National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

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Alan Levitan
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Interview conducted by Marissa Lindsey and Nancy J. Russell
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Edited by Alan Levitan

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START OF RECORDING

Marissa Lindsey:	00:00:02	All right. Today is January 30th, 2020. My name is Marissa Lindsay, Museum Tech. I'm joined here with Nancy Russell, the archivist and Al Levitan. How are you doing?
Al Levitan:	00:00:16	I'm doing fine.
Marissa Lindsey:	00:00:17	Good. Just to start off, if you want to provide some basic background on where you grew up and your education?
Al Levitan:	00:00:27	Okay. Well, I grew up in the suburbs of New York City. My father worked in the city and commuted in every day. I had a fairly uneventful childhood. When I was in first year of high school, my folks moved down to South Florida and I was not really crazy about being in South Florida. That was really my first major experience with a national park. I really took refuge in the Everglades. I would go down there as often as I could, as well as the beaches in South Florida. And I think that, along with maybe the Statue of Liberty when I was a kid, was my first exposure to national parks.
Marissa Lindsey:	00:01:19	What about your education? Where did you go to college?
Al Levitan:	00:01:26	Well, I went to undergraduate school at George Washington University and initially I was thinking that I would like to get into some kind of international affairs, possibly international law. And I went off to school in 1967 which was an era of quite a lot of tumultuous political activity. The first couple of months that I was in Washington was the time of the huge anti-war protests and civil rights protest. I spent a lot of time with old friends and relatives who came and crashed on the floor, to participate

		along with myself in some of those protests. And my perspective changed on the world. And I eventually became an anthropology major and I was particularly interested in material culture. And I think that's what ultimately led me to a career in conservation. I think as a kid, I was oftentimes interested in how things were put together and I enjoyed working with my hands.
Al Levitan:	00:02:35	I remember as a kid, there were some folks down the block that were building their own house and I was absolutely fascinated with that. And I would go over as a six, seven-year-old just watched the guys and then they took a liking to me and showed me what they were doing. And I guess that stuck with me and I always enjoyed the process and the satisfaction that you get from doing something with your hands.
Marissa Lindsey:	00:03:01	Okay. When did you first become aware of the NPS as a career opportunity?
Al Levitan:	00:03:08	Well, as an undergraduate, I became friends with Greg Bryne who had gotten a job here as an objects conservator. And actually when I graduated as an undergraduate from GW, I was looking for a job and there aren't too many jobs for undergraduate anthropology majors. And, Greg, at the time was working in Washington at a place that was called Mario's Art Shop that later on became Mario's Conservation Services.
Al Levitan:	00:03:45	And they were looking for somebody and I had experience working with my hands. I had taken some design courses and Greg said, "Hey, we're looking for somebody. You interested in working there?" And I said, "Yeah, sure." I started working at Mario's Art Shop and enjoyed it for the most part, but we were working mostly on old lady's tchotchkes, things that had fallen off of the mantle. And I wasn't so crazy about that aspect of things, but I thought, "This is a fun, satisfying work." I thought, "Well, maybe I would like to get into some aspect of that." Saved up some money and my wife and I drove down through Mexico and Central America for about six months and I was thinking at the time of combining the anthropology, archeological experience with conservation. And I was thinking maybe in terms of doing archeological conservation or conservation of sites.

Al Levitan: 00:04:47 We visited a lot of archeological sites in Central and Middle America. And when I came back to the city, needed to get a job and make some money, so I got a job as a carpenter at George Washington University in the physical plant. And because I was working there, I was able to take graduate courses for free. Then I started taking courses in museum studies and in conservation. And at the time, GW had a relationship with the conservation labs in the Natural History Museum. That was my first exposure to academic conservation. And I would slowly work my way through because I was only able to take two courses per semester. And when I was almost finished with the program and I think I had worked as a carpenter at GW for about two or three years at that point, I got wind of a course that was being given by Park Service folks who were involved in historic preservation work. And it was a series of lectures by Hugh Miller who was the chief architect at the time--chief historic architect--and some of the long-term exhibits specialists in the Park Service who were working at C&O Canal and Antietam and Harpers Ferry at the time.

Al Levitan: 00:06:19 And I met a fellow who was responsible for the preservation work that was going on at Harpers Ferry Park. And we struck up a conversation and he was looking for an exhibit specialist and I said, "Hmm, sounds really interesting." I applied for the job and as most things in the government, it took a while to make its way through. And I think about six months later or so, I got the job and it was at a strange time in my life because my wife was pregnant with our first kid. We did what they always tell you not to do, which was to move, have a child and change jobs at the same time. But did that and came up here and it was a bit of a gamble because it wasn't a permanent job at the time.

Nancy Russell: 00:07:07 Al, what year was that?

Al Levitan: 00:07:08 1978. Came up here, got the job as an exhibit--it's called exhibit specialist (restoration). I think that's the title that's still used for most of the HPTC employees. I was doing building investigation and preservation work mostly on structures at the time. And as part of my degree program, I needed to do an internship. I arranged to do an internship at the [Furniture Conservation Lab] at Harpers Ferry Center. And that's where I met Ralph Sheetz, who was Ron's uncle and Alan Cochran and Ron, who had just started maybe six months prior to that.

Al Levitan:	00:08:02	I think after the internship was done, they still needed some help. I managed to get an appointment where I was one day a week at Harpers Ferry Center, and four days a week working for the park itself. And that went on for maybe two years or thereabouts. And then ultimately when, well, Ralph retired early on and then Alan Cochran retired maybe four years later. They were looking for somebody, when Alan retired, and I ultimately got that job.
Nancy Russell:	00:08:42	And when was that?
Al Levitan:	00:08:44	That would have probably been 1983, '84 thereabouts.
Marissa Lindsey:	00:08:55	And what did that job entail?
Al Levitan:	00:08:55	The job with Harpers Ferry Center or the--
Marissa Lindsey:	00:08:57	Yeah.
Al Levitan:	00:09:00	Well, I was the junior person in the lab and I did a lot of hands on work. I traveled some but not as much, nearly as much as I did later on in my career. I worked a lot with Ron and some of the other labs at the time, so really absorbed an awful lot from the folks that had been here.
Marissa Lindsey:	00:09:27	How was HFC organized when you started and where did conservation fit into that?
Al Levitan:	00:09:32	Well, HFC as a whole was organized by area of expertise. I know now it's changed to where there are teams that are oriented to particular regions of the Park Service. At the time though, it was organized, there was an Exhibits group, there was AV group, Publications group, Interpretive Planning group. Their people were together in their area of expertise and as was Conservation and there were some problems as a result of that organization, but I think that those problems were really outweighed by the synergy that's developed when people with similar expertise are working together. And--
Nancy Russell:	00:10:40	What do you think some of those problems were?
Al Levitan:	00:10:45	Well, there's a certain amount of stove piping as they say, there was not always the best coordination amongst the various divisions. But for the most part I think people felt good working with folks that had similar areas of expertise just to be able to bounce ideas off of. And at that point, I think that Harpers Ferry was looked upon as a collection of

experts in various areas and there was a lot of expertise. If a revolutionary war park wanting to know how many buttons George Washington would have had on his uniform, they would be able to call Harpers Ferry Center and find out. And I think, in general, and this may be skipping ahead a bit, the focus has moved from one of expertise to more of process at Harpers Ferry Center.

