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

Johnwill Faris
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Interview conducted by S. Herbert Evison
Transcribed by Unknown
Digitized by Sara E. Forrest

NPS History Collection
Harpers Ferry Center
P.O. Box 50
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
HFC_Archivist@nps.gov

Johnwill Faris

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[START OF INTERVIEW]

Herbert Evison: This is Herbert Evison, and today, which is January 9,1963, I am at Platt National Park and with me is my very good friend Johnwill Faris, superintendent of Platt, whose record with the National Park Service extends clear back to 1929 when he became the one-man staff - and the first one-man staff, I think - at Tumacácori National Monument down almost against the Mexican border in southern Arizona.

Herbert Evison: Johnwill, how did you happen to come to work for the Park Service in the first place, what was your background, what background did you bring into the Service?

Johnwill Faris: Well, Herb, I have been attempting over a period of some thirty years to establish a background that I thought the Service might accept as my reason for coming in. I think more than anything else is my desire to work with people; and I might say that my first interest in the Park Service was through a Sunday School class in Florence, Arizona, near the Casa Grande National Monument where Boss Pinkley of course was the superintendent of the Southwestern National Monuments. And that Sunday School class and my association with it called Mr. Pinkley's attention to the fact that I liked people, and he was hunting for somebody who liked people, and he asked me indirectly if I might be interested in a job in the National Park Service. And the thought appealed to me so vividly and it was what I had dreamed might be the ideal position, that I accepted it without any thought of salary or the remuneration that might be in it, and I resigned a perfectly good job with the Indian Irrigation Department, of which I was a member at that time, to accept the job of which I knew nothing in the National Park Service.

Herbert Evison: Sounds to me like you were kind of a reckless young fellow. Well, you went in there at Tumacácori and I think you said in April, 1929. Isn't that right?

Johnwill Faris: That was the position to which I was appointed. I reported on the first day of April 1929, to the Casa Grande National Monument which was headquarters at that time of the old Southwestern Monuments set-up. Mr. Pinkley, Boss Pinkley, was not there at the time but had left instructions for me to report on April First, which I did, to a Martin Evensted who was the clerk of the Southwestern groups at that particular time.

Herbert Evison: Hugh Miller in that organization at that time?

Johnwill Faris: No, no. Hugh was just a bright young boy that was coming into the picture several years later; in fact, he didn't appear until 1933, if I remember correctly.

Herbert Evison: I see. You antedate him quite comfortably, then. Well, let's go on from your appointment there at Tumacácori. I certainly am going to want to come back to it again, but you were there how long and then went where?

Johnwill Faris: Well, sir, my tenure as superintendent at Tumacácori, or custodian which it was called at that time, is probably comparable to some Governor of Oklahoma short tenure as Governor at the present time. I was appointed as superintendent at Tumacácori and served at Casa Grande and was at Casa Grande from the first day of April until sometime in September, at which time I was transferred from superintendent at Tumacácori to superintendent at Aztec Ruins, having spent about ten days at the Tumacácori Mission, several of which was putting on a new roof over the Mission, one of the first groups since the early restoration work began. With the exception of that and possibly half a day with Isabelle Story to visit the area, that was the time I spent at Tumacácori. We did make a couple of trips down, just an inspection trip down to be sure everything was all right and take the collection box that always found its way back into the church proper - we had to take it out, and that occurred several times, but it had a way of reappearing as soon as I left, and it stayed there until I came back the next time.

Herbert Evison: We'll come back to that later. You went to Aztec right within your first year with the Park Service, you were transferred to Aztec.

Johnwill Faris: That is correct. It was more or less a mutual understanding that because George Boundey, who was at Aztec, was desirous perhaps I think because of health conditions, I am not positive right now, of getting into the southern part of the Southwest, and he and I more or less decided to trade places early in my career, very early. Whether it was Aztec or not was not definitely determined because Hilding Palmer, who antedated me a couple of months in the Service, had his choice and he hadn't fully decided whether he was going to Chaco Canyon or whether he would take the Aztec Ruins.

Herbert Evison: But you did go to Aztec?

Johnwill Faris: I went to Aztec following my mission at Casa Grande.

Herbert Evison: How long were you there?

Johnwill Faris: I was at Aztec from September in '29 until December of '36.

Herbert Evison: I didn't realize you had served anywhere else that long. Then in '36 did you go in '36 to White Sands?

Johnwill Faris: No, sir, I did not. I went from 1936 to 1938 as superintendent at Canyon de Chelly over on the Navajo country.

Herbert Evison: Then where?

Johnwill Faris: In '38 I went to the White Sands and stayed there until '61 at which time I came to Platt.

Herbert Evison: Twenty-three years or thereabouts. And you came here when in '61?

Johnwill Faris: I came here on January 29th, if I remember correctly, in '61.

