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Michael D. Watson
September 13, 2012

Interview conducted by Katrina Pierson, Lu Ann Jones, Debbie Mills, Danica Willis, Keola Awong, and Bill Fischer
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

MICHAEL D. WATSON

September 13, 2012

Harpers Ferry, Virginia

Transcribed by Technitype Transcripts

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Stephen T. Mather Training Center

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Katrina Pierson: Good morning. We're just going to record a little intro so we can remember later on what day it was and everything like that. So today is Thursday, September 13, 2012. We are in the Storer College Room at the Mather Training Center, and we are here with Mike Watson, and he is going to be our narrator today. My name is Katrina Pierson. I am a park guide at Fort Caroline National Memorial in Jacksonville, Florida, and I'm here today for an oral history training program, and that's what this interview is a part of. So, basically, did we want to talk about the release form on the tape?

Lu Ann Jones: Just a little bit, yes.

Katrina Pierson: Okay. So, as you heard in our wonderful talk this morning, I think you probably know all the details by now, but we are going to ask you to sign this release form. It's just for your protection and for everyone's here protection. Basically, you're going to sign it over so that we can use this for research purposes later on, other educational purposes, possibly interpretive purposes, that kind of a thing, for – you know, we're going to be collecting lots of administrative oral histories for this project, and we just want to be able to use that for the future, for future people and current research needs.

Michael Watson: I'll cooperate.

Katrina Pierson: Great. Sounds great. Do I need to anything about that?

Lu Ann Jones: I don't think so.

Katrina Pierson: Okay. Let's go ahead and get started, then. So, you told us yesterday that you were born in Tampa.

Michael Watson: Right.

Katrina Pierson: How did your family end up in Tampa? How did your parents get there?

Michael Watson: My dad was in the Army Air Force, and that was his base station. So, he was from Ohio, as was my mother, but I was born on base right at the end of the war in March 1945.

Katrina Pierson: All right. Excellent. When did you leave Florida?

Michael Watson: I was held in the hospital because my mother had complications, and so it was like six weeks before she even got to hold me. So, my dad was seeing me when he could. I never quite understood what was wrong with her, except it affected her legs and she's had phlebitis ever since I was born. I think they were trying to keep infections away from me. Her mother had died of tuberculosis, so she was always testing positive for tuberculosis.

- Michael Watson: So, I think all that stuff was entering in. So, I think I was probably three months old and she went back by train with me, and then Dad was released in August or September, at the end of the war.
- Katrina Pierson: And they decided to go back to Ohio at that time?
- Michael Watson: Right. That was always the plan.
- Katrina Pierson: You talked a little bit about their careers yesterday. You said your father was an auto mechanic. Is that correct?
- Michael Watson: Yes, most of the time. For a while he tried insurance, and that wasn't his cup of tea, so he would always go back to the garage and work in the parts department or actually do the physical.
- Katrina Pierson: Did they have any particular career field in mind for you? Did they sort of push you towards a particular career, expect you to go into the Air Force, anything like that?
- Michael Watson: No, it was none of that. In fact, at Vietnam time, when it was time for me to be looked at by the draft boards, Dad was hoping I wouldn't go.
- Michael Watson: There's a story behind it. You know what the Memphis Belle is. It was the B-17, the first one to complete its twenty-five missions over Europe. He was in that group, the Army 8th Air Force. His was the second or third plane to complete twenty-five missions. This was a big deal. You got to come home. Something like 60 or 80 percent never completed their twenty-five missions. So, he got to come back and finish up in Tampa. He had seen the hell of war, and he kept a record of all his raids in his hat, which was actually against Army regulations. So, I've read those. He was not happy to be in the military, but he did his duty.
- Katrina Pierson: So, were you just interested in the natural sciences as a child?
- Michael Watson: Not really. (laughs) No. They didn't push me this direction. By junior high, I was into science and math, I was good at it, and so I started along down that path.
- Michael Watson: They were not college graduates. Nobody'd gone to college until me, which was kind of interesting, in retrospect. You and I talked about Ohio State University. Ohio State University had a dorm, a scholarship dorm, under its football stadium, and I didn't even know this until recently, they were always looking for first children in a family in Ohio that had never gone to college, and they put men, at the time, 350 men, in this dorm. I knew that about my classmates, but I didn't realize they'd methodically chosen first families like that. It was a co-op dorm.
- Katrina Pierson: So, your degree was in science education?

- Michael Watson: That's right.
- Katrina Pierson: So, did you plan teaching science as your kind of long-term career?
- Michael Watson: That's right. That's right.
- Katrina Pierson: So, you taught for two years.
- Michael Watson: And certainly, I had science teachers that influenced me, one in particular, absolutely.
- Katrina Pierson: Did you want to talk a little bit about that?
- Michael Watson: A science teacher with his Ph.D., who had polio and MS at the same time, walked on crutches, was braced up and down, humpbacked; one of the smartest guys I've ever known, and he challenged me and everyone in his science classes.
- Katrina Pierson: Wow. Excellent. So, you taught for two years, and then you switched over to the Park Service.
- Michael Watson: Three years, actually, in junior high. Well, see, I started out in the state park system in the summers. You only got paid for nine months as a teacher, and I'd started in college at a 4-H camp as a naturalist. I'd started out in the hard sciences, chemistry and physics, but by my sophomore year, I had to have a little bit of biology, and I took a local flora identification course, and that really turned me on. So, I then started taking all the sciences and had what was called a comprehensive science degree so I could teach all the sciences.
- Katrina Pierson: Excellent. So, what was kind of the deciding factor for you of getting out of teaching that you planned as your career and kind of moving into the Park Service?
- Michael Watson: Well, I never thought of getting out of teaching, for one thing, and I never have felt that. So, the National Science Foundation had this great program for science teachers, and so I was able to go get my master's degree in South Dakota, all expenses paid, and there was a whole group of us that did it in one year.
- Michael Watson: By that time, I was starting to notice national parks. I'd been to state park. By then I'd taken a National Science Foundation summer program in Utah on geology, and that's when we did the whole circuit through the Southwest from central Utah down to the north rim of the canyon.

- Michael Watson: Honestly, at Bryce Canyon when a ranger gave an evening program, and I'd given evening programs at the state park in uniform, that night in Bryce Canyon, I thought, "I'm going to do this," because I saw it as an extension of education and outreach. So, after South Dakota, I got a job at Mount Rainier that summer, and that started the National Park Service path.
- Katrina Pierson: Excellent. Do you remember that first day as a National Park Service employee?
- Michael Watson: Absolutely. So, I was assigned to be the naturalist at the remotest public area of Mount Rainier, Carbon River, and I drove in and no one was there. The cabin was open where I was going to stay with the law enforcement. So, I just wandered around on my own that first week, frankly. Carbon River is on the northwest corner. It gets all the rain, so it's classified as an inland rainforest.
- Michael Watson: By the second or third day, I knew one of my tasks was on Saturdays I would take a glacier walk, and it would be a three-hour walk up to the snout of the Carbon Glacier with people from the campground there. So, I decided to go see the Carbon Glacier. This was in late May or early June. Halfway up, this trail was covered by snow still, and I had carried my heavy tripod and all my camera stuff. I mean, I was out of college, I thought I knew all this, and immediately fell through an ice cave and was like this with my arms out, splaying, and my tripod had fallen down into the river. I wasn't in real danger, although people get killed doing this all the time.
- Michael Watson: There was a family that was on the other side, and they said, "Are you all right?"
- Michael Watson: I said, "Well, I could use some help getting out of here," because I was really stuck.
- Michael Watson: They said, "Are you the new interpreter?" And it was a family from Tacoma, and this was a local campground at Mount Rainier. We became fast friends for several years.
- Michael Watson: But that was the first time I'd been called an interpreter. Up until then I'd been called a naturalist. And that's when I realized that I wasn't out of my element, but I was out of my element. I had to learn fast what's safe and what's doable, because Mount Rainier was not the same as Burr Oak State Park in southeastern Ohio, which was a manmade lake, you know. This was big time.
- Katrina Pierson: Great. Did we want to transition to [unclear]?

- Lu Ann Jones: I'm sorry, but how did you get assigned to Mount Rainier or choose that as your first posting?
- Michael Watson: You had to apply to every park separately and it had to be an original application, and so while I was doing my master's, I'd come home at night, and I had a master one that I had done on my little Smith-Corona portable typewriter. I would do one a night, and I sent them out to twenty-five parks. In March, Wind Cave hired me, because I was taking prairie ecology and I was learning about South Dakota. So that was a natural hookup, and I accepted, and my wife was going to go back and get her – she was working on her master's in library science at Bowling Green.
- Michael Watson: But then in May, just before I was ready to go, Mount Rainier calls, and Mount Rainier made you go through all these – you had to write an essay question. There were like six questions and you had to write essays. You had to outline your first program. They put you through the ropes, and I'd done it successfully. He hired me, and Mount Rainier always hired late for some reason.
- Michael Watson: Well, my wife knew that there was a better library science program in Seattle at the University of Washington, and so with a lot of finagling, I called Wind Cave and said, "I'm not coming."
- Michael Watson: I remember the administrative officer saying, "You will never have a career in the National Park Service since you have done this."
- Michael Watson: And I said, "Well, that's fine." (laughs)
- Michael Watson: So, it was because my wife could go and we could be together, so to speak, that first summer, and we did that for five summers.
- Lu Ann Jones: Thank you.
- Debbie Mills: Good morning, Mike. I'm Debbie Mills. I'm an interpretative ranger at Catoctin Mountain Park pretty close to here. Your first permanent Park Service job was an environmental education specialist at Everglades, is that correct?
- Michael Watson: That's correct.
- Debbie Mills: Looking back, can you describe the events and circumstances that led to the popularity of the Environmental Education Movement in the seventies?
- Michael Watson: Yes. I think I was involved in some of it. Earth Day occurred, what, in 1970? No, it had to be before '70. I guess I was still teaching. Yes, I was still teaching there. So, we held the first Earth Day.
- Debbie Mills: You personally?