Al Levitan: 00:11:54 As far as Conservation was concerned in the early years, much of our work at that time was related to large exhibits that were being developed at the Center. We were much more of an arm of the exhibits group than in my later years here at the Center.

Nancy Russell: 00:12:20 Well, in looking at Ralph Lewis's book on Curatorship in the Park Service, he talks about that argument for as they split the museum branches and in '80, they hired Ann Hitchcock as the Chief Curator. There was originally a sense that conservation would go with cultural resources but then one of the arguments that Harpers Ferry Center made was they really felt that conservation was so integral to that exhibit piece. I think that does reflect what you're saying in terms of, at that time, it was considered really integral to the exhibit product.

Al Levitan: 00:12:58 Right. And that was a bit of an acrimonious split at the time. And I think the argument could be made that we were an integral part of the exhibit process, but I think also it was a matter of power and FTEs and the like. And I think ultimately, although it was very nice to be located here doing the kind of work that we do, that at least administratively it probably would've made more sense for conservation to have become part of cultural resources rather than this branch of Harpers Ferry Center.

Marissa Lindsey: 00:13:40 How is the organization of the conservation department set up?

Al Levitan: 00:13:46 How was it set up?

Marissa Lindsey: 00:13:47 Yeah. Like a program manager who is there--

Al Levitan: 00:13:53 Well, let's see. When I first started in '78, Art Allen had been the head of, I think it was called Museum Services at the time and it included both conservation and curation and art, I think, although he was not trained in museum studies, conservation, or curation, he had an understanding of it and

he's had a very good understanding of how the Park Service functions and he was able to maneuver in the bureaucracy amazingly well. And he is the one that said, "Okay, we need to separate out curation from conservation." And I think he might have thought that he would be the chief curator. As it turned out Ann [Hitchcock] was chosen.

Al Levitan: 00:14:52 And Art, I think, was the assistant to her for a few years at any rate before he left and became, I think, assistant superintendent at Blue Ridge Parkway. But I think Art deserves a lot of credit for promoting both conservation and curation. And although Art was not formally trained in those fields, he had a respect for the work and a respect for the folks that were--when I started initially, Tom Vaughn was the manager for the, what did they call it at the time? Probably division chief for conservation. And then John Demer became the division chief after Tom Vaughn.

Nancy Russell: 00:15:51 And what labs existed at the time?

Al Levitan: 00:15:54 Well, when I first started there was a paper lab, there was a painting's lab. Tom Carter was the paintings conservator. There was the wood lab, there was objects, which was primarily ceramics and glass, and that's what Greg did. There was a metals lab and that's what Bart Rogers and Charlie, blanking on Charlie's last name, what they did.

[Forgot to mention the ethnographic lab-Toby Raphael and the textile lab-Fonda Thomson]

And then when Martin [Burke] took over, Tom Carter retired soon after and then painting's conservator position was never refilled after that. And Martin's vision was to have a senior conservator and an associate conservator in each lab.

Al Levitan: 00:16:41 At that time, textiles had a senior conservator and associate conservator. Paper, the wood lab did, objects. And by that time Bart had also retired and Charlie then went to work for Greg. Objects then included metals as well as ceramics and glass. And then Martin also worked very hard to get a science component in. He was able to recruit for a scientist and spent a lot of money in outfitting a science lab. And then at one time there was an assistant scientist as well, but that didn't last very long at all.

Al Levitan:	00:17:30	I think, maybe the high water mark of conservation, there were probably 17 or 18 folks. There was also a registrar and an assistant registrar. I would say there were probably 18 folks in conservation.
Nancy Russell:	00:17:45	Did you have technicians also working in the labs?
Al Levitan:	00:17:49	It would be generally senior conservator, associate conservator, and then we would sometimes have volunteers and interns. But to my recollection, there weren't technicians that came in. Occasionally, somebody from the park who wanted a curator or a museum tech in the park who wanted experience in conservation would ask to come in and might spend a month or two or three. But for the most part there weren't Harpers Ferry Center employees working as technicians.
Nancy Russell:	00:18:19	How was the work between the senior conservators and the assistant conservator within a given lab? How was that work managed, divvied up, and how were projects brought in at the time?
Al Levitan:	00:18:36	I think the way it was divvied up, probably it depended on the particular lab and the dynamics in the lab. Usually it was the senior person's responsibility to determine who was going to do what. But oftentimes it wasn't a major issue. And work came in a variety of ways. There was still work coming from the Center. And generally at that time, usually Martin would assign somebody to be the manager of projects as they came in from the Center. Typically a large project like Gettysburg might come in and involve virtually all of the labs. The conservator that managed that particular project would meet with the various labs and say, "Okay, this is what needs to be done. This is the deadline; this is what we're going to be dealing with." It didn't always work that way, but ideally that's the way it was supposed to work.
Nancy Russell:	00:19:43	And these were still predominantly exhibit-driven projects?
Al Levitan:	00:19:47	Yeah, in early years with Martin, it was primarily exhibit driven and then as things changed in the Center and there were fewer large projects coming through the Center, then we started getting more work from the regions and from the parks directly.

Nancy Russell: 00:20:01 Do you have a sense of why you stopped getting large projects from the parks?

Al Levitan: 00:20:09 Why the Center did?

Nancy Russell: 00:20:10 Yeah.

Al Levitan: 00:20:11 I think at the time there were, as always there are budget issues and WASO had made the determination that there weren't going to be increases in footprints in the various parks. Large projects, unless there were major donations, just were not coming through to the Center at that period of time. And it varied from year to year, but I think that was primarily it--that the determination was made that we were not going to do large museums, large visitor centers anymore.

Nancy Russell: 00:20:57 While Martin was here up through Martin's time, you were all still based funded?

Al Levitan: 00:21:04 We were never based funded. We would get a certain percentage of base funded money. But it was less and less and less every year. But we were never fully based funded.

Nancy Russell: 00:21:16 Okay. For some reason I thought there was a period where you were and then after Martin, it became less and less.

Al Levitan: 00:21:27 No, we were never fully based funded. We would get a certain amount of base money, but for the most part we were not base funded. And one of the issues for most of my years here at the Center was that oftentimes the money that came through the Center was construction money. It could be two-year money. The money that came from the regions in the parks [unless] it was donation money was year money. It had to be expended by the end of the fiscal year. We were basically starting from scratch in the beginning of the fiscal year. We would typically use up all of the base funding, whatever it was, 15-20%, in those early months because it would take a long time for the budget to trickle down through the regions and then to the parks and then to us.