Herbert Evison: You have been here just about two years, then. Well, now, you have really bounced around over the Southwest a good deal. You say that when you started to work in 1929 you went there to Casa Grande with the title of custodian at Tumacácori and hardly spent any time down at Tumacácori; and you also said I think that Boss Pinkley was not there at the time but that sooner or later he showed up. Now you had a long period of association, a good deal of it at considerable distance, with Boss Pinkley. At Aztec you were still under him and at Canyon de Chelly you were still under him, and I think at White Sands you were still under him. I have talked with a number of people who worked with or in association with Boss Pinkley and it has been very interesting to get their personal reactions to him; and I would like to have your own comment on the kind of a guy you found him to be and any incidents in your association with him that occur to you, Johnwill.

Johnwill Faris: Well, Herb, in speaking of Boss Pinkley it's almost like a dedicated pastor in our Christian faith trying to tell you about his conception of a god. Now I don't mean to be facetious in that. The Boss, just as the name implied, he was the boss, we just had an affection for him which I can't put into words; you just felt it, you gave it; he didn't ask for it, he merely drew it out of you, and it was given with such pleasure and enjoyment that we never thought of why or how or anything else, it was just our good blessing.

Herbert Evison: Well, that was two-way too, wasn't it, Johnwill? I mean he had a great affection for the people who worked for him.

Johnwill Faris: I think if the Boss, probably if anyone who knew him would allow him to be criticized, that would be one of the criticisms you would have to make for him. He over-protected us, and probably much of the time we didn't deserve the protection or the support that he often gave us.

Herbert Evison: That is a very interesting observation on him.

Herbert Evison: What else would you say about him? Do any incidents of your association with him come back to you?

Johnwill Faris: Well, obviously I think this would be true of pretty nearly every person who was present, the thing that strikes you most was the fact that the first conference that he was ever able to assemble of the Southwestern Monuments superintendents or custodians at the time, was also his last conference. He called us together at Casa Grande Ruins, gave us this truly gifted inspirational talk, and then just dropped over dead of a heart attack. I don't know how anyone could have an experience that would anyways near approach that, and with the feeling that all of us there had knowing what had taken place and realizing the final drop of blood, you might say, that he had to offer was given us and the manner in which it was given us.

Herbert Evison: Well, that must have been a very - I don't know whether dramatic is the word to use about it, but certainly a stirring sort of thing to look back on, to have lived through and to look back on.

Herbert Evison: But how about your own personal relationships with him? You must have had many contacts and could tell something about some of his approaches to people and to problems.

Johnwill Faris: Herb, your association with the Service in the later years in which you were in contact with some of the early Southwestern - shall I say technical papers? which later drew an epitaph which has become almost history - the Boss had a way of expressing himself, and I am sure a glimpse of the early Southwestern Monuments reports and the ruminations which followed most of these early reports will bear this out: The Boss had a way of expressing himself which was a philosophy that you just simply have to listen to and have experienced to even attempt to explain.

Johnwill Faris: Experiences I used to have with the Boss, Herb, would be much like me asking you, "Herb, can you tell me some of the things that your father told you when you were growing up, that you knew would be essential to your existence and your livelihood." It's difficult to put your finger on these things, and yet you know that your very existence is due to them. And I would hesitate to say that we could point out what the Boss might have meant to us, but I hope that many of us at least have radiated to the Service that esprit de corps, I believe is the term that they used at the time, of the old Southwestern Monuments group, that only the Boss I think could have left with a group of men.

Johnwill Faris: Now you appreciate he didn't have the choice we have now, and many of the men were picked up by certain standards and so on; he had to just take what he could get. And I am living proof of the fact that some of them he got, had access to, weren't maybe the best. But he made some mighty good material out of some material that may not have been good to start with. He was trying with me even up to the point of his death.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, one thing that I am interested in is Aztec. You went in there also in 1929. What was the situation in there then as compared with what you know of it now? Had most of the excavation and restoration been done already?

Johnwill Faris: No, sir, it had not. Now the ruins proper, the old Aztec Ruins, had been excavated under the Museum of Natural History, and Earl Morris of course did much of that excavation. But much of it too had been done merely for the knowledge they could get, and the debris was put back in place, so to speak. And under the CCC - first the PWA and the CWA programs - why, the initial excavation work began at the Aztec Ruins and the old Big Kiva, or the Great Kiva was completely restored at that time. In fact, I believe Earl Morris was borrowed from the Carnegie Institute at the time; I think he was down in Mexico or Central America somewhere

and was borrowed to supervise the excavation and the restoration of the Great Kiva, at the Aztec Ruins.

Herbert Evison: Now you spoke of the PWA and CWA, but you mentioned first the CCC. Now I take it that the CCC did have a hand in some of the work of restoring the Great Kiva. Was that Indian CCC?

Johnwill Faris: No, it was not. We did not have a CCC camp at the Aztec Ruins, Herb. We operated under a fly camp from Durango, Colorado. (And the reason I was hesitating on "Herb," Herb Maier was the man who initiated the fly camp at Aztec Ruins from the base camp at Durango, Colorado.)

Herbert Evison: The base camp at Durango presumably having been under some other agency than the National Park Service, probably a Forest Service or a BLM camp there?

Johnwill Faris: Now, I am sorry - I would assume it was under National Park Service. Herb Maier at Oklahoma City at that time had charge of it.

Herbert Evison: Well, I don't know what it would have been, but that's aside from the point anyway.

