National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

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

Eldon Reyer
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

Eldon Reyer

28 October 2016

Interview conducted by
Lu Ann Jones

Transcribed by
Teresa Bergen

The narrator has reviewed and corrected the transcript.

Audiofile: REYER Eldon 28 October 2016

[START OF TAPE 1]

Lu Ann Jones: We'll just do a little test. I generally ask people when I start off to give me their full name and date of birth, if that's okay.

Eldon Reyer: Eldon George Reyer.

Lu Ann Jones: And where were you born?

Eldon Reyer: Born in Sheridan, Wyoming.

Lu Ann Jones: How do you spell that?

Eldon Reyer: Don't know. (laughter)

Lu Ann Jones: Were you born on a ranch?

Eldon Reyer: No. My father was a Prohibition agent, undercover, was stationed in Sheridan, Wyoming, and handled Wyoming, mainly. I was born, and four months later, Prohibition was repealed. So we moved to Colorado so my dad could find a job in the dairy. Out of federal service. Looking for a job.

Lu Ann Jones: And what year were you born?

Eldon Reyer: Thirty-three, 1933.

Lu Ann Jones: Thirty-three. Let's see what we—

[END OF TRACK 1]

[START OF TRACK 2]

Lu Ann Jones: You have had a long park service career. So, I was curious about how you got interested in working for the National Park Service.

Eldon Reyer: (laughs) Probably not the normal. For sure.

Lu Ann Jones: Okay.

Eldon Reyer: Because my youth spent as a Boy Scout, and I didn't have time for sports, or girls, or anything like that. But my five buddies and I would go into the Rocky Mountain National Park on hikes. In September, let's see, that would be 1945, we were camped and watched a rider come down off of the Continental Divide, leading two pack mules. He rode up to our camp and asked if he could share the meadow, and we said sure. So he unpacked and picketed his horse. And we offered him some stew. He told us about his chosen career as a national park ranger. And I thought, you know, I could do this.

Eldon Reyer: So, the rest of my school years, I read every book in the library about national parks, National Park Service. Most of them were about Yellowstone National Park. I thought, I'm going to be a ranger. But then when I graduated in 1952, I knew I had to go to college. So I was trying to figure out how to work a year, then go to school, and work a year. Well, the Korean War came up, and we were subject to draft. So my buddies and I decided we didn't want to be foot soldiers, so we enlisted in the navy. When I came home from the navy, saw action in Korea. I had the GI Bill, so I immediately went to college at Fort Collins. And that's where I got started, anyway. But I didn't have a job that summer because my GI Bill didn't carry over in the summer. So I had four months. I decided I would try to get a job in Yellowstone. Filled out an application for the fire guard. Filled it out. Highly qualified. They hired me.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, so how had you, had you had experience as a fire guard?

Eldon Reyer: No. Well, I knew how to handle tools. I instructed in Boy Scouts on, you know, hiking and camping and everything. There was a list of skills, knowledge and experience. I qualified for everything, but the last thing on there was, "must handle stock," and I didn't have any experience. But I thought, you know, I was born in Sheridan, Wyoming. If you're born in Wyoming, you're a cowboy. But that didn't qualify. But when I got to college and found the freshman girls wearing tight jeans. Checked them out. They belonged to the Rodeo Club. So I went to the Rodeo Club and they talked me into bareback riding. So I bucked out bareback horses. So I just marked "yes" and mailed it off. They hired me. Highly qualified. (laughter) But I just started from scratch as a fire guard.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, how did you learn to become, being a packer was so much a part of your entire career. How did you learn that?

Eldon Reyer: Well, when I got there and checked in, I had to go down to the fire cache and wait for the fire officer to come and assign me my summer's job. And so when he got there, it was Scotty Chapman, who had 32 years in Yellowstone as a ranger. He knew every trail. He'd fought fires in every corner of the park. He was a ranger's ranger. He had my forms when he got down there. He said, "Eldon, I have a job I'd like you to consider taking, as a swamper for the government mule packer." He said, "You have more maturity, and I know you can do the job." But he wasn't assigning me; he was asking me if I would take the job. And I said sure I will.

Eldon Reyer: So, he sent me to the back of the fire cache, and down the hill about a hundred feet was a goat and mule packer and 15 head of mules. So I went down and introduced myself. The packer was 74 that summer. He'd been packing for 60 years. So he and I split the mules into two teams. And so for four months, I led a pack stream of seven mules, and learned to pack and take care of them in the back country. We spent ten days in, four days out. Then go in another ten days.

Lu Ann Jones: And what would you do when you were in the—

Eldon Reyer: We were packing in supplies to the patrol cabins. And then we had three project fires, where we had to pack in the fire kitchen, and all of the food for the fire fighters and everything. This is before they had rations. So you got steak and eggs. Good food. But mainly we were keeping the trails open and keeping the mules in shape for being able to go in on fires and work hard.

Lu Ann Jones: So, what does it take to be a good packer?

Eldon Reyer: (laughs) Well, John Card, when I told him I was his swamper—

Lu Ann Jones: And what does being a swamper mean?

Eldon Reyer: Swamp, the helper, basically. It's an old cowboy reference to a swamper that does all the wood gathering and helps the cook. That's basically what they called it, swamper. But he said to me, he says, "Well, I suppose you want to learn to be a packer." Before I could answer, he says, "I don't have time to teach you. But if you want to learn, you watch me close all the time. And when you see me do something three times the same way, that's the right way. If I do it once and don't repeat it, that's the wrong way."

Eldon Reyer: That was the extent of my training. So I had to watch him, everything he did, tying his knots. Then I would practice them so I could do them. Within 30 days, I was a good packer. I was young and fairly athletic. But I learned how to care for the animals, taking them out, that kind of thing. So, in fact, four months really made me a packer.

Eldon Reyer: When I left the park, John had already taken his mules to winter pasture. I was coming in with mine, making my last run. And I was going to go to, across Montana, Wyoming, to Colorado. When I got up that, at four o'clock in the morning to get away before the snow hit, John was asleep in the bed next to the door. But he heard me and he stuck his hand out and he says, "So long, Packer Eldon Reyer. I'll see you in spring."

Eldon Reyer: And I said, "So long, Packer John Card. I'll see you next summer."

Eldon Reyer: Well, when I got to the bottom of the steps I thought, I'm a packer. John said I was. And I've been a packer ever since. John died the next spring. So, there was a big hole in my heart to lose my packer.

Lu Ann Jones: How do you spell his last name?

Eldon Reyer: C-a-r-d.

Lu Ann Jones: Card. Uh huh.

Eldon Reyer: Maybe two "r"s in there, I don't know.

Lu Ann Jones: So, is part of packing also just balancing the load?

Eldon Reyer: Yes. Weighing it out. John could look at a couple of packs and tell you the weight. I mean, he was so sensitive to it, balance. Even today, I use the same technique. I don't use a scale. I can balance out a load. Just lifting it.

Lu Ann Jones: So how much can the mule carry? What kind of weight?

Eldon Reyer: Well, they can carry 20 percent of their body weight. So, you have to sort of know the weight a mule is, which is generally a thousand pounds to about three hundred. Three hundred. So just figure about 80 pounds is all you want to put on each side. A hundred and sixty is a good weight for a mule.

Eldon Reyer: And these mules were all army surplus mules from Camp Carson, Colorado. And some of them had seen action in Korea, as packers. So they were very well-trained mules. That was good, because mules can be hard to work with. But they were perfect mules for me to learn on.

Lu Ann Jones: So, did you learn to train mules yourself, later on?