Al Levitan: 00:22:22 That was always an issue and it seemed like Harpers Ferry management, never really wanted to deal with it. Well, at one point, and I can't remember exactly when that was, we went through the A76 process and maybe Wade [Myers] has got a better recollection of the year. But they brought in a contract crew to do the A76. We had to justify our

existence to people that knew nothing about conservation, knew nothing about the Park Service. And then after months of this bureaucratic hassle, we theoretically won the A76 process and they'd made the determination that would make more sense to have the work done in-house by the Park Service.

Al Levitan: 00:23:15 And in part, which we told them from day one, they came to the realization that there really aren't any private sector businesses, institutions that did that variety of work. But after winning A76, then we had to go through a business plan. They brought in, yet another crew of contractors. I think this crew was from Texas and we went through a business plan that much like the A76. And the upshot of the business plan was that we would charge significant overhead for our services to the parks and to the regions. And then the other part of that was that we would be able to use multi-year money, that the money we would get would last for more than one year.

Al Levitan: 00:24:10 The negative part of that went into effect that we ended up charging considerable overhead for our services to the parks and the regions. The positive part of having a multiyear money never occurred. We were theoretically in a business model, but that business had to basically close up shop at the end of September and then start from scratch beginning of October. And of course, it could not work.

Marissa Lindsey: 00:24:42 You've already touched on a little bit, but could you describe it a little bit more, the state of conservation and the Park Service as a whole when you first started?

Al Levitan: 00:24:52 When I first started, I would say that the conservation labs were more integrated--and I think probably this was partly as a result of Art Allen's influence--more integrated with the whole museum efforts around the Park Service. We worked fairly closely with a lot of the regional curators at the time and also the curators at some of the bigger parks. I think as years went by, we became more isolated and had less contact with the regional curators. And that began to change, but it depended on the particular regional curator. But we used to participate in training programs with the regional curators.

Al Levitan: 00:25:38 There was the curatorial methods course that we were involved with. And I think having those contacts with new curators in the Park Service really generated a lot of contact

and then a lot of business for the Division of Conservation. And ultimately at some point, I think this was under the director, [Roger Kennedy] the name of the director fails me at the moment, but the director who had been the director of the history museum at the Smithsonian wanted to increase training for all Park Service employees. I don't know if you were around in those days, Nancy, but he thought, "Okay, the best institutions, the best businesses invest X number of dollars in their employees for training." He wanted to do that. Consequently, all existing training was wiped away and the new training system never really occurred. At that point, the curatorial methods course, which was really quite successful, stopped.

Nancy Russell: 00:27:02 I never knew that about why the curatorial methods class stopped.

Al Levitan: 00:27:07 Yeah.

Nancy Russell: 00:27:08 That's interesting. When you say the director, you're talking about the character of the NPS as a whole?

Al Levitan: 00:27:13 Right.

Nancy Russell: 00:27:13 Yeah.

Al Levitan: 00:27:16 His name will come to me. He had been the director of the history museum at the Smithsonian. And he had good instincts, but he just didn't have the ability to push things through. He never got the funding to actually have this new training initiative. And similarly, there was a cultural resource training initiative, which maybe predates your day as well. And I applied for that on a number of occasions and was able to get some money. And the idea there was that Park Service employees and cultural resources would partner with other organizations outside of the Park Service to provide training. And then I think it was 2000 to 2001 I got money from that training initiative to do training on totem preservation up in Alaska. And I partnered with the Wrangell Museum in Wrangell, Alaska.

Al Levitan: 00:28:28 For two successive summers we got folks together, primarily native carvers who would be caretakers for their totem collections and preservation training with them. And that had worked out really well. But once again, that program was nixed because of budgetary concerns.

Marissa Lindsey: 00:28:57 Can you describe how the conservation program changed over time and the impacts of those changes?

Al Levitan: 00:29:04 Well, I think we've discussed that to an extent that over the years there were fewer and fewer major projects coming from the Center and more and more from parks and regions. And a lot of that depended on the individual conservator's relationship with folks in the parks and the regions. And whether they felt comfortable calling up and say, "Hey, look, I've got such and such a problem, what do you think I should do about it?" Oftentimes, I'm sure the conservators today will tell you the same, that these projects oftentimes take a number of years to percolate, that you'll discuss with a curator, either regional or at the park, particular issues, and then maybe help them do a PMIS statement and then a year or two or three later, they get the funding and then you might go out and actually do the work or the stuff might come in here to you.

Nancy Russell: 00:30:10 At the height of the program when Martin was here and you were able to have two folks in each lab plus the registrar's office and 18 people, was that the peak of staffing for the conservation program?

Al Levitan: 00:30:25 Yeah.

Nancy Russell: 00:30:26 And then there was a decline?

Al Levitan: 00:30:29 I think the science lab is probably totally based funded, but the other labs still were pretty much dependent on projects.

Nancy Russell: 00:30:43 But the science lab wasn't very long lived, was it? They got other jobs.

Al Levitan: 00:30:50 The assistant conservator decided that the job was just not for him. He left maybe after six months or a year. And at one point in one of the many reorganizations of conservation, the determination was made that the scientist, who was a PhD scientist, would no longer do science, but she would edit the reports that were coming out of the other labs. As you can imagine, she wasn't very happy with that bit of the reorganization and was able to find another job in the Park Service and moved on leaving the science lab empty and the position was never refilled.

Nancy Russell: 00:31:42 When you talk about the reorganizations, was conservation changing within its role within the Center or just different managers, loss of staffing, they're covering gaps?

Al Levitan: 00:31:56 Under Gary Cummins, who was a manager of the Center for, I would guess probably four or five years, Gary really liked to reorganize and at one point the determination was made that conservation would no longer be called Division of Conservation. Instead, we were being called Media Assets.

Nancy Russell: 00:32:22 Whatever that means.

Al Levitan: 00:32:24 And nobody knew what Media Assets meant, but in somebody's mind somewhere we were some kind of media because the other groups in the Center were being called media as well. Conservation became Media Assets. And at about the same time, I think this was part of the general trend to, let's say place less respect on expertise. About the same time as we were being called Media Assets, we were no longer encouraged to receive phone calls from the park or regions. The idea was that there would be one front door to the Center. If anybody called with a question about cartography or "my photograph is foxing", it would be answered by one person at the Center. We were told if somebody was to call us with a question that we would refer them to the front door.

Nancy Russell: 00:33:44 The front door was designed to answer those questions or funnel to the correct person?

Al Levitan: 00:33:50 I think it was the idea of a phone tree that answered as much as they could. And if they could not answer it to direct it then to the right person. But oftentimes, when somebody calls up with a general idea or has a problem, they don't necessarily know how to phrase it even if you're talking to somebody that doesn't have expertise in that area. There was a real difficulty then to be able to contact and relate to the parks. As far as Conservation was concerned, I'm sure the other groups had similar problems.

