



National Park Service Paleontology Program

Oral History Interview – Don Morris



ON THE COVER

Don Morris, retired NPS archeologist at Channel Islands National Park, leading a field trip to the Arlington Man Site on Santa Rosa Island during June 2019 (NPS/VINCENT SANTUCCI).

National Park Service Paleontology Program

Oral History Interview – Don Morris

Justin S. Tweet¹ and Vincent L. Santucci²

¹National Park Service
9149 79th St. S.
Cottage Grove, Minnesota 55016

²National Park Service
Geologic Resources Division
1849 “C” Street, NW
Washington, Don Morris: C. 20240

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The Paleontology Program of the National Park Service is within the Geologic Resources Division, part of the Natural Resource Stewardship and Service Directorate. It maintains paleontological resource records for the National Park Service and offers Servicewide assistance managing these nonrenewable resources.

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Background

Interview with Don Morris: This interview was conducted on the morning of Sunday, June 30, 2019, approximately 7:20 AM PDT to 8:20 AM. The primary speakers are interviewee Don Morris and Vincent L. Santucci as chief interviewer. Justin Tweet is occasionally heard as well. Don is a retired National Park Service archeologist, including park archeologist of Channel Islands National Park from 1985–2001; his NPS career began as a seasonal at Mesa Verde National Park in 1959. Vince is the senior paleontologist for the National Park Service. Justin is a National Park Service associate, paleontologist, and assistant to Vince Santucci.

This interview was held in park housing on Santa Rosa Island, on the last morning of a brief trip to the island undertaken as part of the planning and scoping for a Channel Islands National Park paleontological resource inventory. Don had been invited on the trip because of his great experience with the paleontological resources of the islands, which, as discussed in the interview, overlap with the archeological resources. He may have the most paleontological field time in CHIS of anyone living. Of particular note, he was part of the group that found the nearly complete Rockwell pygmy mammoth in 1994, and facilitated the work of scientists from the Mammoth Site of Hot Springs, beginning with Larry Agenbroad in 1994.

Aside from Don, Justin, and Vince, other participants on this trip included Kenneth Convery (CHIS Chief of Natural Resources Management), Laura Kirn (CHIS Chief of Cultural Resources), Jonathan Hoffman (Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Dibblee Collection Manager of Earth Sciences), and Jason Irving (Ediacara Conservation Park Manager), who is briefly addressed late in the interview.

Speakers are as follows:

Don Morris

Justin Tweet

Vince Santucci

There are clicks and pops from time to time when Justin checks the status of the cell phone he is using to record the interview. Other speakers and various kitchen noises are heard from time to time in the background, but they are generally unintelligible. If present, PII has been omitted.

Transcript

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Justin Tweet: Hello?

Don Morris: Howdy.

Justin Tweet: [chuckle] I'll go over here.

[indistinct]

Justin Tweet: Should pick us up fine because I used this before in a room where people were walking all around.

Vincent Santucci: So, how long does it allow recording for?

Justin Tweet: It has a storage – remaining storage of 130 hours.

Vincent Santucci: Okay.

Don Morris: Okay, I don't think I can talk for 130 hours.

Vincent Santucci: So let me just do an introduction. So, today is Sunday, June 30th, 2019, we're here on Santa Rosa Island with retired NPS archeologist Don Morris. Justin Tweet, National Park Service paleontologist, is here, and myself, Vince Santucci, the senior paleontologist for the National Park Service. And so, we're going to just briefly interview Don in regards to his experiences involving paleontology at Channel Island National Park. So, Don, what year did you come on board at Channel Islands?

Don Morris: Well, I first saw Channel Islands and Santa Rosa in late December of 1982, part of a group of employees coming out here to assess the resources of an island Park Service was going to eventually possess, and I was of course concentrating on archeology. The thing that was notable about that assemblage to me was there was no geologist and there was no paleontologist, although Santa Rosa Island was well known for the pygmy mammoths that were present here during the Pleistocene, and I know at the time I thought "Well, I guess the pygmy mammoths are a done deal, a known story, and there's no particular interest in them," and I concentrated on the archeology which was fabulous. And I maneuvered to become the park archeologist, which happened in 1985, and I started working with the archeology, and we would occasionally find bits of pygmy mammoth material, and it would be collected. My first trip after we purchased the island was with Dan Guthrie, paleontologist who was interested in birds and small mammals, a very productive enterprise, and we casually collected some pygmy mammoth material. This was in 1987. And we went along that way until we discovered the Rockwell mammoth, and then I contacted Larry Agenbroad. He was recommended as someone who would do a good job of excavating. And then I realized how much was unexplored about the situation with pygmy mammoths, but it took me a while to learn.

Vincent Santucci: Very good. So, very very briefly, are you able to summarize what you know about the fossils of the particular islands?