- Michael Watson: In our school system, with everybody else in the United States. That was a big deal. Environmental Movement had started by '68 or so, and '70, every school in the nation was doing something that week. I was the eighth-grade science teacher and the ninth-grade science teacher, and we coordinated it for all the schools in the city of Marion, Ohio. I mean, we were getting everything from the music teachers to sing Pete Seeger songs, to going out and doing cleanups. There was a little stream by the school, and we were doing measurements of that stream. So, the time was just really right.
- Michael Watson: So, I went to South Dakota. They were really pushing the whole environmental ecological approach to studying biology and the out-of-doors, so that really got into my bones in South Dakota, and I saw the Park Service that summer. That program, incidentally, was an environmental program at Bryce Canyon. He was talking about air quality then. He was talking about infringement on the park by various environmental types of things.
- Michael Watson: So, I came out of South Dakota all primed for that, and I knew about the Ph.D. program at Wisconsin. Wisconsin was in the midst of all the riots. All that was going on at the same time. One reason I didn't go to Wisconsin when I went to South Dakota was because I didn't want to be on campus. The riots were at their height in '70, or '71, '72, and I wasn't into the radical stuff. So, it had calmed down, although not completely, by the time I got to Wisconsin.
- Michael Watson: They were one of the handful of campuses that were really into the Environmental Movement, Ohio State to some extent, but not as much as Wisconsin. They had an environmental education Ph.D. program, and they were paying me to go. I never took a student loan.
- Debbie Mills: Wow.
- Michael Watson: I know. It was a different time. I would have finished my Ph.D. if I hadn't lost my entire committee, and I had to start over again with a new committee. By that time, I knew about the Everglades, and the Everglades had just this rocket scientist science environment education program. So, I applied and got a seasonal job, and then that led a couple years later to a full-time job.
- Michael Watson: I went down there thinking I would actually do my dissertation and prove that the environmental education program was making a significant difference in the attitudes and behaviors of South Florida schoolchildren. That was a tall order, and I never proved it.

- Michael Watson: But like you were talking about, the right thing to do, the ethical thing to do, in my bones, I know that we made a difference in the Everglades in South Florida with the environmental education program, because it was a huge program.
- Michael Watson: Did I answer your question? What was the question again?
- Lu Ann Jones: The question was what influences in the country dictated the—?
- Michael Watson: Yes. The times, the times and the fact that the National Science Foundation wanted to put teachers in place, so I was getting financed to do all this.
- Debbie Mills: Do you see any similarities with the STEM program that's coming out now that's so popular?
- Michael Watson: STEM?
- Debbie Mills: That's Science Technology Engineering and Math, and basically what it does now, it poses – it's based on inquiry. So, the idea of STEM is to pose a question to students, and they are to develop the answers using science, technology, engineering, and math.
- Michael Watson: I'm sure there are. I mean, I remember even when I was going to school as a science teacher, the whole Sputnik thing about the Russians put the first thing in space, and then there was a whole panic about science and math then. So, all these different curriculums were coming out. And that cycle keeps repeating itself. We knew how to teach science then. I couldn't teach things now that I taught then in seventh and eighth grades. I taught evolution. We talked about religion but that it was separate from science. I'd get in trouble for some of those things today in Ohio.
- Debbie Mills: While in Florida, you coordinated a partnership between the school systems and the Park Service. I'm not sure they called them partnerships back in the seventies.
- Michael Watson: No, it wasn't in vogue.
- Debbie Mills: Also, on a side note, you talked about, you did stream cleanups and things as part of the first Earth Day. That was prior to the Park Service volunteer program. So, were there any issues that evolved from using non-Park Service people to do functions like that, or this wasn't part of the Park Service?
- Michael Watson: These were my students. We'd go out different places.
- Debbie Mills: Do you see any correlations between the development of the volunteer program and the Environmental Education Movement?

- Michael Watson: Yes. Oh, yes. Look, Hartzog really put environmental education on the map in the National Park Service at the same time, and a whole curriculum had been funded by the National Park Foundation called NEED, N-E-E-D, National Environmental Education Development. So, by '68, this stuff was being shared with teachers all over the park system, and parks were encouraged and given money out of launching an office for the National Environmental Study Area. We had trails devoted to the fourth grade and the fifth grade and the sixth grade called NESAs, N-E-S-A's. So, I mean, it was just exploding everywhere. But Hartzog was the one. He's the one who did the volunteer program, and he was getting people to come into the parks and to the cities. These programs were as energetic in the cities as anywhere. Urban parks was just part of this stuff.
- Michael Watson: So, I didn't establish the program in the Everglades; it had been established. Martha Aikens, who's being interviewed in another room, had run that program before me, and another guy had helped set it up before her. Everglades had a philosophic, sort of, philosopher chief of interpretation who had been a planner next door at the Harpers Ferry Center, and he was going to put Everglades on the map and be a leader in interpretation education, and so the park learned very quickly how to get funds out of the Washington program out of the Department of Transportation. It was called – I'll think of it in a minute. But it was funds for transportation. Transportation for Children Funds, I think is what it was called. We were getting like three or four hundred buses paid for out of that thing and giving that money to Dade County Public Schools. There were five counties around the park. All of them were getting free bus money, and we controlled it. So, they had to come to our workshop and get certified before they could get the free bus money and this science coordinator. So, here's the partnership.
- Michael Watson: The science coordinator for Dade County – that was the third largest public system in the nation then, and Broward was fifth, Fort Lauderdale – she was aboard, and she made her teachers come to our workshops. They would get credit for it in course credit. Then from October through March, fourth and sixth grades from Miami would come every day during the week, something like four classes a day.
- Debbie Mills: We're getting kind of close on our time right now, but you said you could not successfully prove that you could make a difference with the students.
- Michael Watson: Yes, scientifically.
- Debbie Mills: Scientifically. So, non-scientifically, could you explain the impact you had on students?

- Michael Watson: Yes. I think from 1968 or so until still today, Everglades was touching a majority of schoolchildren in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades and showing how the South Florida environment's connected and how the Everglades is part of that.
- Michael Watson: Now, two specific examples. The park had its fiftieth anniversary in 1999, and they had brought all the superintendents back. There were like seven past or current superintendents, it was great, and they were on a panel. You got to ask them questions. I asked them, "What did the EE program mean to you?" And every one of them said it made our education process at public meetings, the parents of these children, working with the Corps of Engineers on water issues and endangered species, they said over that long haul we had educated the population of South Florida. They understood how you just can't ignore one another, that this was all intertwined, and one thing affected the other. The survival of endangered species in the Everglades depended on how much water was going to come through these floodgates that had crisscrossed Florida in the thirties.
- Michael Watson: Then the other thing, they built a new Visitors Center after it was destroyed by Hurricane Andrew. I was here by then at Mather, and I went down for the dedication of the new Visitors Center, and it's still there. There's a mosaic that starts outside on a patio and has the whole South Florida environment. It shows how it's connected to the cities, and the mosaic goes into the main part of the Visitors Center inside. When they put that bid out for the creation of that, they got several bids from artists, but the one that they chose was the one from a boy who had gone to Flamingo in our NEED camping program, and how it affected his life when he was in the sixth grade and how this was his way of giving back to the park for that experience that had made a difference in his life. I think that was solid proof.
- Debbie Mills: Yes, absolutely. Well, apparently there were some factors that caused you to leave the Everglades and move on to Mather, so we would like to explore that further.
- Michael Watson: Okay.
- Danica Willis: All right. Those questions will come from me. I'm Danica Willis at Whiskeytown, cultural resource program manager. So, my first question is, what led you to be an instructor at Mather?
- Michael Watson: Okay. The environmental education coordinator was a GS-9, and all the districts around Everglades was a GS-9. The chief of interpretation was a GS-13, and that was the gap. So, there was no place else for me to go in the Everglades.