Nancy Russell: 00:34:34 But we're having established relationships with regional curators and others. I can't see them changing that behavior of just picking up the phone and call it Al--

Al Levitan: 00:34:41 Well, that oftentimes happened. But nevertheless for new people in the parks or, of course you never know what calls you didn't get. Yes, and I tried to pay as little attention to the whole idea of being a media asset and directing calls to the front door as I could. But that was some of the

bureaucratic ridiculousness that we were dealing with in those days.

Nancy Russell: 00:35:12 Did you remain Media Assets after Gary left?

Al Levitan: 00:35:16 We remained Media Assets for a number of years and Wade [Myers] probably could recall better than I, but I think at the same time as we became Media Assets, then Martin had responsibilities for Tom [DuRant] and Wade [Myers] and I'm trying to think, and I think there were a couple of other smaller aspects of his responsibilities at that point. I think we may have remained Media Assets until maybe when Linda had come and then we became museum services or something along those lines. But for a number of years, there was almost constant reorganization of the Center. I think people would come either as manager of the Center or assistant manager of the Center and want to place their stamp on the functioning of the Center. Reorganization was in the air.

Nancy Russell: 00:36:22 When the rest of the Center then reorganized from expertise to regions, did that affect Conservation?

Al Levitan: 00:36:32 There was some talk that we might have to go along with this concept of regional alignment but luckily that never occurred. I think that they realized that that was pretty much insane.

Marissa Lindsey: 00:36:46 Can you touch on a little bit of the staffing level changes over the years and how the two conservators in each lab changed?

Al Levitan: 00:37:01 Well, again, as we mentioned, the high water mark was having two conservators in each lab and then there was a period of time under a particular museum chief or chief of Conservation here where a number of people retired or were forced out and then those positions would just never [be refilled]. I would say probably at one point, in the course of two years, it was six or so conservators and people in registrar's office ended up leaving for one reason or another and then the positions just weren't filled.

Nancy Russell: 00:37:44 Do you think that was a deliberate attempt by HFC management to downsize the operation or was it just other pressure, as attrition happened, people left, the money went elsewhere, budget cuts or whatever?

Al Levitan:	00:38:01	I think it was probably a combination. I think there was always pressure on the budget and I think that HFC management at the time was not particularly adept at fighting for their piece of the pie. And I think that HFC management didn't particularly value Conservation at that particular period of time and didn't necessarily want to replace FTE. I will say that at one point under Martin there were three GS-13's in conservation and within two years after Martin left, they were all gone. One can draw one's own conclusions.
Marissa Lindsey:	00:38:58	Can you touch on a little bit the move from the Shipley building out to Willow Springs?
Al Levitan:	00:39:04	Sure. We were originally at the old Shipley School building in Harpers Ferry. That was a building that was, when we were there, it was still owned by the Board of Education of Jefferson County leased by GSA and then in turn Park Service lease. And the building was literally falling down around our ears. And every six months or so, GSA folks would come, and they'd look around. The wood lab was on the second floor of the Harpers Ferry Center of the Shipley School building. And we had our lab on one side of the hallway and the machine room on the other. There's a lot of heavy machinery, saws and planers and the like. And you could see where the wood floor ended. And then the brick wall began, and the gap literally got wider and wider.
Al Levitan:	00:40:08	I took measurements and wrote notes and every time the GSA folks would come, I would say, "Hey look, what used to be a three-inch gap is now a four-inch gap." And they'd go, "Okay." They'd note it down. And then we'd never hear anything again about it. But it finally became quite obvious that a new location was needed. And we went through probably three or four years of various teams of architects coming up and taking measurements. And at one point they did a video presentation of what the new structure would look like. There was constantly a debate over whether or not to rehab the existing building or to move us out entirely.
Al Levitan:	00:40:55	And ultimately when it looked like that building was just not going to be inhabitable, they decided, "Okay, we'll build a temporary building somewhere offsite, have a private contractor build that building and there'll be there for five years, possibly 10 years, and then move into

permanent facilities." And here you guys are. How many years later?

Nancy Russell: 00:41:21 Alice [Newton] had mentioned that one of the plans was move guys out, raze the old Shipley building, build something on that site.

Al Levitan: 00:41:29 Yeah, there was talk of that, there was talk about leaving the existing building but basically gutting it and rehabbing it, adding something. One period of time, as I had mentioned, there was talk about a new facility for us at the same time as a new facility would be built for the National Capital Region for storage and curatorial workspace. And that was going to be actually there was property that was purchased by Department of Interior along the Shenandoah River. And that was going to be the initial site of NCTC and then they determined that there were some problems there--with environmental problems.

Al Levitan: 00:42:18 There was some thinking at one point that the new structure would be on that newly purchased property along the Shenandoah. A variety of different plans were floated at the time. I think that the grand plan was when Bob, once again, his name is escaped, he became director of the Park Service. He had previously been the director of the now--

Nancy Russell: 00:42:45 Bob Stanton?

Al Levitan: 00:42:46 Bob Stanton. He previously was the director of the National Capital Region and had some knowledge of the needs for a space for the National Capital Region. He was thinking if during his tenure, the thinking was that we would combine the structures for both functions.

Nancy Russell: 00:43:07 Do you know how it is that MARS, as it was called then, MRCE as is known now, that got built, we didn't become part of that?

Al Levitan: 00:43:18 That, I don't know. I'm not sure exactly what transpired there.

Nancy Russell: 00:43:21 Okay.

Al Levitan: 00:43:25 At any rate, this building [Willow Springs] was built and we were all under the expectation that there would be a contract to move all the stuff from there to here. And then as it turned out, there was no money for the move. We ended up doing the move ourselves. And there was a fellow

who worked for conservation at the time, he was originally hired as a truck driver, but then started working with, I guess, it was Gary and Nancy in the registrar's office, basically packing and shipping and that kind of thing. His name is Butch McNally and Butch was one big, strong, high-energy guy and we moved all that stuff with Butch's untiring help. And at that time I remember we all had these back braces on, and I guess it was Martin at the time, went and invested in the back braces for the entire staff because we were moving tables and chairs and planers and saws and the like. Things were a bit chaotic for probably two or three months, but yeah, the move was made.

Nancy Russell: 00:44:47 What improvements did you have in this facility over Shipley?

Al Levitan: 00:44:52 Well, yeah. Shipley was really an embarrassment. Here we were doing a lot of training, bringing outside folks in and talking about the importance of the environment for preservation of artifacts. And we didn't even have screens on the windows. We had some window air conditioners, but basically the building was falling apart. We had very little in the way of security. I remember for years that the registrar's office was on the second floor at Shipley School and we would be taking large pieces of furniture up basically a fire escape to get to the second floor of the building. Yeah, this building was a major, major improvement over the Shipley School building, far from perfect, but still a major improvement.

Marissa Lindsey: 00:45:54 You touched on a little bit of the conservators involved in trainings. Could you talk a little bit about Conserve-O-Grams and that kind of training?

