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Alexandra Hernandez
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My Narrative
The Administrative History of the National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office

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Interview conducted and transcribed by
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This transcript was reviewed by Alexandra Hernandez

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I actually did not know about heritage areas when I first joined the park service. I was working in the regional office and working with the Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant Program. My predecessor was Greg Kendrick of the heritage area program and he had been struggling to get the heritage area program kind of organized and up and running and he kept trying to recruit me for several years to join the heritage area program. I was working as an intern, and I just wanted to stay with the grant program that I was in. He was great in offering me the opportunity to try something different and get out to the heritage areas and visit them and see what they were all about. Once I started learning about the heritage areas then it grew on me as I started to work with the program and ever since it has been enjoyable to see how our heritage areas in our region have been able to grow from just being designated all the way to more mature well-developed heritage areas.

I split my time between multiple programs. I have the heritage areas which is about 80% of my work. The other 20% of my work has to do with the Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant Program as well as National Historic Landmarks.

Funding of the position in Inter-Mountain region: My position is paid 50 50. Half of it is paid by administrative support funding we get through the heritage area program with the other half paid through the NRP which is the National Recreation and Preservation fund. It is kind of confusing because the funds are for the heritage area partnership program but in my region the other work that I do in the NHL and JACS grant Program is confusingly named the heritage partnerships program.

Functions of the position of regional coordinator: The foremost job is getting the funding out the door to the heritage areas each year. I also provide oversight on the agreements as the agreements technical representative for all of our heritage areas. I am also a resource for them to find other technical assistance for them from the park service or other agencies to help them get some of their projects done. To provide training for their board. The final aspect would be working on partnership development for the heritage areas and the park service.

Oversight of the heritage areas: It's really cradle to grave. I review all the work plans and budgets. I submit all the paperwork with our awarding officers. I negotiate the agreement with them and once the agreement is in place, I monitor how they are spending the funding to make sure it is in alignment with their management plan, legislation, as well as with the agreement we have in place. I handle their payments. I also review any projects they might need assistance with. Another aspect is that I do the compliance so if they should need section 106 consultation, I'll handle that as well. I verify how they are spending their money. They send payment requests to me, and I'll review them to make sure they are expending money per their work plan and budget. We work on a reimbursement and advance payment basis. I am listed as their agreements technical representative so I have to make sure that they comply with both the terms of the agreement and also the regulations so I have to make sure they are not spending money on funding something they shouldn't. My background in grants transferred very, very well.

I try to visit all the heritage areas at least once a year. I have seven (heritage areas) now. It is a lot of fun and a little bit easier compared to other regions because I have a smaller amount compared to like the Northeast region or the Southeast region. Three of the heritage areas I have are in Colorado. In one trip heading south I can hit two in Colorado and cross the border into New Mexico and hit another heritage area. Any time I do a site visit I try to do all three.

Skills needed to be a successful partner with the heritage areas: One is understanding what kind of assistance we as the park service can provide to the heritage areas both in my role and also other offices that I can tap into and kind of recruit to support the heritage areas. Another is financial assistance training is really valuable. Also being very personable because the heritage areas have a diverse set of people and diverse levels of experiences so it's good to have that collegial type of background. Another big skill to have is thinking creatively how you can problem solve certain issues that typically arise when working with heritage areas.

What kinds of problems are common with heritage areas: A lot of difficulties that our heritage areas have is change over in staff and board members. They change quite a bit. It is because a lot of our areas are very rural so it's very hard to recruit either board members that have time and can actively engage toward projects and staff that would be willing to live in some of these areas because housing can be quite difficult to secure in some of these rural heritage areas. That compounds when they have a high turnover in staff or board members because they have to constantly try to recruit but also have to try to train up the staff and get them back on board for some of their projects. That can sometimes create delays for them.

The contribution of the board members varies greatly across the areas. Some may have a less engaged group of board members. They are there just to be sitting in the seat as a representative for the county perhaps. The more developed boards will have more engagement where their board members will actively participate on committees or review projects or even help with the planning for projects. Typically, the heritage areas we have are understaffed so the board needs to take a more active role in order to support what the heritage area is doing in order for them to be successful. The number of board members varies from seven to thirteen or so. What we are trying to do especially with newer or newly designated heritage areas is to have them try to think about their board recruitment since it affects them down the road. If they set up a model where they expect their board members to actively engage and contribute towards the goals of the heritage area, then that sets them up for success later. Especially when they have less staff to tap into.

