

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817)
Association of National Park Rangers Oral History Project, 2012-2016



Rob Arnberger
October 28, 2016

Interview conducted by Lu Ann Jones
Transcribed by Teresa Bergen
Digitized by Casey Oehler

This digital transcript contains updated pagination, formatting, and editing for accessibility and compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Interview content has not been altered.
The original typed transcript is preserved in the NPS History Collection.

The release form for this interview is on file at the NPS History Collection.

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

ANPR Oral History Project

Robert Arnberger

28 October 2016

Interview conducted by
Lu Ann Jones

Transcribed by
Teresa Bergen

The narrator has reviewed and corrected this transcript.

Audiofile: ARNBERGER Robert 28 Oct 2016

[START OF TAPE 1]

Lu Ann Jones: We could go forever, but we'll try to keep it brief.

Rob Arnberger: You probably can't go forever. (laughter)

Lu Ann Jones: Well, I do usually start out with when you were born, where you were born, and something about your background. And particularly since you're park service, that's particularly important.

Rob Arnberger: I was born June 17, 1947. I was born in the clinic at Grand Canyon National Park, and that clinic was a little two-room clinic. Not really a hospital at that time. And it's now being used by the Grand Canyon Association for their offices. So, my dad was out fighting a small wildfire, brush fire, on Rowell Well Road when I was born. It was a very intentional decision on my mother's part to have her child at Grand Canyon. He was a seasonal at that time. He'd come back from the war and managed to get on with the Park Service. And she very intentionally came up from Flagstaff. She was going to school at Arizona State College at that time, but now it's NAU [Northern Arizona University], with the intention of dropping her firstborn on the rim of the canyon. And my dad's career went on. And I grew up within the Park Service family.

Rob Arnberger: A lot of people wonder what parks I grew up in and so forth. My dad's career was a little bit more, I don't know, non-park-focused. I grew up in Casa Grande Ruins, was actually the first place where he got his permanent status at Casa Grande Ruins. Then he went into some kind of staff positions as a naturalist. At Globe, Arizona, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and then we left Santa Fe and went back to Roanoke, where he was the first naturalist at the Blue Ridge Parkway. But it was rather nonconventional. We weren't living in the park where, you know, there are potlucks and all that kind of stuff. Then we came back to Santa Fe and then he was an assistant regional director for park planning, and was involved with bringing in Canyon Lands, Guadalupe Mountains, LBJ, Padre Island, a lot of those parks into the system.

Rob Arnberger: Then he went off to a special training that he got selected for from the Department of the Interior in Princeton, New Jersey. Yanked me out of high school in my senior year in high school and the family, and we went back to Princeton. After that was over, he then started, you might say, his inside-the-park type of career. And I went off to college. So, I kind of got separated from that. He went to Point Reyes as superintendent, then he did Cape Cod. He was deputy associate director for operations up in Washington. He was a superintendent at Yosemite. And came down with Parkinson's disease somewhere along the route. And finished his career his last year in Santa Fe.

Rob Arnberger: So, I went off to the University of New Mexico. I majored in history, minored in biology. Got a teaching certificate and thought I was going to be the world's

greatest teacher. And started doing a little bit of teaching in secondary school and quickly realized that I wasn't suited for that. The day in, day out grind of the same old, same old was just— [high-pitched tone of Lu Ann Jones's computer turning off]

Lu Ann Jones: It's just the computer turning off. (laughs)

Rob Arnberger: It didn't sit well with me. And my dad asked me, well, I asked my dad, of course I felt very self-conscious because he'd helped pay my way through college, of course. I had to tell him that after going through all of this education, I didn't want to be a teacher after all. He says, "Well, have you ever thought about being a seasonal ranger?" Well, even though I'd grown up in the Park Service, I never really had considered that. I had worked seasonally when I was going through college for the forest service on the timber inventory crew. But I'd never considered that. So, I was hard up enough. I was married at that time and had a child on the way. I took a seasonal job down at Gila Cliff Dwellings, which is where I choose to say that's where I began my career. A lot of people don't include their seasonal time as the beginning of their career. I do. And the reason why I do – and it sounds a little bit hokey, but it is what it is – because I went down there and I was living on a 43-foot long trailer in the middle of the Gila Wilderness at the Gila Cliff Dwellings, which is the end of nowhere. And I got up early in the morning to go to my first day on the job. I'd never worn the uniform before. And I put it on. Was having a cup of coffee. I stood in front of the mirror to make sure all the belts and buckles were right. I had this incredible calmness come over me. I get emotional now thinking about it, to be honest with you. But it was a calmness. And I basically said phew, I finally figured out what I want to do.

