a wayside exhibit was different than other two dimensional media because its outdoors and we only have the attention of our viewers for a matter of seconds. A minute at the most.
- Bruce Kaiser: 10:09 They recognized that the discipline of creating content for a wayside should always be hung on the idea of brevity, and the idea that you're always talking about something you can see from that wayside.

- Bruce Kaiser: 10:22 You can tell a story anywhere. But the reason you tell a wayside story at a particular location, is because there's a particular resource in-sight of that location. So whether its historic or cultural, we're always attaching to what can be seen right there.
- Bruce Kaiser: 10:41 It was five or ten years after that, I believe, Phil Musselwhite contracted with Vignelli Design, who had been brought in to do the unigrid for publications. And had Vignelli come in. He himself visited, and created a uniguide system for wayside exhibits. Which, over the years, has been tweaked to make it a little bit more efficient. It has the classic black band, although it started very wide and we realized it took up a lot of real estate, so its gotten narrower.
- Bruce Kaiser: 11:17 But the grids, and the band, and the fonts were all brought in at one time, at that point. That's when real standardization, if you want to call it that, took place. That's similar to the time that Betsy Ehrlich and Chad Beale got involved. They've really developed that beyond, I think, even what Vignelli had imagined.
- Bruce Kaiser: 11:41 Particularly, in that its not a constraint to have these standards. The standards grease the skids for what needs to happen and allow us to do a greater quantity of quality work.
- M. Hartley: 11:58 You've probably worked on a gazillion-and-five projects, but...
- Bruce Kaiser: 12:03 Probably a couple hundred projects and several thousand waysides at this point.
- M. Hartley: 12:09 So you think there are several thousand out there that you've had a hand in installing throughout the system?
- Bruce Kaiser: 12:15 Yes, three or four thousand. Altogether there's something like fifteen thousand waysides out there in the parks. Probably half of those have probably come out of Harper's Ferry Center, and I've had a hand on about half of those.
- M. Hartley: 12:29 Do you have a particular favorite park or memorable project that you can share?

- Bruce Kaiser: 12:36 Well, I have a lot of memorable park projects. Not all for the same reasons. Some of the smallest projects, in fact, were quite memorable.
- Bruce Kaiser: 12:51 Oh sure, let me tell you about Badlands. When I'd only been here a couple of years, this would have been maybe my first favorite park. But I worked on the Badlands project, and after everything was delivered the park called up and said "we have this real problem. All the birds in the park stand of the top edge of the wayside and soil the waysides."
- Bruce Kaiser: 13:11 So someone here came up with a wire that could be stretched across the back of the wayside. But it required installing special metal tabs and wires. And I got the job of going to Badlands and screwing on all the wires on all the waysides across the park.
- Bruce Kaiser: 13:27 I realized at that point, that even when you were doing the most menial of tasks, what a wonderful thing to get sent to South Dakota to spend three or four days stretching wires across the exhibits and seeing the park and meeting people.
- Bruce Kaiser: 13:41 It's always good. In fact, that's when I realized what a benefit it was to go to a park and meet the people. I couldn't, through my career, justify going on every trip I went on. But certainly once you're there and you've met the folks, it really puts a different spin on everything you're doing because you feel the meaningfulness of it and how much it means to the park and the visitors.
- Bruce Kaiser: 14:04 Plus you get to see these beautiful resources.
- Bruce Kaiser: 14:10 Another fun episode. We had a contractor once who went bankrupt. We called them one day and got a recording that told us that they had gone bankrupt. They were gone.
- Bruce Kaiser: 14:22 But there was tens of thousands of dollars of materials at that contractor's facility. They were in the middle of some very big projects.
- Bruce Kaiser: 14:32 Well, another contractor of ours wound up buying the facility. They bought out the failed business, and called me and said "we own everything in the building now, and we're about to pretty much throw away anything that's not computers and machines. But there's all this stuff:



photographs and films. And a lot of it has Park Service on it. If you'd like to have that, you're welcome to come get it."

- Bruce Kaiser: 15:00 Within two days, Susie Haynes and I were in California, in this empty building with about forty-five huge Fed-Ex boxes, packing them full of all the stuff that we found there and Fed-Exed it all back, and saved it all. We came back and the assistant director here at the center came up, said wanted to talk to Susan and I.
- Bruce Kaiser: 15:22 And she said, "we wanna thank you so much for going out there and saving all that material. We recognize the dollar value, and it's wonderful that you did that. Don't ever do that again." Well, why?
- Bruce Kaiser: 15:37 It turns out there could have been some legal ramifications to what we did. Although there were none, and to this day it seems like it was a fairly straightforward thing. We didn't have lawyer clearance, and could have gotten in a sticky situation with who-knows-what. So we got an award, and a reprimand. (Laughter)
- M. Hartley: 15:58 (Laughter) Oops!
- Bruce Kaiser: 16:02 All in all I felt pretty good about it though.
- M. Hartley: 16:06 Well thank you so very much Bruce, we really appreciate you coming down and making some time.
- Bruce Kaiser: 16:12 Glad to do it, it's been a good day.
- M. Hartley: 16:14 Good! I hear it has been a good day.
- Bruce Kaiser: 16:16 Good to see folks from the golden days and these days are still fairly golden so, happy to be here.
- M. Hartley: 16:22 Good. Thank you Bruce.
- Bruce Kaiser: 16:24 You're welcome.