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Dorothy Huyck's National Park Service Oral History Project, 1942-1987



Margaret Chambers Abrego
September 20, 1978

Interview conducted by Dorothy B. Huyck
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[START OF TAPE]

Dorothy Huyck: 00:00 The date is September 20th, 1978. I am Dorothy Huyck. I will be interviewing Margaret Abrego, A-B-R-E-G-O, who is an accounting technician in the Southwest Regional Office, Santa Fe. May I ask you how you first became acquainted with the National Park Service?

Margaret Abrego: 00:23 I haven't been a Park Service employee too long. It's only about eight years now, and it's only been here.

Dorothy Huyck: 00:30 About 1970, you came?

Margaret Abrego: 00:30 I came in 1970, and it was in the Southwest region. I didn't know anything about the park, I just applied for a job and got one.

Dorothy Huyck: 00:41 You had not traveled to national parks at all before?

Margaret Abrego: 00:44 I had visited parks, yes, but I had never worked or never even thought of working until I came to Santa Fe. I was looking for work and I applied here at the park, and I got on.

Dorothy Huyck: 00:56 What kind of job did you initially take?

Margaret Abrego: 01:01 I took it as the voucher examiner. After a little over a year, I got into accounts maintenance, which I'm still in.

Dorothy Huyck: 01:13 When you came on duty, what grade were you?

Margaret Abrego: 01:16 I was a temporary grade four.

Dorothy Huyck: 01:19 Then you moved to accounts maintenance?

Margaret Abrego: 01:20 Yes.

Dorothy Huyck: 01:21 Was that a promotion?

Margaret Abrego: 01:22 No it wasn't. I was still the same grade. For 22 months, I stayed temporary, but once I got in as a permanent, I did go up from the four to the seven in three years' time.

Dorothy Huyck: 01:40 You must've become permanent about 1972?

Margaret Abrego: 01:42 Yes, I did. Three years later, I was a seven. They did move me, then each year I got to step upgrade.

Dorothy Huyck: 01:53 What's your current title?

Margaret Abrego: 01:54 It's accounting technician.

Dorothy Huyck: 01:57 What are you doing as an account technician?

Margaret Abrego: 02:01 It's working with counts, and I am working with the reports to Washington, the general ledger. It's keeping things in balance, sending reports, monthly reports is what I do, and the accounts receivable, billing people, and following up on collections to see that we get paid for what we bill them. That's what I do, mostly just working with general ledger.

Dorothy Huyck: 02:33 Can I ask where and when you were born?

Margaret Abrego: 02:35 I was born in Montana. Miles City, Montana, in 1915 December.

Dorothy Huyck: 02:42 Did you grow up there?

Margaret Abrego: 02:43 No. I have moved very much all my life. I spent about 10 years there and 10 years in North Dakota.

Dorothy Huyck: 02:51 Whereabouts in North Dakota?

Margaret Abrego: 02:51 New England.

Dorothy Huyck: 02:54 New England, North Dakota?

Margaret Abrego: 02:57 That's right. Very small town, about a thousand. From there, I moved to Seattle, and I've been on the move almost ever since. I worked in Alaska quite a bit. During World War II, I was in the Coast Guard. I worked in Washington, New York, and Florida.

Dorothy Huyck: 03:18 You were actually in the Coast Guard?

Margaret Abrego: 03:20 Yes, I was the women's Coast Guard. They called us SPARS.

Dorothy Huyck: 03:25 What rank did you have there?

Margaret Abrego: 03:26 I was Star Keeper. Second.

Dorothy Huyck: 03:32 Second class?

Margaret Abrego: 03:33 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dorothy Huyck: 03:35 Where you in Alaska with the Coast Guard?

Margaret Abrego: 03:37 No, I had been in Alaska prior to going into the service. After my service, I went back to Alaska. I've worked in Seattle quite a bit. I worked in San Diego and San Antonio, Texas. I've moved around an awful lot.

Dorothy Huyck: 03:57 You certainly have veteran's preference.

Margaret Abrego: 03:59 Yes, that's right.

Dorothy Huyck: 04:01 Many women do not.

Margaret Abrego: 04:02 That's right, there aren't too many women that have that.

Dorothy Huyck: 04:04 Has that made any difference?

Margaret Abrego: 04:07 The only time I asked where to go, that applied at all, was for this job, and whether – When I took the examination, they added it onto my score, that five points, because it was in the continental unit. So, they did use it then the same as they would for a man.

Dorothy Huyck: 04:29 Were you an only child?

Margaret Abrego: 04:34 No. I have five brothers and two sisters.

Dorothy Huyck: 04:38 So you were one of eight children.

Margaret Abrego: 04:40 I was one of eight.

Dorothy Huyck: 04:41 Which one of eight?

Margaret Abrego: 04:42 I was the fourth, if that means something.

Dorothy Huyck: 04:46 Not necessarily.

Margaret Abrego: 04:48 I know, I read things lots of times where the old and the youngest in the middle, how the family life affects people. I don't know how it affected me.

