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Candy Streed
July 19, 2017

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
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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
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Antoinette J. Condo
The narrator was asked to review the transcript, but did not.

Candy Streed Interview: July 19, 2017

I started working with Silos and Smokestacks when I became an AmeriCorps member the first year it had been created, '94-'95 period, and began working with the Iowa USDA development program. I ended up getting loaned out to the non-profit, Silos and Smokestacks, and was there when they became a national heritage area and offered me a position. I was drawn to the work of preserving my home state's heritage. My role has grown and changed with the organization.

Current responsibilities: Today, I am the Director of Partnerships and work with our designated partner sites and emerging sites to help develop their agricultural stories. Help them put it into the national context. Many of the stories here in Iowa have national and some even international significance. A big part of my role is to help communities, sites, farms, museums, vineyards, volunteers and professionals develop and present their agricultural story.

We are in the process of doing our evaluation of our 117 current sites. By the end of next year, we will probably be at 120. We help them build capacity for their toolbox to create a positive experience as well as to properly tell their story so that folks will be interested and help them preserve their story. In some cases, it's actually preserving artifacts. We really try to help them develop the story so that others can take part in what they have to offer and share that in a positive way. My work is around interpretation, education, preservation, conservation. Taking the site or community where it is. I don't take the same strategy when I'm working with a museum or a small volunteer organization. The one common thread we have is our story of agriculture. We also try to help them take their work to the next level of interpretation.

That is why we are going to start an evaluation with our partner sites. The network of the sites that we work with really represent the heritage area. We are across 37 counties, the northeastern quadrant of the state of Iowa. The heritage area is on the landscape. It is in these folks and communities. They are the keepers of the story and heritage. We help them look at their story through the lens of their state and national and international context.

I manage tools like grant programs. That might be putting on workshops. We were a sponsor and partner for the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions forum held in the heritage area in 2018. We worked with them to look to statewide or national partnerships to develop some of the sessions offered. Many of our communities have a historic preservation commission and this was a great opportunity for capacity building partnering with other organizations.

Encouraging new partners: Interestingly enough, we don't do a lot of advertising for that (new partners). What happens is we work with sites and communities that want to work with us. Our heritage area is so large we work with folks that want to be a part of the heritage area. We always have the information available on our website, but I believe it is the network of other sites and the product that they are producing. For example, I had an orchard which has been developing over time that I have been working with. It's a very seasonal operation. An orchard or pumpkin patch might do just *agritainment*. Nothing wrong with that. They have a bunch of mazes and places where kids can play but many of those places don't tell their story about how that farm came to exist there, how their family has changed the operation over time. This particular orchard wanted to develop their story more about their family and their history, and

it's equally fascinating to see how apple operations have changed in Iowa over time. As long as they are willing to include that piece with their experience then they can become a partner site. That is one of the most recent sites I have been working with. They didn't start there. It took several years for them to decide to involve education or interpretation in their operation.

It isn't like we are looking to add a whole bunch of sites all the time. But we try to work with folks we do add so they are developing a high-quality experience. It's interesting that as we have gone on, I feel like the quality of the sites and the expectations of what a visitor looks for today are so much higher than it was when we first began the partners program back in 2001.

There is peer pressure, I think, to maintain a level. The heritage area is as good as the weakest link in the program. There is a conscious effort from all sites that we must maintain our integrity as partners collectively because that is what really is the heritage area. A bad experience at a site reflects on the rest of the crew. Over time that has developed. They have continued to grow the quality of their experiences, their interpretation and programming.

We are continually asking our sites about why they become partners. We have an annual partner site meeting to do a day-long training and major updates about what's going on in the heritage area, what's on the horizon. Over and over again I think it's the networking with the other sites that keep them coming. Initially some sites come because they want to be in the visitor guide. We have a tremendous following of our high-quality visitor guide. A lot of our communities see a value in being a part of that because they may not be able to afford it for themselves. They also are working with other sites that have like interests or visitors with similar interests. They appreciate each other's experiences. Our smaller communities understand that visitors are not just coming to their small town. They are coming to the region to experience a larger array of things than just that one site. If we can share visitors across city and county lines in the region, everyone will be more successful.

Initially, our seed money for grants to help them develop their programming, visitor experience and interpretation gets them in the door. Everyone comes for different reasons but many of them stay for the same reason, they see a value in it.

Benefits of NPS to heritage areas: Early on the sites and communities in the northeastern corner of the state felt like the NPS and this designation as a National Heritage Area validated their work, their lifestyles, the farming community. When I first started, they would ask me, "Why would anyone want to come visit this region? Or come to my farm and listen to my cows bellowing or the smells of the farm?" Today, the idea that people want to know where their food comes from, it's nearly impossible for someone to come onto someone's farm and not want to talk to the actual producer in some capacity. Iowans are very modest folk and don't necessarily like to share stories about themselves. To talk about their own successes is a very difficult thing for them to do. Talking about their contributions to feeding the world initially was a tough sell. Now, with all the food security and food safety issues going on we can be really relevant. The agriculture story in Iowa continues today. Our story didn't start and end. Our story of American agriculture continues today. We have tremendous opportunities with engaging people in relevant conversations about their daily lives. We work right now with our sites, farms, communities to talk about why they are doing what they are doing each day. In some cases, putting it in a

historical context, some of these are historical organizations. They can work with our folks to preserve the current agricultural story. Maintain artifacts but on the current day stuff.