Don Morris: Well [chuckle], this won't take too long. On Anacapa and Santa Barbara, very little fossil material. There was a fossil locality at Frenchy's Cove [on Anacapa]. It's in the literature, and I've been at Frenchy's Cove, and I cannot find anything that relates to that deposit. I think it's all washed away, but I could be mistaken. Santa Cruz is a different story. There is hard rock paleontology there, which I'm basically completely ignorant, but on the west end there [are] Pleistocene sediments, and some pygmy mammoth material has been recovered from there, fewer than ten specimens, I believe; it's pretty sparse. Larry visited west Santa Cruz Island once, about 1995, and he said, "no point in returning there, there's not a whole lot," but fossil Pleistocene plant material has been recovered, Douglas fir and so forth, so there is material there on the west end. Santa Rosa is, particularly on the western and southern areas, is quite replete with pygmy mammoth material. Pleistocene deposits, typically eroding out from sea cliffs, and from some of the major canyons, particularly Arlington, Garañon, and Tecolote. And material is where you find it. It's a matter of searching. I think it's interesting we blundered into the Rockwell mammoth quite by accident. Tom wanted to look at sea terraces and I suggested Garañon Canyon because there was a cave I was interested in investigating for archeological possibilities, and nobody had ever noted material anywhere around Carrington Point prior to that time. And there actually is a fair amount of bone from pygmy mammoths exposed in and around Carrington Point. So it's a matter of looking over the island systematically in the right deposits. I think the notion that the pygmy mammoths concentrated on the northwest coast, in Arlington, Garañon, and Tecolote is more a matter of collection bias than their actual distribution.

Justin Tweet: Yeah, it seems like it would be kind of strange given how much larger the islands were at the time they were inhabited.

Don Morris: Well, that's the other thing. I mean, we're looking at a rather small slice of the area that they would have occupied at the maximum glaciation [chuckle]. Oh, and San Miguel. San Miguel, to me, it essentially replicates the situation on Santa Rosa. Material has been found on the east end, on the west end especially. Again you've got eroding sea cliffs. Running Springs is a well-known locality there. It's a water source, which would have attracted pygmy mammoths. But material can be found, it's just a matter of keeping your eyes open and looking.

Vincent Santucci: Have you worked with any other paleontologists on the islands, other than Larry Agenbroad?

Don Morris: A little bit with Bob Gray, from Santa Barbara City College. He collected some material before the Rockwell discovery and assisted us there. And Dan Guthrie, worked with him, say my first, first trip prior after the purchase of the island was with Dan. Dan was looking for more bird deposits, that kind of thing. And Dan, incidentally, was [instrumental] in revealing that Daisy Cave was extremely old as an archeological site. He found extinct species, *Chendytes* and so forth, in the deposits, and he said, "this thing has got to be older than 3,000 years," and that sparked our activity to determine the true age of Daisy Cave, and that was a revolution in terms of the archeology here. So, I [chuckle], I'm very much convinced that archeology and paleontology should be integrated and work together on this island, because the material is inextricably combined.

Vincent Santucci: Other than Daisy Cave, are there other caves on the islands that may have paleontological resources?

[conversation followed by work in kitchen begins in background, but not loudly enough to interfere with understanding recording]

Don Morris: Absolutely, and I'll tell you if you ask me for any specific instances all I can say is there are a lot of caves we haven't looked at, a lot of caves with archeology evident on the surface or in the upper layers, and nobody has gone down deep and seen what lies below. But there are all kinds of potential sites. It would take a long time to list them, but I don't think we have a complete inventory. The inventory of archeological sites has increased dramatically. We have over a thousand recorded sites here on Santa Rosa Island currently. Phil Orr recorded up to site 182 and he said "well, pretty well got it all, this is all the major stuff." He was mistaken, and we're still going. I don't think we've covered 50% of the island adequately in terms of archeological sites, and paleontology lies below many of these deposits in caves and rock shelters, and Lord only knows how much is there. I think the archeological potential is still untapped, or isn't, hasn't been sucked dry on this island, and that's even more true of the paleontological material.

Vincent Santucci: And so, would you estimate that there are hundreds of caves amongst the islands—

Don Morris: Easily.

Vincent Santucci: Easily?

Don Morris: Yeah.

Vincent Santucci: And, are there particular islands that have more caves than others, or are they distributed amongst all the islands?

Don Morris: Well, most of the caves are sea caves or at least sea caves in origin. You have some situations where you have rock shelters that are not sea-cave-related, so I think it would a function of the extent of coastline, so your bigger islands are gonna have more caves.

[background noise has paused]

Vincent Santucci: Is Daisy Cave a sea cave?

Don Morris: Yes it is. Elevated. It was formed, what – it's about, oh, 50, 60 feet above sea level currently, but it was formed by wave action.

Vincent Santucci: Okay. And so, typically sea caves get scoured out because of wave action [unclear, sounds like "and resources were impacted"], so if there's occupation after it was elevated—

Don Morris: Right.