Al Levitan: 00:46:04 Yeah. Originally, way back in' 78 and before it was all done under that one Museum Services group that Art Allan had headed up. And then when the split occurred, the responsibility for producing the Conserve-O-Grams and Museum Handbook and the other publications went with the curatorial folks, but then they still used us as a resource. I think generally one or two of us might be assigned to work with whoever was producing the Conserve-O-Grams. I did that on a couple of occasions, and I wrote sections for the Handbook back in the day. And we worked together with Museum Services, like in the curatorial methods course and then workshops around the country. We did a number of workshops at various parks around the country.

Nancy Russell: 00:47:07 If you weren't based funded at that point, were they having to come up with money for your time to do those things?

Al Levitan: 00:47:16 I think that there was some mechanism where that group paid our group. But I think also we just used the base funding for those kinds of functions as well. But I wouldn't be at all surprised if they didn't pay our group. I think when there were big projects, like writing a chapter in the Handbook would be a big enough chunk of time that they would reimburse Conservation.

Marissa Lindsey: 00:47:52 Do you want to share any memories or anecdotes of iconic conservators or people that you worked with?

Al Levitan: 00:48:05 Yeah, sure. I would say on the whole, it was a very compatible group. There were some issues and tensions early on, but I think on the whole it was a pretty compatible group of folks. I think when I started, it was primarily male and then over the years got progressively more female. I got to work with Ron Sheetz for probably a dozen years, maybe more. And Ron just had an ability to relate to everybody in the Park Service. I don't know if you had met Ron.

Nancy Russell: 00:48:47 No.

Al Levitan: 00:48:47 Okay. Well, he's a country boy and his father was a cabinet maker and he grew up doing cabinet making but smart and picked up on conservation early on. His uncle Ralph who was also a cabinet maker, had worked at the Eastern Museum Lab in the D.C. area. Then was one of the very first employees of Harpers Ferry Center when it started. And then when Ralph was ready to retire, I think he suggested Ron and then Ron started, I think, probably it was in '77 or '78. But anyway, Ron could just relate to from the most erudite scholar of 17th century American furniture to the guy who was cleaning the bathroom at the park. And he just had the ability to relate that maybe not everybody was in the Division of Conservation. And I got to observe that firsthand and tried to take that ability into account in my dealings with the folks in the Park Service.

Marissa Lindsey: 00:50:09 I believe you also knew Master Carver John Segeren?

Al Levitan: 00:50:12 Segeren.

Marissa Lindsey: 00:50:19 Segeren, thank you.

Al Levitan:	00:50:19	I didn't know him well. When I first started in '78, we would cross paths on occasion, and I had an appreciation for his skill level. He was a German, trained as a carver in Germany as a young man and then immigrated here. We still have, or we, I shouldn't say we anymore, in the wood lab there's a roll of beautiful chisels and carving tools that were John Segeren's German-made chisels and carving tools. I will say one thing about John. He did a model of a dugout canoe, Tlinkit dugout canoe that's in the collection of Sitka. I think originally it was in one of the early exhibits in Sitka. And fast forward, probably 30 some odd years, maybe 40 years, and there were two or actually three native carvers that were making a full-scale dugout canoe. And the curator at Sitka told me at the time that these guys would come into the collection and asked to see John's model to make sure that they were getting the dimensions of this dugout canoe correctly. I think that speaks to John's both research ability and carving ability.
Nancy Russell:	00:52:00	And certainly in some of your later career, you then ended up having to treat some of his objects or some of his carvings because you did that for me in Everglades.
Al Levitan:	00:52:10	That's right. I did, yeah. I think that was pretty successful. There was one, I can't remember exactly where this was going in, but John would oftentimes detail the carving on the surfaces that would show, and then the surfaces that were not going to show whether it'd be the bottom or side or whatever, he wouldn't detail. And I was managing this exhibit project and as I said, I can't remember where it went in, and the exhibit designers wanted to hang one of his carvings that was never designed to hang and that it would be displayed in such an orientation that the uncarved or partially carved portion of the animal figure, I can't even remember what it was maybe an alligator was going to show. And I said, "I can't do that. I'm not going to that." I think they may have gone ahead and hired somebody else to do the work on it. But I said, "No, I'm not going to work on a piece that's going to be shown in a way that was never designed to be shown." But yeah, his stuff is in a number of parks all around the country.
Nancy Russell:	00:53:32	And in the NPS History Collection, we have some too.
Al Levitan:	00:53:41	There ya go.
Marissa Lindsey:	00:53:41	Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Levitan: 00:53:41 Right.

Marissa Lindsey: 00:53:41 One of the projects that you're involved with is the Sitka totem poles which you talked about a little bit, but could you go into a little bit further detail of it?

Al Levitan: 00:53:49 Sure. I first went up to Sitka 1991, which dates me quite a bit. And Ron and I, Ron was still working at the time, Ron and I did a survey of the totems at the request of the superintendent who was concerned about their condition. These were the outdoor totems, most of which were not actually original totems. They weren't the totems that were carved in the 19th century, but they were CCC era--Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Project Administration--reproductions of those poles were displayed along what was originally called the Russian Walk and now it's called the Totem Trail in Sitka.

Al Levitan: 00:54:47 The park had off and on done some treatment on these poles. The last treatment was in the 1970s where they hired a fellow by the name of Joe Clark, who was a wood pathologist working for the Forest Service at the time. And he devised some treatments, some of which were successful, some of them not so successful, where they dug big trenches and much to the current chagrin of the archeologists up there, dug trenches in what was the Kiksadi Fort site in Sitka and lined the trenches and then used this herbicide, fungicide to treat the poles. And then they were re-erected in the late '70s, and the park would periodically do some minor treatment.

Al Levitan: 00:55:45 At the time, a material called Pentachlorophenol which is a fungicide and herbicide was used to treat the poles and it's fairly effective herbicide and fungicide. But in the late '80s, the Park Service discontinued use because it was found to be carcinogenic. Between that period of time in the '80s and '91, nothing was done on the poles. And a lot of the deterioration of the poles occurs in the end grain surfaces, oftentimes high up.

Al Levitan: 00:56:27 When looking at the poles from below, oftentimes you don't see the damage. When Ron and I went up there in 1991, we hired a high lift and we were able to get up and see a lot of these things were in really bad shape. And then also there was a lot of deterioration right above the grade line of the poles. We did a report that was sent up to the

park and the park went, "Oh, geez, it's worse than we thought."

Al Levitan: 00:56:55 They were able to get some money together and we worked together with the historic preservation training center folks. And over the course of probably three to four years, many of the poles were taken down. Originally, the poles were erected on their uncarved bases and it was that uncarved base that was heavily deteriorated. A lot of the poles were taken down. The uncarved base was cut off and then we put them on to support--we bolted them on to support posts. Yeah, that went on for probably three or four years and then there was a hiatus a few years and we came back and did some re-treatment and it's been ongoing. They've used Ron and myself off and on over the years since then and I was most recently up there in 2018. I did a chapter in the collection management plan on how to deal with the poles in the future.