Rob Arnberger: Then I remember standing there before my first day of work, and I remember telling myself, I am going to do whatever I need to do in order to make my way in this career. I was a seasonal for a little over a year there. And then I was able to get on a permanent status at Tumacacori National Monument because I could speak a lot of Spanish. That's how the story began.

Lu Ann Jones: Why do you think you hadn't thought about the Parks Service even though—

Rob Arnberger: I think there was, I knew all about the Park Service, of course. It was, and one of the great things I knew, I mean, even in the regional office, where my dad was working, there was a sense of family. You know, we would get together and place luminaries on the regional office, you know, for different festivities. The families were always getting together. So, there was a sense of family. So, I knew enough about Park Service. But I suppose a little bit like the preacher's son never considers becoming a preacher.

Lu Ann Jones: Right.

Rob Arnberger: And then, you know, there's some kind of illumination happens along the way and then that's where you find yourself. So, I never had a course or a path in my

mind to follow in the footsteps. And why I didn't, you know, there were no hard feelings or anything. I loved the Park Service. I loved the sense of family. But I guess I just, you know, my dad made his way, and I was supposed to make my way, you know? And making my way didn't necessarily include walking in his footsteps.

Rob Arnberger: Even in my early years of my career, until I became confident enough in myself, I guess you might say, in my own professionalism, I would have people come up and say, "Oh, you're Les Arnberger's son?"

Rob Arnberger: And I would look at them and say, "No. No. He's my father."

Rob Arnberger: And they said, "That's what I said."

Rob Arnberger: And I'd say, "No, that's not what you said." Very few people picked up the subtlety there. And perhaps it was overly subtle, but it was very clear in my mind, you know? My dad was, you know, quite a figure in his own right in his career. And I was going to be a figure in my own right. In fact, in the early years of my career, I deliberately took some course deviations to make sure I was distinguished from his career. So.

Lu Ann Jones: So, go ahead.

Rob Arnberger: So, I suppose maybe there was some kind of subconscious thing going on like that as I was growing up. I don't know.

Lu Ann Jones: So how would you describe the way your career deviated from his?

Rob Arnberger: Well, of course in the early years, I went through the same struggles he did. Which is trying to get on permanent. Trying to establish yourself. Trying to establish your own professionalism, your own credibility and so forth. He had kind of gone into interpretation. He was a naturalist, and then went on into more of the management side of things pretty early in his career. I started out in interpretation as well, and I think I was pretty darn good at it, and what helped me be good at it was my education background. I enjoyed, you know, I just didn't like doing the daily fights with kids in the school. But I loved the education side of it. Talking with people. But there was something in me that I wanted to move my career on into, what we called at that time, the protection side of things. Perhaps it was adrenaline, young person, you know, and so forth. But I wanted to do search and rescue. I wanted to do those hero things. I wanted to do law enforcement and so forth. I didn't want to give up education. In fact, I saw them, really, it's not distinctly different. I saw them as very interrelated. Still do. So, I took my career off that way. And my dad never did that. He didn't work in that side of the business.

Rob Arnberger: It was when I did that that I began to establish my own career path, my own level of credibility or lack thereof. But at least it was in a distinct, different career field. So that was a major thing.

Rob Arnberger: As time went on, my career ambitions were focused around several very basic ingredients. One was personal challenge. Personal knowledge and growth. And so, I looked for opportunities in the career to do that. Not with the idea of becoming a superintendent or whatever. I can remember my ambitions changing as I went. All I wanted to be was a district ranger. Oh. Okay. Then I thought, God, I'd be lucky if I could ever be a chief ranger. And so forth. I didn't have this master plan about where I wanted to end up. All I wanted to make sure was that I was challenged, that I enjoyed the work, and that I learned. Those were the three very essential things. So, I picked my assignments, or I conducted my work to do that. And I was richly rewarded by it all.

Lu Ann Jones: Well do you think early on, I mean, I'm always interested in the idea of mentors or people who guide you. Or did you happen to have people early on?