Skills needed for successful heritage areas staff: Honestly, it would be the same thing as what would be expected for the park service side. The financial assistance training is key because now they are receiving federal financial assistance and they are responsible to the taxpayer. That is really essential. They also have to learn how to think creatively with less resources and funding to do larger projects or more impactful projects. The staff and the board have to be very cognizant of fund raising and how to do that effectively. That is really where you see a separation between heritage areas that are just doing okay and heritage areas that are really taking it to the next level when they are thinking about, how can we leverage different funding and partnerships within our community and how can we work collaboratively with one another in order to get things done. How can we diversify our revenue stream in order to

succeed? If something falls through, they can essentially play the shell game and move the funding around or call someone to assist with an issue that we might have.

We have some heritage areas that use our federal funding as seed money, and they are able to leverage that for larger grants or even additional funding from other federal sources. The other half rely on our funding as their main source of funding in addition to the one-to-one match that they need. Some of these still are able to do well because they have their partners to support them. Some struggle because they are a non-profit in a rural area. It can be difficult in the west to find matching support for small non-profits. There is just less funding in the community. Some of our heritage areas are in areas of the state that are some of our more economically depressed areas. So, it can also be hard for public support.

Usually when we have these rural heritage areas they like to recruit locally and there might not be enough qualified candidates locally. They might see the heritage area as a steppingstone for another position.

Community acceptance of the heritage areas: All the heritage areas in our region are able to get county and state support. A lot of that too has to do with the projects they are able to do in the community, the outreach they have accomplished, and the publicity that they receive from those projects as well. The successful heritage areas are the ones that think about including county commissioners in some of those events. They are seen as an asset to the community.

Our heritage areas in the west have usually two to three people on staff. Usually there is an executive director and a financial officer and if they are lucky, they'll have an outreach coordinator. Only one heritage area in our region has multiple staff members and that is because they are not a non-profit. They are tied into a local government. That is Yuma Crossing. I just met their new executive director, Lowell Perry, last week. I think he has a fund-raising background. He seems to be working very well with them.

Changes needed in NPS partnership with heritage areas: I think it would be helpful if our region or even WASO could help alleviate some of the DOI approvals that we have had. That is the biggest thing, and we are working in our region right now to get additional support and create additional advocacy from our leadership team for the heritage area program. We heard across the board from heritage areas across the country that they always struggle with working with the park service because they don't feel that they are fully in the park service family. Our region in particular is trying to address that issue and an example of which is getting leadership support and creating more visibility of the program. Within our region we are trying to show the benefits of the heritage areas and the benefit of the park service and heritage area partnership as well.

The superintendents who are working directly with heritage areas see the benefits of that partnership. It is difficult, especially in the west, when we don't have a heritage area that is close by to a park to sell the idea of a partnership that might be far away from a heritage area, but I will say that most recently in the last few months we have been able to get leadership support here in our region for the program in particular in supporting the park liaison role. And, encouraging superintendents to more frequently work with heritage areas. Most of our parks do

not have a heritage area close by. Our region is large, and it is difficult to make the park heritage area connection because we are so spread out and we have only seven heritage areas.

Evaluation measures for heritage areas: I think it is a cumbersome process. It could be streamlined. And I think it costs way too much to get the evaluation done. Yuma Crossing has gone through theirs. They were able to get reauthorized prior to completion of the evaluation. Which is another one of my grips about the process. It takes too long to get done, and with any plan or study that the park service does itself it waits on someone's desk in DOI for months and months and months because of a backlog of other studies. After the contractor has done the evaluation, it sits on someone's desk waiting for high level review and approval.

I think they are over-evaluating. That Yuma crossing NHA could be reauthorized before the evaluation was completed shows that the process is extremely political. Sometimes we may be spending an excessive amount of money for something that Congress may or may not even fully read. There are pros and cons to it obviously. I think it is a tool that can show the impact of the heritage areas. They can go to their congressman and say here's what we have done, here's our evaluation and what the findings are. But I think we can do that in a more streamlined way.