Vincent Santucci: —then certainly I could see that's important. Sea level rise in the future certainly will be a concern for preservation of those sites.

Don Morris: Many – well, Daisy Cave is high enough, it's a good 50, 75 feet above current sea level. But again, you wonder, with the lower sea levels in the past, what lies – what do we have

in the way of submerged sea caves that might contain both archeological and paleontological material. There's current emphasis now, fortunately, in examining the underwater portions of the park for archeological material, but I'm looking at the situation we have on land here and say that exists below the waters, what kind of paleontological material is out there? And again, that's going to fill out the story. We just – we're dealing with a remnant on the existing islands, we don't have the whole story up here. Not even close.

Vincent Santucci: How many times do you think Larry Agenbroad visited Channel Islands?

Don Morris: [chuckle] Well, we started in '94; I don't think he came back - he was back in '95, '96 – Basically every year through about – I'm not sure that it's either 2010 or 2011, and in 2012 he told me that he didn't think he would be doing any more field work. I think at that point he knew that he had the illness that eventually resulted in his demise. And he said that Justin Wilkins, who's on staff at the Mammoth Site, would be interested in carrying on his work, and so Justin came out starting in 2014, worked on the island for a bit. But, basically it was either 2010 or 2011 was Larry's last visit.

Vincent Santucci: Any personal accounts of Larry on the island working with you that you want to share?

Don Morris: [chuckle] Well, it was a delightful experience. He's a very hearty worker in the field, very dedicated. We got right down to business, and it was pleasurable because it was professional and focused, no fooling around, very direct, long days, hard work, but just an extremely positive experience. I continued to go out with him after I retired in 2001, and I kept working with Larry. During the summers I went to the Mammoth Site in Hot Springs and functioned there as crew chief during the excavation season. So, my relationship with Larry was both a good steady professional relationship and I regarded him as a good friend.

Vincent Santucci: Justin, do you have any questions?

Justin Tweet: I'd like to hear [clears throat] more about the 1994 discovery and how that was found and excavated. I mean, I've seen the cast at the Hot Springs Mammoth Site.

Don Morris: [chuckle] This is one of my favorite stories because we were sitting in camp and Rockwell had been work – we'd been working at the Arlington Man site, and Tom was just ecstatic about the exquisite stratigraphy there. We had no burrowing mammals on the island so the layers stayed intact, and he wanted—I'm not sure of the relationship here—but he wanted to correlate that stratigraphy with the sea terrace sequence. And we were talking, and the question was, "Where's a good place to look at sea terraces?" And I suggested could we go to Carrington Point, because there was this upper sea cave, again a remnant sea cave, up high on the island, that might have archeological material in it, and you needed technical equipment, you needed rope expertise to get into the cave, and when we had first seen it we didn't have that material with us. So that was on my checklist of things to do, and I said "could we go to Carrington Point? Would that work for you?" I went into the cave, and there was nothing there, it was [no word supplied], and a friend came charging up from the area where Tom was working, and he said "Tom thinks he's found a complete pygmy mammoth. You haven't ever found – you don't have many of those, do you?" and I said, "we've never found a complete pygmy mammoth on this island." And we went – I went down and looked at the exposure, and we had the spine all

intact, beautifully – just coming out of the ground, and what you could interpret as the scapulae and the skull was there, and I thought, “well, yeah, could be a pygmy mammoth,” and Tom looked at it and said, “yeah, could be,” but he’s not a paleontologist, I’m just an archeologist, never seen anything like this before. And we were sitting around camp that night, I thought back, I’d been in graduate school at the University of Arizona in 1969–1970, and I heard a lot about Larry Agenbroad and his work at Murray Springs. And I thought – I suggested to Tom, I said, “Have you ever heard of Larry Agenbroad?”. And Tom looked at me and said, “No.” [chuckle] So anyway, this was late June of ’94. I went back to the mainland and I sat down and I called the paleontologist at Dinosaur [National Monument] and I explained the situation. I said, “do you have any recommendations for someone who’d be a good person to check this out and maybe dig it, do the excavation?” and he said “Larry Agenbroad”. And I had met Louise Roth at Channel Islands Symposium a few years earlier, I knew she’d studied pygmy mammoths, and I called her up, put the same question to her, got the same response, Larry Agenbroad. So I called Larry and connected with him. I called him on a Tuesday, he was in my bedroom ready to go out to the island Thursday night [chuckle]. He was raring to go, to get on the Channel Islands. He had sent a letter to the park, which just got lost in the fog somehow or another, volunteering to come out here and research pygmy mammoth, but this discovery started that process with a bang, you might say.



Photo 1. A cast of the Rockwell Mammoth on display at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. The hat visible behind the bones of the left forearm belonged to Don (NPS/JUSTIN TWEET).

Vincent Santucci: And you've worked with Jim Mead. Has Jim Mead been out to the islands?

