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Harpers Ferry Center's 40th Anniversary Oral History Project



Ron Sheetz
June 16, 2010

Interview conducted by Michele Hartley

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Interview with: Ron Sheetz

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M. Hartley: 00:00 Yeah, he has an archeologist background. Already? Okay. So I'm here with Ron Sheetz and before we start I just want to make sure it's okay that you know you're being recorded.

Ron Sheetz: 00:13 Sure.

M. Hartley: 00:13 Okay, great. So could you please tell me your name and the position you had here when you worked at the center?

Ron Sheetz: 00:20 All right. My name is Ron Sheetz and I was conservator, furniture and wooden objects conservator for the division of conservation and Art Allen at that time was the chief of the division.

M. Hartley: 00:34 From when did you work? What was your time?

Ron Sheetz: 00:36 I worked from, let's see, 1978 until retired in 1997.

M. Hartley: 00:45 Okay, so that's a fair bit of time.

Ron Sheetz: 00:47 Yeah. Yeah.

M. Hartley: 00:49 What brought you to the Park Service in the Harpers Ferry Center?

Ron Sheetz: 00:56 I worked as a cabinet maker and I worked on furniture and I've worked on wood all my life, I reckon. But was a cabinet maker down in Edinburg, Virginia. I made a lot of reproduction furniture and worked on a lot of antique furniture. And then the position came open down here at

the Harpers Ferry for a furniture, wooden objects conservator. So I applied for that and lucky enough to get the position and stuck with it. Still doing some work.

M. Hartley: 01:28

How did you learn your craft? How did people in conservation teach people?

Ron Sheetz: 01:33

Well, actually, when I got out of the service under the GI Bill, you could--my father actually was a cabinet maker. I grew up in the shop or probably cut my teeth on wood I imagine, probably walnut. But when I got out of the service in under the GI Bill as apprentice, so worked there for under five years under the GI Bill and then later I was actually proprietor of a shop until this position came open down here.

M. Hartley: 02:05

Now our conservation department has moved, I think to a number of places. So where are you physically located?

Ron Sheetz: 02:12

When I came here, we were actually in the old Shipley schoolhouse, and then at that time they put out a opening for building. And the contractor over at Charles Town got the bid and that's the way we ended up over Charles Town with the Division of Conservation plus other units over there.

M. Hartley: 02:36

When was that?

Ron Sheetz: 02:38

You know, you got me on that. I can't think of the exact year on that. Really, but they did let us design. We could design the furniture lab, exactly what we wanted as far as the textile lab and all the labs, was able to design what you wanted. So it worked out great. It worked that we had a much better place to actually perform our duties over there than we did in the old Shipley schoolhouse. We were chased out of there. They said it was falling down, but I notice she's still standing.

M. Hartley: 03:13

Yeah, they have a new roof on it.

M. Hartley: 03:20

Conservation folks work on all kinds of incredible objects. I mean, they're just priceless. Could you talk a little bit about some of the objects that you worked on?

Ron Sheetz: 03:30

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, like I was stating, we had conservators that covered just about everything. Textiles

and wood, metals and Bart Rogers was under metals, and what would happen is the objects would either they come to Harpers Ferry and we would work on them there or we would, if they wouldn't be up to be transferred, then we would go to the object. But one good example I guess would be the Russian Bishop's House up in Sitka, Alaska. They was working on the house, restoring the house, over a 10 year period. So all the objects they had to have a place, they came down here and we actually treated those objects. Remember, covered everything, like I'm telling you again.

- Ron Sheetz: 04:13 And then in '80--1988 I guess it was, I went back up to help install the art objects. So that's one of your trips to Alaska. My first with the National Park Service. So installed the objects and help put them all in. Tom Carter, he was painting conservator, but he went along at that time. And at that time the--actually superintendent wanted me to look at the totems at Sitka, Alaska, and that's where I got involved with the totems then.
- M. Hartley: 04:47 Wow.
- Ron Sheetz: 04:48 Right. So I'd made quite a few trips to Alaska ever since.
- M. Hartley: 04:52 Well, you might be happy to know that we finally just made a video for the Russian Bishop's House because a lot of people who are older can't make it up to the second floor.
- Ron Sheetz: 05:05 Right.
- M. Hartley: 05:05 So I know that place pretty well. Could you describe some of the specific objects that you worked on?
- Ron Sheetz: 05:12 Oh, yeah. Yeah. They had Archbishop Veniaminov and I'm sure I don't have that, pronouncing that right. But actually he must have been a real good friend of the Czar of Russia at that time because he had some of the nicest furniture that you would see of that period. We had mahogany sofa, chairs, and they had gold plush upholstery on them. In working with them, we actually found some of the original upholstery, which was very seldom happen, but they'd covered it with three or four covers. So this furniture actually was shipped unassembled, a lot of it unassembled and then assembled on site, from Russia. So I guess that was one way they could transport it. So I guess if you look

at it, maybe some of the first knock-down furniture, I don't know. But it was some well-made furniture.