Rob Arnberger: And I think we all do, to a certain extent. But it was less then than it is now, and I don't think there's much to brag about now. But much less a formal program. It was, number one, I think being fortunate in having some leaders that you work for. And I make a distinction between leadership and supervision. But in having some leaders that you worked for that served as role models. Sometimes you developed a closeness with these people that over time you could call and chat and bounce ideas. I've got to be honest with you. I worked for a lot of superintendents along my career path, and I only had one that was, that I consider a bad superintendent. I had some marvelous, some were better than others, but I had some marvelous ones. Lorraine Mintzmyer, my superintendent when I was at Buffalo National River, was flat inspirational to me and taught me a lot about having backbone and supporting your staff when they're in the right. My chief ranger at Buffalo was Harry Graffe, who taught me about an intuitive sense of right and wrong. Not just a policy sense. Mike Finley, my superintendent at Everglades, I was his deputy; political strategy and tactics and just, you know, incredible understanding of how politics works. So, I had people that I admired. And in many of those cases, they became close friends or somebody I could trust to call for advice.

Rob Arnberger: Or else when they called me and gave me an alert about, perhaps, my own behavior. Or, "Have you thought of," "it caught my attention." So, it wasn't a formal system, but it was a very effective informal system. But it was only effective because I was very lucky in having some superb role models along the way.

Rob Arnberger: I worry about today, of the accidental role models of, in my view, less and less of the principled leadership that I was exposed to. And so that the idea of mentorship becomes, through the informal system of association of watching, of being influenced, is much less of a sure thing than it was in those days. I really worry that that's one of the problems with leadership in today's world is the lack of principled leadership and of role models to where you can understand their imperfections as well as the real positive things. You can model some of your

behavior and tailor it to yourself. I worry about whether that really exists in today's world.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, if it doesn't, what would you, how would you explain that?

Rob Arnberger: I think, for God's sake, you know, why is Syria as bad off as it is right now? Obviously, I don't have answers to any bit of that. I believe, though, there has been a one or two generational change, in which there's been a degradation of principled leadership. And it's been lost in a lot of different ways. There's been a lot of political accommodation, value systems that are constantly changing rather than fixed. And I'm a realist. I mean, I operated in a very, very real political world in my own career. But I think that in responding to some of the ambiguities that always have existed, and exist today in the leadership realm, that there is a generation or two of our leadership right now that are not firmly grounded in a series of really clear principles. You can talk about core values and all that kind of stuff. I've always said there's a big difference between core values. I've always said there's a big difference between core values and principled leadership. Core values, yes, you can have the core values. But executing core values is called principled leadership. And I think that that's not been as effective.

Rob Arnberger: Now I was fortunate, I think, and I'm not saying it was perfect. Obviously, it wasn't. No generation ever is. But I was very fortunate, I think, in my career, to have been influenced by some people that were principled leaders. [phone interruption] Obviously I was talking about [Hers?] to some of my colleagues, retirees, today. And they came out of a session with Mike Reynolds [deputy director of operations] and said, "Geez, I'm glad I'm retired. Can you imagine dealing with some of this bullshit that they're dealing with now?"

Rob Arnberger: I kind of blew my top a little bit. I said, "Give me a break. Every generation, every generation goes through their BS. I can remember my dad telling me, just as he was getting ready to retire, 'Boy, am I glad I'm retiring now. I don't have to—'" And I said, "And if you distill what Mike Reynolds was talking about, nothing's changed. The only thing that's changed was a bit of the context. Some of the nuances. But we're still talking about executing leadership. We're still talking about where does the National Park Service fit into the American conscience?" And we've always been talking about that. Now, is it a little bit more technical? Yeah. Are there some other factors that we have to deal with? Yes. Obviously. But some of those core issues have not changed over the years; the context has changed. And every generation has got to respond to that. And every generation also judges the next one. And sits there, well, it was, those are the good old days. Well, let me tell you. They were the good old days for *us*. And our context. And that's all they were. Our context, it was the good old days. We did what we thought was right, and da, da, da, da, da, da, da. The only question is, do the people of this generation now, do they have the equipment, do they have the ammunition to meet those challenges that, the same challenges packaged a little different, but the same stuff? Do they have that basic – in my estimation, significantly no, they don't.