Herbert Evison: Now I don't remember how long you said you were there, I think until '36?

Johnwill Faris: That is correct.

Herbert Evison: And then you went to what to my mind is one of the most fascinating areas in the whole National Park System, which is Canyon de Chelly. And I had forgotten until you mentioned it that you were there. Who did you succeed there, do you remember?

Johnwill Faris: Yes, sir, I followed Robert Budlong as superintendent at Canyon de Chelly.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, one of the unique things about that of course is that it lies in the Navajo Indian Reservation, that its actual status is rather anomalous in that it is a Monument and yet it is still a part of the Reservation, and the Navajo Indians live in it, and you find their hogans in it and you find them in it. I have distinct remembrance of that in my visit in there. What sort of problems did you face when you went in there, what jobs fell on your shoulders?

Johnwill Faris: Well, Herb, to recall vividly maybe some of the more important ones is difficult, but perhaps some of the more interesting ones is the fact that being in the Indian Reservation as it was, the very heart of it, and dealing with the only concessioner we had was the old Cozy McSparron of the trading post there, and the trading post itself was the headquarters for the tourist set-up more or less. We had a superintendent's residence there and a little room in it served as an office, but the trading post was the headquarters, and the visitors - many of them, at least - came in and took

the guided tours that Cozy gave with the old open touring-car type of automobile with the big, inflated tires on it enabling it to get up and down the Canyons de Chelly and del Muerto themselves.

Herbert Evison: Cozy McSparron was in there for long years. I didn't even meet him when I was in there, but what kind of a guy was he?

Johnwill Faris: Well, Herb, Cozy McSparron among the old Indian traders I imagine would be very comparable to Kit Carson and Bridger and Fremont and a few of those among the old Indian scouts. He was just a character among characters. I am speaking of the early Indian traders.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, was he a big man, little man, loud voiced, soft voiced, or how did he act, anyway?

Johnwill Faris: Well, Cozy operated on a rather stern principle of operation. He felt that you had to be rather strict with the Indians or they might take advantage of you, and perhaps he was right; that is a matter of opinion, of course. But he did have a great deal of respect, whether it was merely forced or deserved; I think the Indians loved him much more than a lot of them let on. But regardless, he was there for years. Now of course you know that the old tradition is that the traders robbed the Indians of everything they had. But you know too that the traders did a lot that they never received credit for in maintaining and keeping many of the Indians over much of the time.

Herbert Evison: Yes, I know that's so. I take it that you had a good deal of respect yourself for Cozy McSparron.

Johnwill Faris: I liked Cozy very much, yes sir I did.

Herbert Evison: Now what was the physical situation back in 1938? I didn't get in there myself until 1948. Presumably when you were in there you were the only employee.

Johnwill Faris: Well, we had at that time summer help, of course, what we call seasonal employees or seasonal rangers. The winter that I was in happened to be one of the most severe winters we had for numbers of years, and as you recall de Chelly itself was quite inaccessible for a number of years, but from December 1936 until March 1937 I had three visitors and they had to come in over frozen ground to get in. They had to travel either early in the morning when the ground was still frozen, or they couldn't get in at all. I spent - I got out and went to Gallup, which was our nearest center, one time and spent eight days trying to get from Gallup out to Canyon de Chelly, a distance of 98 miles, merely because we had a thaw in the mid-winter and the ground thawed out and we had to wait until it froze again before we could get from on Ganado on to de Chelly, and we couldn't get from Ganado back to Gallup because of the snow.

Herbert Evison: I don't think very many people realize how severe the winter can be in that country. They think of it as being pretty far south; but I remember Bob Budlong telling me about having been showed in, really snowed in, there at El Morro when he was custodian in there.

Herbert Evison: How about the relationships with the Indians and yourself and the Park Service down there? Were they agreeable, or did you find antagonism among any of the Indians to the idea of the Monument?

Johnwill Faris: No, sir, I did not. Now of course, Herb, I think in fairness to the situation, I was probably prejudiced for the Indians. Hy father spent forty-some years with the Indian Service. I did not go to Canyon it de Chelly prior to 1936 although it had been suggested to me, because of the fact that my father was the superintendent of the Navajo Reservation which was then the first headquarters at Window Rock, and I refused to go in to de Chelly until after such time as he had been taken out of Window Rock, so there would not be that feeling of father-and-son relationship which might interfere with his administration from the Indian standpoint and certainly my administration from the Park Service standpoint. So, I felt a very kindred spirit for the Indians; until I was in the eighth grade, I never went to any school but an Indian school.

Johnwill Faris: So, I was criticized severely by Cozy and several of the employees because I wouldn't lock up all of our tools and what not. They said, "They're going to steal you blind." But I took the chance of my faith in the Indians and left my tool shop open and would go off up the Canyon for hours at a time, and to my knowledge we never lost a pick or a hoe or anything else in the two years I was at de Chelly. Now don't misunderstand me; I don't mean that I radiated such confidence and what not that they just refused to take anything from me; but I do think that oftentimes we misunderstand them, and that an Indian might want to come up and borrow your shovel for a while and go up and take it; it was there and he needed it, so he would take it; but I think if you give him half a chance and he realized that you expected him to bring it back, he would bring it back in a very much more reasonable time than we often suspect.