Sunsetting: I have thought a lot about this over the years. When I was first brought on and heard about the program, I thought that yes, sure, they should sunset. But after I have seen the work that these heritage areas do. After talking every single week with board members and executive directors for several years now I have seen, especially in our western heritage areas, the need for that funding. I don't necessarily think that they have to sunset. I do support them continuing their funding if they are reauthorized.

Lobbying: Our heritage areas do talk to their congressmen. It is kind of a skewed model from what some of the eastern areas said because they started out with a larger funding source. That is what they have to maintain. It is a lot harder to ask for additional money than to maintain what you have. Especially when you talk to your congressman. Our heritage areas meet frequently with their local politicians as well as state. Yuma was able to win over John McCain and that led to their reauthorization. Several of our Colorado heritage areas are able to do that. There is no doubt though that some of the older heritage areas that might be on the east coast have a stronger relationship or stronger connection with their elected officials because they have maintained that for a longer duration of time. But, I think, our heritage areas are certainly actively connecting with their elected officials and continuing to build their relationships.

Successes of some Inter-Mountain region heritage areas: Going one by one, Mormon Pioneers has been a huge advocate and fund source and partner for a lot of historic preservation projects of physical historic properties along their heritage corridor and have received tons of historic preservation awards. Yuma Crossing has a storied history of wetland restoration and getting folks who have had a contentious past to come to the table and work together on wetland restoration. For example, they were able to get their local city and state park and local ranchers and farmers and tribes together to work on wetland restoration along the Colorado River. This was really huge. It takes a long time to do that. For Cache la Poudre they have had a lot of success in supporting youth and community nature projects along the river front. Supporting educational programs locally about water laws. South Park and Sangre de Cristo have been very

good with local historic preservation work. They also have built archeology programs that engage youth and young adults. Sangre de Cristo has partnered a lot with Great Sand Dunes National Park & Preserve for those projects as well. Northern Rio Grande, they have a big heritage area. They've really tried to support tribal needs as well as their local art community on various projects. Across the board we have a diverse set of heritage areas in that they do different things and are able to work with and collaborate with a lot of different community groups that have sometimes complex agendas.

A lot of my involvement is helping the heritage areas with retraining of staff as new employees come on board. I usually have to do a site visit and go through the forms and explain the type of agreement we set up. Tell them what is expected. What has been completed in the past. Explain the park service and heritage area relationship as well. Each region handles it a little bit differently. In our region we like to stress to our heritage areas that we are a resource to them, and they shouldn't be afraid to pick up the phone and give me a call or ask for assistance. If they have an idea to work with a park always bring that forward and we can try and help build that partnership between them. It is always interesting to kind of go through that whole explanation.

NPS advantage to NHAs: The park service is really a huge pool of resources and assistance for the heritage areas to tap into. Usually what I do is to set aside funding each year in order to support another park service staff member to go out to a heritage area. I try to build that into my budget. Sometimes the folks that we recruit for these projects get so excited about the project they are willing to ask their own program to help support some of their time or travel. They have been successful in that. Our regional administration is supportive. That is the type of mindset we try to encourage here.

NHA benefit to NPS mission: You know it's been really great to have the heritage areas be involved. We have used the phrase that the heritage area program extends the mission of the park service outside of the boundaries of the parks. It takes it to the communities and makes it visible. When our heritage areas work with parks specifically it is usually through youth engagement or community engagement projects. They'll tackle a youth summit together and we'll have flat hats provide training or giving tours or talks with young adults and youth and then the heritage area will help coordinate workshops and training and site visits in collaboration with the park. What we try to explain to the park is that everybody is stretched thin in resources, staff, and funding, both the heritage areas and the park service. So, the best way to accomplish whatever project you have going on is you can split the work or the funding in some way and that is usually where these projects develop. The heritage area will take one aspect of the project and the park will take another. They can get it done together.