- Michael Watson: It was a great job, I did it six years, I guess, but there was no chance for me to advance in the Everglades. For me to even think about the chief of interpretation, I would have to go out and go back.
- Michael Watson: I had done all my training, including interpretative training, at the Grand Canyon. Even though this was the training center where interpretative training went on at Mather, for some reason the ones I was selected for, they held them out at the Grand Canyon. But I did know the superintendent here, David [unclear], and Tom Thomas [phonetic] was another superintendent here before him. They would come to the Everglades, and so I started to know a little bit about Mather Training Center. I actually came up and gave a presentation on environmental education here about the Everglades.
- Michael Watson: So, there was a job announcement for a GS-11/12 instructor. I was qualified for it, and so I went after it. I was told by the superintendent of Everglades I wouldn't get it because he knew the politics of what was going on, and I wasn't going to get it because of the politics, except the superintendent here then, Charlie Gebler [phonetic], wanted me, and somebody in Washington wanted Mary Kimmett [phonetic]. So, they decided to hire both of us, and that doesn't happen very often.
- Michael Watson: But there were two other instructors here who were kind of just biding their time, and they knew they were not going to go around, so they took the chances that they could get away with it, and they did. So, Mary and I both came in on the same day and two of my other colleagues went to Albright on the same day. Four of us started on the same day in 1981 at the two training centers, and we knew each other.
- Michael Watson: So, finding a job that got me to a 12 in a year was a big deal. That was a big deal. That didn't happen very often back then.
- Danica Willis: So, during your time here as an instructor, what kind of shifts did you notice in class offerings?
- Michael Watson: When I got here, interpretation has always been a mainstay for Mather Training Center since day one, but cultural resources was sort of fledgling, and there was a big class in the works. One of those other instructors that were here was in charge of it, and it was something like five or six weeks before that course, and nothing had been done.
- Michael Watson: So, the superintendent assigned it to me, and I knew nothing about the cultural side of the Park Service. I'd always been the natural history side. But I knew how to train. I knew how to organize a class and a curriculum. I knew how to do that, and so I went, and I was told who to contact.

Michael Watson: I went to the Washington office and found some key players, including one who'd just retired, a guy named Harry Butowsky [phonetic], a guy named Hugh Miller [phonetic]. There was a third person.

Michael Watson: This was a turmoil time in the Park Service because the Heritage and Conservation and Recreation Society, HCRS, as they sometimes referred to it, was coming in at the same time. They talked about this guy named Dick Sellers [phonetic] out west in Santa Fe, and he would be a good one to bring in. So, I brought him in, and we sat down and put together the program without the other instructor, which was kind of an awkward situation. We held that first – I think it was ten-day cultural resources management course, and it was a winner. Nobody had seen anything like it before, and that would lead to historic architecture courses for both managers and for maintenance people. It was real heavy. And we had money. We were paying people to come here. We had money to transport people here. I don't know. Did you have money to come here, or did your parks—?

Lu Ann Jones: The chief historian, Bob Sutton [phonetic], gave scholarships for [unclear].

Michael Watson: But for a while that wasn't happening.

Lu Ann Jones: I mean, this is a special, special occasion.

Michael Watson: It was happening for all the courses. We had a chunk of money that we could bring people here. So, cultural resources, we would give one-week orientation courses to all new employees in the eastern half of the U.S. Those were going on once or twice a month.

Michael Watson: The interp courses took off with interpretative operations for first-line supervisors. That was a big two-weeklong course, and Mary and I set it up with the help of regional chiefs of interpretation in the Washington office. We became valuable to the Washington office, to the program managers in Washington. They saw training as a way to get the word out to the parks and to make the park staffs better trained and better prepared. So those were the three main areas. There was some maintenance going on and some administration.

Danica Willis: In the 1982 annual report, they also talk a lot about it was a year of accomplishment, so they were talking about different changes that were made in the building itself, climate control, painting, carpeting, but there was also a complete overhaul in the audiovisual equipment and things.

Michael Watson: Yes.

Danica Willis: How did that affect classes here?

Michael Watson: You got a hold of that, huh? I didn't write that. Charlie Gebler would have written that. I need to tell you a little bit about Charlie at some point.

Danica Willis: Okay.

Michael Watson: So, the first time I gave a talk here, all you had were little holes in the back of the classroom, which a 16-millimeter projector would give a film. So, they cut the big windows out, and those were installed when I got here, and they were putting new equipment in. There were people from the Harpers Ferry Center wiring the place, and so suddenly we have all new bells and whistles, the Ektagraphic slide projectors that could be synced three at a time so that you had transitions. We had two stacks of those.

Michael Watson: Videotape was still reel-to-reel, but soon after, they brought in the big tape decks with three-quarter-inch cassettes, which are about this big. So that was the first cassette. But we were using reel-to-reel still in 1982. We put a stereo system in, and upstairs in that classroom a huge screen that's almost the whole width of the front wall. When that was put in, that allowed people to think differently.

Michael Watson: So, this guy, Hugh Miller, who was Randy Biallas's [phonetic] predecessor, friendly, really full of information about historical architecture, and he could turn on maintenance men on how to preserve it. He would go out and take before-and-after pictures of things, and all of a sudden, he could put slides side by side. Now, that doesn't sound like a big deal, but it was. When he put slides side by side with how you could change a structure and what it would look like historically and what it looks like today, that was just a revelation, and it's so simple, but by changing the configuration of those two classrooms, especially the one upstairs, the big one, and we had to haul that screen up through the classroom window with ropes and pulleys. There was no way to get it in there any other way except through the window.

Danica Willis: So, did you only have the one screen up there, or did you have both, and you just put it from one room to another?

Michael Watson: No, no. The one that's still there, it's kind of hidden now with all this new – my guess, it's still the same screen. The one upstairs has been changed a couple of times. For one thing, it was so big that it would sag, the weight, so we had to replace it, I think, a couple of times. They put it in with a skyhook, or whatever you call those things, one time. So, yes, and you could lower it. You had electric controls. You didn't have to go up and pull it. It was high-tech.

Danica Willis: Did that cause a change in the class offerings at all or—

Michael Watson: Well, I think it more was in the way people presented their programs. Overheads were big. You know what they are? (laughs)

Danica Willis: Yes.

Michael Watson: There's probably one hidden around here somewhere. Overheads, I think, preceded the slideshow with all the bells and whistles. So, slides became the big way of doing things, and at times we had to tell people, "Too many slideshows." We can't just have slides after slides after slides. So, we would work with the people who developed their programs to have interactive things.

Michael Watson: Hugh Miller would take the class out for the afternoon walk through the park down here. We didn't have pointers, but we had a way of shining a light on stuff. It wasn't a laser pointer. Because he would want them to look at the finials and all these things. Interpretation classes, we made them do programs or pieces of programs and critique them in the class and videotape them. That was something different. Then they would see themselves while they were here, and we would sit around and critique them.

Danica Willis: Did you see a lot of demographic changes happening

Michael Watson: Yes, yes. First women and then minorities. It happened in interp first. But in all the classes, you would see more minorities over time, and it was dramatic.

Danica Willis: I also read in one of the reports that a large amount of international visitors came to Mather. What kind of role did they play in this program?

Michael Watson: Well, they took classes here, and I got involved in that. I mentioned a guy named Tom Thomas. He'd been superintendent here before Dave [unclear], and then he went to the International Affairs Office, and he started holding an international seminar every year for, I think, fifty park directors from around the world, in cooperation with Michigan State University. So, there was faculty from Michigan State and Park Service. He would bring those groups here. They would travel all over the country for six weeks. We trained nearly every Park Service director in the world in the eighties, the Park Service did. So, Tom Thomas had also been chief of training, so you had this mix of Mather because he'd been three places, and they all fit together. So, he would bring all these people, and he started taking me with him.

Michael Watson: I got to do things I'd never expected or set out to until I did the first one in India and was scared to death to go there in 1980 with a Fish and Wildlife Service person.

- Michael Watson: After about two days there, just thought, “Oh, my god, there are other people doing—,” and they worshiped the National Park Service around the world because of these seminars that were part of the international affairs in Washington and the training program of the National Park Service. It was amazing what was going on.
- Danica Willis: Wow. Okay. You asked us to bring up Charlie Gebler. What kind of story did you want to tell about him?
- Michael Watson: Well, he had been the regional chief of interpretation in Seattle, and I’d come across him a couple of times at Mount Rainier. He was difficult, and I knew about that, and I don’t know if one of you has the question what’s the hardest thing you ever had to do while you were here, but ask me what’s the hardest thing I ever had to do, because it involved Charlie Gebler.
- Danica Willis: Okay.
- Michael Watson: So, he knew me and so he was sticking up for me as his employee. He didn’t know the woman. It turns out the woman and I meshed, Mary Kimmett, and we did great things together, and it was a perfect match because she was from the cultural side of the house and I was from the natural history. She was from Independence.
- Michael Watson: I came to the first staff meeting here the first day in this room, but it was a blue room. These are the aftermath of the blue room, the blue curtains, but they’re hidden now. He was throwing a fit at the staff. Somebody put a complaint in, an EO complaint on him, because he had said something that had upset a woman. I probably know who it was. But, I mean, he was going around and making everybody sign that they hadn’t done it, in this room. That was the first staff meeting. That was not the Charlie I knew.
- Michael Watson: He invited me to Thanksgiving, to his family, good Mormon family, and he yelled at his kids and he threw food at his kids on Thanksgiving Day in my presence, and I’m his employee. This continues for almost a year, this bizarre behavior, and we as a staff are meeting behind his back and saying, “What is wrong with Charlie?” He’s paranoid. All day he’s coming from office to office sitting down and, “Did so-and-so say this?” We talked about it, and finally I was elected to go around Charlie.
- Michael Watson: There were problems in Washington also. A woman named Clem Penter had hired, was the chief of training, and she’d actually interviewed me for this job. She had suddenly died at forty years of age with an asthma attack. She was African American. So Flip Haygood was the acting chief of training; he hadn’t been named the chief of training. I called him up and I said, “I need to talk to you.”

Michael Watson: And he said, "I've been waiting for someone to call. Can you come down tomorrow morning first thing? Can you make an excuse?"

Michael Watson: I said, "I'll do it," and I went down and told him.

