

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817)
Harpers Ferry Center's 40th Anniversary Oral History Project



Elizabeth (Betsy) Ehrlich
June 16, 2010

Interview conducted by Michele Hartley

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Interview with: Elizabeth (Betsy) Ehrlich

Interview by: Michele Hartley, NPS Employee

Interview Date: June 16, 2010

Release form available: Yes

Transcript reviewed by interviewee: Yes

Transcript reviewed against original audio by NPS History Collection staff: Yes

Transcript time stamped: Yes

M. Hartley:	00:00	Yeah.
Audio Tech:	00:03	Okay, we're rolling.
B. Ehrlich:	00:03	So ...
M. Hartley:	00:04	Okay, so, I'm here with Betsy. And I just wanna confirm that you're okay with us recording the interview.
B. Ehrlich:	00:10	Yes.
M. Hartley:	00:11	Thank you.
M. Hartley:	00:13	So, if you wouldn't mind, Betsy, could you tell us your name and your title position at the center?
B. Ehrlich:	00:21	Okay. My name is Betsy Ehrlich, and my official government title is, visual information specialist, which I've been for 23 years. Although, my specialty has changed a number of times, the formal title hasn't.
M. Hartley:	00:36	That's right, you have gone from different media types, which is probably great to talk about. But before we do that, could you just tell me, when ... So I don't have to do the math, what was your start date?
B. Ehrlich:	00:49	I started in December, 1986. December 7th, 1986.
M. Hartley:	00:55	Wow, okay. And where did you start?

- B. Ehrlich: 00:57 I was in publications to begin with Nick Kirilloff and Vince Gleason interviewed me and hired me after ... I guess I had met them back in the fall and they had invited me to come to a presentation on publications, A Sense Of Place In Publications, I think was the seminar title, over at Mather. And I attended that before I was even an employee. And I was really impressed with the people, and the topics, and the intellectual exercise of thinking about publications and what they all meant. And that's why I applied for the job, and I was here in December.
- M. Hartley: 01:37 And how long were you in publications for?
- B. Ehrlich: 01:40 About five years. Yeah, I left in 1991, roughly. I moved down into exhibits. And I say down because publications is on the second floor, and exhibits is in the basement or the lower floor, however we talk about it. But yeah, moved down to exhibits and stayed there about five years before moving up to waysides, and have been there ever since.
- M. Hartley: 02:02 So, what do you, in all these capacities, what was your professional background, or your specialty?
- B. Ehrlich: 02:08 Yeah, I came in as a graphic designer. I started in graphic design in college, and was focused more on editorial design. So, although I did some exhibit work when I was in college, I focused a little bit more on the editorial part, and so publications were a more natural fit with what was in my portfolio. And I was talking to Nick Kirilloff today about his recent recollection of my portfolio, there were actually things in it that he remembers, one of which had black bands in it. So, I think that was why they probably hired me, because I was doing black bands.
- M. Hartley: 02:45 You had a natural affinity towards the unigrid.
- B. Ehrlich: 02:47 Apparently so. I didn't know it at the time.
- M. Hartley: 02:51 Well, what it would make, you know, we have an interesting collection, I talked to Mary Herber, she was in advertising, Bernie Sanders was a network affiliate who came here to work in the AV department. Why would you wanna come to the Park Service, I mean?
- B. Ehrlich: 03:11 I didn't at first. When I first heard about this office ... Actually, I heard about Nick Kirilloff first from a friend of

his, he was a designer in Baltimore, and had just started a new studio, and he was interested in some of my work but was very small and only just growing then. So, he said, "You should go talk to my friend Nick, over in the Park Service." And I said, "Isn't that federal government?" And he said, "Yeah."

- B. Ehrlich: 03:35 So, I put it at the very bottom of my list and thought ...
- Audio Tech: 03:39 I'm hearing a squeal noise from somewhere.
- B. Ehrlich: 03:42 Oh, you know what, that's the curtain. Somebody was opening or closing their ...
- M. Hartley: 03:46 Their curtains? Oh.
- B. Ehrlich: 03:47 Yeah, I recognized that noise.
- M. Hartley: 03:49 Oh, okay. Oh, it might've been right over here. That's okay.
- B. Ehrlich: 03:55 Maybe you guys could go over there. Can you guys go over there?
- M. Hartley: 04:00 No, that's okay. We're working around it all, so.
- Audio Tech: 04:03 If we maybe start with that question again.
- M. Hartley: 04:08 Yeah. If you wouldn't mind just, why on earth would you wanna come to ...
- B. Ehrlich: 04:13 Wanna work for the Park Service?
- M. Hartley: 04:16 Yeah. It seems like there are just sexier things to do.
- B. Ehrlich: 04:18 Yeah. Well, and thinking about working for the federal government was not high on my list, in fact, I did put it on the bottom of my list. It seemed, just thinking, federal government didn't inspire me. But then I was close enough in the area to drive over to West Virginia, I was living in Southern Pennsylvania at the time, working in Baltimore, and thought it would be nice to come for a day in the country and meet some of these people that I had heard about.
- B. Ehrlich: 04:44 And I sat down and I talked to Nick Kirilloff, and he showed me some of the more recent unigrid publications,