Dorothy Huyck: 04:59 How much older were you than the next child?

Margaret Abrego: 05:01 About a year and a half.

Dorothy Huyck: 05:04 What was your father's occupation?

Margaret Abrego: 05:07 He was a railroad engineer.

Dorothy Huyck: 05:09 I guess your mother was busy with eight children.

Margaret Abrego: 05:11 She stayed very busy.

Dorothy Huyck: 05:14 Did you graduate from high school in Miles City?

Margaret Abrego: 05:16 No. I graduated in New England, North Dakota.

Dorothy Huyck: 05:22 Did you get any further education after high school?

Margaret Abrego: 05:25 I went to a business college. No, first of all, I went one year to the teacher's college in Dickinson, North Dakota, and I taught in a country school for two years, then I went to business college in Seattle. From there on, just started working. I never got very high in any job I had, I moved so much. I always had the urge to see some more of the country, so I would move and find another job.

Dorothy Huyck: 06:01 Going back to when you were in high school, was there someone in your family or among your teachers, or someone in the community, who encouraged you during the high school educational process?

Margaret Abrego: 06:15 Not that I can think of. No individual, no.

Dorothy Huyck: 06:21 When you were a youngster, were you considered a tomboy?

Margaret Abrego: 06:26 I guess I was, yes. I always liked to – At that time the girls didn't have the jeans to wear, but I always had my brothers. I always had enough brothers that I'd always found a pair that I could get into. I guess I was a tomboy.

Dorothy Huyck: 06:40 As you were going into the teenage years, were you encouraged to be something more of a lady?

Margaret Abrego: 06:46 Not necessarily. Well, yes, my mother was a lady, and she did say it, but not too much. I don't think that I was ever forced in a woman's role, not really. My mother came from a large family. There were eight girls and three boys in her

family. The girls always had to wait on the men. She had said in her family, it wasn't going to be that way, and it never was. We had five brothers, but the three girls, we didn't have to wait on our brothers. She said she didn't think that that was the proper role for a woman just to wait on the man. So maybe I got it.

- Dorothy Huyck: 07:22 Does this mean that, since there was no waiting on men members of the family, did everybody assume some responsibility? Brothers and sisters?
- Margaret Abrego: 07:30 Yes, brothers and sisters, we all had work that we had to do, but it wasn't man's work or woman's work. It was all just work that had to be done. We'd just do it.
- Dorothy Huyck: 07:39 Was your mother ahead of the times?
- Margaret Abrego: 07:42 I think maybe she was; I think she was a great person. I always remember, she never tried to manage us. I don't know how she did it. It never seemed like she tried to manage us. And yet, as we got older, she would advise more than – She never forced us to do things. Looking back, I always feel that she did a great job because we we're all very individualistic. Everybody different in the family. I think my mother was responsible for a lot of that.
- Dorothy Huyck: 08:17 In the eight years that you've been working with the Park Service, I'm curious as to whether or not you had found your supervisors to be encouraging, or discouraging, or possibly both?
- Margaret Abrego: 08:32 I don't think we have a lot of guidance in our supervisors. I think that they – My immediate one and the next one are both chauvinistic, very much so. They don't think a woman actually belongs in anything higher than just doing the manual work. A woman would have a much harder time. For me, it hasn't affected me. They didn't put me up. Personally, because I did all right in the time I was here after they once put me on permanent, and I myself haven't pushed for anything. I've been thinking of retiring, really. I'm at the age when I can, but I don't think they are very helpful for women.
- Dorothy Huyck: 09:34 Would you say that being a woman has made a difference, pro or con, in your opportunities?

- Margaret Abrego: 09:43 I'll have to say that I, myself, haven't looked for opportunities in the Park Service. I came in here. I was almost 55 years old when I came, and I didn't expect much. All my life I had moved, and because I wanted to move around, I didn't expect a lot of opportunity. I always found jobs and always found my niche, so when I came here, I didn't expect very much. I can't blame the supervisors for anything that happened to me, and I did as much as I expected.
- Dorothy Huyck: 10:29 I can see that is an important distinction.
- Margaret Abrego: 10:29 Yes. To me, it is. I got up as much as I would expect to with my background. I've had a lot of varied types of work, and I had worked in the type of work I'm working in here, but I didn't expect to do any better. So, you can't blame the supervisors.
- Dorothy Huyck: 10:57 Were there any particular factors that went into your working with the Park Service or was it simply that a job appeared?
- Margaret Abrego: 11:04 It was a job. I had taken a Civil Service exam and I was on the register, and I was called.
- Dorothy Huyck: 11:13 Since you've been on the job, have you been given any opportunities to take additional coursework or training?
- Margaret Abrego: 11:20 Very little. I applied a couple of times and didn't get accepted. I haven't tried very hard in the last couple of years, but the first few years, I wasn't accepted a couple of times by the supervisors.
- Dorothy Huyck: 11:38 There are some people who think of the Park Service as a rather male-oriented organization. Do you?
- Margaret Abrego: 11:46 In thinking about it before I came to work for it, all I ever saw were men. That's all I saw in the park whenever I visited them. I never thought of women in it. Since I am working in the regional office, I see many more women in the last couple of years. Women have gotten up in a few higher grades. When I first arrived, there wasn't anybody else in the higher grade, any woman. We have the deputy director, and that's great. I think it is. She went in as a supervisor first, a couple of years ago, and that was something new to them.