Don Morris: Yes, well, that first trip, when I met them, met their plane, Jim was with Larry, so Jim was right at the start.

Justin Tweet: Yeah, I've seen references actually to you in the field notes, "Don found this, Don found that".

Don Morris: Well, it was interesting. Jim's interest is in the smaller animals and the ecological information that they reveal. And of course, all the media attention was on the pygmy mammoth. It was certainly a sterling find. But there's a paper—Larry collected, oh, a bag of soil, and Jim went through it and found, published a paper on the microfauna that was in that bag, so that's been a consistent interest of his, and Justin Wilkins has continued that. His master's thesis deals with microfauna on the island, and that interests me because I think overall that will be as informative as the information we'll derive about the pygmy mammoth, maybe moreso in terms of the ecology and changes on the island.

Vincent Santucci: Yesterday you took us to the Larramendy site. Can you tell us about that discovery, the excavation, and significance of that specimen?

Don Morris: Sure. That's some quirky things there. Peter Larramendy was a biological technician, going up – I think he was studying stream flow dynamics of some sort, but he was going up and saw this tusk exposed laterally in the side wall of Arlington Canyon, took the coordinates, reported that he'd seen this nice tusk, and this information was relayed to us in 2014. And I think he made the initial discovery in September, and we, Justin and I, showed up in October along with Monica Bugbee and we were doing some collecting. And next to our last day we said, "Well, let's check out this tusk that Larramendy found". And we went down and looked at it, we had, oh, 18 inches of curved tusk sitting right in the canyon wall. And I looked at this and I still chuckle about this—I'm the grizzled veteran, you know, knowledgeable, source of all information—and I said, "Let's dig, oh, another 8 inches, and we'll get this specimen out of the ground, we'll have a dandy specimen." So we started digging and digging and digging and the tusk continued down into the ground, down, down, down. We didn't finish, we still had tusk exposed at the end of the day. We came back the next day at [or and] about noon we finally found the end of the tusk. We have a photograph of this. It's in life position in the alveolar socket of what we at that point said, "Well, bingo, there's a skull in here." We went back to the park and gave them the glad tidings and said, "You know, for a few thousand dollars we can get this out". They were a little skeptical. We came back the next year, came in from the side, and bingo, there was tusk, skull material right where it should be. So, it was pretty clear we had real deal here at that point. And we came back in 2016 with really significant Park Service support and completed the excavation. About 10 days of good solid digging and we had that guy out of the ground.

Vincent Santucci: How did it wind up in South Dakota?

Don Morris: Well [chuckle], this was kind of interesting. Monica's the preparator at the Mammoth Site, and she was looking forward – she told me she has Seasonal Affective Disorder and the South Dakota winters are kind of rough on her, so she was looking forward to coming down January–February, whenever, during the wintertime, to Santa Barbara, and working on the specimen there. They came down and did this the following February, in 2017, and the cost was

just too high, so the decision was made to take the skull to South Dakota where they could work on it there in their labs which are really state of the art and set up for it, but it involved the transport of the skull up there, and now we've got to deal with the challenge of getting the prepared skull back here, hopefully in one piece, more or less, and in good shape. So it's an awkward arrangement.



Photo 2. The Larramendi skull under preparation at the Mammoth Site of Hot Springs, May 2019 (NPS/JUSTIN TWEET).

Vincent Santucci: We had the opportunity yesterday to also visit the Arlington [Man] site. Can you tell us about your work there and the significance of that particular material?

Don Morris: Well, I kind of slid into the Arlington site sideways. I think it's interesting: in 1982, when I came out here, we had the day after we arrived, the question was put to each of us "what part of the island do you want to see?" And I had read just the basic literature, archeology, and I thought "well, I think I want to go to Arlington Canyon, look at the Arlington site." And so I was taken there, and I looked at it. The site had filled in. You could still obviously see part of Orr's scaffolding he had to erect to get to the bones and all that. But the stratigraphy was obscured, and I thought "well, we'll eventually have to clear this out," because at the time the only information we had was Orr's date, which was 10,000 years plus or minus 2,000. Little broad. And I think Arlington Man was kind of off to the side in terms of serious considerations of antiquity of man in southern California, given that very equivocal date. Anyway at that time the ranch foreman showed me a very deeply buried burial in Lobo Canyon, right at the mouth of Lobo Canyon. And I looked at that and said "yeah, it certainly does look like it's old," and I collected some material

to be dated, and came back and ran a date. I was at – I was stationed in Tucson, near the University of Arizona, and I remember at that time we would go for a noon run, and the radiocarbon lab was right on my way. I dropped it off [chuckle] on my run, and they did a date, and “congratulations, you have the oldest burial in California,” 9,700 years, uncalibrated; this was in 1986 and calibration wasn’t very common then. But anyway, that got me to thinking about Arlington Man, and the fact that they were using AMS techniques. Orr had not done any direct dating on the bone because the technology of the time would have required the consumption of all the material he had, and so he declined to do that, wisely. Good move on his part. We came back and I hunted up John Johnson and discussed the situation with him. We went down and found the original cast of the Arlington material, still in the jacket. Orr had done nothing in the way of preparation or analysis after he returned, and there are all kinds of reasons for that, which I don’t fully understand, but anyway, we had that jacket and we opened it up. It clearly was Arlington Man material, and John took the ball and ran with it. And it took a long time; this is 1986. In 2001 we published the date of 13,100 years, oldest human skeletal material in North America.