Al Levitan: 00:58:07 It's been a very positive experience. And I should say too that as an outgrowth of that was that there are probably, I would guess eight pole collections are scattered around Southeast Alaska. Some of them are state entities, some of them are run by native corporations. They got wind of the fact that Ron and I were using some new techniques and some new non-toxic herbicides and fungicides. They would call the park and say, "Hey, can we get those guys?"

Al Levitan: 00:58:44 The park was able to get some funds together and the regional office as well kicked in funds. We were able to do surveys of pole collections in probably six or so totem parks that were not actually part of the Park Service. And as I mentioned, we were able to do, I think Ron had retired by that time, but so I was able to put together a training course with the Wrangell Museum and we were able to get a lot of the caretakers of the various pole collections to come and discuss totem preservation.

Marissa Lindsey: 00:59:33 Are there any other park based projects that you would like to highlight? Any unusual or challenging objects?

Al Levitan: 00:59:42 Well, yeah. It's funny, when I went back to Sitka and probably the last few visits to Sitka, I found that, "Oh, geez, I've got more history with the park than virtually anybody there." Probably a lot of the staff weren't even born in 1991. It's odd when you go back and you realize, "Oh, geez, really got a long history with this park." And I guess I had

similar relationships at Cumberland Island. I had started going there in the late '80s, early '90s and developed a connection with both the park employees and the park itself. And Death Valley. I had number of return trips to working on artifacts there.

Al Levitan: 01:00:29 I would say that both because of the fact that I like getting out to the parks and also because I felt that there were a lot of things in park collections, like totem poles, that aren't traditional museum collections and aren't considered architecture either that fall into this netherworld that really hadn't been addressed very much. Things like wagons, carriages, and mining equipment at the Park Service just has tons of, and oftentimes because it doesn't fit into either category, it tends to get ignored. I found a niche in dealing with those kinds of things that allowed me to get out to the park. I think actually do some good for things that had been more or less ignored for a good deal of their existence.

Nancy Russell: 01:01:28 How much traveling were you doing when you were working for the Park Service? I know you said in the earlier years you weren't traveling as much, but then you said later you were traveling a lot more.

Al Levitan: 01:01:38 Yeah. Between getting out to the parks to work on immovable things and doing collection surveys at the parks and doing collection management plans and then doing some of the disaster response work, I ended up traveling quite a bit for, I would say a number of years.

Marissa Lindsey: 01:02:06 Can you speak to your experience working with the emergency response for park collections after disasters?

Al Levitan: 01:02:13 Sure. There seemed to be a period of time, maybe it was in the early 2000s where there were just a number of hurricanes and fires and one thing or another. And we, in conservation would get called out periodically for things, if a water pipe leaked or occasionally for storms. And then, I guess, in the early 2000s when we had a number of these events, started getting called out more and more. And Allen Bohnert was the regional curator in the Southeast Region at the time. And Allen would oftentimes just call and say, "Hey, can you go down to such and such a place?" And I did that on a number of occasions. And I remember one time in particular, I can't remember the name of the hurricane, but Theresa [Voellinger] and I went down to Cape Lookout, Harkers Island at the request of Allen and

we weren't really sure what we were going to be doing or who are going to be meeting, what the whole thing was about.

Al Levitan: 01:03:25 And I remember we pulled into the parking lot at the park and we just happened to run into these two guys in uniform and started chatting with them. And it turns out that they were the incident commanders and it's the first time that I had even heard the term incident command at that time, the whole incident command system was getting taken up by the Park System. We started chatting with these guys and they were really nice and open to the concept of, not only saving life and limb but saving cultural resources as well. And the superintendent at the time was also receptive to that. And once again, it's a name that escapes me at the moment, but he's now, I think, the regional curator possibly in the Southeast. He was the regional director in National Capital Region. Bob [Vogel]

Nancy Russell: 01:04:25 Bob Sonderman.

Al Levitan: 01:04:28 No, not Sonderman.

Nancy Russell: 01:04:30 Mary's in Southeast.

Al Levitan: 01:04:31 Right. But no, the director.

Nancy Russell: 01:04:34 Director, yeah.

Al Levitan: 01:04:37 Anyway, Theresa and I remember we had a lot of hours in the car, chatting and we were thinking, "We probably should institutionalize this somehow or other." And at about the same time, Pam West and Bob Sonderman were getting involved in that kind of thing as well. I can't remember exactly how it came up but we contacted Pam, Pam contacted us, and we worked together with Pam and Bob and Pam was able to get some funding together from the National Capital Region and then MERT more or less came out of that and included both curators and conservators.

Nancy Russell: 01:05:23 Was this post Hurricane Isabel at Jamestown?

Al Levitan: 01:05:28 I think it might have been Isabel. I think that maybe Pam and her folks were involved in Isabel and Theresa and I were down at Harkers. It might've been Isabel as well. And then apart from MERT, at one point after Katrina, I got asked to be detailed to FEMA. Went down to Baton Rouge.

And once again, this was part of this whole incident management system. And I was just astounded by the size and scope of the response. And then also we spent a couple of days just getting oriented to the whole FEMA bureaucracy, which makes the Park Service bureaucracy looked small amazingly enough. They gave us a booklet that was like this thick, by this big, and it was the abbreviated acronym dictionary for FEMA.

Nancy Russell: 01:06:50 A two inch thick book is the abbreviated average?

Al Levitan: 01:06:50 Exactly. There were four or five of us, some in the Park Service who were trying mightily to just get out of that office space staring at computers. We managed to get out and we got a car somehow and went around to various sites in New Orleans and then, I can't remember exactly how the contact was made, but there's a museum, a parish museum in Plaquemines Parish south of New Orleans that in what's called Fort Jackson, one of the brick star forts along the Mississippi River. And they had a collection down there that had been in one of the casemates that was inundated for weeks. We arranged finally, it was a bit of a hassle to actually get the team together and we were able to really do something and evacuate that collection and get it up into decent storage. That was a satisfying event. We were able to bypass the bureaucracy and actually get on the ground and do something.

Nancy Russell: 01:07:59 You mentioned the acronym MERT in passing, can you, it's for the record, say what that is.

Al Levitan: 01:08:06 The Museum Emergency Response Team. We were trying to more or less formalize our response and then also integrate the response to the incident command system that the Park Service was adopting at that time. I think that probably for law enforcement folks, it was old news, but for cultural resource folks it was all new. As part of the MERT training, we all took some introductory incident management command system training.

Nancy Russell: 01:08:46 How did the MERT select and train the folks that were participating and do you have any idea of how many people were on call under the MERT? I know you guys had go bags and stuff like that.