Eldon Reyer: Well, I did some mule packing. In fact, Karen and I owned two mules later on after we retired. But no, I really didn't train mules, but I did pack horses. I went to pack horses. So I've had pack horses since 1989. So I've probably had eight or nine pack horses. I've got one now.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, so you talked about, you called somebody a ranger's ranger. One thing, what did being a national park ranger mean to you?

Eldon Reyer: Probably the pride; being able to take pride in my job. Because I've run into people, not only in the National Park Service but in the private sector, that are not happy in their job. And I could never figure out why, because I was the happiest person in the world. Just to be a ranger. But I think a lot of it was what I got from those old-line rangers. Simply because I figured out later when I got into management and supervision, most of them, in fact, I cannot think of one that was not a veteran of World War Two. And their attitude and their pride in the park service and being a ranger showed. I didn't know I was absorbing that early on, but I'm sure I did, because they really had the pride that I wanted to have. So I think that influenced my basic concept of what a ranger should be. And like I say, I've run into employees that just didn't like their job. My counsel was, "Find another one." We didn't have room for those kind of unsatisfied people.

Lu Ann Jones: Did being a ranger mean having certain skills that you could do?

Eldon Reyer: Yeah. I think so. Strangely enough, the rangers that I worked with in Yellowstone were very visitor-oriented. I mean, they went out of their way to make contact with the visitors. And as my career progressed, I found that didn't exist in every park that I worked in. And particularly when we went into a heavy law enforcement situation, and all of a sudden the ranger became the policeman, and they could not get close contact with the visitor. That was one of the hardest things to teach a ranger is how to approach the public, because they're all of a

sudden a policeman. So I found that a real challenge for me, because I never strapped on a firearm. I never wore one. Didn't need one, I thought. But I think that transition when we went into that law enforcement mode was a real challenge for a lot of park service people that were visitor-oriented, found it very hard to make contact.

Lu Ann Jones: About when did that transition happen?

Eldon Reyer: Well, let me see. Probably when I was, when I was in Custer Battlefield and then Washington, which would have been the early seventies. There was a law passed that rangers must have a certain amount of law enforcement training. That's when we opened up the training centers, law enforcement training centers. And strangely enough, I didn't qualify to be a chief ranger, but I could be a superintendent. (laughter) Sort of reversed the situation.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, when did you know that you were going to make the park service your career?

Eldon Reyer: Well, I don't think there was ever any question that I wasn't. Even when I was dating Karen, her mother was probably one of the wisest women I'll ever know, because she saw in me, I think, a ranger. She told me later, after Karen and I were married, that Karen wanted to marry a cowboy or a ranger, and I was both. She said, "I knew you were the man for my daughter." (laughter) So she nurtured me along. But even Lon [Garrison, legendary NPS ranger and administrator], her dad, took me aside and told me about his career, which paralleled mine – fire guard, smoke jumper, etcetera. He'd done the same things until he got his permanency. But he wanted me to get into uniform, and I was still a fire guard, out of uniform. So he convinced me to go into ranger, seasonal ranger. But I didn't want to do that because normally they work the gates, collecting fees. And I was having fun packing mules.

Eldon Reyer: But when I went up there the year that I became a seasonal, the district ranger called me out of the orientation class and told me to get into field uniform because I was going to go out and select a pack horse and a saddle horse and be assigned to a back country horse patrol. So my reputation for the first three years got me that job, and that didn't stop, because Hal Edwards was the district ranger. Karen and I had our daughter, she was still in the hospital, and I didn't have a job. But I made application for summer jobs and winter jobs, hoping I'd get something like Everglades or maybe Grand Canyon.

Eldon Reyer: Well, I got a phone call to call back a phone number collect. And when I called it, it was the chief ranger's office. And Hal Edwards was chief ranger. I thought it was in Yellowstone, but it was Big Bend. And he said, "I've got your application. I need a horse patrol ranger."

Eldon Reyer: I said, "When do you want me?"

Eldon Reyer: And he said, "Yesterday." So that happening got me – well, where I had eleven months seasonal. Then I went to Carlsbad for a month, a year and a half, and got my permanency and could transfer back. Hal called me back down to Big Bend as a permanent. So that's when I got my permanent status. Had I not had experience with Hal, and Hal knew me, knew my skills, and he knew Karen, that she would live in an isolated situation, which we did, 80 miles from town and 30 miles from headquarters in a little trailer house with a baby. He knew that she could do that. So I have to give credit to Karen for her professionalism. There was never a question. When she wanted to move, we moved. (laughter) She was willing. But I think that's her family upbringing as well.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, what was it like to be on horse patrol at a place like Big Bend?

Eldon Reyer: Well, again, I had the experience at packing mules, but not as just a single pack horse and staying in patrol cabins. And I was the only ranger in the [Galveton?] district. He told me I had 117 miles of trail to ride at least once during the summer. But I had to learn from my horses. And when I picked my two horses, Hal said, "That's the only ones I'd let you take because they were born and raised in the park. They're very wildlife-oriented. They know grizzly bears." And so I would pay attention to my mules and my horses. So whenever I couldn't find a patrol cabin, I'd just slack up on the reins and they'd take me right to the door. Because they'd been there over the 25 years that they'd been in the park. They knew everything. And they'd stop, turn and go up the hillside. I'd let them go. Then we'd turn and look down and we'd find a grizzly standing in the trail. They could smell a grizzly a mile away, and they would climb the hill rather than go down, because grizzlies can't catch them going up. It's hard for a grizzly to go uphill. But the horses can do it. So that kind of stuff I had to learn.

Eldon Reyer: I had some close encounters, but I never had any real serious accidents or anything like that. Simply because I think I learned to be careful and cautious with horses.

Lu Ann Jones: So how often would you be away, and your wife would be there with the baby by herself?

Eldon Reyer: Well, as the only ranger in Big Bend on the west side, so I had a patrol pickup and a trailer for the horse, because we had illegal activity coming across. What it was was candelilla wax, which is they boil the cactus and get the cutin off of it and then pour it out and let it harden. And they use to make phonograph records, shoe polish and stuff. They would harvest the plant in the park, which was illegal. So they would have what we called wax camp. They'd pack up this candelilla wax plant on burros, and then they'd boil it off at night. So, we were constantly trying to find these camps.

Eldon Reyer: In Mexico, they'd do the same thing, and then they'd bring them across the Rio Grande and through the park at night. And so a lot of my patrols were at night. And I learned to use my horse. He was a Mexican horse, and he knew the desert,

and he could track these burros. He'd he'd take me right to the two burros. And so I spent a lot of nights away from home and Karen. We came back down and they had converted the old cavalry officer's house for us to live in. So we really stepped up from trailer to an old cavalry officer's house. We spent two years, two and a half years in Big Bend that way. Then went to Carlsbad.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, how did you get used to different parks? I mean, Carlsbad's pretty different, I think, from Big Bend. So, what was, one, how did you get different jobs, and then how did you make the adjustment to different parks?

Eldon Reyer: Well, we laid off after 11 months; we boarded up the car to drive to Yellowstone to visit her parents. We went through Carlsbad. We stopped at the caverns, and I asked if they had any seasonal job. He says, oh, no, they were having a federal entrance exam in Carlsbad for park guides, and it would be Saturday. So we laid over and I signed up for the test. Took it. And used the address of her parents in Yellowstone. So while visiting them, I got a card that I'd been selected as a park guide in Carlsbad. That meant I could get permanency.