Herbert Evison: Or than we often do ourselves.

Johnwill Faris: Or than we often do ourselves, that is correct.

Herbert Evison: Do you speak Navajo?

Johnwill Faris: I do not. My father before me worked with the Indians, as I say, some forty years and he said, "I am here to help the Indians become Americanized; his problem is not to Indianize me."

Herbert Evison: Well, that's an interesting expression of a viewpoint, too.

Herbert Evison: You remember any specific incidents in your relationship with those Indians there that are unusual or interesting?

Johnwill Faris: Herb, this I would say is not necessarily unusual, it's very interesting, and you have to experience the features themselves to really have the full significance of them.

Johnwill Faris: Probably one of the things that was expected of us, and it was a little hard for us to realize the responsibility that I assume we were expected to carry, is in the matter of death with the Indians. When one of them died, why, you took care of him, and the manner in which you did it and the grace, or whatever you might call it, was quite tedious sometimes because you didn't dare tramp on some of their traditions you were dealing with their loved ones; you couldn't be too hard and cold about the matter. And oftentimes I think we were treading on quite dangerous ground, due to the circumstances in which we found ourselves, and yet they were gracious enough to accept the blunders that we probably made, and we carried on as best we could.

Johnwill Faris: Now this is true of many of the superintendents that had these early experiences. John Wetherill I am sure could tell you many many of them. Budlong and even later superintendents could probably tell you the same thing at de Chelly.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, I would like to get a little flesh on that general commentary of yours. Let's take some specific situation. Do you remember some specific situation where you did have to take care of a dead Navajo, and just what did you do about it?

Johnwill Faris: Well, we were merely told, or they got word down to the superintendent, that a Navajo had died up the Canyon, and it was just understood - although I question whether it was ever decidedly expressed as such, but it was understood - that after we were told the Navajo was up the Canyon and had died, we would see to it that the body was brought down to the Indian Service which was nearby; and why they didn't go to the Indian Service first I don't know, but we were closer, perhaps. And we took the body into the Indian Service, and they prepared a simple box and then took it from there. We never carried clear through to the funeral or anything of that nature.

Herbert Evison: If I remember rightly, when a person has died in a Navajo hogan it is never lived in again. Is that right?

Johnwill Faris: Herb, yes. I would hesitate to say this from my experience in De Chelly itself, but from my general experience with the Indians I know that their association with the departed spirits is rather remote and they don't like to— This is true of not only the Navajo Indians but several other Indian tribes, and I have known this custom to have prevailed in many instances.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, do you remember them in the case of Canyon de Chelly having moved out of or even destroyed a hogan in the Canyon?

Johnwill Faris: Yes, the hogan was burned, in the Canyon, but you asked no questions; it was just understood that the spirit had left, and the individual had died in it; if they did die in the hogan, it was understood that it would be burned, whether you burned it, or they burned it. We didn't burn them, but if it wasn't burned it was certainly deserted. In most instances I think they destroyed them themselves. Some tribes, you know, moved the body so that they wouldn't die in the hogan.

Herbert Evison: Yes, I was going to ask about that, if that were not frequently the case.

Johnwill Faris: Not to my knowledge in my specific experience in De Chelly, although it may have occurred.

Herbert Evison: During your years in there, Johnwill, was much done in the way of archeological exploration?

Johnwill Faris: No, sir, there was not. Earl Morris had worked in De Chelly years before with the American Museum, if I remember correctly, and his work at Canyon del Muerto, Mummy Cave in Canyon del Muerto, which was written up by the Geographic in some detail, the year I can't give you off-hand now, but that was done several years prior to my arrival at De Chelly. That is also true of the White House in Canyon de Chelly itself'.

Herbert Evison: I remember being in there and climbing up a wash embankment, I think it was in Canyon del Muerto, and getting up on just a dirt ledge at the base of the cliff and finding the ground just covered with fragments, potsherds, and, incidentally, where we climbed up, discovering a skull and part of a skeleton in a little hole that had been washed out by drip from that shelf. Isn't it a fact that almost everywhere in Canyon de Chelly that you come across these prehistoric traces?

Johnwill Faris: Oh, yes. The Canyon is full - Canyon de Chelly and Canyon del Muerto - are literally dotted by Indian ruins, early ruins; and from the mention you made I would assume that you were probably in Antelope House in del Muerto.

Herbert Evison: It was somewhere near Antelope House.

Johnwill Faris: There are so many, it could have been a hundred yards either way and there could have been another one. Further up, just above Mummy Cave, of course, was the Master Cave which has the famous group killing in it, and you have seen pictures in Geographic and other, probably, publications of Master Cave and the story that goes with that.

Herbert Evison: No, that's one that I'm not familiar with. I'll have to look that up.

Herbert Evison: In addition to the chore that devolved on you in the case of a Navajo death, did they look to you, or did they look to the Park Service for any other kind of help in connection with their occupancy of the Monument?