Michael Watson: He said, "Yeah."

Michael Watson: And Charlie, it spilled over in the classroom. That was the tipping point. He liked to give this slide show of the National Parks of America to music. It was a media extravaganza. He put cinemascope. We had cinemascope in here with his stuff. But he just fell apart in front of the classroom, and we couldn't have that anymore. So, I told my supervisor's supervisor, I went above my supervisor, and Flip was grateful.

Michael Watson: The next day he came, and Charlie was having a staff meeting and fell apart in front of Flip, and that was it. Flip put him on administrative leave. Then we shared actings.

Michael Watson: Charlie had been complaining about his eyesight. He went to his eye doctor after he'd been put on administrative leave. The eye doctor said, "You need to see a neurosurgeon now." He had a massive brain tumor. It was just so sad because I'd known him as a robust guy out in Seattle. But something had to be done. He never came back as such. He died a year and a half later.

Michael Watson: I had another incident in the Everglades where I thought my supervisor might be going to commit suicide because of divorce and stuff, and he said something to me as I left the building. I thought about it out in my car and went back in, to the superintendent, and I said, "I know I shouldn't do this, but I have to do this."

Michael Watson: He said, "I'll go." And he did, and that guy went on to have a great career.

Michael Watson: So, I did it twice in my career, but Charlie was really the tough one because we couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. So sometimes you have to go above your supervisor, and it is the right thing to do. It's a terrible time to know when to do it.

Danica Willis: Well, thank you for sharing that.

Michael Watson: Yes. That was a defining moment for me at this place.

Danica Willis: Later on, after we have all of our questions, if we have time, I'd like to ask you why you were rescued while you were here.

Michael Watson: Okay.

Danica Willis: But I will pass the interview on.

- Keola Awong: Okay. I'm Keola Awong, and I'm going to take your career to the next step and see what you—
- Michael Watson: You've dissected me.
- Keola Awong: So, I'm from Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. So, what was it like for you to work at Wausau after working at Mount Rainier and Everglades and then coming here to the training center?
- Michael Watson: It was a scary proposition, but it was an exciting one, because the director, William Mott, William Penn Mott, had come in, and he was kind of an old codger that had been the state park director for Ronald Reagan, and Ronald Reagan had put him in now as the new director. He came with this twelve-point plan, and fully seven or eight of those twelve points had to do with interpretation and outreach. It was amazing. There was the plan for the National Park Service under a new director.
- Michael Watson: When I had been in the Everglades and here in 1980 when Secretary of Interior Watt went in, James Watt, and he tried to shut down environmental education, and now Mott comes in and he's promoting interpretation and partnerships. That's where partnerships first came about as a concept. Mott immediately hired an assistant director for interpretation. Now, that job had only been filled once before under Hartzog, and that was Bill Everhart, who developed the Harpers Ferry Center next door, and then that job hadn't been filled for many years. So here was more clout in Washington.
- Michael Watson: So, the division head, the job that I got, in the Division of Interpretation, didn't have quite the power that it had before because it used to directly go to the associate director for operations. Now there was a new layer, but he had more authority. So that appealed to me. He was going to be the political guy. I was the field guy, I was the educator on the deck, and that's why I was hired, because the field interpreters in the Park Service had come through my classes for six years and they knew me, they respected me. So that was how I got hired.
- Michael Watson: Not a single regional chief of interpretation applied. There were ten of them then. There were ten regions. That would be the normal progression. So, I was able to slip in because, frankly, that competition wasn't there, and he wanted a new guy. Ken [unclear] was the assistant director. He was from the Denver Service Center. He wanted somebody to give him credibility. I had credibility in his eyes.
- Michael Watson: So, I was also up for the chief of interpretation at Sequoia and thought that I would be interviewed at Sequoia first before the Washington job was offered, but Mott said, "We're not waiting around."

- Michael Watson: Mott had us all come down. I went down with Ann Casalina [phonetic], who was on staff. The two of us went to be interviewed at the same time. I sat outside while she was interviewed, and then we drove back together and compared notes.
- Michael Watson: He waited two days, and I was offered the job. It was really interesting, because I had twenty-four hours because I had told him about Sequoia, and he said, “No. What? You’re up for another job?”
- Michael Watson: I said, “Well, yeah.”
- Michael Watson: He said, “I’ve already told the other people that you’re the one,” which is absolutely a mistake from a supervisory standpoint. You seal the deal before you tell the people that they didn’t get it.
- Michael Watson: So, Mott said I had twenty-four hours. So, I called Sequoia and I talked to the superintendent. He said, “Well, you’re in the final three, but we’re five or six weeks away, so that will help you make your decision, probably.” It just took me twenty-four hours and then I knew it was the right thing to do.
- Keola Awong: So, what were your hopes and dreams with the support now for education? Training, what was your hopes and goals as you started your new job?
- Michael Watson: In Washington?
- Keola Awong: Yes.
- Michael Watson: Well, it was to take Mott’s twelve-point plan to the field and to get the interpretative programs at the parks to feel that they were part of it. I never felt like I left this training center, because the chief of interpretation in Wausau had always been a top supporter of training here. So, I still had that relationship with the training center, and Martha was the superintendent. I worked for Martha in the Everglades. She was my first supervisor in Everglades. She was on my staff in the Washington office for two years before she came out here, and then she would supervise me again when I was superintendent at the end. Martha was here. She was an interpreter. She was an environmental education person.
- Michael Watson: So, we started putting together skills teams, interpretative skills teams from the regions. There were ten teams, and we brought all these people together that were known trainers in their own situations, people from Hawaii Volcanoes. I’ll try and remember this guy because you’ll know him. It was a huge man. He looked Hawaiian, but he wasn’t.
- Keola Awong: John Erickson [phonetic].

Michael Watson: John Erickson. I knew you'd know. He was one of the leaders of those. So, we put these ten skills groups together, and they practiced their training here and then they went out as teams all over the systems. All the parks were getting trained with a central curriculum that we had all agreed that these are the objectives. Those eventually then led to the ten competencies for interpreters, which are still used today.

Michael Watson: So, one thing was to bring education back to the forefront. We had a five-point plan for interpretation under Mott's twelve-point plan. One of it was education. One was program integration, which we should have called partnerships, because that's what it meant. We were still learning that. We wanted to professionalize the interpretative workforce, and so we started having relationships with universities, including University of Idaho. We started doing the sociological studies. That does have to go through and be out of Idaho. That was all part of that.

Michael Watson: Harpers Ferry Center was part of this. We wanted to upgrade old films, waysides, all the interpretive media, and the Mission 66 stuff. So that became our plan. It was called the Interpretive Challenge. It had five Sequoia [unclear] on the front for each of the things we were trying to do.

Keola Awong: That's a big achievement and step forward.

Michael Watson: I'm proud of it. I'm proud of it. And we had literally a couple hundred people involved, which became a model then for when I came back to Mather, by bringing field people together to get things done.

Keola Awong: So why did you come back to Mather?

Michael Watson: I rode the train for six years from Harpers Ferry, the little station down here in town. My daughter was starting school by then, and it was too much. I was missing out on all of her stuff. And it was available.

Michael Watson: Now, I did have a goal for returning to Mather as the superintendent, and I thought that was my ideal job. After Mott left, then the assistant director left, the guy that was taking the heat from Congress and doing the politics, and suddenly I was in that chair again, and, again, that's never been my cup of tea. So, I was starting to feel the politics of the organization a lot more when that layer was removed again and being able to come back here – by our staying here, my wife was able to pursue her career as a librarian. I'd pulled her out of South Florida, where she was doing quite well in the Miami system. It took her two years to recover and get back to where she'd been, and by staying put but having different jobs in this area, it worked out for our careers, both of us, and I could watch my daughter go to school.

Keola Awong: Great. Okay. I'll hand over the interview to Bill.

- Bill Fischer: My name's Bill Fischer. I'm historian at Fort Scott National Historic Site. You already answered the first question, that coming back here as superintendent was your ideal job.
- Michael Watson: Right. Martha called me up one day, and she said, "Mike, I discovered a bunch of books up in the attic with your name on them. What do you want me to do with them?"
- Michael Watson: I said, "Leave them be. I'm coming back. When you leave, I'm coming back."
- Bill Fischer: So, when you arrived back here in 1992, in general, what was working and wasn't?
- Michael Watson: I think training was sort of in a holding pattern. Interpretation was certainly still going strong. I'm trying to remember if cultural resources was real active then or not, and Martha could tell you better. I think training wasn't getting the funding it had traditionally. Flip Haygood was still chief of training, and Director Ridenour was the second Republican under Reagan. It was Director Ridenour who had been Indiana State Parks. I think that was the beginning of working with Indiana.
- Bill Fischer: Meaning the [unclear] institute?
- [START OF FILE 3]
- Michael Watson: Yes. Eppley[phonetic] hadn't been established yet, but that was the seed of it in the early eighties, and the TEL program, the Technology Enhanced Learning program. So those seeds were around.
- Michael Watson: Then Ridenour left, and Kennedy came in, and that was a big transition in 1994 or so. I'd been back two years. So, it seems like things had been going along in training and was sort of steady as she goes. I think cultural resources and interp were still pretty active.
- Bill Fischer: Probably you answered this question I had. In one of the documents that I looked at for this interview, training dropped precipitously between FY '94 and FY '95, and then it nearly triples from FY '96 to '97.
- Michael Watson: Right, and there's a real good reason for that. That's dramatic. I'd forgotten that. So, there was a timeout for training when Kennedy came in, and this guy that was superintendent of Glacier National Park, Gil Lusk [phonetic], had taken a year's sabbatical.
- Michael Watson: I don't know how he pulled this off for the Park Service, but he was paid to go to the Pinchot Institute in Pennsylvania, the Forest Service think tank, if you will, on Gifford Pinchot's old house, estate. For a year, Gil outlined a training strategy for the National Park Service, and he was

representing the superintendents. The superintendents were feeling that their training needs weren't being met, especially in orientation and mission sort of training that those of us who came in the seventies and eighties would get at Albright. I was at Albright for twelve weeks when I became a permanent, twelve weeks of training. That went down to ten weeks and five weeks, but still was happening. I think all that had disappeared by this time, and so the superintendents were sort of on a warpath, and Kennedy and Gil made a pact. Gil was assigned chief of training while Flip Haygood was still chief of training. There were two chiefs of training, which was really strange.