Eldon Reyer: So, we had to go to Big Bend, load up all the household belongings, again a little two-horse trailer and then went to Carlsbad. And then they hired us back as permanents. So it was basically a reputation, but that was the first time that all the positions, park service ranger positions, were frozen. But the park guides weren't. So there were 20 of us that took that test and got park guides at Carlsbad. Of that 20, ten of us came in as superintendents or associate regional directors.

Lu Ann Jones: Wow.

Eldon Reyer: Because of that – we had interpretation. We had to give talks. Lead people through the caves and before the free roaming, so we'd have as many as 300 people on a tour. So we learned how to handle people, give talks. I became a supervisor. So when we went to Canyonlands, I was selected for the first staff, you had to have interpretation and resource management experience. And that cave experience was the reason I went to Canyonlands. So it's building up your repertoires as you go along. People knew I'd been a guide. They knew what it took to be a guide. And when a supervisor is making a selection, they just add up the numbers.

Lu Ann Jones: So how did you, were you given any training in terms of supervision? In terms of interpretation? Or what was training like in the park service in that point in your career?

Eldon Reyer: I think most of it, the interpretation, like in Big Bend, we had to give an evening talk once a week. That was just part of a job. Again, the old-line rangers believed in interpretation and resource management. That was the two key words. So giving interpretive talks at night, I liked it. And I liked the guide work, just the contact with people up and down the trail. So I don't know. I didn't receive any

formal training. But I observed some pretty sharp interpreters in Yellowstone and Big Bend. So it was all just part of the job. We never considered anything else.

Eldon Reyer: But as far as supervision, that really didn't start until I was at Canyonlands. And I didn't have any supervision there. But when I went to Mount McKinley, I had eight people. So I sort of had to learn by example, really. That was so until mid-level management came in. That all changed my career tremendously.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, I'd like to go back to Canyonlands, because I think when we talked the other day you said that was a very important experience. I think part of it because it was a new park, so it was a start-up. So, could you talk about why that was such an important part of your career development?

Eldon Reyer: Yeah, I think we had heard about Canyonlands from the training center when we were there. Frank Kowski was director of the center, and Frank Kowski would be one of those ranger's rangers. He started the training center, so training was the uppermost in his career. And he really started the concept of interpretation and resource management. He was instrumental in selecting the staff for Canyonlands, along with the superintendent, Bates Wilson. So when I got the word from him that I was going, I knew that it had to do with interpretation. And I just made my days learning my own skills in interpretive, because you've got to know the resource to interpret it, and that was their emphasis. So we spent that one year that we were at Canyonlands learning about archeology, geology; it was all right there, and we just had to interpret it for the planners, mainly. What's significant about a sandstone rock? So we were able to contribute to that in the master planning for the future of that park. And I think that's what drove us. We worked 20 hours a day. (laughs) But that was fun. It was a new experience.

Lu Ann Jones: How were you learning about the geology and all of that?

Eldon Reyer: Well, they were smart enough to hire people that had that degree. I had a degree in biology and geology and political science. So, and I got involved with oral history because we needed to—

[END OF TRACK 2]

[START OF TRACK 3]

Eldon Reyer: —talk to some of the old time ranchers. One of the ranchers north of the park had lived on this little spring and built a cabin. He'd been arrested and put in jail for cattle theft, and then he broke out. So for 19 years he lived there and nobody ever bothered him because he had carried a gun all the time. They left him alone.

Eldon Reyer: We decided we were going to go interview him and take the tape recorder. He met us at the gate and he said no. And then his wife come up and says, "Why not? Why don't we give them the history of this spring?" So we were able to get a recording that other people could not only get a recording, they couldn't even talk to him. But we did. So we thought man, we contributed, I think, to some of the

early history of that park, long before it was a park. Then we had him take us and show us some of the places that we could find water. Springs that nobody knew about. And to be able to travel that country when you needed to get water, we could find it, because he'd showed us on the map how to find this springs. So, he became a friend.

Lu Ann Jones: That's a great story.

Eldon Reyer: Yeah. After he sold the ranch and moved to town, he ran that bought the ranch, was an old park ranger, and then he'd worked for the BLM. He's the one that then his wife did all the cattle gathering while he was still working for BLM. And the wife would drive from Page, Arizona, when we lived there, at Lake Powell, up with our horses and get up cattle for his wife. And then we'd go up the next weekend and help brand. So we were traveling 108 miles just to help out this rancher. He eventually fell off a truck and broke his back. His wife of 40 years went out every fall and rounded up cattle for him, and then I'd go up and work, brand, and dehorn them. So that was part of our personal life, and yet it was related to Canyonlands. Because it was right at Canyonlands. So that's the way we sort of paid it back.

Lu Ann Jones: That's nice. But where did you go after Canyonlands?

Eldon Reyer: Well, they said we'd be there a year. And they didn't want us to homestead. So they said after a year we'd be transferred. But my wife, with our daughter, went to Omaha to visit her dad, who'd become regional director in Omaha. So she took the truck and went up there. I was still down in the park in Canyonlands. The superintendent says, "Don't go out Monday. Come into headquarters in Moab. You'll get a phone call at nine o'clock."

Eldon Reyer: So, I was sitting there waiting. I get a call and it was Oscar Dick. But Oscar Dick had been chief ranger in Yellowstone, so we knew him real well. He wanted to know if Karen was there. I said, "Well, no, she's in Omaha visiting Lon and Ingrid."

Eldon Reyer: He says, "Okay, I'll call you back." He hung up. He called Karen and asked her if she would live in Mount McKinley because he was now superintendent of Mount McKinley. And when she said she'd live in Mount McKinley – which is isolated as heck – then he called me back and offered me the job. (laughter) If she'd have said no, I wouldn't have been selected for that job. But there was an old-line ranger that used common sense, that he wanted to make sure the wife would be able to survive it. So that's where we went to Mount McKinley then. And we were there two and a half years.

Lu Ann Jones: So, what was that like at that point?

Eldon Reyer: Well, it was before the road from Fairbanks to Anchorage, so there was no driving. You had to rely on the railroad that came through twice a week, on Sunday and Wednesday night at midnight. And then bush pilots. So you'd charter

a plane to pick you up and fly you into Fairbanks. So it was really isolated. We only plowed the road three miles from the housing area down to the railroad depot.

Eldon Reyer: I got there, went to see Oscar Dick. I said, "Oscar, what do I do to drive a sled dog team?"

Eldon Reyer: He said, "Take nine, and good luck." That was the training. In other words, you can experience, do it. That's the only way to learn is to do it. You can't take instruction on how to – but I had to know how to hook up the dogs and then we had older dogs that were probably 14 or 15, and they were just about to the end of their time. So Oscar told me, "You've got two female dogs that we keep for raising pups. And we've got four mature dogs. Take one of those dogs and breed one of those females and see what kind of replacement dogs we can get."

Eldon Reyer: So, Karen and I went through the process of selecting a dog that didn't know what he was doing, and he would not breed. (laughter) And that's the one Oscar thought we should breed. Karen and I said – well, my lead dog probably is the dumbest one. But he's the biggest, heaviest, stoutest. His paws are good. So we bred him to the female. And we got nine male dogs. Which was unheard of. There wasn't a female, because you put the females down. We just only ran male dogs. So we ended up with these pups. Within four months, I had a team of nine.

Eldon Reyer: So, I'd make patrols. The patrol cabins were a dog sled day apart. You'd go from one to the other. Then we'd go out in the summertime and stock them with dried fish and dog food, the cabins, so we didn't have to haul it with us. But then I made probably 30 patrols that way.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, how was dealing with dogs? How did that compare with dealing with horses or mules?