Photo 3. The bluff at the Arlington Man site, June 2019. The yellow field book is 19 cm (7.5 in) tall (NPS/JUSTIN TWEET).

Vincent Santucci: So, you're a graduate of the University of Arizona?

Don Morris: Right.

Vincent Santucci: And during your education, who did you have the opportunity to work with?

Don Morris: Well, Emil Haury [chuckle]. Chairman of the department. I was in awe of Emil. God! He was like God, only more powerful. [chuckle.] But he ran a really good program. I had a lot of classes from Raymond Thompson, who was an excellent mentor and teacher, and I went to the Point of Pines field school, which at the time was considered the best field school in operation. And, all in all, it was a really fun experience.

Vincent Santucci: Paul Martin?

Don Morris: I met Paul Martin. I never worked with him. I didn't—none of our interests ever really intersected but I was certainly aware of him and the work he was doing.

Vincent Santucci: As a student, did you visit any paleontological sites as part of your—?

Don Morris: Nahhh, that's paleontology [chuckle]. That's stuff for geologists to work with [chuckle].

Vincent Santucci: Okay. Vance Haynes?

Don Morris: Again, I knew he was on campus. I don't think I ever had any interaction with him.

Vincent Santucci: Okay. Were you aware of the Tule Springs work that was going on?

Don Morris: Just from classroom comments. Never any direct involvement with that.

Vincent Santucci: And then, once you graduated, what was your dissertation project?

Don Morris: Oh, I never had a dissertation. The only degree I have is a bachelor's.

Vincent Santucci: Okay.

Don Morris: [some background conversation during this response] I got out of the school with my BA degree and applied to the Park Service for a seasonal job, and I was very intrigued at working for the Park Service. I took the federal service entrance exam, and that worked because within a couple of months I got my draft notice from the military, and I was offered the position of Private E-1 [chuckle] and spent a couple of years in the military. Got out, went back to school—that was a disaster—but I got out and said, "Okay, I've got a bachelor's degree in archeology. The Park Service will hire me with those qualifications". So I got a permanent job at Wupatki. Eventually I got a promotion, I was doing ruins stabilization work, very interesting activity. But I was sitting there and I said, "You know, you're incompetent, you're untrained, you need to go back to school." And so I was planning to resign from the Park Service. And I was reaccepted at Arizona, I was gonna go back and I had an assistantship. Anyway, out of the blue, I got a Park Service scholarship. This was 1969; the Park Service had money to send three people to school, full-ride scholarships, salary, moving expenses, a real plush deal, and I just – to this day, I don't know how my name came up in that. I don't know. Somebody did me a real good favor, and I do not know who it was. Anyway, I went through that, and then there was a

project in Canyon de Chelly, and I worked there. It turned out to be [a] big research project. I finished that, we wrote it up, and my career kind of leveled out and I was just shuffling papers at the Western Archeological Center and my supervisor walked in and said, “we need someone to go to Santa Rosa Island”, and I said “well, exactly where is Santa Rosa Island?” [chuckle] But, a day in the field – the worst day in the field is better than the best day in the office. I came out here essentially on a whim. I was happy to get out of the office and I was just blown away by the potential.

Vincent Santucci: So let’s go through the chronology a little bit again. So when did you graduate from University of Arizona?

Don Morris: ’59.

Vincent Santucci: 1959. And then you had a seasonal job with the National Park Service?

Don Morris: Yep.

Vincent Santucci: And where was that?

Don Morris: Mesa Verde.

Vincent Santucci: And how long was that?

Don Morris: That was three months, and then I hooked on with the Wetherill Mesa project. I remember I was at Wetherill Mesa down in the ventilator shaft of the kiva, taking tree ring cores. Very arduous, fulfilling day. Got back, and there was a note from home saying “your draft notice arrived” [chuckle].

Vincent Santucci: So then you went to the military. What years were you in the military?

Don Morris: I was drafted June – December 4th, 1959 and I was released from service sometime in early September ’61. I got an early release to go to graduate school.

Vincent Santucci: And so, did you stay Stateside, or did you go overseas?

Don Morris: No, I spent 9 months in Korea.

Vincent Santucci: Okay. And then when you return, and you were discharged then, what was the next?