Michael Watson: But there was a timeout, and so Flip gracefully left, went over to the senior vice president of the SCA, where he still does great stuff today and continues his good work, because he was one of my mentors. Gil's one of the others. Gil held all these workshops to implement the strategy that he had put together when he was at the Pinchot Institute. So that then became the document under Director Kennedy for training, which was called the training development strategy.

Bill Fischer: During this same timeframe when you first get here, we've talked about the upgrading of the classrooms, the giant screen, and slides. Now we're getting into the computer era. Can you take us through that a little bit, computer [unclear]?

Michael Watson: Yes. We started to have projectors hanging in the classroom from the ceiling. You'd crawl up there and wire everything, and remote controls. We had remote. If you look at the classrooms, there's a little depression in the wall out there in this lower classroom. I was looking at it during your session. That used to be where all the buttons were. We could make everything work from that point. Then that would change into teachers' stations, where all the controls were and everything remote. All of them would fail at one time or another, didn't matter how high-tech it was. And then the needs of email.

Michael Watson: Look, the first computer course that I ever saw here was maintenance when they came up with a maintenance management system. I went out to Frederick and rented desktops because when I first came here, all that there was here of that sort of thing was an IBM with upright screen, a word processor of some sort, and that was in one of the secretary's offices, and that was all we had.

Michael Watson: So, we went out and started buying computers, renting computers at first, and then setting up email stations for classrooms. It was maintenance who first did computer training.

- Bill Fischer: How did you transition the other programs here to incorporate that technology?
- Michael Watson: Well, one big part of the strategy then was this Technological Enhanced Learning. It was started at Albright Training Center under Jim Boyd, but it was moved here because it was really tough for him to get the connections he needed at the Grand Canyon. He needed satellite stuff. He couldn't do that at Grand Canyon at the time, so Jim came here and is still here. So that was a big push.
- Michael Watson: By then, the Eppley Institute had started. Ridenour was still involved with it after he left the Washington office, and we held a weeklong training session for our trainers on how to incorporate TEL into all the programs. So that was the seed.
- Bill Fischer: What was it, being pushed from Wausau, or was it a lot independently done here?
- Michael Watson: It was being pushed by Gil, and he would always say, "The train is leaving the station. Get on it or it's going to leave you behind." It was his philosophy that we were going to push new stuff at the Service, new ideas, new ways of delivery.
- Bill Fischer: A few years after you're here getting all settled in, trying to figure out the computers and everything else, the National Conservation Training Center opens.
- Michael Watson: Right. They were part of this.
- Bill Fischer: Walk through that.
- Michael Watson: They were part of this strategy in a sense. We knew about them, and by 1989 Rick Lemon, who would become the first director over there, came in and spent a day with me here. Fish and Wildlife had total supported our organization for that construction. They didn't have anything at the time except a little wet lab over in Kearneysville, West Virginia, a few miles from here. Okay. Here's where we [unclear]. What was the word? Malignment.
- Lu Ann Jones: Just remember who you're talking to. (laughs)
- Michael Watson: Yes. So, Senator Byrd, good West Virginia Robert C. Byrd, comes to the Park Service in the late eighties when Mott, I think, was still director, and says, "I want a national aquarium in the panhandle of West Virginia."
- Michael Watson: Now, there was already a national aquarium in Baltimore and in Washington, but he wanted another one here to bring a million tourists to the panhandle.

- Michael Watson: And the Park Service looked at him – I won't say who – and, "That just doesn't make any sense, Senator Byrd."
- Michael Watson: Well, Senator Byrd, not wanting to be upstaged, he goes to Fish and Wildlife, and they said, "Well, yeah, we can do that. We'll do that. We'd like to attach a training center concept to that." Smart.
- Michael Watson: Then they started putting their plans together, and then it no longer was an aquarium; it was a national habitat center. It would be their central training center and it would be located out here on park land, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park land, right down the road.
- Michael Watson: Then they found this place that was for sale over on the Potomac River, 512 acres outside of Shepherdstown, and now it's going to be a Fish and Wildlife training center for conservation for all of Interior. So that was going on in parallel with the strategy, and they got the money to do it from Byrd, because we had not. This was even before Gil.
- Michael Watson: So how did it affect us? Well, for one thing, the Interior directed Park Service and BLM to have full-time liaisons. They couldn't dictate it to the Forest Service, but the Forest Service was invited. Conservation Foundation was invited. Others were invited, state of West Virginia. But in that we were also going to give a million dollars to the operation, 500 from BLM, 500 from NPS.
- Bill Fischer: One time or recurring?
- Michael Watson: Recurring, out of the training budget. What was the training budget then? I don't know. It was not more than two and a half or three million at the time, anyway. It was a big chunk of our training budget.
- Michael Watson: So, they certainly had the momentum. Gil's strategy called for me to build a new dorm and for Albright to recondition its dorms, called for a new training center at the Capitol Training Center in Wausau, called for the enhancement of stuff for the Historic Preservation Training Center, but we never got the money like Fish and Wildlife did. Two of their regional directors were assigned to that project for, like, ten years. They did it right.
- Michael Watson: So, the idea of having a liaison over there, I went back and said, "Well, we need to have a full-time employee." We have an agreement with them still in place today. They could have sent two people to this class tuition-free from the Fish and Wildlife Service if you advertised it the right way. So did BLM. I think BLM is still over there.
- Michael Watson: But we were able to grab 100,000 back, and that funds an employee of Mather Training Center to be stationed at Fish and Wildlife to look after Park Service interests.

- Michael Watson: So, we got our feet in the door over there from day one. Peggy Sandretzky's been there since day one, and she's still there and represents National Park Service training interests at the Fish and Wildlife Center.
- Bill Fischer: How did that affect morale here?
- Michael Watson: I don't think we ever felt that this was going to close us down. I think later on we thought it might. The biggest thing was it affected people staying in the dorm. Cook Hall was the old girls' dormitory and home ec department for Storer College, and some rooms had as many as six beds, and everybody shared restrooms. Once it stayed in the facilities at Fish and Wildlife, people in the Park Service did not want to stay in Cook Hall anymore. You talk to people who came here and stayed here in this thing before they knew better that there were better ways to stay, they'll talk about how that influenced their whole career, staying together under those circumstances. But once that genie was out of the bottle, we could not fill the dorm. We couldn't make people stay there.
- Bill Fischer: So, the dorm closes here with FY 2000.
- Michael Watson: That sounds right.
- Bill Fischer: Funding was supposed to come back in 2004, and we're heading on to FY 2013, and there are no dorms.
- Michael Watson: We had the funding for the dorms. I went to the DAB, the Development Advisory Board. We spent a million dollars putting the drawings together. We removed the three Mission 66 houses that were down here as the site. So, if you look down over the hill, that's where it would have been, three stories that held forty-six, forty-eight people, single rooms, patterned after the facilities at Fish and Wildlife. It was in the line-item construction. The money was there.
- Michael Watson: I retired. Other people came in. I retired. 2006 was an ideal time for me personally, but you got a new associate director from NASA [phonetic], and I've been through too many reorganizations. But when I left, everything was a go. It was in the line-item construction. It was near the top. Albright got theirs done.
- Michael Watson: I was on the grading panel for those construction projects. I represented the Washington – training is under administration in Washington now. It wasn't always. Sue Masica [phonetic] was the associate for administration, and she got me on that panel to representing training interests in WASO. There weren't any other real construction issues with WASO.