Johnwill Faris: Herb, I would be inclined to state that the Indian probably is very much like you or I; they look to you if they think you are sympathetic. They may come to you in case of what they feel is genuine sympathy for their cause or with their cause. If they were forced to come to you, they might do it, but not with the gesture and the feeling that they would if they knew they were coming to you because you had a feeling for them.

Herbert Evison: You think that the Indians around there pretty well understood you did sympathize with them and were reasonably eager to help?

Johnwill Faris: Well, I would hope that any people would feel that I was interested in their well-being. I wouldn't be a Park Service employee if I were not, had such interest.

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Herbert Evison: Johnwill, off the tape you made some mention of some of the difficulties of being a custodian, difficulties of living that went along with being custodian of Canyon de Chelly National Monument. How about just giving me a little idea of what that did mean? You said something about it having taken you one time eight days to get back from Ganado to Canyon de Chelly. Tell me a little something about that.

Johnwill Faris: Well, Herb, those are things that we find very convenient to forget oftentimes and we reminisce on the nicer things, not necessarily the more unfortunate things. As far as being stalled in de Chelly I married a girl from Aztec or that vicinity and just went over to spend a few days following the Christmas holidays with her people, and to get a few days I leave that I had to take, and we thought that we would get back out during before the storm that was approaching hit, and we got as far as Ganado and then the thaw, which we were not anticipating, occurred and we couldn't get any further, and it was just one of those things which we weren't prepared to meet, we had no expectation of having to meet them. And I think with the exception of just a suitcase we had in the car, for my wife left a few things at Aztec so over there we didn't need a lot of material, like baby diapers - we had a new baby - and so we were just caught unprepared, so to speak, for an eight-day stay in a strange place. But fortunately, the situation at Ganado was such that their mess there and the set-up of I believe at that time it was the Presbyterian Mission that had that set-up there, and they did have a spare guest room and they were very gracious and allowed us to occupy that for the period that was necessary. And of course, there was a new baby, and one dress or something, and my wife was a little reluctant to appear every day, every meal, with the same dress or maybe just a housedress, but nevertheless those things are just things that you put up with. And as I say, you forget, you don't remember.

Herbert Evison: Of course, I think now it's very easy to get from Highway 66 up to Chinle and on to headquarters at Canyon de Chelly. I doubt if even very many people who have been there recently realize just what the road situation was ten or fifteen years ago or longer, there. I don't know where the nearest piece of pavement was unless maybe there was a little of it right in Chinle. But what sort of roads did you travel on?

Johnwill Faris: Well, Herb, now my memory may have failed me with the short stretches of pavement we might have encountered, but if I remember correctly as far as pavement is concerned as we speak of pavement today, the first pavement we hit was on 66, which was way over near Gallup, and I think we had, if I remember correctly, twelve or fourteen miles of pavement, which was a tremendous stretch. It was what we called a graveled road on into Ganado and then from there on out it was just so-called graded road and had no surfacing of any kind, not even graveled; it was just graded up. In the summertime it was dusty, and you couldn't see, and in the wintertime, it was muddy, and you couldn't get across. But those were conveniences that we didn't worry about; they were annoyances that we put up with. And you spoke in the early part of this about bouncing over the Southwest, and I couldn1t help but chuckle to myself: you don't know how true that was. We literally bounced over them. And you probably heard in your day of the Boss and the Baby. Now the Baby was his panel car in which he had his camp outfit set up. We speak of them nowadays as a camper, something of that nature. We had all facilities for eating, sleeping and everything right in this old panel-body Ford. And the Boss and the Baby were just as traditional in the Southwest as the old prospector and his burro.

Herbert Evison: The Boss and his Baby, referring to you and your—

Johnwill Faris: No, sir. Referring to Boss Pinkley and his Ford panel-body car, which was his only means of getting from I believe at that time twelve or fourteen areas in the Southwest in which he had jurisdiction.

Herbert Evison: I think it is interesting to get on this record something about the real isolation at Canyon de Chelly in those days, because it's so relatively easy to get to now. I came in from Dennehotso from a main road which then was just graveled and not very well at that, but then over the track across the desert to get to Chinle back in '48, so I know personally something of what the road situation was there. We came in that way and then went out by way of Ganado, and in many places had to drive out from the track alongside of it to avoid deep mudholes that we couldn't possibly have gotten through. I am sure all of that awakens memories in your mind too.

Herbert Evison: Now let's get from there to White Sands where you spent so many years. And one of the things, as I wrote you, I am particularly anxious to get on the record is this: The White Sands National Monument does not include anything like all of the actual white sands, the gypsum sands. Isn't that correct?

Johnwill Fars: That is correct. We have 142,000-some acres, if I remember correctly, of the Monument proper, all of which is not sand, by any means. And if I remember again correctly, there are approximately 176,000 acres of the gypsum dunes, or the white sands themselves.

Herbert Evison: Now, the gypsum sands area and a lot of additional land became a bombing range, and I am anxious to know something of the story of that bombing range and of course specifically how its existence and how its use affected the Monument - visitors to the Monument, management of the Monument.

