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National Heritage Areas Administrative History Project



James M. “Jim” Ridenour  
June 20, 2016

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

James M. “Jim” Ridenour  
June 20, 2016

Interview conducted and transcribed by  
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by James Ridenour

**James M. "Jim" Ridenour Interview: June 20, 2016**

Plain and simple—the need for a category called heritage areas grew out of a defensive need of the National Park system. We needed some way to recognize areas of regional, state and local importance but not at the level of national significance that is expected for national park designation. It was, and is, a battle to fend off proposals to designate all kinds of areas for national park status. Everyone wants to put that NPS logo on their project and they would like the congressional dollars that come along with recognition.

Dollars were being bled away from the traditional national system and being given to projects that were of dubious national status. This watering down of the National Park System bothered me. It seemed like every member of Congress wanted to create a new national park in their state. Money to create new national parks was coming out of the hide of existing national parks. I called this problem, *thinning of the blood of the national parks*. We had huge infrastructure backlogs. Sewer plants, roads, employee housing, etc., etc... We weren't taking care of what we had and were being directed by Congress to take on new areas.

A problem that had been growing for years was that the legislative branch was trying to run the National Park Service. They were the ones proposing new areas for inclusion. The NPS was sitting on its hands trying to keep up with all the proposals coming from Congress. We were *reacting* rather than *acting*. We needed to get back to being an executive branch agency.

In many ways you couldn't blame the Congress. Members were being pressured by their constituents to have one site or another put on the federal payroll. Many of these areas had regional, state or local significance but couldn't be considered nationally significant.

Members were asking me to come to their state to look at one project or another. Often, the member knew the project wasn't of national park status but having the director of NPS come to visit the project and the local people made the congressman look good. At the urging of one member I visited his state to look at a very nice petting zoo. It was a great zoo and served the local area very well, but the owner wanted to get the zoo on the federal payroll, or at least get some sort of NPS recognition, like having a NPS logo on their site, and on their state map.

I wasn't opposed to helping these areas by providing some planning and technical assistance services. I just didn't want to grant NPS status and long-term financial support for these projects.

One of those projects that come to mind was Steamtown in Pennsylvania. An interesting local economic development project that was worthy of some recognition but not national park status. This was Congressman Joe McDade's baby. I met with him and told him that we couldn't testify in support of the project. He understood and asked if we would not strongly oppose the project? I agreed and Joe did the heavy lifting to get Steamtown on the payroll.

We needed to find a way to deal with the flood of new ideas for projects, something short of national park status but supportive of state and local projects. As a state official I had used the Federal Land and Water program and thought it was a very good way for the feds to encourage and support state and local projects. The feds would bring money and expertise to the table. The

states and local governments would match the funds and would own and manage the projects. Out of this program grew the idea of national heritage areas.

The lead NPS staffer for this idea was Deny Galvin, a thoughtful guy who had the respect of the Congress and the NPS staff. Others working with him included NPS staffer Bill Briggie and Henry Diamond, a highly thought of conservation-oriented attorney. Henry had headed up state and local programs in New York and was a close confidant of Laurance Rockefeller.

To make a long story, this became the incubator for the National Heritage Areas Program. It was designed to recognize the importance of regional, state and local projects but not bring them in to actual ownership by the NPS.

Just some further reflection on the federal budget process. The congressmen liked to point out that they had fully funded the NPS budget. That they had given us the \$ number we asked for. Not true! They may have given us the \$ number we asked for, but they slipped projects of their own into the budget which had the consequence of shorting items that we actually needed. Thus, *thinning of the blood*. Infrastructure funds we desperately needed went unfunded while we took on new, questionable projects.

The recognition of these heritage areas has served us well. The public is well served by having these areas to enjoy and to further educate those who visit. The program has created a way for the various units of government and private citizens to cooperate and preserve these areas.