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Steve Elkinton
July 13, 2016

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

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Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Steve Elkinton

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I served as the NPS program leader for the National Trails System in the NPS Washington Office from 1989 to 2014. For some of that time, the Heritage Program, such as it was, was managed in the same division as the Trails System. I watched it grow from its beginnings until we were all subsumed under Cultural Resources where Heritage has remained.

Interest in heritage areas: A major reason for my interest in heritage areas was NPS Deputy Director Deny Galvin's interest in them as an alternative to national parks, less costly, no land acquisition, and locally managed. In one talk he opened his hands wide to indicate the spectrum of resource protection offered by federal agencies, from total neglect to total preservation. He said one of the exciting things about this period when the concept of traditional parks is being questioned is that we are filling in missing gaps with new partnership tools. That's why I believe he was intrigued by heritage areas and corridors and, The National Trails, an interesting hybrid of authorities, including land acquisition and intense partnerships. By law these trails can't really happen unless citizens join together as volunteer organizations to do their part. I think what he was doing in taking that spectrum seriously was providing a whole new set of tools for nationally significant resources or at least outstanding resources to be protected and preserved at least in the short run through local grassroots organizing efforts and funding. For heritage areas, the federal government would play more an advisory role, even providing short term finances. It would bring resources to the table, National Registry that kind of thing. But we wouldn't run the area and not be there in the long-term. He saw this as a lot cheaper way for the federal government to help conserve resources around the country than the old parks model.

Others interested in heritage areas: Randy Cooley is another person who would know a lot about heritage areas. He was a park ranger who somehow got involved with the western Pennsylvania heritage enthusiasts. He really challenged the agency's attitude (at least in the Philadelphia Regional Office) about the potential of heritage areas. Randy was able to insert the NPS into a whole range of very innovative efforts related to industrial heritage areas in western Pennsylvania. His was the name that came up in my memory in those days (early 1990s) as someone who was out there inventing new things every day, coming up with partnerships, and there was just enough interest in them in the NPS as an alternative to the old model of the park with the boundary around it for control that he was getting away with it. People were paying attention.

My division chief in those days, Bill Spitzer, had been in the old Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (BOR). When the BOT was merged with the Cultural Resources of NPS under President Carter's Heritage, Conservation, and Recreation Service (HCRS), Bill moved into that. He got involved in outdoor recreation programs. Then HCRS was abolished by Jim Watt on Bill Spitzer's birthday, which he was quick to point out to everyone. Bill came reluctantly into the NPS. He had always seen the NPS as stodgy and old school and limited in the tools it could offer the public. It (NPS) was good at parks, at producing rangers and very good at law enforcement. But, in terms of really reaching the people, where they were, he didn't think it was effective at all. He came into the NPS as a pretty reluctant person. Even when I was working with him, he would speak out at meetings of how the NPS was not really doing its job. He believed in what you might call *the peripheral programs*. The one he helped start and really fell

in love with was the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA). He felt it had a valid role in NPS because it fostered community conservation partnerships, parks and open spaces and river protection close to home and didn't involve land acquisition. NPS could spread the gospel of open space conservation and river protection and organizing people around the outdoors that was much more effective. It could be effective in every community. His dream was that there be an RTCA extension office in every county.

So, he (Bill Spitzer) was ambitious, a great inspirer. But, in reality, he ran an office that the NPS considered had a number of relatively marginal programs and few staff. He didn't have the Land, Water and Conservation Fund, that had its own staff and funding. Bill took in any program he could. When I came into the office, he was trying to build the RTCA program out of nothing. It didn't have a congressional mandate. It didn't have an organic act. When I came into the office, it was obvious to me that the Trails System was something he was willing to house. Willing to guide me. Willing to legitimize the offices but was not going to spend a lot of time thinking about it. This gave me a free hand to develop my little program like I wanted to.

By this time the Trails, along with Wild and Scenic Rivers, were in a kind of middle ground between the traditional park operations with organic acts of each park and these newer looser programs like RTCA, the heritage movement, all that other stuff. Few knew what they were, and NPS operations people didn't trust them at all. The nationally designated rivers and trails were in the middle, some were NPS units, some were not. And it's still that way today.

I think Bill was intrigued by heritage as one more way of reaching out and positively affecting the American people. He was interested in being a shepherd for it. But then, in the mid-1990s we were all moved under Cultural Resources where the Heritage Program has stayed. I liked that era because it gave attention to the historic trails and cultural resources in my program.

Bill, being such an entrepreneur, always wanted to talk about a new way of doing things. He asked me to write a paper about heritage areas. I was willing to look into them because of their effect on my program. Also, trail field staff had asked what the similarities and difference were between heritage corridors and national historic trails. I thought this was an excellent question. Bill and I wanted to see if we could build some bridges and see if it (the Heritage Areas Program) was going anywhere. Bill had a way of wanting to break down barriers, merge programs. However, I liked the discrete stand-alone legislative foundations -- organic acts, if you will -- for Wild and Scenic Rivers and National Trails. We were looking for ways to strengthen our office. The Mid-Atlantic Region was already working with heritage areas and adding them so we could bring another budget line into our program cluster.