We have in the last couple of years, through grants, encouraged people to do programming that connects with current issues or current day agriculture. It is helping them be more relevant.

Every partner site goes through a peer review. There are established criteria that every partner site must meet. With each of the sites we hold a memorandum of understanding, which we are going to upgrade and call an agreement as we go back and revisit all of the partner sites individually. Not necessarily to say, *you're in, you're out*, but "what can we do to take you to the next level in terms of your experience, your operations, your story?" To open up a dialog and connect with them on a more intimate level. Amongst our many sites we have so much talent and we want to utilize that with site visits by a team of partners, either state, local, agricultural, organizations or sites. When we go to do a site visit for designation as a partner site the team goes through the criteria and do an evaluation of how that site rates on the criteria and then do a recommendation to the full panel. Then, our board reviews it. All sites go through the same criteria whether museum, bed and breakfast, farm etc. They have to demonstrate how they tell their story of agriculture and what kind of experience they offer. In the B&Bs people can visit and have the experience but not necessarily stay overnight. We ask them all to tell the story of agriculture that is unique to them to the best they can.

Collaboration with local NPS sites: They are part of the region, but their agricultural stories and connections aren't ones they focus on at their site. Effigy Mounds National Monument is not a partner of the heritage area. But, over the years their leadership has been involved in our partnership panel and so has Herbert Hoover National Historic Site. Herbert Hoover was part of our panel and board. Especially in the beginning both national sites helped us put on our regional hats and put our personal hats away. When people came into the room to work on programs, they came in for the betterment of the region not just for their own individual gain. They (the national sites) set that tone for us because they are the big kids on the block. In Iowa, we have two small NPS sites, but they are held in high regard. They are the experts in telling stories and interpretation. They would say, "I'm taking off my ranger hat and site agenda." They would come into the room when we created our management plans etc. They helped set that tone to work as a region. Initially they gave us staff time to help us with interpretation at the basic level. We didn't know. We were new to it. We have gone to different training. We have had staff come here to help us build capacity to tell the story.

When we created our initial grants program, they were instrumental in helping the technical advisors to develop good practices in granting, and what we needed to do to be good stewards of federal funds. The Mid-West Region was always very helpful with that. Early on, Sue Pridemore with the NPS regional office had come with experience with heritage areas and she helped us with the lingo, the language of the NPS. NPS has been a good mentor to us. As their budgets have gotten tighter and tighter, we have less opportunities with NPS sites than we did in the beginning. The superintendents were on our panels and committees that devised best practices that we still use today.

The Mid-West Regional Office from day one really helped us understand our relationship as a national heritage area with the NPS and what it meant to be a National Heritage Area with federal responsibilities, and how to bridge that with working on the other side, with us being a non-profit. For instance, most of our granting programs don't involve infrastructure, they involve story development, interpretation, and education. We didn't have enough money, resources, or expertise to be able to fulfill all the requirements for such things as environmental impact statements. NPS helped us identify what was feasible for us to undertake. Sue Pridemore, who was our regional coordinator for years, got us on the right track. Have your interpretive plan and help your sites put their story into that context. They might look at it way too small, not look at the national context. We have sophisticated businesses or museums and mom and pop sites.

The national coordinating office has been out here many times over the years. Silos had one of the early heritage areas evaluations because we had a track record. We are a different model than some of the other heritage areas. After the evaluation they set up a model of how the heritage area should look in the future. There is a tremendous amount of respect (between Silos and the national office). I have often been asked by the national office and the mid-west office to work with other heritage areas to give them advice and tell them how we do things. The national office has been able to provide us with information about larger national opportunities.

Successes: Some of the successes are really in the small things that happen in communities. We created an exhibit, *It Takes an Iowan*. It displays what Iowans have done to feed the world, be it humanitarian efforts, science, technology, inventions. We asked people to think about what is happening in their lives today. What they are going to do to help feed a growing national and world population. The exhibit traveled to communities. There is a tiny little town of Dysart that did a great job of taking that exhibit and making it local for them. It had the larger context and then stories from the local community and did programming. They had it open for a long weekend and their programming made it intimate for their community. They were all volunteers. Because they are so passionate about it, they will get a little grant and with other small groups in the community keep adding to it and they keep growing. They are proud of being part of the heritage area because they are being put in a larger lime-light than they would be on their own. It does validate the things they are doing in their community. They have taken advantage of all the different programs we have had to offer over the years, from workshop trainings on how to develop your experience, how to write interpretive texts etc. and have over the years developed their community into a pleasant visiting experience. The volunteers have grown together. I think that is indicative of the entire heritage area. The sites that have been the most successful are not stagnant and keep growing and changing.