Johnwill Faris: Well, Herb, I don't know that I have ever considered exactly in that sense. up with it. It was one of these things that just occurred and we grew I might ask you how in the world you ever got down a certain avenue in Washington before it was - such and such buildings were placed there, and so on, and then you'd just look back and it would be difficult to tell exactly how, but the first thing you know they were there and you went around them, walked through them, as the case might be, and you accept them.

Johnwill Faris: The White Sands Proving Grounds, as I recall now - I am not speaking as an authority from a military standpoint - but as I recall, the White Sands Proving Grounds grew out of the fact that we captured a number of the German V-2 rockets that were so successful in their invasion or their shelling of England. And if I remember too, we had done very little research in rockets. I think Goddard or somebody like that around Roswell, incidentally, very coincidental actually, had done some research but it was more or less scoffed or laughed at and it was abandoned because of the tremendous expense. I think they determined it would take two or three thousand dollars to establish one of the type rockets that he wanted to experiment with. This is just as I recall it.

Johnwill Faris: But a Colonel Turner, who had had considerable experience with the V-2 rockets, was placed in charge of a little stretch of land about thirty-five miles south of us, of the Monument proper, and from that little beginning, and merely a tent camp, so to speak, the White Sands Proving Grounds grew. Now prior to that between Alamogordo and the White Sands which is to the north of us, the Holloman Air Base became a reality, and the White Sands Proving Grounds followed this Alamogordo Bombing Range which was the original Army encroachment on our vicinity. And some of the most horrible, I suppose you would call it, duties that I have had to perform in the White Sands proper was the checking or assisting in checking some of the wrecks of the bombers that occurred in the Sands proper and particularly those resulting in fire or crashes, and that of going in and finding - it's not agreeable to mention, but shoes with feet in them or a glove with a hand in them and so on. And this, Herb, was brought about by probably several things.

Johnwil Faris: From the air I had been told - and then I found out myself later - the Dunes themselves had the appearance of being more or less ripples, and this is

not necessarily true by any means, but from a distance they naturally would appear as ripples. But after several crashes in the Sands proper and with no apparent reason for them, it was concluded that from the air the pilots felt this was a very relatively smooth place and headed for it to land, because of its being relatively smooth, and of course realizing too late that it was not smooth by any means. Now we have large areas in between the dunes which were smooth, relatively smooth, and the Alkali Flats, which incidentally is why the White Sands Missile Range was later created, was relatively flat. And in the later part of the Bombing Range existence, before they ever let a pilot fly over the area they were put in busses and brought out to the Monument and taken through the dunes to show them that the area was not a landing field by any means and certainly was hazardous, and to avoid it all they could, rather than to come to it because it looked so tempting for miles and miles away and from greater elevations.

Johnwill Faris: Now this was the cause probably of many of the early accidents in the Sands. Now my experience there qualified me to a certain extent at least to drive the dunes with reasonable success. I shoveled my way over more dunes that I probably drove my way over, and after a few miles of shoveling you acquire great skill not so much in driving the dunes but in avoiding those that you can't drive. And it seemed that this skill, if I may call it that, which I acquired was later misinterpreted by the Army prior to our invasion at Casa Blanca as something which they might use for the benefit of the Army, and I was literally challenged to a draft - in fact I was promised a commission - if I would leave my post and join the Army to teach the invasion forces, which were later to go into Casa Blanca, how to drive over desert areas and the dune area, which I turned down will all due respect not because I wouldn't have enjoyed a commission in the Armed Forces perhaps, but because there was no particular skill to it. I had acquired what I thought was skill in driving sand at Canyon de Chelly, and in order to keep out of some of those quicksand beds up there you had to be quite apt at driving, and I had got caught with several up there and I thought that I was an experienced driver; but when I got down to White Sands I found it was not sand - as you know, it is not sand - and my experience in sand really gave me some false confidence which caused me considerable trouble in trying to drive the dunes of the White Sands National Monument.

Johnwill Faris: But in driving them over a period of years we did get to where we could do it quite interestingly in just an ordinary Ford conventional pick-up, no special equipment or anything else except maybe lots of intelligence on the part of the driver, and I qualified in that respect. But the Army would take out their special equipment to test it on sand abilities, ability to do certain things under certain conditions, and they would get them out there and get them stuck, and I would go out; I knew the short routes and could get there much quicker than they could ever get there because they didn't

know where they were going. It was a large area; 176,000 acres is a tremendous thing to try to pick up an airplane in if it's down particularly, even though you have the smoke maybe as a guide.

Johnwill Faris: But they misconstrued this ability that I had acquired to get to these things rather hurriedly, as super-ability in driving, and that was not true. I would buzz around like a little mosquito getting to these things, and the big equipment - thousands of dollars invested in a special vehicle to travel dunes - would be bogged down, and my little old $600 Ford would just buzz around like nobody's business. But I convinced the authorities, Army authorities, that it was no special skill of mine and evaded the draft to that extent.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, there were bombings, or at least there were tests there, which I remember rather frequently involved closing a road through the Monument. Tell me something about how that worked.