Rob Arnberger: One of the reasons, it's a very simplistic reply, is that the organization has lost the capacity to educate all of its employees early in their careers about the mission of the National Park Service. In the past, in the past history, there has been different types of trainings and exposures and so forth that put people pretty much on the same wavelength, whether you're a chief of maintenance or whether you were a park technician, or whether you were an interpreter, a naturalist, or whatever. You first and foremost understood the mission of the National Park Service and its complexities within today's world, and the legislation that got us there. And you understood them very well. And you understood them more deeply than you understood the execution of the principles of your particular profession. Which came later. And we've lost that. There's an entire generation of people out there that are supervisors, first-line supervisors, that have only an ephemeral understanding, a deep understanding, of not only the traditions but the legislative history of our organization. How we got to be what we are. Maybe it's because I'm a historian that I appreciate that. But that doesn't exist. And the reason why I know it, I've heard first-person understanding of this. I've been a mentor in some of the classes at Albright. And I'm astounded by the level of ignorance, of being able to sit down and intellectually discuss the Organic Act, or the Redwoods Act, or the Historic Sites Act, and to understand those kinds of things, and then to be able to have intelligent discussions about policy and how you interpret it. I'm amazed.

Rob Arnberger: My own son is part of that generation. One fantastic young ranger. Really fantastic young ranger. I'm proud of him. But he's never been through a foundation course. Even worse than that, he's never even had a supervisor that saw that as a deficit in his background. So, we've become compartmentalized very much, you know, into working disciplines within the organization. But we've lost one sense of commonality that we should all have. And that is a very deep understanding of our organization, of the law, and of what the intent always has been for this organization with the law, and how regulations and policy derives from that. That's how you get core values. And that's how you also begin to get executive principled leadership. I see that as being pretty haphazard right now. At all levels of the organization. At all levels.

Lu Ann Jones: When did you, in your own career, begin to realize that, you know, you got to district ranger, that you had even bigger, "ambition" sounds like a crass word. But you had talents that you were going to develop in different ways.

Rob Arnberger: Yeah. I don't think there was any watershed event. In my particular quest of learning and being challenged and enjoying, it led me to one thing to another – and making a lot of mistakes along the way as well. In those days, the Park Service didn't have a formal program of identifying, of identifying future potential leaders, you know. Putting a gold star over your head and all that kind of stuff. It was pretty haphazard even in those days. *But* there was an informal process where senior leaders recognized excellence along the way and began to hire people along the way and place them in key positions. While it was risky, as it always is, I think that, in the majority of cases, the people rose to the occasion. I

certainly, you could make that argument now. I'm not holding out that generation as the greatest generation, simply not. I think that there's a little more risk in the selection of senior leaders now than there was in those days. And how I went from one job to the next it wasn't – I had some friends who were peers at that time who had a written sense, actually made a list of their ambitions. I didn't do that. And in fact, I distrusted people that did that. I often wondered about their motivation, you know?

Rob Arnberger: Of course, it was a different generation. Young people now in this generation have, often separate the career from the life. The Park Service is no different from our society. There are at least distinctions. In my generation, there was no distinction. People don't work for the same company forever anymore. They take whatever job works for them the best. My generation, we didn't. I was just fortunate that after only one misfire, that I was able to find a career that became my life, you know? And I'm not saying that that will work now. I mean, times change. Everything changes. So that's why I say that this generation has to make their own way. I just hope we've given them the proper ammunition to do what they need to do. The proper preparation. And in some respects, I don't think we have. So.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, so, I'm always interested when people say they've made mistakes and learned from them. Can you think of particular instances where you think you've made a mistake?

Rob Arnberger: Well, for God's sake, anybody that sits there and says, "Well, I had five big mistakes in my career" are liars. The capacity to do two things with mistakes is essential. One is to rebound from it. And the second is to learn from it. So, we had them. I had them. At Grand Canyon, I was an SES [Senior Executive Service] superintendent. I had spent six years there trying to negotiate a new river management plan. The list of high-profile issues at Grand Canyon was at least two pages long. The river management plan took its place along in those two pages. It was a highly contentious environment: private boaters against the concession boaters. And the permit system; it was a very, very difficult issue. And everyone's suing everyone.