Don Morris: I was in school, and it’s funny, I had a rough time. And I think it was—not PTSD; that wouldn’t be—my service wasn’t that bad, but I, as one of my colleagues said, he said, “You’ve got a GI attitude.” I was going through an adjustment period, and I resolved it by getting a job with the Park Service. I mean, I was in my late – early twenties, I wanted to be independent, I was – just the whole thing with school, and depending upon your parents for resources, just the whole school routine was not very appealing. Working, being independent, getting a paycheck was a good thing. So, just the personal adjustment to the situation.

Vincent Santucci: So, you didn’t have any other seasonal jobs, you went directly to a permanent job?

Don Morris: Yeah.

Vincent Santucci: At Wupatki?

Don Morris: Yeah.

Vincent Santucci: And how long were you there?

Don Morris: About three years.

Vincent Santucci: And what years were those?

Don Morris: '62 through '66.

Vincent Santucci: Okay. And then from Wupatki, where did you go?

Don Morris: Again, I don't know how this happened, but I was offered a promotion. I was a 7 at Wupatki. I was offered a GS-9 as a crew stabilization leader at the Southwest Archeological Center in Globe, and "hey, it's a promotion, I'll take that". And that work was extremely interesting because you basically had a Navajo crew, and there were a few little wrinkles. It wasn't a – the normal principles of job supervision applied, but there's a cross-cultural thing there that you need to be aware of, and that's where training in anthropology came in handy. But that worked out very well. I worked at Chaco Canyon in 1966, and in 1967, I and my crew were assigned to Fort Bowie, and again that was a challenging and interesting situation. We were there for two years, and that was when I said, "You know, I've got to get back to school. I'm not adequately trained, I've got to get smart so I can function properly."

Vincent Santucci: And then you had mentioned Canyon de Chelly somewhere in there?

Don Morris: Right. Well, that happened after my year of school.

Vincent Santucci: So tell us more about this schooling.

Don Morris: Well, again, as I say, to this day, I don't know how it happened that this thing fell into my lap, but somewhere, somebody knew that I was planning to resign, and worked this out for me, and I was already accepted at the University of Arizona in graduate school, so, and that was 70 miles down the road, so we moved down there, and I stayed there until 1985 when I came out here. But I remember toward the end, because you were – you got a year of schooling, you were not required to produce a degree at the end of that. You had to agree to continue to work for the Park Service for the next three years, which was an easy enough thing to do. But I remember talking to my supervisor back at Globe, I said, "Well, okay, I'm gonna be through with school in a few months. What project will be coming up?" and he said there were a couple of things. There was some work at Tuzigoot and places like that. And he said, "Oh, yeah, and there's Antelope House at Canyon de Chelly." And Antelope House is this cliff dwelling, with, as it turned out, incredible preservation. We had all kinds of material there. And I had, full of graduate school knowledge, and they turned me loose on that, and it was rather interesting, because the aim of the project was to open that site for visitation, so this meant stabilization so the walls wouldn't fall on visitors; that's a very bad thing. And also some excavation. And as we dug there, I realized "God, we've got incredible potential here", all kinds of vegetal material, one thing and another, and I went to my supervisor. At that point the center had moved from Globe down to Tucson, so

that they would be kind of in the orbit of anthropological research, and the new director, Doug Scoville, and Doug carried the ball for me and we got the research component really jacked up, to where it was now a research project, not just with the ultimate objective of opening the ruin to visitation, but with complementary research to go along with it. We dug for four years, analyzed for four more years, submitted our manuscript in '78, job done, it was finally published in 1986 [chuckle].

Vincent Santucci: So, what years were you in school?

Don Morris: Just '69 and '70.

Vincent Santucci: 1969 and '70. And you said that there was a total of three National Park Service employees involved in this program.

Don Morris: As I—that's my understanding, one in the social sciences [a visitor begins talking to us], natural sciences, and some other field.

[interview interrupted momentarily for the visitor]

Vincent Santucci: So, you didn't know these other two Park Service employees.

Don Morris: No, oh no. It was servicewide, you picked your school.

Vincent Santucci: I see.

Don Morris: That program unfortunately didn't last very long.

Vincent Santucci: So you completed the education, and then what was the next thing that happened?

Don Morris: Well, that summer, finally turned out, go to Canyon de Chelly and dig there. And so that's when I went up. Fortunately, we knew about this, that I was going to go there, while I was still in school, and I was in a seminar for tree-ring dating with Jeff Dean, and we took a little field trip up and visited the site, and I had the benefit of Jeff's comments and observations on the site, so it was kind of a nice transition period. And we formed—we didn't bring people over from Chaco Canyon, but there was local expertise there. And I worked with a fabulous gentleman, a Navajo named Chauncey Neboyia, who as a young kid had worked with Earl Morris at Mummy Cave in 1923. Some continuity there. And he was a wonderful colleague.

Vincent Santucci: Before coming to Channel Islands, were there any other parks you worked in?

