

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

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



Don Kodak
June 16, 2010

Interview conducted by Michele Hartley

This digital transcript has been edited for accessibility and compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Interview content has not been altered.

The National Park Service does not have a release form for this interview. Access is provided for research and accessibility via assistive technology purposes only. Individuals are responsible for ensuring that their use complies with copyright laws.

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

Interview with: Don Kodak

Interview by: Michele Hartley, NPS Employee

Interview Date: June 16, 2010

Release form available: No (NPS employee at time of interview)

Transcript reviewed by interviewee: No

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

Transcript time stamped: Yes

Don Kodak:	00:00	Terry's done such a wonderful job. I just don't think that the center could have presented itself to its you know, all stakeholders, people. It's wonderful, had a great time.
Audio Tech:	00:16	We're rolling.
M. Hartley:	00:16	Rolling? Okay so, I'm here with Don Kodak. Don I just want to confirm that you're okay with us recording the interview?
Don Kodak:	00:25	Oh yes ma'am
M. Hartley:	00:26	Thank you. If you wouldn't mind telling us, giving us your name, and I know you've been in a couple of positions here, if you wouldn't mind giving us your name and the positions you've held and what time periods those were?
Don Kodak:	00:42	My name is Don Kodak, I came here in July 1992 as a GS-11 interpretive planner. Really just a fabulous experience. Came here really to spend two or three at the most four years before going back out into the field and being an interpreter in a park. Really anxious to get back out in the field. Realizing you had to get that kind of central office focus. The very first week I was here I was assigned to do a special resource study on Route 66. I never thought about leaving again. The kind of work that we do has just been so intoxicating, so much fun to do. I was interpretive planner for, gosh a number of years about eight or nine years, then had the opportunity to become the chief of the division. I did that for a couple of years, then I was the center's first

associate manager for workflow and project management. Then I left that job to become the director of the center. I have been the director now for three and a half years.

- M. Hartley: 02:03 The staff size has fluctuated and I have asked this of Marc and asked this of Dave; how many employees are here at the center currently?
- Don Kodak: 02:15 I think federal employees we have about 148. I want to say about because we are in the process of hiring some people and I'm not exactly sure where those hires are but, by the end of the month we will probably be around 151.
- M. Hartley: 02:34 And why do you think it was important at our fortieth year of this building, why do you think it was important for us to acknowledge this day? And what are the accomplishments you see the center as having over the past four decades of its life?
- Don Kodak: 02:55 Well, there are 392 units in the National Park Service. There is not a single unit in the National Park Service that you can't see our thumbprint on. I mean, wherever you go we've done something for that park and sometimes quite a bit. It's just amazing the kind of experiences you have here, the kind of ways that you help parks here. I don't think people realize--they think of us just as a media center, you know we're building things. But the kind of relationships that we have with parks, the way that often our people in doing their work help the park really come to grips with the concepts that they really want to talk about. I know as an interpretive planner I'd show up at a park with my team and at first was really surprised that people--they all had a really good sense of what their narratives, what their stories were, but getting them to refine that and focus, that they hadn't done. And the center does that every time we engage with the park.
- Don Kodak: 04:18 And we just left a tremendous legacy around the National Park Service. Here too, the people are so committed to the work, to the mission of the National Park Service for sure, but to the mission of the center; making sure that the parks have the best media that we can produce to tell their story. It's just a phenomenal place. I mean you look around our center and unlike other centers of this type in the Park Service, we have people who have been here for decades and decades, a substantial number. That's actually the rule

rather than the exception to the rule. And I think that in and of itself is a testament to the fulfillment that the work brings. And the kind of work we do; it's just wonderful. And, I am just so happy to be the director here and have this opportunity to serve these people. Very good job.

- M. Hartley: 05:27 So looking back to when you were an interpretive planner do you have a particular project or park that is particularly memorable for you?
- Don Kodak: 05:39 There are a number of them but I think that Nez Perce National Historical Park is most significant to me. There I worked on the general management plan as the interpretive planner and then I followed that up with an interpretive plan but to meet those people, the Nez Perce people, to become their friend, to become part of their culture, to be recognized by their elders was a life changing experience. And to understand their culture and how the way that they honor and respect their stories, the significant differences, between the way they do it and the way the western culture does it. It just was a fantastic experience. It went over three or four years doing those two different plans and the follow up and everything. Just a tremendous tremendous experience and I still have friendships and relationships with people from that project. It's just tremendous.
- M. Hartley: 06:56 Well, it's interesting because two other people have also mentioned Nez Perce. And I don't know if the exhibits came after the plan?
- Don Kodak: 07:05 The exhibits actually came before the plan.
- M. Hartley: 07:11 The exhibits came before the plan?
- Don Kodak: 07:16 Because we did a project--the exhibit at the Spalding Site, their main visitor center, were done right early in the park's history. And then we were actually coming back to take a look at how the Nez Perce National Historic Trail, how that overlay effected the whole park and how to plan around that. Now the exhibits at the Spalding Visitor Center; that museum is world renowned. It's so gorgeous. The mount making, all that stuff we did here, just fabulous.
- M. Hartley: 07:55 I think we talked about the Harper's Ferry Center and have been talking about it mostly throughout the day as obviously it's a place where media is created, where there is

a lot of exciting media created. It's also a government agency. As a director what are the challenges you see or do you have any challenges as the director working in 2010 in the federal government for the Nation Park Service?