Rob Arnberger: I made a decision that we weren't going to proceed ahead with the river management plan because there wasn't a pathway towards resolution of any of these issues. And that I felt that some level of litigation clarifying that pathway was essential to accomplishing that plan. So that was the decision I made. And in fact, I was sued. Well, whatever, whatever.

Rob Arnberger: In retrospect, I think that that was probably a mistake, because litigation never occurred. It was over several years, negotiations between the parties did this and that. I didn't have the capacity, or I didn't have the interest, or whatever it was, to continue to work with all parties to find some – I mean, I hadn't been the first person to try to do this. Every superintendent before me for fifteen years had been trying to do this. But every superintendent goes in there, hopes and prays that it's

on their watch that they're going to be the ones to solve it. Then you come to a point where this, you look at it as insoluble. Well, I'm not sure it is. But that's how I looked at it. At the time, I knew it was a very risky strategy, and I wasn't 100 percent sure. I had to inform my staff. It was in the press, the Congress was all over my back, all this kind of stuff. Sometimes you don't know that you made a mistake until you can look back and make a mistake. So, I mean, there's one example. And if I had a beer and more free time, I could probably give you a list of ten others. But that one sticks in my mind. It's probably one of the most recent ones that when I look back in time, I wish that I could have taken a step back, maybe with some help, and taken a step back and said, "Well, wait a minute, our entire way of thinking, of trying to get to a solution of this issue, is wrong. Maybe we need to do something totally different." And I didn't do that. And I wished I had.

Rob Arnberger: Because after two years, a new superintendent came in there. And because of what I did, it forced it into the legal arena, in which people had to sit down and talk and do da, da, da, da. They finally hammered out somewhat of a solution, you know. Someone with, you know, somebody might argue well, they wouldn't have done that if you hadn't created that situation. Well, I'm not sure that's true. I'm not sure I necessarily look at my action as creating the environment that created a solution. I'm not sure that's true at all. But that's my own analysis. So. And that and a dime will buy you a cup of coffee.

Lu Ann Jones: (laughs) What personal traits do you think you have that made you good at dealing with people and large groups of people? I mean, a big park, a region, etcetera? To keep so many balls at one time?

Rob Arnberger: Yeah. Well, I used to say I was a good multitasker. I've since found out there is no such thing as multitasking. At multitasking, what you do is you succeed in degrading all of them equally or, you know, there is no such thing. But I was able to keep a lot of balls in the air. I think I had a structured approach to decision making. I was not afraid to make decisions. I did not necessarily believe that finding consensus, in other words, was the automatic route to the correct decision. I often saw that consensus, in seeking consensus, you ended up not doing what was right. I thought it was very, very important to personally interact, out of the public arena but in a personal arena, with key groups to where you could have some level of a personal relationship with an advocate or an adversary. I looked at my job as figuring out how to get around a wall. Either knocking it over, climbing over it, or moving along the wall and finding another way. I was also candid, sometimes painfully so, but always was honestly candid. My experience with some of the political leaders that I dealt with, they found that very refreshing. They could rely on me on a straight shot. I believe that I was principled. That if I got beat, I wasn't worried so much about being beaten in some kind of an arena. What I worried about was being beaten and not being principled. In other words, if I stood for the right things, if I stood for that resource, if I stood for that person or whatever it was, and if I got beat in the big world of politics, or in the big world of management and all that kind of stuff, then let me be beat for the right

things. Let me be able to be able to say, “Okay, you won. But that doesn’t mean you were right. Okay?” And so, I wasn’t afraid of the politics knocking on my door in a consistent —.

Rob Arnberger: In other words, I remember one time when this congressional aide called me up – used to drive me nuts, 22 year-old wonder kid working for guy – and on a very vexing subject at Grand Canyon. And began to launch into, “Well, you need to do this and that.”

Rob Arnberger: And I said, “Well, I’m just not going to do that.” “Well, the congressman is very concerned...”

Rob Arnberger: I remember telling this person, “If the congressman is concerned, have him personally contact me.” Because I found in too many cases that in politics and in executive management that people used other people to express their own agenda. And if the congressman was personally concerned, and he was personally concerned enough about it, then I want to talk to him about it and not you. Because I cannot distinguish what’s your agenda and what’s his agenda.