Don Morris: Oh, during stabilization, Fort Bowie, Gila Cliff Dwellings, Tonto, a whole bunch, and did little exploratory trips over to Yosemite, Lassen, all over the western region. Didn't often amount to a whole lot, but a lot of visitation. I think I worked in one degree or another in something like 28 parks during my career.

Vincent Santucci: Petrified Forest at all?

Don Morris: No, I don't think so.

Vincent Santucci: Any of the parks in Utah?

Don Morris: No.

Vincent Santucci: Grand Canyon?

Don Morris: Grand Canyon yes.

Vincent Santucci: Lake Mead?

Don Morris: I don't think I was involved in any Lake Mead projects, but we had some going there.

Vincent Santucci: Excellent. Justin, any other questions?

Justin Tweet: Not at this time. I was—sorry [chuckle]

Vincent Santucci: Anything else you can think of that might be helpful for us in planning a paleontological inventory for Channel Islands?

Don Morris: Well, the one thing that stick in my mind is, with the eroding situation, especially the sea cliffs, and a lot of the archeological occupation concentrates along the coast, you could—just plotting the archeological sites, you practically define the outline of the island. So that's an ongoing concern. And it strikes me that over time, most of the significant discoveries have been exposed through erosion, starting with Arlington Man, a very important site that John Erlandson found in Arlington Canyon, an area that Phil Orr walked by, that I walked by, John had walked by, finally he went by and stuff was exposed, and bingo. But this has been the typical—and the Rockwell mammoth, we were there at just the right time. You need, just from the archeological standpoint, you need to monitor the situation, the erosion situation continually, because you just don't know what is going to show up. And, concurrent with that, if you have a crew of the right expertise, you should be looking and can be looking for paleontological material as well. It's the same erosive action that's exposing archeology up here, and a little bit lower, you're finding paleontology. And in a way, the holy grail out here, is it would be nice to find a bona fide kill site. And that certainly hasn't been done. None of the material that has been proposed in the past in my opinion is even close to what we should be finding. And it may not exist, but it wouldn't surprise me if it does. I think we're pretty confident now that people and pygmy mammoths were present on the island at the same time, so the potential is there. And I would bet serious money that it would be exposed initially through erosion, and we need to keep our eyes open and be watching the erosive process on a systematic, continual basis.

Vincent Santucci: Have you documented any submerged archeological or paleontological resources since there's been sea level rise in the recent past?

Don Morris: Technically I could say yes. One of my, aspects of my job here was to do shipwreck research, historic shipwreck research, which [humorous sigh] unfortunately involves diving, you have to go out and get in the water. One of the great things about the job, everything from Arlington Man to shipwrecks in the last 50 years is within your scope. And in process of doing that shipwreck research I know we recovered a stone mortar that was submerged, probably washed in from an adjacent site. But it was submerged on the seabed, that meant it was actually the property of the state of California. So I didn't enter into, enter it into our collection, it went to the Santa Barbara Museum with the provenience information and it's catalogued there. So,

material has been collected from a submerged context, but finding a independent submerged site that's of reasonable antiquity is work that is just going on now, and I'm anxious to see what they come up with, 'cause they've got some very promising localities. And I think even this summer they've been going out and coring some of these anomalies they've detected, and I'm hoping that we'll find some bona fide submerged sites. I'm sure that they're out there.

Justin Tweet: I was impressed. It just seems like so many of the discoveries were somebody says "why don't we go over here? I haven't been here before. Let's just walk around," and it's, when it happens so much it's not so much a question of luck, it's a question of there's something everywhere you look [chuckle], it's just nobody's looked.

Don Morris: Well, that's the thing. I spent a lot of time in the field here. I think 40% of my time was spent in the field in one capacity or another, and I looked at the map as I was retiring and I said, "you know, you never looked in upper Tecolote Canyon," there's this broad expanse, Orr didn't have any sites recorded there. He probably hadn't gone in there because there was no road, he was kind of married to his Jeep and where it could go. And I thought "I'll bet there's stuff up there". And sure enough, survey was done later on, and just as I thought, there's a rock shelter up in upper Tecolote [chuckles]. I mentioned this, and I was shown that rock shelter, and it's true, if you haven't been there, if you haven't looked, you can't write it off. The chances are there's material there, and whether it will be paleontological material or archeological material is just a matter of chance. But even now I'm not sure the current percentage of the island that remains unsurveyed for archeological remains, but it's, I'll bet it's at least 25% of the island, probably more than that. And the fact that an archeologist has cast his eyeballs on the landscape doesn't mean of course that you've found everything. There're all kinds of random factors that can influence what you're going to record, including erosion. You go through there one month, it rains, you come back and bingo, it's a whole new ball game. And that would apply to the paleontology. That's why we need to be systematic and continual in our work on the island.

Vincent Santucci: So, now you're helping and volunteering at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History—

Don Morris: Right.