Al Levitan: 01:08:58 Yeah. Let's see. In conservation, it was Theresa and myself and Sylvia [Frye] and I think one or two others in

conservation that expressed an interest to be part of it and to do the rudimentary training. And then in the National Capital Region, Pam and Bob spearheaded it and it included a number of employees at MARS and then some regional curators. And I think at that time Mary got involved. She was a curator, I guess at Clara Barton at the time.

Nancy Russell: 01:09:46 Mary Troy?

Al Levitan: 01:09:47 Mary Troy, right. It was various curators around the National Capital Region. And then I guess also we should mention that there were a number of responses at Harpers Ferry because of floods and that was in, two of them, at least, were in 1996, where the river rose really quickly and threatened all the exhibits along Shenandoah Street and Potomac Street.

Al Levitan: 01:10:24 One of the floods was in January and it was preceded by a really large snow storm. We had three feet of snow on the ground. I had an old tractor that I was trying to clear my road with at my house and it threw a chain that got wrapped around the axle and I thought, "Okay, I just can't deal with this. I'm just going to wait until the snow melts to deal with it. Otherwise I'd be digging the axle out." The next day or two came to work and it started to rain, and Greg and I were doing some work at Harpers Ferry at the time. And I remember seeing Nancy Hatcher and saying, "Hey man, it looks like the river is coming up pretty fast and if you need any help, let me know and we can help evacuate this stuff." And she said, "Well, we were just in touch with the weather service and they said it's not going to be an issue." I said, "Okay, well, if you need help, let me know."

Al Levitan: 01:11:28 About two o'clock, that night I get a call from dispatch somewhere saying, "Al, we need you down at Harpers Ferry." I said, "Okay, I'll be there in the morning." They said, "No, no, we need you now." I guess my truck was up on top of the hill by the house and I came down. I live next to the Potomac and there's bottomland and then this hillside where the house is. I'm coming down in the truck and I see the lights glinting off the surface of something.

Al Levitan: 01:12:02 What is that?

Al Levitan: 01:12:03 And I realized it was water that was up over the bottom land and approaching the location of my tractor, stop the

truck and got the tractor and was able to move it up onto the hillside and then drove out and got to Harpers Ferry probably three o'clock in the morning and work through the night and we were able to move everything, get it out of danger. And then by the time I got home, the water was way up over the road leading to my house. I had to walk through the woods to get to my house. But having gotten that phone call at two o'clock in the morning saved my truck because it would've been totally inundated. That's my emergency response story.

Nancy Russell: 01:12:59 Did you do emergency response at American Samoa?

Al Levitan: 01:13:04 No. Didn't Theresa tell you about this? This was one of the sweetest jobs we've ever had because the work was done, well, I know Steve, who's now at NCTC.

Nancy Russell: 01:13:16 Floray?

Al Levitan: 01:13:16 Steve Floray was there at American Samoa. They basically flew out, packed this stuff up in these hideous tourist towels and blankets and whatnot, and shipped them to Pearl Harbor. And then Theresa and I got called out to go to Pearl Harbor to work on this stuff. We were able to do emergency response but stayed at the Hawaiian Hilton. Theresa hasn't owned up to that, huh?

Nancy Russell: 01:13:51 Well, we've haven't done her interview yet. We'll probably make a note of that for her future interview. What was the incident that happened in American Samoa that you were recovering from?

Al Levitan: 01:14:01 I think it was a tsunami that inundated the collection area and I don't know how many people were ultimately sent out to deal with the initial packing up of the stuff, but yeah, I think that we were in Hawaii for maybe two weeks working on that collection. We were able to preserve most of it. And then it got shipped back to Samoa. But yeah, everybody was very appreciative of the work that we did in this response, but we were living the life.

Nancy Russell: 01:14:44 It wasn't MREs in a parish in New Orleans.

Al Levitan: 01:14:44 No. There was nary a mosquito in sight.

Marissa Lindsey: 01:14:57 Were there any other challenges of working on emergency response either personal or professional?

Al Levitan: 01:15:05 Well, there were always challenges. I probably have a tendency to take more chances than I should have. And I think on some of the emergency response, I went into areas that I probably shouldn't have. I think I probably compromised my respiratory system there for a few years. But I probably should have been smarter about it. I was younger at the time. But no, I think for myself and for a lot of other people that were involved, it was really a satisfying thing. And you get out there and you're working with the team and you really feel part of the National Park Service and you feel like you're really doing something.

Al Levitan: 01:15:55 I remember one response that I don't, again, I don't remember the name of the hurricane, but I went down to Gulf Islands. And once again, this was a situation where hurricane hit. And the collection, which was a huge collection, had been stored out on the barrier island in, I think it was like a World War I or World War II casemate. And there was a seawall in front of the casemate and curators over the years had said, "Well, this probably isn't the best place to store this stuff." And the superintendents always said, "We never had problems before." Well, sure enough, this time they had a problem. The waves came over and totally inundated the collection.

Al Levitan: 01:16:40 MERT got called out and I was on some of the later team to get there. And I remember arriving on the barrier island and Sylvia Frye and [Katherine Dewy]. She was a historical or an architectural conservator in the region and I think she's now doing something else. Anyway, she was also part of the MERT team.

Al Levitan: 01:17:26 They came to pick me up and they look really bedraggled and I just remember Sylvia opening the door and saying, "Welcome to hell." Those folks had been there three or four days and apparently it was really buggy and really snaky and pretty nasty. Once again, I was fairly lucky in that by that time they'd moved us to what was an office space, so we just pretty much laid down bed rolls in the office space.

Al Levitan: 01:18:03 I spent one night there. I remember I was bunking with Allen Bohnert and Bob Sonderman in this weird office arrangement. And then the next day, Weather Service reported that a low-pressure system was moving in, that they were afraid was going to become a tropical storm. They wanted to get everybody off of the barrier island because there were absolutely no services there. Most of

the team were evacuated by helicopter and they didn't have enough space in the helicopter. I ended up taking a really bumpy ride back to the mainland on this wee little boat, but then Bob and I spent two or three days at a condo in Destin, Florida before we got back to the barrier island.

Al Levitan: 01:18:55 But I remember once we got back there, we really were working hard and obviously responsible for collecting the objects, packing them, putting them on pallets, and then arranging to get a forklift out there that would take the stuff to the seawall. And then another tracked piece of equipment that would take it from the seawall. The park had one of those World War II style landing craft where it can land on the beach and then the front would flop down. I organized that whole arrangement and getting the stuff onto the boat, and then I rode with the boat back to this Naval base that was on the mainland and offloading and it eventually it got taken to temporary storage in mainland and just feeling like, "Wow, this is really satisfying to be part of that and to manage that." It took out of the confines that you're used to. You really felt part of a bigger picture. I think a lot of folks that were in MERT at the time felt that way.

Marissa Lindsey: 01:20:13 Why did MERT disband?