Johnwill Faris: Well, Herb, just glancing at one of our folders which you so well performed for years and years - the production of our interpretive folders - glancing at the maps of one of those you will recall that the headquarters of the White Sands National Monument became virtually the heart of what was later the White Sands Missile Range, because it extended over such a tremendous area and the Army bought out thousands of acres of ranchers and receded leases of thousands of acres of public lands, public domain lands. And so, it reached the point where we were just a dot in this tremendous expanse, but this dot was right in the middle of this tremendous expanse, as well as U. S. Highway 70 going across a portion of the Monument and across this bombing section.

Johnwill Faris: And in the early experiments, and even more or less the later experiments, they thought for the safety of the public it would be best maybe that they close this portion of the highway that covered the bombing range itself or the White Sands Missile area, and of course in closing that we, being right in the middle of it, had occasion to evacuate all the visitors that were in the Monument, for safety reasons. And oftentimes they would schedule a firing and tell us that we had the advantage of a forty-five-minute warning, and they would say "You will clear the area because in forty-five minutes we are going to fire a rocket."

Johnwill Faris: While the impact area was not on the Monument proper, in the early stages like the little boy, they shot an arrow into the air, it fell to the earth, they knew not where. And many of them fell within our Monument areas, but they assured me they weren't aimed at us. Sometimes we questioned that, but nevertheless it was an obligation we had to clear the area of our visitors.

Johnwill Faris: And oftentimes they would set up these firings and due to a technicality they wouldn't fire; we would go out and clear the area, hold them at headquarters, they would cancel the firing, we would let them go back out,

and before we could even get back out to the Sands they would have corrected the technicality that was wrong and set up another firing, and we would go out and pull them out. We have pulled them out of there as many as six or eight times in one day and never fired a rocket.

Johnwill Faris: Now that type of thing was a little hard to explain to a visitor about the third or fourth time he had been pulled out of the area. About the time he got out there and got his bacon and eggs or his lunch spread out and you said, "Well, I'm sorry but you just have to leave it and come back to it thirty minutes or forty minutes or two hours from now; I can't tell you how long, because this is something that we have no control over." The third or fourth time you fed him that story he became a little irritated, and I can't say I blamed him. But oftentimes they were forced to wait because their frying pan and their facilities were still out in the picnic area at the Great White Sands. So, it was quite difficult.

Johnwill Faris: The Army did later print little bulletins which they gave at these stops stating the purpose of the stops, and that helped somewhat. But the public on the whole I think was a little reluctant to accept the fact that maybe this would fall there, and if they didn't know where it was going to fall, wasn't it just as bad to congregate them in one place as it would be to let them scatter out over a large area of the dunes proper. But we weren't the judges; ours was not to decide what to do, we merely did what the agreement with the Army and the Park Service said we would do, and that was to clear the area during an act of firing.

Johnwill Faris: We have had several times in my knowledge where the rockets themselves - at one time, for example, we had a group of children, school children, visiting the area in tremendous numbers and the picnic area itself, which is about nine miles - six to eight or nine, picnic all along there, but the picnic area itself was about eight or nine miles out from headquarters. We had tables, and these children together at these tables would play all over the dunes, then the tables of course were shaded, and they would come in for their lunch and cold drinks and so forth. And one day we knew a rocket had dropped out in the area and went out to see what happened, and a rocket fell right through one of our tables just as straight as if it had been fired from a plane through the top of the shelter down over the table and shattered the table. There wasn't a piece of it left any bigger than a two-by-four. And across from the area not two hundred yards was the group of children, probably thirty or forty, at a picnic, and if this rocket had fallen at that table, we would probably have killed twenty-five or thirty children. Nobody knew anything about this rocket firing, we weren't warned about it, or we would have cleared the area. But that just shows how close often-times these things may have occurred and how perhaps a greater spirit than even the Army, or power, even, than the Army or Park Service determines many of these things and not us in our departmental regimentation.

Herbert Evison: That's a very interesting, very unique kind of a situation.

Herbert Evison: One other thing that I want to ask you about in connection with White Sands. I don't remember how you designate it, but I think there was one day of the year when all the neighbors were invited in for a big shindig. Can you tell me something of the history of that and just what it involved? Is that something that you launched?

Johnwill Faris: No, sir. I'm sorry I can't take credit for that, Herb.

Herbert Evison: Who did? Charles?

Johnwill Faris: Tom Charles was the first custodian of the White Sands. And incidentally I went to the White Sands as a ranger under Tom Charles, and not as superintendent. Thereby I can lay claim to having been a ranger in the Park Service too, even though my original appointment was as custodian at Tumacácori, so I have been a ranger in the Service. I was a ranger under Tom Charles for about a year before he resigned and relinquished his hold on the area, and he had a tremendous hold on it. Tom Charles was to the White Sands what Stephen Mather is to the National Park Service. He was just certainly an inspiration, made it, and it was built around him. And Tom and Mrs. Charles, who are still living, incidentally; Mrs. Charles is still living at Alamogordo - they were the most unusual individuals you could hope to meet, and I'm sure Horace Albright, Arno Cammerer and Arthur Demaray, any of them who knew them would verify this statement. But Tom Charles developed the play day as a means of creating attention to the poor struggling new area which was a dream of his come true. He realized that it was a thing that people would come from all over the world to see.