Rob Arnberger: I also felt that my particular management style, leadership style, was I wanted to talk to my own employees, the people I worked with, in their work environment. I didn’t want to constantly be calling them, come on up to the superintendent’s office. If they were called to the superintendent’s office, I wanted that to stand for something. So, I went over to the maintenance shop, and I’d spend an hour over there, you know, leaning up. I went around, and I went out to the fee stations and that kind of stuff. I had standing order of my secretary at Grand Canyon that she was constantly listening to the radio. If there was a bad accident and the rangers were responding to it – I mean a bad, serious one – that she was to come and break in. I would drive out there. Not to meddle. I wanted them to know that I was there to support them and whatever they needed as they went through this. There were several times where, unfortunately, I got involved in some things.

Rob Arnberger: But that was my particular style. I didn’t necessarily see, the job was, you know, it was every day of the week, every hour of the day. So, there was no such thing as well, you know, it’s five o’clock, it’s time to go home. That’s not to say that I was idiotic about it. I went to plenty of my kids’ basketball games.

Lu Ann Jones: Right. Right.

Rob Arnberger: But I also saw that with another thing with the community. That, you know, I was a normal human, too. So, I guess those are some of the characteristics. I’m sure that, you know, there’s going to be some people that can recall me much different than how I personally see myself. But guess what? That’s what life is. Each one of us is three people, you know? What other people think we are, what we think we are, and what we really are. So. (laughter) And there you go.

Lu Ann Jones: What was it like to go from being a superintendent of a large park to director of an enormous region [Alaska]? That kind of leap?

Rob Arnberger: Well, the difference is, was astounding. In my view, the hardest job in the national park system is being a superintendent of a large, complex park. That's the hardest job. I was responsible for everything that went on, good and bad. And there was always somebody looking to knock you off.

Rob Arnberger: In the region, it took me a little bit of time to learn the difference. I'm not sure I ever effectively did. The difference as a regional director is that your job is to support those superintendents that are managing those resources. And when you see one of them losing it or not being on top of it, then your job is not to command and beat him over the head, but in fact to counsel and to maneuver them to where they understand what they need to do. They need to be self-directed. And so, your job is to provide that oversight and that mentorship and that support. And the job is to look at the staff elements within a region and say there's only one, except for some of the programs that are being run that the only job is to support these people. They're in charge of the warships out there, and your job is to support them. Your job is also to tell me when you think that something's not going right. At that time, it's my damn job to make it right, and not let the superintendent make a decision that's a bad decision.

Rob Arnberger: So, the difference between the two are remarkably different. I think it took me at least a year when I got to the region not to treat the regional office and that whole environment as if it were my park. I'm not sure I ever truly effectively learned that perfectly. But that's the major difference. The buck truly stops at your desk when you're the superintendent of a park, and it gets made into change, pennies and dimes, by the time it goes higher than that. It gets spread around on a lot of different desks when you're at the park. And it truly is. And you have a sense of that, and the difference. So, things get a little bit diluted at the higher level. But at that higher level, you focus in on the people where you can use your influence, as opposed to the command and control. The reality is is that that is principled leadership at its highest form is where you're not really necessarily the captain of a ship, but you're the admiral of a navy. And where the captains are making their own control-command decisions, but they trust implicitly the admiral of that navy. I guess I use those analogies over and over, and they're even becoming tiresome to me. But I think it is a good analogy as to what the difference is.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, you went to SES and got formal training. So, what kinds of leadership philosophies were you being exposed to? You saw kind of leadership in action in the Park Service. But in terms of kind of who you were reading and the kinds of seminars and things that you were—

Rob Arnberger: Well, you know, a lot of people think, you're going to SES and so forth and then all of a sudden, you're exposed to this sophisticated training. I'll be honest with you. Some of the worst leadership and some of the worst supervision I ever experienced happened as I went higher up in the organization. I remember one time I was a GS-15 superintendent of a significant park, and I was at a conference. And the deputy regional director called me into his room at the motel and said, "We're going to have your annual evaluation." I timed this, by the way.

It was right around, if I recall, it was two minutes and 17 seconds. I walked over and he said, "Sign right here." He says, "You've done an excellent job. But I never give new superintendents in the region an excellent rating. So, you're only getting a good rating." Whatever that was. But it was two minutes and 17 seconds later I walked out of there. And there was my annual evaluation.