Al Levitan: 01:20:15 I think it was lack of funding and maybe lack of storms, but Pam West had great interpersonal skills and she was able to convince higher ups of the need to fund something like this. And I think when Pam left, that ability left with her and there weren't any embarrassing storms for the last few years. And that's the way the Park Service oftentimes operates. Unless there's a real cause of embarrassment, then we're not going to fund anything to prevent that embarrassment. I think that's probably it, but I didn't really know the details.

Marissa Lindsey: 01:20:58 When did you retire from HFC?

Al Levitan: 01:21:04 I retired in 2013 which, in ways seems like a long time ago and in a way seems like not that long ago.

Marissa Lindsey: 01:21:16 Were their reasons for the retirement or was it just time to go?

Al Levitan: 01:21:22 I think it was time and I guess when you've been doing something for a long time and it seemed like the paperwork

burden was getting more onerous. And I think at the time too, there was a strict travel ceiling at the time. You felt, I was oftentimes in a position where I'd work with the park for a long period of time. They had gotten the money together, they wanted me to come out, do the work, and then all of a sudden became a traveling ceiling issue where the funding was there, the desire was there, the need was certainly there, couldn't do it because of this travel ceiling. I think that played into it to a certain extent, but also, they just felt like it was time--somebody else could deal with the paperwork.

Marissa Lindsey: 01:22:17 What was the state of museum conservation in the National Park Service when you retired?

Al Levitan: 01:22:26 Well, it had stabilized at that point. Linda was there for probably four years or so, and then it was very much of a stabilizing influence.

Nancy Russell: 01:22:38 Linda Blaser?

Al Levitan: 01:22:38 Linda Blaser, yes. But still, the numbers were down significantly from where they had been in earlier years during my career. And it seemed like our division was also less of an integral part of the Park Service museum community at that point than it had been earlier on. But things under Linda were, as I said, stable and the morale was fairly reasonable and we hadn't been reorganized for a couple of years, so people were feeling pretty good about that.

Marissa Lindsey: 01:23:23 That's good.

Nancy Russell: 01:23:25 Was there much interaction between HFCs Conservation Lab and say WACC or the Northeast Region?

Al Levitan: 01:23:36 Not as much as there should have been. I tried to promote getting everybody in the Park Service that considered themselves conservators, whether they'd be exhibits specialists or architectural conservators in the Northeast and working with Brigid in the Northeast.

Nancy Russell: 01:24:00 Brigid Sullivan?

Al Levitan: 01:24:00 Brigid Sullivan, right. And that never came to pass, unfortunately. I think it would have been good if it had. And there are a number of folks out there in parks, whether they'd be called exhibit specialists or museum technicians

who do preservation work. And I thought it would have been valuable to bring us all together at some point. We maintained informal contact, but there was very little formal contact amongst the groups.

Marissa Lindsey: 01:24:37 After you retired, you started working as a private contractor with museum collections, are there any projects that you--

Al Levitan: 01:24:48 Well, of course working with Nancy in Everglades.

Nancy Russell: 01:24:52 What can be better than a canoe in Big Cypress?

Al Levitan: 01:24:57 Yeah, that's right. The first couple of years I stayed really busy, probably busier than I had anticipated or even wanted to be. But at that time, you're probably aware of it more than I, there was an IDIQ contractor in the Southeast Region that was able to hire specialists in various areas to do work for the parks. It was very relatively easy way to get the work done without having to go through the whole procurement and contracting process. I got involved with that group, which was called Wiley Wilson, and did a number of fairly large projects with them, including Cumberland Island. I did a lot of preservation, conservation work on the collection at Plum Orchard and another really big project at Tuskegee, where they had a leak in their storeroom. That involved reorganizing the storeroom and stabilizing all the artifacts that were in there. That went on for probably a year and a half or so, off and on. I make trips down there. And then I've been up to Sitka a couple of times as a contractor both to do work and then to do some writing.

Marissa Lindsey: 01:26:34 Has your view of the NPS stayed the same or is it different as a contractor versus an employee?

Al Levitan: 01:26:40 I don't think when I'm at the park, I don't think I necessarily view myself as a contractor. I feel--

Nancy Russell: 01:26:51 You still use "we".

Al Levitan: 01:26:51 Yeah, I do use we and then I've gotta stop that. Yeah, I don't really view myself much differently when I go to a park as a contractor than I did as a Park Service employee. As far as the overall picture, seeing what's going on in the Park Service in general, it's sad, particularly to see the staffing levels. I've been doing a number of collection management plans both as a park employee and more

recently as a contractor and almost every park you go to, you look at the staffing levels, particularly in cultural resources and maintenance and they're just a fraction of what they were originally. And we still have the same policies in place, the same rules and regulations and oftentimes there's just no way that one museum tech, museum aide, curator can handle all the responsibilities that they have with the staffing that they have.

Nancy Russell: 01:28:06 Much less the collateral duty person--

Al Levitan: 01:28:08 Right, exactly. Yeah. It's really sad and I really have a difficult time oftentimes doing these collection management plans where you're saying, "Well, you're lacking here. You're lacking there, you're lacking here." And you know that there's no way in God's green earth that they can actually do it all as one individual. And the same is true in all these maintenance departments. Oftentimes they're a third of what they were at one point.

Al Levitan: 01:28:37 When I started with the Park Service in 1978, there were 160 some odd park units and somewhere north of 20,000 permanent employees. Now there are what, 400 and some odd park units and somewhere north of 20,000 permanent employees. You do the math. And it's not just money, even if they were to flood the Park Service with money, there aren't people at the parks to write the contracts or to oversee the contracts. And the parks just don't have the expertise now. I think it's going to be a long haul.

Al Levitan: 01:29:16 Even if the parks were to come upon all kinds of money in the near future, you need to staff up and particularly staff up the expertise. That's my overall impression.

Marissa Lindsey: 01:29:33 We've touched on a lot, but is there anything else that you'd like to share that we haven't talked or touched on?

Al Levitan: 01:29:44 Well, of course, working day-to-day there are issues and frustrations, but for the most part, particularly once you get a little bit of distance, you realize, "It's been a pretty good gig." Yeah, I think, both the people that I've been working or have worked with and the park--being able to visit the parks and work on the artifacts that I've worked on. And also having a level of independence that I don't think a whole lot of federal employees have. Been a pretty good gig.

Marissa Lindsey:	01:30:25	That's good.
Nancy Russell:	01:30:25	Not a career you imagined.
Al Levitan:	01:30:27	No, I was able to stumble in and feel lucky for having done so. Yeah, it's quite nice to be in a situation where you can live in one place, have your kids go to school in one place, and make a home and at the same time be part of the bigger Park Service picture.
Marissa Lindsey:	01:30:49	Alrighty. Well--
Al Levitan:	01:30:50	Any other questions?
Marissa Lindsey:	01:30:51	No.
Marissa Lindsey:	01:30:51	I think that's it. Thank you for your time.
Al Levitan:	01:30:53	Okay.
Marissa Lindsey:	01:30:53	Thank you for taking your time.

END OF RECORDING