and of course, publications at that time had just won the presidential design award. Well, that was a real eye opener at that time, hey, there's something going on here. Midway through our conversation, the door burst open, and Vince Gleason sort of burst in the way Vince does, and talked to me in, just glowing terms, about this incredible program. And he was so excited, and so enthusiastic that it was just catching. And all I could think about was this incredible program that I didn't know anything about, but suddenly was fortunate enough to have tripped over, and thought it was the greatest thing I had seen yet in my short career outside of college.

- B. Ehrlich: 05:34 So, it didn't take me long to decide that this was a great place to work, and there were just some really dynamic people who ... Earlier in your career, you wanna find people who you can see yourself becoming, and know that this is a place where you can grow. And I definitely saw that when I first came here.
- M. Hartley: 05:56 So then you moved from designing publications to ...
- B. Ehrlich: 06:00 Exhibits. And I started working in exhibits with very little experience in anything sort of 3D. But being a creative center, there was always room for learning new things. And so, I took drafting classes, and I learned about exhibit lighting. And that, moving from publications into exhibits, as a designer, it was more of a technical leap. I mean, I was still doing design work, but I didn't know a lot about the technical aspect of things like lighting.
- B. Ehrlich: 06:33 So, I went to Mary Herber and said, "I need a class in lighting." And she said, "Well, there really aren't any great classes, but you could put together a seminar, and we could all learn more about exhibit lighting." So, I found myself working with Toby Rafael, and Larry Bowers, and putting together ... Actually, it was presented three times this lighting class, and I think there are still notebooks downstairs somewhere on exhibit lighting.
- B. Ehrlich: 07:01 So, what you didn't know, you had the opportunity to learn about, and develop, and help other people through. And I just thought that was also a ... You know, how could you not love a place like that, where you're always able to grow, and learn, and help share knowledge with other people.

- M. Hartley: 07:20 Okay. So, then ...
- B. Ehrlich: 07:22 Then I moved to waysides. Well, Nick Kirilloff had moved around a little bit too, and he had been in wayside exhibits, and he took a job down at National Geographic. And before he left, he came down to my office in exhibits and said, "You really should apply for my position in waysides. We need to develop map standards, and it's something I really wanted to do, but I'm moving on to National Geographic, so please apply for this job and take a look at the maps. We need to develop map standards."
- B. Ehrlich: 07:54 So I did. And applied for the job, and found myself, at that point of my life, with a brand new baby, and a brand new job in waysides. And so, I worked only part-time for the first few years, and it took me a little while to kind of really get rolling. But it was a time of big transition. So, the first five years or so, really just focused on waysides, then the center started changing. So, instead of me having to change jobs after that, then the center changed around me, and I got more opportunities to do other things without having to change my position.
- B. Ehrlich: 08:31 And so, that's why I'm sort of not very clear about what my title is now. It's not media specific any longer, it's not even necessarily graphic design focused, it's just design in general. And so, visual information specialist does sort of seem to capture all the various things that have been folded in over the years.
- M. Hartley: 08:53 Well, I was talking to Marc Sagan, and he's very modest about his interpretive planning book. And you probably will be modest too, but I think it's a legacy that you're leaving even while you're still here, which is your recent guidelines. Could you talk about those?
- B. Ehrlich: 09:15 Yeah. The Wayside Guide is something I'm really proud of because I think it's exemplary of what the center is, which is a collection of people. And the Wayside Guide is not something I could've ever written or done by myself. I just felt like there was so much knowledge, and so much great information in each of the individuals that I worked with, that so many people wanted and needed to know, that to have the opportunity to pull it all together in some format, and presentation that made it manageable and easy to work through, was just a huge opportunity, and I can't ...