Johnwill Faris: But he had a great deal of difficulty in getting the powers that be to accept this vision, and when it was finally created as a national park - national monument, rather - accepted by the Park Service, and they got a little road out to the picnic areas, which is no small task itself, keeping a road out over sand dunes, Tom thought that it would behoove the area to have a big play day celebrating this occasion. And if I remember correctly, in 1934 they had their first White Sands play day. And incidentally, Judge Fall, who was Secretary of Interior at a time in which the White Sands was proposed as the all-weather, all-year national park; and that theory of course was so impossible that Stephen Mather had to reject it, and later then the Sands was created - only the Sands was created - as an area which originally was to be in this grand national park area.

Herbert Evison: Scattered over half the map of New Mexico.

Johnwill Faris: All of southern New Mexico, I think: The Indian Reservation of Mescalero. And incidentally, and purely coincidental I am sure, the big Albert Fall ranch was right in the heart of this proposal, and I think probably the time that the Stephen T. Mather had his lunch with Albert

Fall at this ranch was when he determined that it would be impossible to make it a national park.

Herbert Evison: Getting back to this play day, though, you were talking about the first one, I think it was in 1934?

Johnwill Faris: I believe so.

Herbert Evison: Well, just what is the history of that play day since?

Johnwill Faris: Well, from 1934 and through many many years - of course during the war years we had to abandon it for a time because of the rationing and so forth - but every year in the spring of the year, usually we tried to establish it at a period which we thought would be most advantageous from a weather standpoint; we were about fifty percent correct; many of the days were blizzardy and sandy and stormy but about half of them maybe we had. beautiful days, and when you did it was really an inspirational event. But this was just a means whereby all the children in the communities of that southern New Mexico could just come in with the parents and everything, let down their hair. Originally, they had little programs; one school would put on a little folk dance by Czechoslovakians; maybe another county school would put on one by French peasants, letting the school children enact these parts; another one Spanish, and so on. And then they had their races.

Johnwill Faris: And in that connection we had what we called the old-timers' portion of play day in which all the old-timers from as far back as possible for them to gather participated, and it became an annual event, until such time as we started using the schools and having what they called their White Sands relays, which became more or less a school proposition and then over a period of time interest died down and the relays and everything that was going on at the same time - the school track meets, so to speak - divided the attention; the old-timers didn't get the full attention or the attention wasn't concentrated on the original idea, and it died down until a few years back it was abandoned. Whether it has been reestablished or not I am not certain.

Johnwill Faris: Of course, as you know, Herb, the policy of the Service was to get away from some of these things that grew up in the early day and became such a monster that we couldn't handle them. We had as many as 15-16,000 people in just relatively a few hours' time.

Johnwill Faris: The fireworks was another instance of this. We were never prepared to handle that type of thing, we couldn't prepare ourselves for such a tremendous emergency in such a short time, period of time. So, we found on those, and actually we were not sorry to see the thing die down after it became such a monster that we couldn't handle it.

Herbert Evison: It's an interesting phase, though, in the history of the Monument and in the over-all picture of increasing public use. You realize that a thing you can

do with a few hundred people, if it grows and grows, gets to the point where you just can't do it, the sheer size of it makes it impossible. And while in a way that's unique for White Sands, in other ways it isn't unique, it's quite common.

Johnwill Faris: Yes. Every area has that problem.

Herbert Evison: You can put a small overnight lodging in the midst of a piece of beautiful scenery and it isn't noticeable, but when you have to provide for ten times that many then your monster, your development, begins to overwhelm the natural scene.

Johnwill Faris: Yes. Well, I'm sure that at Montezuma Castle you can recall the day when we used to go up in it, and Mesa Verde likewise, you go up in the ruins, you get the feel of it. We had to cut it out; you just were ruining the ruins; they couldn't stand the transgressions that were forcing upon them. That's right, that's one of the things, a very good example there at Montezuma Castle where year after year it would be all right to take a few people up there.

Johnwill Faris: They did.

Herbert Evison: Yes. I was in there myself in 1948.

Herbert Evison: Johnwill, we're nearing the end of this tape, and I wonder if there are any other things looking back over your long experience and your very varied experience that you would like to record on here before we reach the end of it.

Johnwill Faris: Well, Herb, the only thing I can say is probably a little prejudiced. My career in the National Park Service I have enjoyed tremendously. I am afraid I am a little selfish in that enjoyment. I hope I have given some service at least to the National Park Service. But like this tape, it is ending. You have already retired. I am reaching the point where I am soon to retire. So, before we come to an abrupt ending, like this tape is going to, maybe we'll just bow out with the expectation of a reminiscence of our parks experience furnishing a rich time in reminiscence that we wouldn't experience if it hadn't been for our years in the Park Service. You don't know how I appreciate the time you have given me to talk this over with you, not necessarily because of the tape but just because of my love for the Service.

Herbert Evison: Well, it has been a great privilege for me, too.

Johnwill Faris: Thank you, Herb.

[END OF SIDE 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]