Eldon Reyer: (laughs) Well, I knew dogs, because I grew up with dogs. So I understood that aspect of it. But Karen was very much into, she was thinking she wanted to be a veterinarian, anyway. But she became a veterinary technician, which is equal to that, as far as I'm concerned, because she's a very intelligent woman when it comes to animal husbandry. So she helped me with the pups and made sure they had the vaccinations and everything. But there's really not any comparison because with the horse, you're in control. With the dogs, you were at the mercy of the dogs. We'd tie off the sled to a tree with a rope attached to the sled and string out the harness and then put the dogs in. You'd jerk that rope loose, the first mile was wide open running, and you had really no control until they settled down. So that part of the training was pretty much up to the dogs. But it seems like they knew exactly what they were supposed to do. It was born in them. They were born sled dogs. And most of them, I think all mine were 110 to 120 pounds. Big husky dogs.

Lu Ann Jones: What kinds of things were you looking for on patrol there?

Eldon Reyer: There was some poaching going on. In fact, we had heard that a pilot, a bush pilot was hunting wolves in the park, using a shotgun attached to the wing of his airplane. And he'd fly down in [unclear] wolves, female and female, and shoot them, there was a fifty dollar bounty on them. And then he would sell the hide for five hundred. So that's why they were flying in the parks. So by taking the sled dogs out, we'd keep track of the number of wolves that we saw. Because they would follow us. They would follow the dog team. And we'd keep track of how many wolves were in a pack. And we had five packs. So we wanted to find out where they wintered. So then we wrote reports on them. But just to be out in the park, to see it in the wintertime.

Lu Ann Jones: Remind me, when is this in relationship to the management training that you took?

Eldon Reyer: Well, I came out of then McKinley to Grand Canyon. I was the district ranger. And I put two years in. And in 19, it would have to be 1970, Frank Kowski, we'd been at the training center—

Lu Ann Jones: Are you talking about the Albright training—

Eldon Reyer: Mm hmm. And he got me on Canyonlands staff. I was, I think I was cleaning my saddle on my day off one Saturday. And Frank drove into my driveway, or my yard. He'd been over to the training center and he'd been appointed regional director of the Southwest Region here in Santa Fe. Frank was, we considered a close friend. He and [Al?], his wife, with Karen and I. He wanted to know if Karen was around. And I said no, the girls and Karen are over with the horses. He asked me to take him up the lake in one of the tour boats. So we did, but the boat was so noisy we couldn't carry on a conversation. Finally he motioned to the beach and we put in. And he walked up and down the beach and I could tell, being an old ranger, I think he missed being a ranger.

Eldon Reyer: Finally, he said, "Eldon, where are you going to be in your career ten years from now?" I said, "Man, I think I'd like to be a chief ranger of a major park." He says, "No. You're going to be an associate regional director." I said, "I am?"

Eldon Reyer: He said, "Yes." And he said, "There's going to be a notice coming around for a mid-level management training program that's a two-year on-the-job training. We're missing young rangers moving into park management from the old-line rangers of World War Two; there's a big gap because it's been frozen so long, there's no new blood coming in. And we need to build up that pool," he said. "So this program is going to have each regional director select five people for the training. And then that will build our pool up to about 40 people that would be trained in management, budget, government legislation, supervision, everything that a ranger needs to know but a superintendent has to know." He says, "Go ahead and fill out the form." But he says, "I've already selected you for one of the slots."

Eldon Reyer: So, I filled it out and mailed it in. And it was selected, and I selected Superintendent Courtney Johnson to be my mentor and counselor. And so for two years, they moved me into a management assistant job in charge of concession operations. So, they refilled my job as a district ranger.

Eldon Reyer: So that program, I was probably taking, I think I took 12 different courses, formal courses, most of them were a week long. And by consolidating and doing one a year, it was all then two years. The key to that from a professional standpoint was that Frank Kowski reassigned me to the regional office in Santa Fe for a month. I didn't come in on detail. I was reassigned, so that my records show 30 days assigned to the regional office.

Eldon Reyer: I birddogged Frank. I sat in his office and participated in all the decisions and everything. The budget for the whole region, and position management. He had me review positions to see if they fit the job that he wanted the person to do before he'd hire somebody. So, I would give him the list of things to find out from somebody that he's hiring to put in the superintendency.

Eldon Reyer: Unbeknownst to me, we were required to write a progress report. So I wrote my progress report for that 30 days. But I had had a discussion with my father over in Colorado. He told me, first time he'd ever done it, he sat me down and talked to me about how proud he was of where I was in my career and that I got college education. It was something very dear to me to have my father do that, because he'd never done that. I put that in my report, that he was so proud that I was in the regional office. Thought that was key of my career.

Eldon Reyer: The report was sent by Frank Kowski to the director of the park service, George Hartzog at the time. George took a great deal of pride in employees. I just found my memorandum that the director wrote to Frank Kowski about how impressed he was with my progress report. I had said in there I wanted to take a lateral transfer before I got a park superintendency. George Hartzog said he'd consider that, but he was taking the park service needs first, and he wanted me placed on a secretarial selection. In other words, it was his little book of people that could be placed. I didn't pay much attention to that because I sort of thinking that's blowing smoke. (laughs)

Eldon Reyer: Well, within a month after I finished my two years, I got a call from Omaha regional director. He said, "The director has placed you as superintendent of Custer Battlefield." So I was pre-picked by the director, and regional director. Of course, couldn't say no, and didn't. So that's the way I got my superintendency.

Lu Ann Jones: What did it mean to you to be a superintendent?

Eldon Reyer: You know, funny thing is my district at Glen Canyon, I had probably more employees, I had a bigger budget. And the superintendent before Corky Johnson was Bill Briggle, who was notorious for stern management and personnel matters. But I got along with him because I accepted he was the superintendent. He taught

us zero base budgeting. When we went into budget planning, we had no money, and we had to justify every dollar that we needed. So I applied that with Custer, and we ended up with several thousand dollars that was surplus. I tried to turn it back to the regional director. He said, "No, put it in travel. Bank it." The next year, I got an increase for material that I needed. So I sort of learned that aspect before I got my superintendency. I really had some hard lessons at Glen Canyon. But that was – Custer Battlefield was small, less staff, less responsibility in terms of amount of acreage, even though I had a national cemetery to take care of. I had worked with my brother in Longmont when I was growing up in high school. He was a mortician, so I dug graves. I knew how to—(laughs). So when I took over the cemetery up there, I knew how to take care of a cemetery. So those great experiences, Custer was very easy.

Eldon Reyer: The challenge was the Indian movement was threatening to take over government areas. But when they got to my park and I had basically Native American staff, all but three out of nine, they thought it was great, and they didn't bother me. The regional office didn't understand why they didn't blow up Custer's grave, and I told them he was buried at West Point so that would have been futile. But I got an award, superior performance award, for how I handled the Indian movement up there. So that was a real feather in my cap, I think.

Lu Ann Jones: You said when you were in Washington a few years later, that it was at that point that the name of the park, or the site was renamed. Is that right?

Eldon Reyer: Well, yeah. First thing that came across my desk was a draft, a master plan. It had been in progress for two years. That was one of the reasons George Hartzog wanted me there was because he knew the master plan was coming and he wanted somebody that understood the planning. Well, Canyonlands was where I learned master planning, because we had to prepare basically a draft for that with all the resource information. So I was very critical of the master plan. Because I could see that it wasn't going to work, basically because the proposal was to acquire land for a new entrance station with no consideration for the fact that it was Indian land, reservation land, and could not be bought or transferred. So the master plan was null and void. So I rejected it, and the region supported me. And Hartzog, the director, agreed, and sent them back to redo their master plan. And part of that was I inserted in there then to change the name from Custer Battlefield to Little Big Horn Battlefield.