Don Kodak: 08:25 Well, I think there are several challenges that the center has had and continues to have. I think that the most significant is the fact that the creative process doesn't follow the boundaries of the bureaucratic process very well. It is hard to tell a person that we only have x amount of dollars and you can only do this much work when you get into a project and you start to see the real potential of what really should have been done or what should be done. And then to realize that, you know, there is only so much. You have to get people focused on what they can do under the system what we have the resources to do. And it's just very challenging. The government has become more and more focused on counting things and outputs. I really like to tell people when I talk about the center that one of the values here is that we are really not about outputs. We are about outcomes. And I know that sounds a little bit bureaucratic, lacking some sort of initiative, but its just true.

Don Kodak: 09:54 I mean we really are focused on how does this story come across. I mean whether it's a film or exhibit are we really reaching people? Are we really connecting people with those meanings? You'd think that's what interpretation education in the National Park Service is about and certainly that's their mission. But when you try to then do that within the framework of the bureaucracy of the federal government; it's very tough to do, very tough to do. It really sometimes uses so much of our creative energy just trying to figure out how we're going to make sure that the money's obligated on a certain schedule, make sure that we spent only this much money that we get--that the time line is respected, and our stuff is there when they cut the ribbon. And all those kinds of things which they're part of the real word we operate in and we have to be but they certainly are big constraints on the creative process. That's probably the biggest challenge.

M. Hartley: 11:09 And I know you didn't come in--there are some people that come in--well, Cindy Darr at a one, GS-1--you didn't come in at that level exactly but now in a director position, through coming up from the ranks, any mentors you had here at the center?

- Don Kodak: 11:26 Oh gosh, yes. Well, Andy Cardose who is chief of the division of interpretive planning has through most of my career has been a mentor. I worked for him twice. Once, at New River Gorge National River before I came here and then as an interpretive planner once I came to Harper's Ferry Center. I see him every four to six weeks now and he continues to have an effect on me and how I see things. Yeah, I think Andy Cardose is certainly is a strong mentor. And Dave Dame who is part of the interpretive division at the time when I first came in, probably not so much as a mentor, but as a person who because of his vision and his perspective on these things is someone I always really respected and thought highly of. I don't know. Lots of people. There are a lot of people I worked with here in the center as colleagues that I have a lot of respect for. Cindy, certainly. Mary Herber who was our chief of exhibits before while I was still an interpretive planner, just really a leader in thought in terms of where museum exhibits are going.
- Don Kodak: 13:11 Today even, almost every time we hire somebody here and I get a chance to know them I learn something from them. John Tobiason our new person we just hired for new media, social media. Just a great person to learn stuff from him all the time. Everybody here. Michelle who's done such a wonderful job. I think a lot of people here get the job done, they step up when we need them to step up, and during those trying periods when their budgets were not as large as they needed to be to get the work done, we have always had people who have been willing to focus on the goal and committed to the goal and willing to do what needed to be done. That's the kind of spirit, in the history books the administrative history of this institution, I think that's going to be one of the key characteristics that they are going to find--always willing to step up and do what we needed to.
- M. Hartley: 14:29 You've touched on this, but it's not--the typical question I've been asking at the end, which is what do you think the value of the center is within the Park Service or beyond?
- Don Kodak: 14:48 Well, I think in the Park Service right now we are becoming more and more critical. Everything goes through cycles. And I think the way the Park Service is now managing its business, we the professionals here at Harper's Ferry Center are more and more crucial to getting the work done on the schedules that they're asking that work to be

done. Now that money has to be spent within a 12 month period. Very few people in the park can do quality media work in that short time frame. You have to have people who are doing it everyday in order to make that work and still deliver quality products to the visitors of the National Park Service. So I think our importance is just getting more and more.

Don Kodak: 15:50 Accessibility--this is one of the big issues that the park service is trying to deal with--programmatically. People are looking to us to solve those problems and provide leadership. New media, just last week we were in a week long meeting of the communications council and the web council. And our folks, John and Matt, provided, even though they're new to the center, they were leaders in that discussion and leaders in that thinking about new media and how to make it actually work. Just the role for Harpers Ferry Center in the Park Service is just going to become more and more critical especially for the next half a dozen years. I mean who knows--media is evolving so rapidly it's hard to predict what will be in place in a few years from now. But right now we are critical to getting the work done [inaudible 00:17:00].

Don Kodak: 17:00 Also, I think we have a bigger role outside the Park Service. And I think we see this a lot. People call us up from all kinds of different organizations because we have the reputation for doing quality work, for doing cutting edge work, and work that endures. So, well outside the Park Service they know about the Harper's Ferry Center. They respect us. They look to us for solutions. I mean, again in some of those same areas, in programmatic accessibility and in new media, folks are looking at us to come up with solutions and respecting our voices in solving those problems. We have a huge role. Hopefully my job is to get us the resources that we can get. I mean, you know, resources are limited. But to the degree they are out there to be gotten, I want to work hard to get those resources so people can do what they need to do. A lot of people working hard on that.

Don Kodak: 18:23 I think this is a great watershed for us. This forty year anniversary is kind of a closure for some people. We saw a lot of our colleagues that were here before us and left us in a very good place that we could continue on. And now I think it's our task to move the ball and we will. And I hope

that when you guys are sitting here doing this in 10 years for the fiftieth anniversary that people look back at us and say, "gosh, you know, these guys really did what needed to be done so that I could be here today doing what I need to do."

M. Hartley:	19:08	Well, thank you Don. Like I said, I think that this is a good way to close out our day and the fortieth anniversary picnic events.
Don Kodak:	19:16	Thank you.
M. Hartley:	19:17	Thank you.

END OF TAPE