- Michael Watson: So, people came along in 2006 to '08 and sort of killed it. When was Katrina? When was Hurricane Katrina?
- [Unidentified]: 2005.
- Michael Watson: Okay. Katrina started affecting the priorities of the line-item construction budget terrifically, and a training dorm all of a sudden wasn't cachet. I have to tell you that I – not morale, because I've always felt we had good morale, but disappointment in the agency and seeing the agency not invest in its employees like we know it should as training professionals is probably the biggest disappointment.
- Michael Watson: I used to do studies which compared the percentage of the NPS budget devoted to the training of employees in different agencies, and we were always last as an organization. It dropped as much as – I sort of remember .75 one year. You look at Fish and Forest Service, it could be 5 to 8 percent in some of them, even BLM. So, I've always been a little disappointed in our leadership, because they give great lip service but not always the support that has to go with it.
- Bill Fischer: One last question. There are many others that we all could ask. But business plan. This is the summary pamphlet for FY 2004 that you oversaw. It's a pretty dire document.
- Michael Watson: Yes. It documented all the things that were happening.
- Bill Fischer: Funding shortfall of over one-half million dollars, the need for more full-time employees, the need for more full-time administrative support, the need for the on-campus lodging that we just talked about, and the need for finding new funding partnerships because of those shortfalls. At that time, less than 20 percent of trainees were actually coming here for residence courses.
- Bill Fischer: Since that time, the nation's had economic stagnation, continuing budget cuts. You've lived here forever. You're still part of this place. It's in your soul. You volunteer throughout the National Park Service. You've been called back in as an emergency superintendent, so you're still well in tune with the National Park Service.
- Michael Watson: Right.
- Bill Fischer: The question is, is there still a role for a dedicated campus-based training experience in this age of teleconferencing, webinars, email, telephone calls, etc.?
- Michael Watson: Well, the short answer is absolutely yes, because it's a delivery system that can't be duplicated by any other methodology. I would ask you if you were to take this class via television for a week, would you get the same

results? And my guess is no. I'm not putting those other delivery systems down.

Michael Watson: I think you need a balanced program, and we had it outlined in the strategy as to what the percentages would be as to how we delivered it, but it was also based on a budget that would have filled our dorm, I think, forty weeks minimum out of the fifty-two weeks of the year, and the dorm would have paid for itself. That's why I did the business plan. It's the only business plan, I think, that was not done for a park; it was done for an operation. I saw the opportunity to get it down and to leave it for the next round, but it didn't survive the politics.

Bill Fischer: Right. And I think all of us around this table agree that we benefit by the face-to-face contact in a physical classroom setting.

Michael Watson: And I think if you'd have had a dorm down here where you went after hours and sat around the TV at night or around the pool table, you would have continued your conversations better than wherever you are right now.

Lu Ann Jones: We're at Best Western and the Hampton Inn over in Charles Town now.

Michael Watson: Right, and there's too many distractions, and that's a real plus of the Fish and Wildlife.

Bill Fischer: So how do you change the philosophy? I mean, because the field people understand that need for that interaction. How do you change the philosophy of headquarters to cherish that opportunity?

Michael Watson: Well, there's once again a transition going on now. The associate director for administration – is that the right term? Jerry Simpson has retired. He was an outside-the-Service appointee. So, there is a big gap to be filled soon, and that person will have that overall responsibility through the chief of training, who used to work at the OPM Executive Management Training Center in Shepherdstown, which is like the eastern half of the United States. OPM puts its people there.

Michael Watson: I think the agency has to again rise up, either from the superintendents who wield great power and influence, and if they feel that their employees are not getting what they need, they can make a big difference in the Washington office.

Michael Watson: The other opportunity is 2016 for the hundredth anniversary. We have had training initiatives before connected to anniversaries. Mission 66 filled Mather and Albright Training Centers at the end of the ten years. They opened in, what, '68. It started in '64. They opened in '63 and '64, so that was at the eighth year of Mission 66. But you needed a George Hartzog type of person to really push that through. Gil Lusk was that type, but

because Kennedy didn't last long, and so Gil left when Kennedy left. It gets down to personalities. It really does.

Michael Watson: The only place where training is getting money now is Homeland Security, and you're driving by it as you go to Martinsburg. There probably is more money in there now than even Fish and Wildlife. We'll never know.

Bill Fischer: Sure.

Michael Watson: But I hear them fire the guns every morning around eight o'clock when I walk my dog.

Lu Ann Jones: We could see some of them in the Hampton Inn this week too.

Michael Watson: Yes. Well, they haven't built their dorms yet, that's the last phase, but they will have dorms over there.

Bill Fischer: Do we have time for a few follow-ups?

Lu Ann Jones: Oh, yes. Yes, I think so. Bill, what time is it?

Bill Fischer: It is twenty-five after.

Lu Ann Jones: Oh, yes, we've got till noon, if you've got till—

Michael Watson: I have all day.

Bill Fischer: I have one question. What was your father's crew position on B-17?

Michael Watson: He was assistant radio pilot. And there is a B-17 that goes around from small airport to small airport that you can take a ride in for twenty minutes, and so I did that a few years ago and sat where he would have sat. It has a Morse Code telegraph key anchored down. It was pretty exciting. He was a radio pilot.

[Unidentified]: I think it's really interesting that you said at least twice in your career people either told you you weren't going to get a position or you weren't even going to have a career in the Park Service.

Michael Watson: Yes, that AO at Wind Cave was really mad. But that wasn't important to me. What was important was my wife and I could be together, and Mount Rainier, I knew, was nothing. I love Wind Cave, but I wasn't a cave person. I would have been more interested in the prairie than Wind Cave, which isn't their major emphasis. So, I would have been lost in that cave.

Michael Watson: And the man who told me in the Everglades, Jack Morehead, I mean, he was one of the big-time superintendents ever of the Park Service, Yosemite, but he knew what the politics was. The politics were the woman who was associate for administration – again, which training was part of at

that time – she was going to get a woman on staff here. That was the politics. And Mary Kimmett was eminently qualified.

Michael Watson: So, if there was someone that was qualified that could equal any male applicant, that was who was going to get the nod, and he knew that. I didn't know that. I went on my merry way. But they had to compromise somehow. Charlie wanted me. At least at that point, I don't think the brain tumor had taken him over, so he fought, and he got two people for one.

[Unidentified]: So why did you have to be rescued?

Michael Watson: The short story is that – well, I can't make it too short. The Carhart Wilderness Training Center is a Forest Service operation, and we have a person employed there, a Park Service instructor. For a while, his supervision was assigned to Mather Training Center, so I went out to observe him and to take the wilderness management training course for managers. And that's a combination of all the federal land management agencies. It's a really good course.

Michael Watson: Part of the deal is a two-night, three-day wilderness experience, where you talk about the rules and regulations, and you're in the wilderness. So, we started off on the Bitterroot Mountains field trip. Three or four hours in, I only remember a little bit. I remember it was raining. I couldn't lift my left leg. I remember grabbing my left leg, and I said, "My leg, my leg." Then at that point I went into full grand mal seizure, and I don't remember anything else. I was at the end of the line. I had to urinate; I remember that; that's why I went to the end. The guy behind looked around, and I'm crashing into the [unclear] slope with grand mal, hitting my head against the rocks and with a full pack on. I mean, it was bedlam, I guess. There were ten in our group, including the director of the Carhart Training Center, with people who knew EMT and all of that, and I suddenly became a case study.

Michael Watson: So, I woke up maybe an hour or two later. They put me in a sleeping bag, and they called a first responder in. A guy ran up with just a little pack for your blood pressure and your heart and all that. I remember waking up and saying, "It could be a heart attack. It could be a stroke, but I don't know. I don't know what it is." I remember a guy on a horse. I remember we'd learned the day before that if you broke a bone, the horse comes and takes you out of the wilderness, rather than machine or a helicopter, but if you die, you can call the helicopter in to save time so that the bereavement of the relatives is mitigated, and all that's going through my head.

Michael Watson: Well, it turned out I was diabetic, and the seizure was brought on by low blood sugar. I had all the symptoms of diabetes and hadn't recognized them, and so pushing myself on this wilderness trip did it.

Michael Watson: So then proceeded a six-hour major rescue with YCC kids and litters and wheelbarrow litters and helicopters and ambulances and going to the Missoula Hospital. Then here's the kicker – I don't know how much of this you share.

Lu Ann Jones: This is [unclear].

Michael Watson: Because these are defining moments when you know you're going to be all right. I'm feeling pretty good, because they're giving me Ringer's [best guess] solution. It has sugar in it. Finally, the nurse from the helicopter, before they put me in the helicopter, pricks my thing and takes my sugar, and she says, "Sugar, fine." So, nobody's figured out it's low sugar yet that did this.

Michael Watson: So, we're in the—

[END OF FILE 3]

[START OF FILE 4]

Michael Watson: —and was going to the helicopter, and the driver – we'd struck up a relationship and he'd been with me. I said, "You guys won't believe this, but in 1974 at Mount Rainier my wife had to be rescued by helicopter under medical conditions."

Michael Watson: And he said, "Was that at the [unclear] mudflow area of Mount Rainier National Park?"

Michael Watson: I said, "Yes, it was."

Michael Watson: And he said, "I searched for your wife." And I knew I was going to be all right because he was there. For her, it was her thyroid. They'd gotten lost because the snow had covered the signs on the trail, and they went around into the [unclear] Creek. If you know Mount Rainier, that's the worst place to bushwhack because trees had all grown up in there from the glacial outwash in the forties, and her thyroid just burned up all her blood sugar, and she couldn't go any further. So, the woman she was with had to come out, and then we had to go back in.

Michael Watson: We didn't find her until the next morning. Hers was more major than mine because she was actually by herself, and she had moved when she was told not to. She didn't have all her faculties, frankly. We got there at midnight where she was supposed to be, and there was supposed to be a thing in the tree, and it wasn't there. So, the woman who took us back was under stress, and we weren't sure whether she'd taken us to the right place, and so we had to wait for sunrise. That was probably the hardest six hours. Because it didn't rain, like it usually does at Mount Rainier, she was in the first throes of hypothermia.

Michael Watson: So, the Army came in with helicopters from Fort Lewis and took her out. This guy was evidently coming up the trail and then turned around because we'd found them by going down the trail.

[Unidentified]: Wow.