Eldon Reyer: Well, when the national plan was complete next time it came to Washington, legislation was needed to change the name. So I drafted the draft bill. I thought man, go full circle. Change it. So we did. And I felt pretty confident that it was going to go through. I was able to push it through myself. So, I'm proud of that.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, so what was it like to go from being, you know, driving a dog sled team and being a back country packer, etcetera, to now being a management person? What I imagine is that it was kind of a hard shift. But maybe not. So, kind of how did you make that transition?

Eldon Reyer: Well, it was hard. It was hard. And I think it's the only time Karen hesitated, about going to Washington, mainly because this is our two daughters. But I said, "You know, we've got to do it. It's part of our career." And she agreed. But it was still, you know, the big town. Of course, we had horses, and she said, "I'm not going if the horses don't go." So we said, we get a good school system, a place to put horses, and we found the perfect situation. Not only that, but she was able then to take a two-year course in veterinary technician and then was hired for another five years to teach in that course. So she taught at the junior college level veterinary technician. You know, she would not have had that chance in probably another park situation. So that part of it. But (laughs) my boss, when I went to Washington, was Dr. Curry. He was associate director for legislation and political affairs. And he had a PhD in political science. So he didn't know a whole lot about the park service. The reason he wanted to bring in somebody from the field to fill the supervisory position and office of legislation would have field experience and help him. He had a list of candidates. Five. I don't know who the other four were, but mine was on there.

Eldon Reyer: His secretary had been my clerk at Glen Canyon. She took care of my payroll and all my public affairs stuff. She was his secretary. She'd been transferred to Washington. So she knew me. She explained to him who I was, what my background was. And so I was invited in for an interview. She says, "A formality. You're hired." (laughter) So he hired me. But I had all of his confidence. Mainly because I was very open about things that were coming across my desk. It's related to the proposed legislation. And I had enough knowledge in the field to know what was good, what was bad or what we shouldn't do. So I could counsel him. And I ended up being more of a counselor than anything else. But after eight years, why, he was pretty well trained. (Lu Ann Jones laughs)

Eldon Reyer: But again, I had the confidence of every regional director. I had to deal with ten regional directors. And some of them, I'd worked for. So my reputation preceded me into Washington. I think that's the only reason I was successful there. But I knew supervision, and I had eight [unclear] specialists working with me. So.

Lu Ann Jones: What did you think it meant to be a good supervisor?

Eldon Reyer: Well, I don't always get, sort of, I guess tolerance is probably the thing that I had to deal with the most. I couldn't accept an employee's inability to perform as something that you just have to let go. I wanted to change it. If they're going to stay in the position, I've got the responsibility to direct them to upgrade their ability. And I think that their confidence of the employee is the only thing that will get them turned around if they're – and I've had problem people, mainly because they didn't have the drive, the initiative to do their job right, as I saw it. Again, I had to be able to articulate what the—

[END OF TRACK 3]

[START OF TRACK 4]

Eldon Reyer: —job was. And I was very strong position management by goals initiative. I wanted every employee I had, whether I supervised them directly or they were in the division that I supervised the division chief, I held the division chief responsible to take care of the employees' goals and objectives. So yearly we would go through a whole week of rewriting our job descriptions and setting our goals for the year. When I was associate regional director, it was very difficult for my staff to make that transition and start looking ahead a year where you want to be a year from now. But I did the same thing with the superintendents. We had 54 parks in the Southwest region, so 54 superintendents. And we sat down, or I would sit down with each one of them. "What do you want to accomplish within a year?" By the time that I retired, I had some really great, great superintendents out there, and they were doing the same thing with their staff. I really appreciate and enjoy the fact that I contributed that much to the regional office. Then they abolished the region so, I don't know if I was too progressive. I've been accused of being a hard nose, but it's for their good.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, being in Washington, and then legislative affairs in particular must have been politically tricky sometimes. How did you learn to deal with this? (laughs) Could you give me an example maybe of a situation or two that was kind of a hot potato and you had to deal with it?

Eldon Reyer: Yeah. (laughs) In fact, I just discussed with Rick Smith, who worked for me back there – we brought in four new field people to work on my staff. I wanted field people.

Lu Ann Jones: Was this in Washington or in the Southwest?

Eldon Reyer: In Washington. But we had to work with Phil Burton, a congressman from California. We called him the 51st senator because he would negotiate with senators and congressmen. And he'd get from us, the park service, what does the park service need to do in this state? If we had any pending legislation or boundary change or budget increase or a new area study, a new trail, anything that was legislatively sensitive, we had it in the file. And we had reviewed it, or I had determined whether we should push forward or whether it was worth it or not. I had to evaluate what will happen if we try to introduce the legislation. We've got to have a congressman introduce it, or a senator. So what would happen? What would be the political spinoff?

Eldon Reyer: Phil Burton would take that, and go to that congressman or senator, and say, "We want to introduce this legislation." We ended up putting together an omnibus bill. But Phil Burton (laughs), he was something else to deal with. He called me over to his office to find out something about the certain cost of a boundary change or something, an acquisition. Realistically, I should not be talking to him, let alone giving him information. But with Phil Burton on your side, and his staff well-tuned in to what was going on, he created this omnibus bill that cleaned the House of past pending legislation for 20 years that had never been acted on. We put it all together, and we ended up with 12 new park service areas in that bill. Plus,

wilderness that had not been acted upon. Ten new wilderness areas in parks. But I did all of the oversight on that. I didn't do the drafting of the bills, but my staff did. But I did the overview to make sure it was ready to go to Congress. And I think I got an incentive award for my contribution to that.

Eldon Reyer: But Phil Burton, one time we went into his office, and he wanted a park somewhere in New Hampshire, because he needed that congressman on his side to vote for this bill. We said "Congressman, that's not a nationally significant area."

Eldon Reyer: He opened his drawer to his desk and pulled out a vodka bottle and put it on the counter. He says, "Young man, Congress will tell you what's nationally significant. You just take care of it." (laughter) So it went in. But he was a hardcore. But he had my confidence, and I had his. There was nothing cynical about it. I mean, he was upfront with me, which kept me out of trouble, because I could get in trouble real easy.

Lu Ann Jones: What would make you get into trouble?

Eldon Reyer: Well, if I released information about a land acquisition appraisal, which he needed to put it in the bill, they'd know that it came from the park service, and they could trace it. Interior was very secretive about that kind of information. And sometimes establishment of a new area – when we were doing the legislation for Alaska, we were, I think we were five votes short of having enough votes for that bill to go through. Phil Burton picked that up like a bird dog, and he started negotiating with people. It was new to me, but the offshore oil cartel, which is the Gulf of Mexico, all the states that border the Gulf of Mexico were members of this group of congressmen and senators that governed how much oil was going to be leased.

Eldon Reyer: Phil Burton went to Johnston of Louisiana and asked for those votes. Senator Johnston said, "Phil, you get me a national park and you've got my five votes."

Eldon Reyer: Phil Burton called me in and said, "Eldon, find me a park in Louisiana."

Eldon Reyer: Well, we had a study of the Jean Lafitte pirate, and it was in the files. So I dug that out, gave it to Phil Burton, and he put it in a bill that we had put together. Sure enough, we had one vote over for the Alaska Lands Bill to be created.

Lu Ann Jones: Wow.

Eldon Reyer: So, one vote from a senator. And Jean Lafitte turns out to be one of the better units of the National Park Service, I think. But (laughs) I ended up drafting the bill that was actually introduced.

Lu Ann Jones: Were there other times when you could have gotten into trouble but stayed out of it?