- Dorothy Huyck: 12:34 Are your particular talents and abilities being well used by the Park Service, do you think?
- Margaret Abrego: 12:42 The only training and the only work I ever did all my life was in accounting, and I believe it's okay. That's what I applied for.
- Dorothy Huyck: 12:57 From what you've seen at the Park Service, do you think there are any jobs that women should not undertake within the various categories of employment the Park Service offers?
- Margaret Abrego: 13:07 No, I don't think so. I think if a woman wants to do the work or go out, no matter what it is in maintenance, it's out in the digs or anything, if they're able to do it, I think they should be able. I think they should have the opportunity to do it.
- Dorothy Huyck: 13:22 If you looked ahead five or ten years, do you have any thoughts on what the opportunities for women would be?
- Margaret Abrego: 13:33 I haven't looked ahead much, but I do think the younger generation is going out for their share. The younger women are going up for their share and they're going to fight for it. I think it's only right that they should be able to get up in a supervisory level and on up into administration. I think the younger generation will do better than us older people did.
- Dorothy Huyck: 13:56 Do you think there's been a shift in attitude?
- Margaret Abrego: 13:58 I think so. Part of it is in the individuals nowadays. We didn't have the push because we had been held down and didn't know enough to push is what it amounted to. Now the older ones know what's there, and I think they're going to fight for it, and I think they should.
- Dorothy Huyck: 14:17 In your own life, you were not in the Park Service earlier on, but I take it that in other organizations, you were not encouraged?
- Margaret Abrego: 14:28 No, I never was. In any job, I would always – The women were always held down. Yes.
- Dorothy Huyck: 14:35 How long did you work in Alaska?

Margaret Abrego: 14:37 I did work a little bit for the Army, for the Corps of Engineers, for the Air Force. I was up there over quite a number of years, in and out of Alaska. I worked for the Alaskan railroad, which is also government, up there at McKinley park. Other than government work, I worked in construction to payroll, that type thing.

Dorothy Huyck: 15:07 Some women who had worked for military agencies express considerable enthusiasm about the National Park Service's contrast with military organizations.

Margaret Abrego: 15:16 Yes. I kind of like it. I don't know what it is, but I do like the National Park Service better than the military.

Dorothy Huyck: 15:22 You haven't identified why though?

Margaret Abrego: 15:24 No, I don't know exactly why I like it. I believe it's because the leadership isn't military, it's easier to working. When you work for the military, you might as well be in the military, more or less. The way they run things, it's easier working in the Park Service.

Dorothy Huyck: 15:45 Does that, in turn, afford better opportunities possibly for both men and women?

Margaret Abrego: 15:51 I think it would, yes, I believe so. A civilian in working in the military, I think they have a lot harder time working with military than they do working in non-military government work.

Dorothy Huyck: 16:08 Can I ask you if you've been married?

Margaret Abrego: 16:11 Yes, I have.

Dorothy Huyck: 16:24 When?

Margaret Abrego: 16:24 1955.

Dorothy Huyck: 16:25 Are you married now?

Margaret Abrego: 16:26 No.

Dorothy Huyck: 16:31 You're divorced?

Margaret Abrego: 16:32 Yes.

Dorothy Huyck: 16:32 When was that?

Margaret Abrego: 16:32 In 1961.

Dorothy Huyck: 16:32 You have no children?

Margaret Abrego: 16:32 No.

Dorothy Huyck: 16:32 I've been asking you quite a collection of questions, as you can see. Is there anything about your career during the time you've been with the Park Service that I've not asked about that you'd like to comment on?

Margaret Abrego: 16:46 No, I don't think so. It's been rather uneventful except that I've worked at the same desk for quite a long time now. The longest time in my whole working career that I've ever worked in one place is eight years.

Dorothy Huyck: 17:01 Does that say anything positive about the Park Service?

Margaret Abrego: 17:06 Not really. What it says is about me because I was getting ready to retire and I stayed on.

Dorothy Huyck: 17:12 When will you retire?

Margaret Abrego: 17:14 I expect to retire in a few months.

Dorothy Huyck: 17:17 During 1978?

Margaret Abrego: 17:18 No, probably right after the first of the year.

Dorothy Huyck: 17:24 Anything else we want to talk about?

Margaret Abrego: 17:26 No, I think that probably covers it.

Dorothy Huyck: 17:29 Very good, thank you.

Margaret Abrego: 17:29 Okay.

[END OF TAPE]

[END OF INTERVIEW]