When sites started acknowledging that they are the heritage area, not just seeing the heritage area as the Silos staff, that's success. They take ownership in the region themselves.

Oversight: It is inherent in all of our work, in every grant program that we do that we ask ourselves if this is the best we can do. Is the quality of the work that is being done with each of these grants to a standard to be expected from a federal level? Stewardship of funds.

I feel that we have a lot of oversight from the regional and national level. We are always reporting on what we are doing. We do quarterly reports with our reimbursements. We think it is important to look at where we are. In terms of evaluations: we are in the middle of a planning process for our organization but also at the same time evaluating some of our programs and grants. It is beginning now but will probably be going on for the next five years.

We have an annual state audit. That takes a lot of effort but means that every program we have has a well written, documented process. A lot of what we do is curating our own work.

Challenges: Sometimes our federal assistance with all its paperwork and not on time funding, causes us to slow down and stop what I think is our most productive work in the one-on-one assistance to our partners. We use email and phone but sometimes you have to be there.

This ongoing struggle with federal funding and knowing where our place is in the NPS. It is difficult from year to year to know where we stand. We have a federal mandate and have federal funding to do it and we are appreciative. But when it goes back and forth in the budget cycles as it does it is difficult to be efficient. I'd say that's a pretty big challenge for us. Stop and go.

The bigger challenges in general are that all the groups we work with each have their own individual struggles with budgets and sustainability, as well as ourselves. How we make sure to grow the pie for everyone and not just break up that little pie more and more.

A big issue is aging populations in our volunteer organizations. Part of our partner evaluations will look at the health of each organization. There is concern statewide and nationwide about our cultural and historical organizations. We'll be looking at what we need to do on the horizon.

Criteria for heritage area success: Need to have a clear mission and nationally significant story. Need to give people in the region a clear path on how to participate. Need to be willing to listen to what they are saying. Early on in our heritage area we made the mistake of trying to build things that made it look like we were the heritage area versus helping the community to build their capacity to tell their story. For us that was important. Need to be telling our story more and better. Our mission crosses real and perceived boundaries. People can get behind educating our young people about our history and our heritage, so we have common ground as a heritage area to bring diverse interests to the table.

Sometimes for us, Silos and Smokestacks is a behind the scenes element or entity that's guiding. We as an organization have to put ourselves out in front a little bit more without taking away from that network, we have created in the region from feeling the ownership of the heritage area. We need to help people understand our role so that they understand our value. One of the things we are doing right now is an economic impact study of our work as a heritage area collectively. Sometimes it is hard to place a value on our work. It is a constant battle to share who we are and what we do. I think that showing a tangible value for our work will help.

Our story is huge and can be polarizing. A benefit of being part of the NPS is that we are given a path for interpretation. *You tell the story; you tell all the different perspectives and you let the visitors and consumers make their own decisions.* You talk about genetically modified

organisms vs organic, diversified vs monoculture, or pesticides, all different views of agriculture. We got here historically by a food system we created as a nation. We help explain the why of why we do the things we do. We talk a lot about soil conservation, water conservation.

Heritage area contribution to the mission of the NPS: National Heritage Areas are helping to preserve our national stories and landscapes in a way that is maybe more sustainable than some of the national parks. They have such tremendous responsibility and resources to manage with decreasing amounts of resources and people to do it. They are incredibly important but yet there are all these other nationally important stories that should be preserved and shared. They can't do it alone. I believe that National Heritage Areas are an important part of the partnership that preserves some national stories that can't be preserved by putting a fence around it. You can't fence in the story of agriculture in its grandeur like this in Iowa. The beauty of our work here is that we can tell an ongoing story that continues to change. It can be more accessible. National Heritage Areas often can be more accessible and include more community partnerships than they (NPS) are able to. That is one of the things that we bring to the table.

The story of American agriculture is second only to our story of independence as a nation. I never once questioned whether our story here in Iowa is nationally and internationally significant. That story can be told in other states. Iowans just happened to raise their hand. I look forward to the day when they're more people in the nation telling our agriculture stories. In terms of the NPS, they do not have many agricultural related sites. As a heritage area we can help fill that gap. Help them tell the story they are not able to with their park units.

The National Register has few agricultural listings maybe because agriculture changes so frequently. We continually modify our agricultural structures based on the need of what we are doing in business. As a heritage area we can help prioritize some of those historic structures or places so that we at least have a handful being preserved for future generations to see. Our national and Iowan landscapes are changing drastically. We are able to help NPS by sharing our story with the nation at a high-quality level.

I feel fortunate staying in my own state, working with people who are the keepers of our history. Some of the best people in our communities. They are selfless with their time and see the significance of their experiences. Sometimes it's the little things we do with them that makes all the difference. Their history that enriches their communities would be lost if we were not here. I feel very fortunate to be a part of this.

Down the road, we will be talking about how important the work done by the folks at the National Heritage Areas was. We are behind the scenes of it all.