Eldon Reyer: Probably in the, I may not know too much about some of – Big Bend was an example. They did the same thing. Phil wanted to establish wilderness; he had a wilderness study. Well, the senator from Texas that had that district did not want wilderness in Big Bend. Phil said, "Is there anything else we can do?"

Eldon Reyer: I said, "Yeah, there's a study on a national river, Rio Grande, below Big Bend." That had been squashed, politically. Don't touch it, don't even bring it up. I did.

Eldon Reyer: He went to the congressman or senator and said, "You either get wilderness or a national scenic river. Which do you want?" We got the river. He didn't want the wilderness, but we got the river. But again, that study had to come from the park service. It had never been surfaced before, and there had been a squelch put on it that don't bring it up, because it's too politically hot. So I could probably, if somebody had really thought about it very long – but again, I briefed the director almost weekly on the legislative program, so I had the confidence of the director. Sometimes it was—(laughs).

Eldon Reyer: The Caldera up here was proposed for park service acquisition, and I briefed the director on that. The Department of the Interior says, "We don't want another park area." So we had to play it down. But it was very difficult for the director to tell the person that was trying to get us to buy it that we're not going to put another park in New Mexico. (laughs) Well, since I've been retired, I've worked for Caldera to be transferred over to the park service. But I'm very low key.

Lu Ann Jones: (laughs) Why did you decide to leave Washington?

Eldon Reyer: We talk about the politics of the park service itself. I guess if I were to look at my entire career and when I didn't do something or should have done something, or should have known something, getting my transfer out of Washington was probably the key. Because I was trying to get out, because Karen was living here in Santa Fe because our daughter's health back there, she couldn't take the molds, she had asthma so bad. But a couple here in Santa Fe that were veterinarians offered Karen a job if she'd come out. So they took care of her and the girls to move out. But it was a whole year that I spent there by myself. I wanted to get out, so I was putting in for all the jobs that came across. Superintendency, mainly, because I didn't want to take anything less than a superintendent. I put two years in mid-level, eight years in Washington, and I felt I deserved. But I couldn't get my grade level up high enough. It was a 13. I needed to be a 14 so I could be promoted to a 15. So that was one step. I asked for an evaluation of my job description because I was the same grade level as all my employees. But they said, "Well, you don't qualify." I should have pushed that. I should have really pushed to get my evaluation done. But I didn't. I said okay, that's the system. I'll accept it.

Eldon Reyer: Well, Lorraine Mincemeyer was regional director in Rocky Mountain at the time. She came, she was a good friend of mine because she had been secretary for Karen's dad when he was regional director in Omaha. He saw a real bright young

lady and made her a budget officer. Well she lasted two years and they moved her to a superintendent of Buffalo River. From there she went to Santa Fe as a regional director. One of the first regional directors as a woman. She was a real sharp woman. Well, she became good friends with me because I worked the Rocky Mountain Region, so I was talking to her two or three times a week about legislation.

Eldon Reyer: She came to Washington for probably some other reason, but she came in to see me. She said "I've got Glacier National Park superintendency's going to open up through a retirement. I'd like you to apply for it."

Eldon Reyer: I thought man, first time I've had any help that I might be able to get a job back in the field. Well, I think it was finally three or four months later, I get a memorandum from the personnel office that I had been considered for the superintendency, but another name had been selected. It was a two-name register. I get a call from Lorraine. She apologized. She said, "Eldon, I asked you to sign up for that. But I had to select this other one because he's got more time in. He's got enough time for duty before his retirement."

Eldon Reyer: I said, "Lorraine, I understand. No problem." Well, I didn't realize, but I was an 025, which is ranger classification. I'd always been an 025. Three hundred is administrative. I got to looking at my pay slip. I had somewhere along the line of when I became a supervisor, they moved me into administration. And administration, the personnel office viewed that as not qualified, because I was not an 025. I didn't pick up on it. So, I sat there probably for four or five years trying to get out of Washington and everything was stacked against me.

Eldon Reyer: So, I told the director, I called him on Saturday at home. Mr. Dickinson. And I said, "Russ, I've got to resign and go to Santa Fe."

Eldon Reyer: And he said, "Oh, no. You're not retiring. I don't want you, I want people to see that coming into Washington has its rewards." He said, "You sit tight for four months. There's going to be a position open up that you'll recognize."

Eldon Reyer: So, I waited. Lorraine called me and said, "Glacier may open up. Do you want the job?"

Eldon Reyer: I said, "Well, the director's told me to sit tight." So I did. Next thing I know, I get a call from Bob Kirby, the director here in Santa Fe, offering me associate regional director. But the director had worked that out with Bob Kirby. That position was going to open up. So I was able to get out. But it was my fault, I should have known what my status really was, and I just took it for granted. But maybe waiting that long seemed better. Because I could have gone out.

Eldon Reyer: In fact, when I was just about, I had two years left, Lorraine told me that Glacier was going to open up, and did I want to be on the list? I said no, I'm going to retire here in Santa Fe. But I could have been superintendent of Glacier twice. (laughter)

Lu Ann Jones: So, we had talked about how jobs were not really advertised. I mean, somebody up above would kind of see the person that they wanted in that job, or thought could solve problems that were there that needed to be solved. So at what point – is that how jobs at that level are still filled today, do you think? Or at some point, are these more advertised? Or is it still that system?

Eldon Reyer: Yeah, the system at the time was called BEE, Bureau of Employee Evaluation. I actually sat on two or three panels to select superintendents at small parks or monuments. So we went through all the criteria and everything. To the extent that that goes to the regional director, if the regional director pushes on down to a superintendent or somebody like that, you don't have much control over that. But it was very frustrating for me to see the lack of information in the dossiers of people who didn't know how to write and explain their experiences and knowledge and training. I got real frustrated because I knew the person could do the job for a superintendency, but just wasn't there on paper. So I spent a lot of time sometimes calling them up and saying, "Look, you get your ducks in a row and emphasize this more. I know you know this, and I know you've done this." So that helped build some employees. But yeah, the regional director has the full power to decide one way or another.

Eldon Reyer: Bob Kerr, who was regional director, I was under him. John was a child with Karen in Grand Canyon. And so we knew John and John knew us, and we were close friends. But when John called me and said, "I've got a job I want you to take."

Eldon Reyer: I said, "What's that?" He said, "Mount McKinley." I said, "John, I don't want it. I've been there as a ranger. I don't want to go back."

Eldon Reyer: He says, "Okay." Well, as far as I was concerned, my career was over with John Cook. You don't say no to John Cook. And I did. But I had the associate regional director, John Cook was regional director in Santa Fe. I came in as his associate, which was tough.

Lu Ann Jones: How so?

Eldon Reyer: Well, I didn't know how much he'd trust me.

Lu Ann Jones: Because you'd declined that job?

Eldon Reyer: Yeah. Because I'd declined a job. But we worked it out. And I realized that when I got word that they were going to transfer, to abolish the Southwest, I said I'm retiring.

Lu Ann Jones: Did you decide to decline that superintendency because you just didn't want to live in that environment again? You just didn't want to get back to that park?

Eldon Reyer: Well, I was older. (laughs) I wasn't the young sprout that, and I knew that I wouldn't be rangering. It just didn't, it didn't jump out at me. I was over the

hump. Even beyond superintendencies. And I couldn't think of another park that I would rather be at as far as the park itself. But the job just didn't set me on fire. But the thing that I think still goes on today, it has to, is there is a political arena that you must perform in. I've seen up and coming people that were on their way up the ladder. But they stumble, and it becomes common knowledge. And you can't help but know that that information is out there on what we referred to as the grapevine. And John Cook refers to it as the Navajo telegraph, if something happens, or somebody gets into trouble, it's service-wide. And more so today than during my era, because we didn't have the computers. I never turned a computer on during my entire career. My secretary had one behind my desk, but I never turned it on. And then we end up with the Morning Report, and I begin to read some of those Morning Reports, and there was gossip that was going around the wire. I hope that that's stopped.