Rob Arnberger: Now, if I had done that within my own park, or with my own staff, and set that example, I would have been crucified. So, as I went up, what I found is that I had to actually fight to be an excellent leader, because I had less and less examples as I went up. A lot of it were political people that were appointed assistant secretary. You know, they'd come in for four years, or two years, and they'd be gone, you know? So, I can't really point to the excellence of leadership at those most senior levels as a result of serious SES level training and all those kinds of things. The best example of leadership and so forth that I witnessed and was exposed to was at lower levels.

Rob Arnberger: Now, being in the SES puts you in a rarefied atmosphere. I mean, I used to receive my goals that were sent to me by the Assistant Secretary of the Interior through the director. But I never once sat down with anybody to discuss those. They were just sent. And sometimes it would be 100 pages of crap. In fact, that was a little bit of cynicism that I began to experience. Then I worked for a director that I really did not have a lot of professional respect for. And I began to see that level of degradation at those most senior levels. It became hard to live your own career according to a certain set of principles of excellence when in fact you're surrounded by just the opposite of that. So, I really can't say that as I gravitated to the heights of success in the National Park Service that I was surrounded by the incredible, you know, of excellence, incredible excellence of decision making. I found just the opposite. I found it very hard to maintain a level of principles that wasn't constantly being maneuvered, sold, diluted and it took a lot at those senior levels to, in fact, maintain some thread of personal principles in terms of how you carried out your job.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, when you talk about principles, what's a concrete example of principles you're talking about?

Rob Arnberger: Well, the resource had to come first. It there that your decision making – I used to say that the legislation of the National Park Service is an extraordinary legislation, because there's very few pieces like it in government, anywhere in government. And the reason is, as it says future generations, okay? And the future generations have an equal vote for present generations. Okay? What that implies is that you have to focus on that resource. For perpetuity. For those future generations. And that if I make some decisions and sacrifice a little bit here and a little bit there and so forth in order to satisfy today's generations then, in fact, there won't be anything left. And a good example of that, Mike Finley used to say it all the time, is that by well-meaning people at Everglades National Park, there had been hundreds of small decisions that had all combined and accumulated to put that park and its future into jeopardy. So, it's not a death by one large cut or one large

hack. It's death by a million small cuts. You have to understand that every little piece is important. And I think that when I was at Everglades, I learned that most eloquently. I tried to apply it when I was at Grand Canyon and in Alaska. And when I was at Big Bend. I'm not naïve, and nobody that worked in those senior levels should have been naïve, anyway. They understand how the real world is. There's pressures here and so forth. But it gets at that comment that I said before. And that is to stand for something, okay? Now if you get beat, okay. Not everybody wins. That's part of the democratic process as well, whether you like it or not, okay? But stand for the right things.

Rob Arnberger: I learned that, I remember, I was superintendent of Saguaro. I kept diaries of all this stuff. Occasionally I'm called about some of these diaries, and I go back. For God's sake, I got called on some a couple of years ago. And I went back into my diary and here I am, worried about this bulldozer that had gone 100 feet into the park on an arroyo. And I was worried about this, and I was doing this and that, and it really worried me. The reason why it worried me, and it bothered me was because the principle of it was wrong. I was being pressured to, you know, da da, da da, da da. So, I guess the point is that somewhere along the way, quite a few places along the way, as I intimated earlier, I was influenced by people with principles. I was able to see those things and model myself after some of those things. And the resource comes first was the first principle.

Rob Arnberger: That didn't mean you were stupid. You were strategic. You were careful. You understood politics. You worked angles. You did this. You found alliances. You did partnerships. You didn't do anybody any good going out and setting yourself on fire, okay? So, you worked all of that stuff. But the reason why you were doing that is for that resource, and future generations who are equal, to have the same equal right and vote. Those not yet born have that vote as somebody that is running their ATV [all-terrain vehicle] out there or doing this or that. So, anyway.

Lu Ann Jones: So, if you were the director of the National Park Service and you think it needs an overhaul in some way, how would you start to rebuild it to build principles?