Partners: Outside of the park service the partners for the heritage areas are usually local government and the county that usually provides the most support. They can coordinate with local volunteer corps through them as well. But the heritage areas in our region are starting to create their own volunteers corps. It is working really well. Cache (La Poudre River NHA) have been the most successful in doing this. They actually have a program; it's a volunteer corps program called the heritage culturalist program. They recruit people within the community and have a two-week intensive training for the volunteers. These are people from every walk of life, every age group. They train the volunteers on what the heritage area is all about. They'll take

them out to some of their historic sites or out to the river to learn about the trails that they have, some of the educational programs that they have. Then after that training, they ask the volunteers to decide on a project of their own that they would like to take on in order to give back to the heritage area or become a leader in the heritage area. Different things that have come out from that are some volunteers offered to be researchers for the heritage area. Some have provided guided walking or bicycling tours along the river for the heritage area. They'll run the events that they have within the community. There are so many things they can tap into through that volunteer resource. They are serving as a good model. For a long time, we only had Yuma as our oldest heritage area to be the model and now we are seeing Cache La Poudre stepping up as a great model for a more mature developed heritage area.

Differences of procedures from one region to another: I think this is of major concern for me because it has such drastic implications for the program as a whole. The heritage areas talk to one another even if they are outside their own region and they have a strong network. When the regions are not giving the same information on the same topic it can cause some difficulty for the coordinators or even how business is done. The biggest thing is if we can create more consistency in how we operate the program the better.

I think it is possible, but we have to make some pretty hard decisions. WASO should really make the decision. I think one need is to have program legislation in place. But I think they could stress the needs to the regions and try and garner support from them in order to support a consolidation of coordinators or regions for the program. Right now, for example, we have Peter who has more than 20 heritage areas in his region and Alaska with one heritage area in their region. We have four in Pacific West, seven in mine, and Southeast has twelve. The Midwest has eight or nine. Based on the general numbers I think we could shift some of the heritage areas to different regions under a single coordinator rather than have a single coordinator in each single region. Northeast could probably use more staff people. This is just an idea. I don't know if we necessarily need a coordinator in Alaska if we only have one heritage area there. We might be able to rethink how we have a division of labor. Or, how we divide the heritage areas across the regions. I think it could work with the present NPS regional organization. The regional directors would have to be at the table with WASO in that discussion. We have one heritage area that crosses over into two regions, Pacific West and IMR so should we be looking at that heritage area a little bit more strategically in how we assign it to one region vs another. We are going to continue to get more heritage areas and potentially some of those will cross into multiple regions. Thinking about how we will handle that strategically.

I think the evaluations are overly comprehensive. If we set up a team through WASO and regional folks to look at the evaluation measures and streamline it and make it more cost effective, then it would be a lot better. Some of the primary things that should definitely be covered is what has the heritage area accomplished related to their original management plan? Have they set up a diverse set of partnerships? Different revenue streams? What is their economic impact? That is usually what Congress looks at when they are evaluating but we go much more beyond that. But I think we could make the case to review and create the evaluation in a more streamline way.

The heritage areas have to do a lot of work in order to get the information to the evaluators. They have to be very active and participate in the process so that does cost time and money for them. The grips that we heard were that they were concerned about how long it took for the evaluation to get completed. I understand that DOI has a lot of other plans and studies on their desks but something we should look into is how we can both streamline the process and also improve or shorten the length of time to which a study is actually completed.

I think we need more finalized guidance on feasibility studies and the management plans. Right now, we have a draft feasibility study guidance and really do not have a comprehensive management plan document. We have separate tools for folks to use for the management plan process like we've got one toolkit for interpretive planning and one for business and financial planning another for NEPA compliance, but we don't have a central document that says this is what you need to do to complete a management plan. I think that would best be done with WASO coordinating that with input from regions.

All of our heritage areas in our region are active members of the Alliance.

I love the heritage area program. I am actually trying to get approval to devote all of my time towards the program, because I want to do more and build the program up a bit more here. It is hard to have one foot in the program and the other foot in other programs as well. I really enjoy working with all of our heritage areas and being able to go out to the heritage areas, see what they are doing, see how they are getting their communities involved, talking with their boards and their staff. All the people we get to work with within the park service. Yes, it is a very satisfying job for me.

The only other thing I would point out is the difference between east and west heritage areas. For example, out here there is a lot of concern about private property rights. This makes it more difficult for the areas to get going on projects. It might be nice to have a conversation about that with the other regional coordinators and see how that is playing out in their region or not playing out. Seeing how we can develop maybe resource tools for heritage areas that are geographically specific. Especially for communities that want to establish a heritage area.