Michael Watson: So, a two-rescue family. And it's interesting to have the rescuers and my wife tell the story because we all tell it a little differently, which may be a lesson here somewhere.

Lu Ann Jones: Could I ask a couple of questions?

Michael Watson: Sure.

Lu Ann Jones: You said that it struck you the first time somebody called you an interpreter, that meant something.

Michael Watson: Yes. It meant something.

Lu Ann Jones: What did that mean to you?

Michael Watson: Well, the first time I knew about the profession of interpretation was the first job I had with the Ohio State Parks, essentially because the guy who hired me wasn't the guy who was in charge by the time I started the job, that they'd switched positions, some of them, and so a new guy came in. He'd had a Parks and Rec background from somewhere. I don't know. It wasn't Ohio State. And he knew about Freeman Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage* book, and he assigned us all to read that.

Michael Watson: I remember going around on my bicycle from library to library looking for it on the campus, and I found it in the architectural landscape. There was one copy. It was the last day of school for me as a senior, and I had my teaching job in the fall, so I was going to go to the state park for the first time.

Bill Fischer: This was Burr Oak?

Michael Watson: Burr Oak. I was the first naturalist at Burr Oak State Park, because they'd just opened their new lodge and their cabins and things. So, I sat there and read all of *Interpreting Our Heritage* from start to finish in one setting and knew what interpretation was.

Michael Watson: But nobody called me that until that family, and I don't know how they knew to call me that, but, "Are you the new interpreter?" and I'm up to my waist with ice around me.

Lu Ann Jones: Was that a term that you revered? Did mean something different than educator to you?

- Michael Watson: It meant a step up. A naturalist knows scientific names and can identify everything, but an interpreter can put things together in new ways and connect things to people and the environment. The whole identification, the scientific detail is not quite so important as the defining parts of this old environmental education program that was called SPICE, S-P-I-C-E. And we always did it on our hand. S for similarities and patterns in nature, which leads to – okay. Similarities and differences lead to patterns, leads to, I, interdependence and interaction, and, C, continuity and change to evolution, adaptation and evolution, and that’s what we based our environmental education programs. It’s five layers, each one getting more and more complicated. And that’s what an interpreter does, brings those layers and brings connections with people. So, it’s a higher form of teaching, in my opinion.
- Lu Ann Jones: Thank you. I was struck by that. Also, in a way it’s kind of the inverse of what you were saying where people who said you’re not going to get that, but you mentioned that you had some mentors along the way.
- Michael Watson: Yes.
- Lu Ann Jones: I think anybody who is able to have a career in the Park Service and a good career has mentors at some point. Can you talk about some of the people who you feel like were important mentors for you?
- Michael Watson: Oh, yes. First of all, the chief of interpretation at Everglades who hired me full-time, he was this planner next door who could write better than anyone I’ve ever known. If you read his old interpretative plans for a park, you’ll know it was him because of the way it’s written. He was sort of socially awkward, but his whole philosophy, he was going to bring the brightest and best seasonals. I mean, seasonals were treated well back then. We were part of the management team. We had a specific purpose, and I never felt that I was thought of as a lower employee. I was the face of that park as a seasonal, both Mount Rainier and everybody, and the superintendent expected me to do it right.
- Michael Watson: So, innovation was his thing. He wanted people to do innovative programs, and I remember to the degree that if we failed at some new delivery system, that was all right. That wouldn’t count against us. Of course, he knew secretly that if you tried anything that you thought out and planned well enough, that you were going to succeed almost every time, and people would really appreciate it. All the stuff you were doing was interaction, giving people – I mean, the time he ordered fifty hula hoops, I mean, the guy who does the ordering for the park just about crucified him, you know, “How do you justify?”

- Michael Watson: Well, he wrote up this three-page justification on how he was going to use hula hoops with visitors and school kids.
- Michael Watson: I read the thing about how *Saturday Night Live* started with the original cast, and that was at the same time. Lorne Michaels brought all this talent together, and Lorne Michaels can't get up and make things, but he knew how the talent would, and that's what this guy does. He was Lorne Michaels for me.
- [Unidentified]: What was his name again?
- Michael Watson: George Robbin [phonetic]. He's still living.
- Lu Ann Jones: And where is he now?
- Michael Watson: He's retired in Bozeman. He became chief of interpretation in Yellowstone after he was at Everglades, and he was there during the fires, and so he had to respond to the fires of 1988 and did all kind of innovative things to explain what had happened, because we, as an agency, took a hit along the way, theoretically, the way we had managed those fires. We didn't control the story.
- Lu Ann Jones: Bob Bormey [phonetic], he's been interviewed a number of times to talk about in large measure what happened there. Were there other mentors along the way?
- Michael Watson: Oh, yes. Flip Haygood.
- Lu Ann Jones: I've met him. He's a great guy.
- Michael Watson: He is. He was my training guru. We both were young and starting out and were both thrown into situations very quickly. It's interesting how situations, unanticipated ones like Charlie's situation, makes you step up to the plate. He had to step up to the plate for the woman who had the asthma attack at forty years old. I mean, Clem Penter was a rising star in the National Park Service, and she was cut short at forty. So, Flip had to take her place, and he was all of a sudden in charge of all of training. He'd been with Park Police, I think, before that. He was very influential.
- Michael Watson: Then this Gil Lusk, he didn't push Flip out, but it was just the way things were going. They needed somebody new. Essentially, he fell on his sword for the agency. They offered him another job. That's the way we do it. Flip was not a problem, but there was a new guy, and the new guy wanted a new guy, and so you fall on your sword sometimes. That's what Flip did, and he didn't even take a breather. He went over to SCA and has diversified the National Park Service more through the SCA than any formal program that the National Park Service ever has. That's Flip Haygood.

- Lu Ann Jones: Yes. Very interesting point there.
- Michael Watson: Because the SCA is where we're getting new recruits.
- Lu Ann Jones: I interviewed Liz Titus Putnam, who's the founder of the SCA, this summer.
- Michael Watson: Oh, yes.
- Lu Ann Jones: She'll be glad to hear that you said that. Fascinating. I know that you did, and you mentioned your international work, and you brought that up, but you continued. You went more places than India. I was fascinated by the number of countries that you mentioned that you worked in. Could you talk about that some more?
- Michael Watson: Yes. I mean, again, there were these surplus foreign currencies that the embassies held in India and Thailand and a lot of Asian countries, and the State Department controls them. They can't flood the market because it would crash the economy, so they started doling out monies. If Park Service or Fish and Wildlife would send people over, they would pay your way. So, the agency and international affairs was getting all this.
- Michael Watson: India has a fantastic park system and they knew how to protect their things. In fact, they're stricter than we are. They'll shoot you on sight if you're found in a certain area of the park where elephants or lions are, called sanctum sanctorum. Nobody goes in there except the rangers and the scientists. But they didn't know to do outreach and they didn't know how to get their park visitors, their park communities involved. World Wildlife Fund was actually managing some of their parks, so we did it through the World Wildlife Fund in India.
- Michael Watson: Again, it's this Tom Thomas guy and another guy that worked here, Rob Milne [phonetic], who was head of International Affairs. He was actually on staff here at one time. Freeman Tilden was on staff here at one time. So, Sri Lanka, again, we were helping build dams over there, and they had to decide how they were going to manage the elephants. We got involved in that. And then how do you communicate that? So, one thing just led to another, and all these funds from the State Department were paying for it.
- Michael Watson: I went to Russia and to Siberia when communism was falling. Literally, Yeltsin stood up on top of the tank while I was nine time zones to the east where they didn't care about what Yeltsin was doing. So, communism was falling while I was there, but the park superintendents had asked for help because they were not getting central funding anymore from the Communists. Communism had fallen apart. And they cared so much about their parks that they were determined to keep protecting them. So, they were looking at environmental tourism and outreach programs.

- Michael Watson: It was happening while we were there. Maria Burks, who was doing the Park Service runs, all of the New York Harbor parks, she speaks Russian fluently, and I don't, but we went there and did this weeklong workshop with these people, and it was just like being here with people from our own park system. There are people throughout the world who feel and believe in the same things that our agency does, and they can teach us some things too. I learned as much from them as I [unclear].
- Lu Ann Jones: You also won a number of awards throughout your career in the Park Service. I was just wondering if there were some of those that mean more to you than others for particular reasons. Any thoughts about that?
- Michael Watson: The interpretive awards, Sequoia Award. I don't know if you've ever seen it. It's a Sequoia cone in a plastic thing. That's sort of from your peers. That was real meaningful. They're all meaningful, but I guess the ones where your peers have given it to you are the ones that have the most meaning to me, more so than a departmental award, frankly, although your peers write up that departmental.
- Michael Watson: And lo and behold, the fellow here who passed away at fifty, Dave Larsen, who's out on those banners, he wrote up that for me. So, it's how you got the award that sticks with you, and the people. I mean, he took the time to write me up.
- Lu Ann Jones: If you had it in your power to change one or two things about the National Park Service to help the Park Service really live up to its highest ideals, are there things that you would try to help the agency do?
- Michael Watson: I just believe, one, is to train your employees from the beginning, ground them and invest money in them. Invest money in them, because I just don't think we're doing that to any large extent right now. The times are just tough. I know that. But I came to believe that the tougher the times are, the more you need to invest in your employees, and if it means sacrificing something to do that, you've got to do it. So that's the one thing.
- Michael Watson: Then I believe so strongly in communicating with our publics, our many, many publics, including schools, schools being almost as important as anything.
- Lu Ann Jones: You said that you've always felt that you remained a teacher, and I think you've been a fabulous teacher for us today.
- Michael Watson: You've brought back so many good memories for me, and even the bad memories are good, because you learn from them and you raise yourself up and get past them, because you all have some bad times. You will, if you haven't.