- B. Ehrlich: 09:56 Imagine another organization enabling that kind of thing. Because we have all that diverse talent, there's a lot of people that were involved in that project. And so it is something I'm really proud of because it was ... It's the best of the Center, that we have all this varied talent. I don't have to struggle through something I don't know, I can just walk to the office next to me and say, "Hey, Bruce" or, "Hey, Chad. What are you ... Can you help me with this?" And there's always somebody here who knows the answer, or can get me the answer. And the Wayside Guide is really just that kind of attitude all rolled into one publication.
- M. Hartley: 10:35 And maybe it's because I'm here at the Center, but it seems that ... Could you ... It seems like the wayside ... Waysides is something ... I mean, you do see waysides, quote unquote, throughout the, at other outdoor state parks, or. But could you talk a little bit about the history of a wayside, and you know. It seems like we've kind of ... Well, if you could just talk about the history.
- B. Ehrlich: 10:59 Yeah. I think, having worked in the different media, I was always sort of one among many. You could go to publications conferences and there are lots of people who publish lots of printed matter out there. Lots of printers out in the world. Same thing with exhibits, all kinds of a museum, and trade show, and there was always a big community of people who did those kinds of media, same thing with film.
- B. Ehrlich: 11:23 Waysides has felt very small. It's a small world. There are organizations, very small generally, offices in states around the country that do things like historic markers, those metal signs that simply post words on generally a single post, in metal, painted, usually, in the state colors, stuck along roadsides, which were originally designed so that when you're driving 40 to 50 miles an hour in our old original vehicles, you could slow down, pull over, read them, and move on. They were never really intended for the pedestrian.
- B. Ehrlich: 12:03 My history on when we really leaped into a whole new genre of full color, image-based waysides, goes back to a time when I wasn't in waysides, but I think of Phil Myerly and Ray Price working with local contractors, particularly GS Images, and General Graphics, to develop the screen printing technology. And the reason they are here is

because those two men worked with those companies to develop a full-color presentation in a large format that could be embedded in fiberglass and posted outdoors.

- B. Ehrlich: 12:37 So, that legacy seems to have originated here. Now those contractors worked for, have worked for, still work for the Forest Service, state, local, people all over are making these things. But the root of it all, in fact, a lot of their bases look just like ours because that's what people ask for is the National Park Service standard bases, which Larry Matson designed.
- B. Ehrlich: 13:03 So, it seems as if that big visual presentation, that's outdoors, that helps people understand what they're looking at, not by standing and reading, as you were expected to do with a historic marker, but by seeing something, and seeing relationships between the landscape and images, really did emanate out of this place, has evolved over time, and we've tried to share that approach in our thinking, although it seems hard to get those ideas out sometimes. And that's another reason why the Wayside Guide was an effort that I really wanted to see happen because I think what we see in a lot of other places are more book presentations on sticks. And we're not at all about having people have to learn their history lessons while standing in the hot sun.
- B. Ehrlich: 13:58 So, there's a mentality here that I don't see other places, unless it has sort of emanated out of the center first. So, that's exciting, to be part of something that really is carving a new path, and that we're still really thinking about the whole outdoor experience, and what that's like, and how to build it through new technology, and how new technology is gonna enhance waysides, and how waysides will still have their place because you just ... Even with an iPad, it's only so big, and you can only see it so well in the bright sun, or even in bad weather like rain, you just don't wanna have it out. I don't think those are gonna replace our traditional waysides.
- B. Ehrlich: 14:46 I mean, I may be all wrong in five years, but I think we're all along for the ride and anxious to still help people have good outdoor experiences, that's where the real stuff is, is out there on the trails, in the parks.

- M. Hartley: 15:02 So I know you've been here for some time, so pinpointing one park, or one project might be a challenge, but is there a favorite park or project that you have, that you often recall?
- B. Ehrlich: 15:14 Wow. You know, I would say, a fairly recent, really fun project that stands out in my mind was working with the Kenai Fjords staff just a few years ago. And it stands out because, although we had been moving more toward a lot of contracting at that point, this was a very short turnaround project of only about 14 waysides, with a park staff that was very well prepared, full of energy, and just really ready to go. And we were able to talk them through some of the prep work that they needed to do before the team arrived in June. And it was that Alaska endless day, where the sun never sets.
- B. Ehrlich: 16:00 So, that was memorable in and of itself. So we had really long work days. And we could really quickly ... There were three of us, Michael Lacome, David Guiney, and myself, went to work with Amy Ireland at the park. And there was some exhibit work involved as well, we trying to coordinate waysides and nature center exhibits.
- B. Ehrlich: 16:20 But it stands out in my mind because we were able to work with the park, on site, sort of live. We didn't take our ideas back and develop the work after we got back to the office, we set up a large screen, their teleconference set up was there, and I hooked my computer up to it. And so I could design, they gave me images, I plugged them in. We had layouts before we left, and the waysides were finished and installed by the end of the summer, and evaluated, formal visitor evaluation by the end of the summer. So it was three months, beginning to end, site visit to installation and evaluation.
- B. Ehrlich: 16:57 So, that really stands out as a success, And what we found from the evaluations was that they were successful, and that our ideas about what we were trying to get across did get across. We only had a few minor adjustments that were then made over the next year for a remake. And so what you see in the ground is kind of what we came up with in that one week of just having the right people, the right planning ahead of time. Just get the right people around the table and give them the time to do the work, and it's amazing what can be done.

B. Ehrlich:	17:33	So, I think that's my highlight. Plus it's Kenai Fjords, which is just such a spectacular place. It's hard to not like Alaska.
M. Hartley:	17:43	Yeah. Yeah. Well, thank you Betsy.
B. Ehrlich:	17:47	Thank you.
B. Ehrlich:	17:53	And catch Bruce if you can.

END OF TAPE