Rob Arnberger: Well, you know, I really hesitate to get into that. But I think I've kind of touched on some of those. I think there has to be some kind of return to some kind of level of employee education to where we're on the same parade float here. (laughs) And not lose that. To respect the individuality of each, of all of the disciplines. But the reason why we're doing sciences is for this. The reason why you're out there and enforcing the law is for this. And it's based on this and da, da, da. And then I think that some of the decision making is not based on what is right. It's based on accommodation. And it's due to extreme oversight environment by the Congress meddling. Also, you know, making decisions within the agency is so heavily influenced by the department. In other words, there's nobody that runs, the director doesn't run the Park Service anymore, certainly not like they used to. And that, I understand that. You know, it's a very difficult environment. But I think that there are some decision-making processes that where the goals and the

objectives of the decision-making process are flawed from the get go. They're not based on a series of clearly focused upon principles of protecting that resource.

Rob Arnberger: I think that obviously in today's climate that – I wouldn't have argued this 20 years ago, but I would argue it now – is that the process of deliberation is as important as the product of the deliberation. I used to argue quite forcefully that we spend too much time with the process and the process becomes the product. Today I think I would argue the fact that you cannot, the two of them are together very, very deeply intertwined. And you cannot shortchange the process of transparency, of truly, truly engaging people to find solutions, to understand what the outcomes are. To understand alternatives. To understand what the objectives are when you start the process. And I'm not just talking about doing NEPA and all this kind of stuff. Doing this with your own staff is much more important now than it ever was.

Rob Arnberger: But I don't think I'm equipped. Hell, I've been out of the organization for a long time. I don't think I'm equipped to provide the next director with the five things that are going to bring the organization to health. The only thing that I would say is that, stand for something. And then infuse your organization with a set of principles. And then demonstrate leadership according to those principles all the time. Don't deviate at all from that. And be open and honest and transparent, when you're right and when you're wrong. And then good luck, you know. I'm not sure that I'm really, I certainly don't have an answer, you know? It's a very, very difficult environment right now. And it probably will be for the next one or two generations, you know, until we figure it all out. Which we probably never will. (laughter) So. That's my pontification on the subject. (laughter) So.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, when did your son decide to go into the service?

Rob Arnberger: My oldest son is with the Bureau of Land Management, and he's a senior fire official in the BLM fire management office in Boise. So, he's in a sister agency, aligned agency, and I feel proud of what he's done. Not in the Park Service, but with his agency. My daughter is an administrator in a private college in Ohio, and I'm equally proud of her. She didn't go into that line of work and thank God, you know. She's distinguished herself that way. My youngest son, when we were at Grand Canyon, he joined an Explorer post that we hosted. I remember one of my rangers coming into me. And his name was Chris Fors. And he said, "Hey, boss, what do you say we sponsor an Explorer post at the school?"

Rob Arnberger: And I, having been an old Boy Scout, I was an Eagle Scout, and I didn't need a whole lot of explanation. I said, "Green light. Make it happen. Whatever you need to do in order to tell people you have the support at the highest levels of this park. Go ahead and do it."

Rob Arnberger: Well, he went out and did that. And my son joined it. Pretty soon they're doing ride-alongs, and they're helping the rangers do crowd control. We had the visit with the (P)resident times, and they're out there doing that. And then Hillary

came and visited several times. B the time he was in the tenth grade, he was working for several weeks at a time down in Cottonwood and down at Phantom Ranch, you know, down there by himself, and with the rangers down there. So, he was rubbing shoulders with them.

Rob Arnberger: He graduated from school, and he went to Prescott Yavapai Community College there in Prescott, Arizona, and got his associate degree in criminal justice. He went to a ranger academy, and then he started his own career, and he's off like a herd of buffalo. But I don't think it was me, per se, that influenced him. It was a lot of great people that he rubbed shoulders with when he was in high school that served as role models for him. He loves law enforcement. That's his thing. And he's damn good at it. So, I don't think it was because I came home with a flat hat and gray shirt on and so forth. In some ways, I was fairly unreachable, you know, doing stuff here and there. But he was involved with a lot of the people who actually made the park work. They were wonderful role models with him. And I think it gave him a course for his life. He's been very successful as he's maneuvered it forward. So, I'm proud of him.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, I'm going to, we could go on and on. But I'm going to stop here if that's okay. (laughter)

Rob Arnberger: Good. I'm going to stop, too, because I'm going to go up to my room and I'm going to get a little bottle of, or a little glass of my whiskey, and have my evening toddy.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes, your toddy. Yes, it's toddy time, so we'll stop here. And that's good.

Rob Arnberger: Okay.

[END OF TAPE 1]

[END OF INTERVIEW]