Lu Ann Jones: I mean, what's an example of that?

Eldon Reyer: Well, I can't think of one right offhand. But I guess if somebody gets fired or removed for whatever reason, it's out there. How do you get over the fact that you've been removed from your job? Regardless of what the region, it may be valid, it may not. But if it's out there. I think that has a potential to be the case today. I think knowing that your reputation rests on your computer, that would be scary for me today if I had to go back and relive, particularly associate regional director job. Because hands-on is the way I operated. If we had a problem in the park, and we did, I went, or the regional director sent me to go take care of the problem. I had a very good reputation of being able to negotiate. Sometimes a person would say, "Okay, I want a transfer. I want out of here." And we'd make it happen. But that was our job – for the good of the service.

Lu Ann Jones: So how was the job as the associate regional director? What were your responsibilities?

Eldon Reyer: There was the heritage, HCRS, Heritage, Conservation and Recreation Service came into existence in the early seventies. When I was in Washington, I went in early one morning to run off copies of a statement that was being given at one of the hearings. I had to take 50 copies. I went into the copy machine in Interior. And when I went to put in my copy, I opened it up and there was a white paper proposing the establishment of the HCRS that somebody was putting together. I delivered that to the director, and sure enough, they formed an HCRS within Interior.

Eldon Reyer: Well, they took over a lot of park service responsibilities: land and water conservation fund, and historic sites. And they wanted to take over lakeshores and seashores and recreational areas. They were all to be transferred. (laughs) Well, didn't all happen. But when I came to Santa Fe, the HCRS had an office in Albuquerque with 30 people in it. And they abolished HCRS and told the park service to absorb all those people.

Eldon Reyer: And Bob Kerr, the regional director, said, "Eldon, we've got to do something. Should we just make that a field office, leave it under the regional office?"

Eldon Reyer: I said, "Bob, if you don't have hands-on supervision with them under the same roof, you'll never abolish them."

Eldon Reyer: He says, "Okay. You take over and you make it happen."

Eldon Reyer: So, I had to go down and negotiate with 30 people. I got 15 of them to either retire or find other jobs. And I transferred them all up to regional office. We redid all the office space to reduce park service space down so we could put everybody in. It was like building a fire. I mean, it just roared through the regional office. But we bit the bullet and I convinced Bob that that was the only way to go. It worked out. I had some of the best employees in the park service when we converted those people over and they realized that the park service ain't such a bad organization. And vice versa. We got the park service people to accept them. I think that was one of my high spots, to get that to happen. But again, I was just considered hardboiled. But sometime you just had to do that. And in my later career, that's the only way I solved my problem is go at it. Get it done.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, I'm interested in well, what would be an example of like a problem you would have in a park with a superintendent or somebody that, somebody at your level, at the associate regional director level would have? And how would you, can you give me an example of that?

Eldon Reyer: Well sometimes it's personal, it's a family situation. We had that at Canyon de Chelly. The superintendent was an abused husband. And he would show up sometimes a day or two after—

[END OF TRACK 4]

[START OF TRACK 5]

Eldon Reyer: —he should have gone to his office. But he'd be beat and battered. His employees came to regional office, so I went over to deal with that. And I had to deal with him unable to do his job physically because of his wife. So we decided that he had the possibility of an early out. So, we worked through the personnel idea in accepting a lesser retirement, but for his own safety. But that was a tough one that just had to be dealt with, and then hopefully the problem would go away. But she wasn't willing to leave. So we had that legal part of it, too. But that's one situation that I was not very interested in taking care of, because that's personal and you can't do much about it. And I had to take care of family situations when we had suicide. Immediately you got a major problem with what to do.

Eldon Reyer: The other situation that I was pretty proud of was Phil Martin. He was a guide with me at Carlsbad. They had two little children, and they were stationed at Lee's Ferry at Glen Canyon. Phil and another ranger capsized their canoe. And Phil drowned. There was his wife with two children, both in diapers. When I was

in regional office with Kowski, that came across his desk. And what were they going to do with it? Or how were they going to handle it? We actually created an administrative assistant at Custer Battlefield and moved Carla up there. She was a Rhodes Scholar, had a business degree. They made her a business officer. So, she became an administrative assistant up at Custer.

Eldon Reyer: Well then, when I was associate, Frank Kowski said he wanted to appoint a woman superintendent. And I thought of Carla Martin. She surely qualifies. So I wrote a little note to Frank, these are the things you should look for. And he says, "You got anybody in mind?"

Eldon Reyer: I said, "Yes. Carla Martin. A widow of a ranger. She's got kids in school now. She's at Custer Battlefield."

Eldon Reyer: He says, "Tuzigoot National Monument in Arizona needs a superintendent. Make it happen." So we transferred her. Promoted her. And she was really the first woman superintendent, even though somebody in the east is given credit for being the first woman superintendent. But Carla Martin was the first.

Lu Ann Jones: And what year was that? Do you remember about when?

Eldon Reyer: That would have been '69, '70. Seventy. Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: Why do you think he was interested specifically in appointing a woman as a superintendent?

Eldon Reyer: Because it hadn't been done. That was Frank. (laughter) I think he saw the handwriting on the wall, that women were coming into the park service, and he wanted to be ahead of, because he knew we had good people. We had some good people. That one, I thought man, Frank took my suggestion and everything fell into place. And I wound up being close, we're still – well, Carla just passed away. But her two sons are grown and good young men. But that must have been, I knew that was a real tragedy for her. But she weathered it, and she had the stamina to do it. So she couldn't have found a better person. That made Frank good, too. (laughter)

Lu Ann Jones: Well, of all the things you did in the park service, what part of your career do you think was the best part of your career, or you were happiest? Or did each part have its own kind of pluses and minuses there?

Eldon Reyer: Well, I think Custer Battlefield was, it tested me. I sort of enjoyed being tested. That was just part of my makeup, I think. I didn't like to back down from a challenge. But as far as just doing a job that I enjoyed, Big Bend was, because I was on my own. I mean, it didn't have the staff. And I had good chief rangers, superintendents. They swore by me. I mean, they put so much confidence in me that I really felt I was doing the job that they wanted done. Even though I had very little contact with anybody but myself, but that one, because of the area and it was unknown to me, a lot of learning, I guess that was probably, and everything

ran pretty smooth. So, but I didn't have any supervisory responsibility. So it wasn't till I got into supervision that I realized this is really the park service. So when I see that today what people, the job description or the titles that some people have, I'm not sure what they do. (laughs) Because it means supervision to me. But now it seems to be it's broken down into different categories. Complicates matters.

Eldon Reyer: But I think Canyonlands was probably our high point as far as Karen and I. We did have an experience there that I don't think Karen will ever talk about. But we lost a daughter six days old. She was living with my parents in Colorado because Big Bend was too isolated. When we lost her, I had to go get her, and then coming through Carlsbad back to Big Bend. So that was a trying time for us. But we weathered it and were able to go to Grand Canyon then for four months. That sort of took the heat off. But that was a period of time that things were a little iffy. We didn't know whether we were going to make it or not. But we did.