- Ron Sheetz: 06:10 And then actually, he made a few of the pieces. He did make some of the pieces. Yeah, wardrobe and little desk. Then years later his great, great grandson come over and I was lucky enough to be there at that time and take him through and show him these pieces that his great, great grandfather had actually made. So I remember one that the desk he sat down there in tears was coming in his eyes. He said, "This was just so memorable for me." He said when he was in Russia coming down on ships, he would state that he thought he would never be able to visit America. But here we were. We brought him over, actually the National Park Service supported it and brang him over. Yeah.
- M. Hartley: 06:57 And now he's a Saint. [Bishop Benison].
- Ron Sheetz: 07:00 Right.
- M. Hartley: 07:01 Yep.
- Ron Sheetz: 07:01 Yeah.
- M. Hartley: 07:03 Is that maybe your most favorite project or do you have another project?
- Ron Sheetz: 07:08 Most recent project, I guess, is a month ago. I went up to Juno, Alaska, and did some preservation treatment on the Governor's totem there at the Governor's mansion. 12 years ago we'd lowered it and then put it on a light pole and at that point they were supposed to treat it every four or five years. But it's like a lot of our reports, right? We suggest this, it didn't happen so. But it was still in pretty decent shape. It took some few repairs, few pieces lifting. But mostly you had vegetative growth on it and this type of stuff. So it was cleaning. We applied sodium borates and water repellents on it. And this one I was able to train the conservator there for it at the State Museum. I asked for some help to be able to train her this time. And so four to five years from now she can actually do this treatment.
- M. Hartley: 08:07 And was Sitka where you got your first experience in the Park Service working on totem poles? Did that kind of become-

Ron Sheetz: 08:14 Actually, that was. That was the first, yeah.

M. Hartley: 08:15 Did that-

Ron Sheetz: 08:16 Usually the ones that Governor Brady actually had collected and had down at the St Louis World's Fair, then out at Seattle for the Lewis and Clark's Expedition. Then they needed a place for these totems to go and Sitka was a park at that time or a site, hey, it might've been a site. So they actually took them up to Sitka and erected them up there. They never were there until after these ones collected. So a lot of them are now reproductions carved by the CCC boys, and we put the originals on exhibit up there if we could find originals.

M. Hartley: 08:54 Did you work on other totems throughout the Park Service?

Ron Sheetz: 09:02 Mainly mostly native sites and now I'm working with state sites like Ketchikan. I'm down there working on totems there at Totem Bight State Park for Ketchikan. But most of them now my colleague, Al Levitan, he's worked with me also on totems up in Alaska and we've covered quite a few totems.

M. Hartley: 09:26 Do you have a favorite park?

Ron Sheetz: 09:28 Sitka's probably one of my favorite. Yes. Yeah, that's a beautiful park. Real nice setting. Yeah. And of course some great fishing over there. Kayaking.

M. Hartley: 09:41 So it sounds like, if my memory serves me, if you started in the '70s, right?

Ron Sheetz: 09:45 Right.

M. Hartley: 09:47 Retired. So that's 20 years, is that correct?

Ron Sheetz: 09:50 20 couple, yes.

M. Hartley: 09:51 20 couple of years-

Ron Sheetz: 09:52 I retired actually whenever. Dave Wright and I retired the same time.