Besides writing the three papers on heritage areas, I did not work on them much more than that. I watched them closely because I felt that we had a lot in common. I had conversations with Judy (Hart), Brenda (Barrett) and later with Martha (Raymond) because I thought we had areas of commonality, such as training. There was a whole day retreat, I think under Brenda, where we looked at all the programs that weren't traditional national parks, and it was empowering to explain the possibilities of ways that they could interact with each other, but nothing came of it. We were all stretched so thin. For a long time, I didn't have any kind of budget increase for the Washington Office function. My capacity was pretty limited. When Judy left and the Heritage

Program stayed in Cultural Resources, we kept Helen (Scully) to work on National Trails System activities.

Many of our NPS colleagues were narrowly focused and could not see the magic of these programs. They would say, "How can you operate a park without a boundary, without staff? Why, it is not even a unit of the NPS." When times are tough, as they have been in periodic cycles, everybody rallies to the doors, the gates. Whatever definition boundaries give you; you keep everything else out. The Heritage, Rivers, Trails, and RTCA programs have been fighting those battles for years.

Director Jarvis is wonderful. He was great at making everyone feel that they are under one big tent. But he didn't declare any more trails as NPS units, and he had that power.

Precedents: I see the heritage program as a very interesting legacy of what you might call a liberalization of American conservation. The Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC) of 1962 came out saying: you have the traditional parks, you have the traditional forests, you've got the traditional skills, you've got the federal lands, but now outdoor recreation is more. You need to help people enjoy recreation close to home. You need to help people in urban recreation centers. You need to help people get the most out of urban parks and the things that tie it all together, the rivers and trails. It was innovative. It was broad brush and focused on close-to-home recreation. ORRRC discovered that the most popular form of recreation in American was driving for pleasure. Where does that go? But often that is what heritage areas and historic trails are all about. You drive these long routes. Study the history and the heritage features along the way. Go to the festivals, take part in events etc. So, there was this leftward trend away from the traditional field of recreation like hunting and fishing, and backcountry backpacking. On the other hand, you have a right-wing swing of the Congress and they have a conservative attitude of things and try hard to minimize federal land acquisition. That has put a stop essentially to any new parks, or trails, or rivers. That has all come to a screeching halt since the Omnibus bill of 2009.

But the heritage areas keep on booming. I think it is because they have developed such successful political support at the local level. They are a mission bellwether of how the right and the left resolve differences at the local level.

National Heritage Areas benefit to NPS: Yes, the heritage areas support the mission of the NPS. Well, it depends on what model of a heritage area you are looking at. They probably don't carry out the mission as it was conceived in the early days, public resources that were carved out of the public domain and were set aside to be enjoyed for generations unimpaired. They can be more effective but are a little weak because they don't have access to the absolute powers that the parks do. Some of them depend so much on local support. If that begins to drain away, they fall apart.

A program very similar to the heritage areas was cooked up by the automobile community. Derrick Crandall of the American Recreation Coalition (ARC) has long been a fan of scenic driving and scenic byways. The Transportation Department had a whole program on scenic byways which had funding and a national center from 1991 to 2009. It did all kinds of things

similar to the heritage program in the sense that they were locally organized, nominated, then they had federal blessing and some seed funding, and there was a registry of National Scenic Byways. There are also state scenic byways. In many areas, heritage areas are congruent with scenic byways. But the scenic byways disappeared from the highway funding about 2009. That was a shame because I think it had a lot to offer many communities. It had people thinking differently about how you do signage in culturally significant corridors. But the heritage areas haven't gone away like that. I found the scenic byways and heritage areas programs to be the most similar in the ways they were structured and reliant on local organizing initiatives.

NPS benefit to NHAs: When you think about it, the NPS is terrible at tourism economic development. We study it. We talk about it. Twice we have had a tourism office, and twice it has disappeared. From what I know I wouldn't turn to the NPS for help with tourism and economic development because they are not good at that even though we are critical to both tourism and economic development for communities near parks. But we don't talk about it. (Just as we used to joke in our office that the word *recreation* was a bad word in the NPS. Parks don't think about themselves as recreation. They think of themselves as places where people can come and visit, pay attention and learn from. Interpretation is what we are all about, not recreation. These are funny little eddies in our agency culture that we trip over all the time.

I haven't seen studies that show how effective a heritage area has been in spurring economic development, bringing jobs to people. Many of the National Historic Trails were ginned up for exactly those same reasons, (economic development). We have only done one study (for national trails) in thirty years to see if it bore fruit. It all depends on the economic model you use. This 1995 study looked at the Overmountain Victory Trail, it could have been a heritage corridor as well as a historic trail. They found dazzling results with an on-trail survey at 14 visitor sites. Half the people who participated in the survey didn't even know they were on the trail. When you look at the spending that was going on in the towns they looked at, and the number of people in the visitor's centers along the trail, and multiplied that out to the number of jobs, it was overwhelming. Here was a little trail that we were spending a tenth of one FTE, maybe, and you could directly contribute that to about \$15 million in increased tourist spending in the counties the trail went through. We never have repeated that study. Ironically when we published it very few trail people wanted the study. Lots of people in the heritage community wanted it. Lots of people in state parks wanted it. Economic development in byways wanted it. But the trails people just kind of shrugged it off. Until you come up with those numbers and show how important these designations are, they are not going to be much value to people.

I know that Brenda Barrett was very sophisticated about getting some studies to show the value of designations. I'm sure Martha has followed down that road as best she could. The advantage the heritage people have is that they have outside clients. They can engage state universities that can get outside funding. When you have federal funding, you have all these constraints when doing surveys and research. You can't do surveys without full OMB clearance. That really retards research big time.