Eldon Reyer: But I think my daughters growing up in the park, that's the best experience that we could possibly have. And Karen was just an outstanding woman from that stand point, and mother. I mean, she knew what she was doing. So it made my job much easier. And she got that from her mother.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, was it standard operating procedure that – well now I can't remember which person it was who called her to talk to her first before offering you the job at Mount McKinley.

Eldon Reyer: Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: But was that standard operating procedure? Or was it because she was the daughter of Lon Garrison, perhaps? Well known in the park service, or—

Eldon Reyer: Well, people never acknowledged that. Oscar Dick was the superintendent. But you know, we knew him in Yellowstone. So the park service family really existed. I mean, it was the entire park service. Because people were moving. Today I think that has been lost. I think one of the tipping points is when we found out when we came out of Alaska and then actually went to Washington, the idea of a ranger's wife working, she had to work. We found out it was almost impossible for a ranger to make it on their salary, and required [?] housing. And wives had to find a job. So we ended up with a dual job program. And that sort of hit me and Karen when we were in Washington. And Karen was very much concerned about that, that a wife shouldn't have to work. She was lobbying for making it possible. And you couldn't afford to pay the rent in government housing if your wife didn't work. There was never a resolve in my career. But it's one of those things that was out there, and we knew it exist. I don't know whether it's cleared up now or not, but we see it a lot in dual jobs. I guess that's just what you have to deal with.

Lu Ann Jones: So, are you saying that Karen didn't like the dual career program?

Eldon Reyer: Oh, yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: She did like that.

Eldon Reyer: She said that's the only way to survive.

Lu Ann Jones: Right. Yes. Mm hmm.

Eldon Reyer: And they shouldn't have to. Because she would prefer that, she was not really a stay at home mother, because she was doing her own thing, too. But she didn't have to work. She felt sorry for the wives today that have to work, and it shouldn't be, because the park service family took care of, you know. They'd babysit each other. When we'd go caving down at Carlsbad, one wife would take care of six or seven kids, and the next wife would do the same next time. And it was a family relationship. And talking to people we've run into here, their kids grew up together. Maybe not in the same park, but they had a friendship that they accumulated. Some of them are in the park service. (laughter) Kids grow up, second generation, there's quite a few of them. A lot of them. But that family situation that is, I think the thing we appreciated the most, just one big family. And we're really close. We found out that one of the ladies that worked for me at Glen Canyon got dementia down in Hot Springs and passed away two years ago. We didn't know about it. We didn't hear from her husband. And that really hit Karen. One of her close friends passed away and she didn't know about it. So we feel it today, even. It's family.

Lu Ann Jones: I think our time is just coming, drawn to a close. Other things that you want to talk about during the interview today?

Eldon Reyer: Let's see. Did I have anything else?

Lu Ann Jones: One thing on my list – oh, I was going to ask you about your family. You mentioned that your father was proud of you when you got into the management program and realized that you had a good career ahead of you. What kind of family did you come from?

Eldon Reyer: Well, my parents were raised near Rose Hill, Kansas. Farmers. My mother and dad married just right out of high school. Then he went to work for the police department in Wichita. My brother was born there, and then my sister was born in Wichita. But he went from the police department there to the federal, when it was first created, Prohibition service. But my dad, they were raised Quaker. So basically I was a Quaker, but not a practicing Quaker, because there was no Quaker church in our hometown of Longmont, Colorado. So we became Methodist. And church was a big part of our family. I mean, we went to church every Sunday. And I ended up singing in the choir and youth group and that kind of thing.

Eldon Reyer: But my dad was basically the night chief. So he slept during the day, work at night. I had very little contact with him as far as doing things with me. He always

felt bad about that, not being able to participate in my scouting and stuff like that. But I always got up in the morning and had breakfast with him when he came home from work. That was sort of a loose relationship. I know it worked on my dad, because later years he said, you know, "I just didn't do enough for you."

Eldon Reyer: But I took two paper routes, one in the morning and one in the evening. I had money all the time. (laughter) I couldn't understand why kids didn't have money.

Eldon Reyer: But you know that was during the war years and rationing and all that was part of our family situation. My brother served in Italy and Germany and was wounded. So my mother was a Blue Star Mother. And she hung the same blue star in the window when I went into the navy. So she was proud of her two sons. Scouting was a big part of my life.

Lu Ann Jones: I think I interrupted to ask if you had other things you wanted to talk about in terms of your park service career.

Eldon Reyer: I'm trying to think of it. I can't think of anything. Maybe it's little happenings here and there, but I guess the most depressing was Glen Canyon. I had not worked in a recreational area, of course. So when I came out of Alaska, I had 50 miles of lake and pretty big staff and search and rescue. During my two years district ranger, we had 12 body recoveries, and I participated in overseeing recovery. I had a scuba team. But still it was a hard part. That many, it was just something you didn't want to face up to. That's about the only time I can remember not wanting to go to work. I just pulled out one of my files and kudos that I received. I got a copy of a letter from a couple we saved. Their boat capsized at night, and the other ranger and myself rescued them, saved their lives. We didn't even think about it at the time. But the letter, I mean it definitely, we saved their lives. Because they were slipping off the boat that capsized. And I thought you know, maybe Glen Canyon wasn't that bad. There were good times. It was difficult. That's about the only thing I can think of.

Eldon Reyer: Of course, once I got into region, I was able to activate four or five parks that we created, like San Antonio Missions, Jean Lafitte, Big Thicket, just to name a few. All of a sudden I'm on the operation end of instead of the legislative end of. And it was not necessarily fun, but (laughs) they're there today. I look at them and I say, that's good. My legacy. I can see it. Not everybody can look back on their career and say physically there's something out there. Salem Mission, Chaco Culture.

Eldon Reyer: You know, that's probably one of the areas that Karen and I, we talk about every once in a while. When we were in Yellowstone and I was in the back country, I read the log in the patrol cabins. Because it's fun just to see what went on. There was this one ranger that actually was a fire guard that would write these very wordy, beautiful happenings, Walter Harriman. I thought that's a guy I'd like to meet. Well, when we went to Canyonlands, or to Canyon in Yellowstone, I was walking down the sidewalk going to work for the first day and this guy walked up

and introduced himself, Walt Harriman. Here's the guy that wrote all those things. I said, geez. He was an interpreter then. Permanent interpreter. And I learned from him interpretation. He told me about the birds in the canyon and everything. When we went to Grand Canyon for training, the Thanksgiving came around, so the whole community at Grand Canyon would take the intake rangers for dinner. Walt Harriman and his wife were rangers there. They took us in for Thanksgiving. Renewed an old acquaintance. We found out that his wife was a nurse. She couldn't be married and be married to a ranger. So they always called her Miss Porter. Well, Miss Porter became Miss Harriman.

Eldon Reyer: When I was in Washington and we did the legislation for Chaco Culture, Walt Harriman was superintendent. I got to call him into Washington to testify that three or four or five things, you run into these people all the time. But Walt was a World War Two veteran and a prisoner of war in Germany, which affected his life. The park service pulled him out of it. I thought, man, the park service is doing something right. But that's one relationship that we had that just kept reoccurring. In fact, I selected a saddle in Yellowstone and the tag on it said "Walt Harriman." He'd ridden it in the back country when he was patrol, and wrote his little memoirs. But his stories were so good. I'd give a million dollars to have one of those field books, those log books. Walt's gone. (laughs) Well. That's good memories.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for sharing your stories today. I'm really glad that we were able to connect.

Eldon Reyer: Well, it's a lot of days and a lot of years. But they were good ones.

Lu Ann Jones: I'm going to ask you to [sign a release form].

[END OF TRACK 5]

[END OF INTERVIEW]