- M. Hartley: 09:57 Any observations on how the Harpers Ferry Center or the conservation group has changed or evolved through your employment?
- Ron Sheetz: 10:09 Got to be a little careful guessing. So the Division of Conservation, to me, was one of the greatest places to work. But I have noticed here, on my business over here lately, it's not what it used to be. Put it that way, but I still think it's one of the greater--The Center itself is, as far as the Park Service, is something that has given back to the people. That's one thing. You saw what happened wherever the Parks Service was closed. Whenever our former President was in there, he closed it and all the parks should open, open now. So no, I still go for the [inaudible 00:10:48].
- Ron Sheetz: 10:49 Art Allen always told me, he said, "Wherever"--who was the chief of the division--He said, "Whenever you, if you're working now, you're working privately," he said, "Mention the Park Service." Which I do, but it would come back on his computer as that, so always saw something. And he was one of the best chiefs I thought we have. If you want to classify chiefs, he was great.
- M. Hartley: 11:11 At what? What made him great?
- Ron Sheetz: 11:13 He could really work with the people and then he would let you do your work. He really would. He was just a good chief. He knew how to work and knew to how to handle the people and he will let the people work. That's where the problem comes a lot of times. Seriously.
- M. Hartley: 11:30 Were you the only wood conservator at the time?
- Ron Sheetz: 11:33 No, Al Cochran was, and then Ralph Sheetz was there before I was. And then Al Cochran.
- M. Hartley: 11:44 Any relation?
- Ron Sheetz: 11:45 Yeah, he was actually my uncle. He was one of the first, he was down in D.C. Yeah.
- M. Hartley: 11:55 He was a wood conservator too?
- Ron Sheetz: 11:57 Yeah, he was a wood conservator and then actually, he worked with Al Cochran and then I guess I was probably

the third one there, as far as conservators. And then we had Al Levitan. Now Larry Bowers. Yeah. Yeah. That's all.

- M. Hartley: 12:22 Is there any object, whether you worked on it or conservation, any object or objects that came through that were really powerful or exciting?
- Ron Sheetz: 12:32 Probably one of the most is during the Reagan administration. Oh, I've got a--I'm blanking out on names again. I'm trying to think of who was in charge down there at the White House. But--Rick Skeleton--he was the usher. Rick's called up and he said, "We've got a podium here that we'd like for you guys to work on up here. It was a New England sea captain podium on a boat and President Reagan would like to give a toast off of it to Helmut Schmidt and we need it in two weeks." Well, White House so you get on it. I could even have worked a little bit over the weekend on that but it was a carved podium out of oak. The eagle on is actually carved and then gold-leafed. But it being on a boat and when I did disassemble it, it was mainly coming apart because you got hide glue.
- Ron Sheetz: 13:37 I know it's pre-1840, earlier than that, because it old handmade screws going up. Started out with your machine screws was usually after 1840, so we know it was that old. So actually we worked on that and got it back down to the White House. And President Reagan give a toast off of it. And it's been used by every President since. Yeah. So we see it quite--state dinners is mainly where they show it. Yeah, that's probably one of my more exciting projects. Yeah.
- M. Hartley: 14:10 Yeah.
- Ron Sheetz: 14:10 And it worked out. We got it back. So that was the Park Service at that time and it still is. When Jacqueline Kennedy came in, there was no organization to take care of the furnishings in the White House. So she was sharp enough to come up that. They're used. And they're used badly in some places. But, so she'd come up, we needed an organization to put it under. So that's the way the Park Service come under with the Executive Support Facility. White House's warehouse. You want to break it down, right? So yeah, so that come under. So that's really where we end up working with some objects for the Park Service

then. And I think they have their own conservator down there now. It's at the facility.

M. Hartley: 15:01

Oh, okay.

Ron Sheetz: 15:01

Right.

M. Hartley: 15:05

Coming back for the 40th, I know I'm actually--I mean, you're one of the--Some people have been retired for some time and you have too, but what do you think the value of the Center is in the Park Service?

Ron Sheetz: 15:19

I think it's very valuable. I truly do. I'd love to see it keep operating and I would like to see the division of conservation be built up a little bit better, a little stronger maybe. I don't think we have about three conservators or four conservators over there now, but there's no place that I've enjoyed working more than here. I remember one of my colleagues said, "I've enjoyed working here so much. I feel like I ought to pay them sometimes." But if you enjoy your job, you enjoy your work, that's what makes life, it truly does. Don't get a job that you don't like just because there's money, because it isn't gonna work out in the end. But if you enjoy your work, you put out good work.

M. Hartley: 16:06

Well, thank you very much.

Ron Sheetz: 16:08

Thanks, Ma'am.

M. Hartley: 16:08

Yeah.

Ron Sheetz: 16:09

All right.

M. Hartley: 16:10

I hope you enjoy your day.

Ron Sheetz: 16:12

Looking forward to it.

M. Hartley: 16:13

Yeah. I think actually Don's going to say a few words soon. It's 11:51, so yeah, and then we'll be eating.

Ron Sheetz: 16:23

Okay.

M. Hartley: 16:23

Always a good thing.

END OF TAPE