- Lu Ann Jones: Is there a particular moment during your career or period that you look back on as just a particularly happy time or you were [unclear]?
- Michael Watson: Yes. Okay. I almost forgot. I knew you'd ask me this. It was the day I received this letter, and I don't know if anybody's shared this letter with you yet.
- Lu Ann Jones: No.
- Michael Watson: So, it's dated May 14, 2001. Here's the envelope. Look. Read what it says.
- [Unidentified]: To Storer College, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, USA. From Gregory—
- Michael Watson: It was just signed Gregory.
- [Unidentified]: Gregory in—
- Michael Watson: Nigeria, Lagos.
- [Unidentified]: —Lagos state, Nigeria.
- Michael Watson: May 14, 2001, handwritten, and it gets to my boss from the U.S. Postal Service in, like, July or something. It's taken two months or something. "Request, dear sir, for admission. I'm a native African of Nigeria descent. I'm a male who was born on the second of February, 1983, and dark in complexion. I have a burning and yearning desire for pursuing higher education in the U.S. in quest of, 'the golden fleece of knowledge and skill.'" Now, that refers to Storer College. That was one of their mottos, "the golden fleece of knowledge and skill."
- Michael Watson: "My aim in securing a higher education is not necessary to acquire an academic training in cultural background, but education to me is the social contract of mutual understanding. I intend to reeducate myself from my miseducation since I have a great propensity to become a product of American education." And it goes on. I'll let you read it.
- Michael Watson: "Sir, I would be glad if this request is granted, grateful, with a tremendous appreciation of gratitude. I am looking forward to receiving a reply. Thank you very much, and may God in his infinite mercy and love, bless you. Amen. Gregory. Sincerely yours."
- Michael Watson: So, he wrote it in May. I get it in the summer, okay. This just floors me, and you should be [unclear]. You can take this and post it. So, I write back to him and I said, "Okay. 1955, the school closed. In 1964 it became a training center for people like you in our agency. I'm sorry that the college doesn't exist anymore, but the alumni still are active."

- Michael Watson: The next-to-the-last president was still alive, living in Baltimore. He lived to be ninety-nine, Dr. McKinney [phonetic]. So, I shared this letter and sent it to them and asked them to write to him.
- Michael Watson: I don't hear from him. I don't hear from him until, like, December. This is May 2001, and now it's December and a letter comes. And it's strange because it doesn't connect with the letter I'd sent him, and he sort of takes me to task for not responding to him properly, and I couldn't reconcile it until a week or so later here comes another letter, but this time the letter is in a sealed envelope, scorched, because it was his second letter, and the second letter I received was his third letter, and the second letter had gone to D.C. and went through all the x-ray and burning processes that they were doing to get rid of anthrax in 2001.
- Michael Watson: So, his letters got mixed. So, the second letter talks about how he had heard from Dr. McKinney and some of the people, but then in the third letter he was getting frustrated because he wasn't getting a way to get over here. I wrote him one more time and said, "You know, you probably should look for something in Africa, because you're going to have a hard time right now penetrating what's going on in the United States."
- Michael Watson: This man wanted to come here for his golden fleece of knowledge and skill, and that just was one of the greatest things that ever happened when I was around here.
- Lu Ann Jones: What was your relationship with the Storer College Alumni Association?
- Michael Watson: It was very good. The last class graduated in 1955, and so they have died out. They've been dying out rapidly now. But when I started, every year they have a picnic and a gathering the first week of August, and the head of it was a woman named Mary Harris [phonetic], and she was very strong-willed. She was in the class of '55. There were, I think, eight graduates that year.
- Michael Watson: W.E.B. Du Bois had given the graduation speech. Du Bois was here a lot. He didn't say anything controversial because there were people from the House on Un-American Activities here on campus trying to get him, and they eventually did make him move out to France. Dr. McKinney was the first African American president, and Dr. McDonald [phonetic] was the long-term Baptist minister that had been here for fifty years or something with his wife, and so he followed. He was here during the war years.
- Michael Watson: So, I lost my thought.
- Lu Ann Jones: But you had a long relationship with [unclear]?

- Michael Watson: So, Mrs. Harris knew Dr. McKinney. That was her hero, was Dr. McKinney. So, the alumni, Martha put the plans together for this room while she was superintendent, with help from them and from the Harpers Ferry Center. She didn't have any money, so it got done while I was here, and I was able to get the Historic Preservation Training Center to sort of donate their time, which has been a pattern ever since. They're out their putting a new porch on, the same way.
- Michael Watson: A local guy, a local historian who had worked at the training center did the stenciling. He took that from – there's a picture in here of an old pennant. He took that design. Yes, see it there? So, he took that design and stenciled it around here. So, when they came in and saw this that first year, this was their room, and they absolutely love coming here.
- Bill Fischer: A relatively inexpensive way to link the former, past, present, and future.
- Michael Watson: Right. Unbelievable. They walked in. We kind of unveiled it, and this couple walked in and she shrieked when she saw the picture of them at Jefferson Rock, because he had just proposed to her. That was where they went.
- Michael Watson: Another lady who worked there went over, and her mother is in one of those pictures. The women in the car for the homecoming, and the two guys, most of them were living at one time when I was here, and they just loved that picture. This was the football field out here.
- Michael Watson: So, they would come back, and they were the first interpreters on campus because John Brown's fort sat right out here, the old monument out there on the patio. They took people on tours when they were on campus. I mean, it's just incredible.
- Michael Watson: Then this whole story of the Niagara Movement of 2006, and you look at that big picture out there and realize that, I think, these two windows and the window in the lobby that they're sitting on, and that would become the NAACP over a few years later. It's unbelievable, and nobody knows this history, including the African Americans. They don't know their own history, and the alumni now are dying out, so the park has to carry this one, and I think the training center has to take it on. We didn't get into all the relationships we had with the park, which are tricky, and the Harpers Ferry Center, but one of them is that the story of this place, both for the agency and the Storer College, has to keep going.
- Lu Ann Jones: There are some oral history projects in the works, I think, with Storer and everything, so I think it's a fortuitous time that we—
- Michael Watson: Right, and Harpers Ferry got some videotape of Dr. McKinney before he died. Pretty amazing stuff.

Lu Ann Jones: That's sounds great.

Michael Watson: That's him over there too. This fellow I don't know much about.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, this has been wonderful. Anybody else have – we could keep talking all day.

Michael Watson: Well, you've got to stop sometime.

Lu Ann Jones: I might be back or something, or somebody might. We'll probably do some more follow-up. I was thinking, I was going to stop the recording and maybe we could complete the release form, fill that out, then we could sign names. I know that Debbie Cox wanted to take pictures of each of the groups, if she could, so I'm going to go see if she's [unclear], try to be quiet back over there.

[END OF FILE 4]

[START OF FILE 5]

Michael Watson: I always thought it was a place, a home away from home for boys. This is not a park; it's a function of the Park Service. The audience is not the visiting public or the surrounding community; it's the workforce of the National Park Service. So, I always felt we should treat them as if they were part of the staff, that we trusted them as the staff. Everybody got a combination to the front door. I mean, sometimes the doors were open here. They could come in anytime they wanted to. They're responsible for sophisticated equipment at their workstations, so why don't we trust them with that here? I just never thought about treating people as babies or coddling them, but this was their place they could come. And for the most part, what was said here, stayed here. Sometimes you had to sit on a couple of people because they would cross the line, but most of the times they didn't, and they felt free to talk about things without repercussion.

[Unidentified]: Wow. And you always made the staff – I mean, certainly the staff here was one big family. It was home, and not only was this building home, but I was given a home here when my own home burned down.

Michael Watson: Unfortunately, I tore it down later. The final two? The same one?

[Unidentified]: Mary Robinson's [unclear].

Michael Watson: The third one.

[Unidentified]: The third one. We had Mission 66 homes, and I came to work, I think, the next – maybe the following day, and Mike said, "What are you doing here?"

[Unidentified]: I said, "Well, where else am I going to be?" "Where are you living?" "Oh, my mom's in Gaithersburg." "No." Called maintenance. Bam! I was in the house by that night.

Michael Watson: You weren't the first person to lose your house by fire.

[Unidentified]: It was above and beyond a normal loss, in my opinion.

Michael Watson: I know we say this, that the Service takes care of its own.

[Unidentified]: It doesn't always. (laughs)

Michael Watson: It doesn't always, I know that, but it's still something to strive for, and when you can do it, you've got to do it. I mean, at Mount Rainier they screwed up my pay slip from the Everglades. It didn't make the transition. The cooperating association gave me money to live on and to pay my wife's tuition until I got it straightened out, interest-free.

Michael Watson: They can't do that anymore. There's too many checks and balances now. It was the right thing to do.

[Unidentified]: It feels to me like the Park Service is being run more as a business now.

Michael Watson: Yes.

[Unidentified]: And less – you look at the reassignment stuff I went through last year and tell me that was family. That wasn't.

Michael Watson: Yes. She went through hell.

[Unidentified]: I'll cut that off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]