Vincent Santucci: —and working with Jonathan Hoffman. Can you talk about that relationship, between that museum and the park, over the years?

Don Morris: Well, I think it's always been there, and particularly with the Arlington Man situation: they had the remains, we had the real estate. So, if you're gonna do any more work [chuckle], you're gonna have to cooperate. And that has gone very well. I mean, the museum has gone back and conducted major excavations, moved far more dirt, for instance, than Orr ever did, in 2001–2006, and subsequently we've got, done coring, located anomalies there which haven't been fully investigated. Their past experience there and their collections, it makes sense, I think it was a good move there, the official repository for material coming from the islands. They have a good curatorial facility. And the park headquarters, located 10 feet above sea level in Ventura Harbor, is not a real good place to do curation. You're going to have to have some kind of facility that's a little bit higher, if nothing else, and the Santa Barbara Museum works fine. It seems to me it's much more efficient to graft on to an existing facility and staff than to create an independent situation. So I think it's a very natural partnership, that's my opinion on it,

at least, and of course like any partnership or marriage there will be occasional bumps in the road, you can't deny that.

Vincent Santucci: So what's next for you in your career?

Don Morris: Well [chuckle], I want to hang on as long as I can. And I think, basically what I should do is pass on whatever I can and assist the current archeologist, who seems like a real go-getter, to provide useful information and insight wherever possible, and be aware that things have changed since 1980s, and they have different challenges, different policies, they're working in different political administrations, different environments, so the information that I have won't always be pertinent or all that useful, but, I just, I want to do what I can to assist.

Vincent Santucci: So, you've created a dilemma for us, and that is, we're trying to decide whether we dedicate this report to you, or that we have you as a coauthor. And so we'll let you guide us on that discussion. [chuckle]

Don Morris: Well, okay, I'll be happy to contribute whatever I can, and if you feel it's coauthorship, fine. I'm not concerned with embellishing my bibliography all that much, so it's not a big deal for me one way or the other, but I'll be happy to contribute. Again, this right in the same vein of passing on information. As well as trials and stuff like that [chuckle].

Vincent Santucci: So there's two ways to do this, is, we just have you as a coauthor. If you're a coauthor, then, probably not good to dedicate it to you.

Don Morris: Right [chuckle].

Vincent Santucci: But if we dedicate it to you, one way we could get you to contribute is that you could be official peer reviewer—

Don Morris: Okay.

Vincent Santucci: —of that document, and that way you can contribute—

Don Morris: Boy, are you gonna be in trouble!

Vincent Santucci: [laugh] So, would that be okay, to go that route?

Don Morris: Sure, no problem. So, whatever works for you guys is fine with me.

Vincent Santucci: Definitely.

Don Morris: And I'm happy and honored to be involved in whatever way.

Vincent Santucci: We're very lucky to have you, that's for sure. Justin, any final thoughts?

Justin Tweet: I'm just, just thinkin' about, just, with so much erosion, you can't say "this was unfossiliferous when we looked ten years ago," you have to keep going back.

Don Morris: Well, you saw a perfect example. We were going down to look at this tusk which had been sitting there in the side wall of the canyon for a good ten years. Matter of fact, I, one of the projects I wanted, one of the things on my agenda, was to look at an early picture taken by

Orr, and see if that was the same tusk. And we go down there, and situation's scrambled. The tusk is definitely not visible. It may be under the slide area, it may have washed out, it's gone. And that's the nature of the game here. And we're just lucky we got to Rockwell at the perfect time, we got to Larramendy at the perfect time. We scored big there. And, the one thing about the Larramendy dig, it focused our attention on that part of Arlington Canyon exclusively for a good three years. So, while we were narrowing in on Larramendy, what else was being exposed and falling into the sea, and washing away? We didn't have any concurrent program monitoring any other part of the island. All our resources were focused right on Larramendy, which is understandable and not a bad thing to do, but what else is going on? You need to be able to focus and keep your widespread vision as well.

Vincent Santucci: Anything else, Justin?

Justin Tweet: No.

Vincent Santucci: Anything from you, Jason? [Jason Irving, who was sharing the housing with us.]

Vincent Santucci: Well, we want to thank you for your service, and also for being such a wonderful steward of Channel Islands paleontological resources, so thanks.

Don Morris: Well, thank you.

Justin Tweet: Thank you, and for coming out with us.

Don Morris: Oh, I – It's so hard to come to this barren, desolate [Justin chuckles], windswept island in harsh living conditions and—

Justin Tweet: Mm-hm.

Don Morris: —but anything for science.

Justin Tweet: [chuckle] All right. Thanks again.

[END OF INTERVIEW]



The Department of the Interior protects and manages the nation's natural resources and cultural heritage; provides scientific and other information about those resources; and honors its special responsibilities to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and affiliated Island Communities.

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1201 Oakridge Drive, Suite 150
Fort Collins, CO 80525