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Herbert Evison's National Park Service Oral History Project, 1952-1999



Lyle Bennett
October 26, 1962

Interview conducted by S. Herbert Evison
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NPS History Collection
Harpers Ferry Center
PO Box 50
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
HFC_Archivist@nps.gov

LYLE BENNETT

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Including corrections submitted
with letter of March 5, 1964

[START OF INTERVIEW]

- Herbert Evison: This is Herbert Evison, in San Francisco on the morning of October 26, 1962, and for the second time this morning I am conducting an interview in the office of the Chief of the Western Office of Design and Construction of the National Park Service. I am going to be talking for a while with Lyle Bennett, who is actually an employee of the Washington Office, of the Design and Construction staff of the Washington Office, on assignment out here in San Francisco. He is Lyle Bennett, and his title is an unusual one: he is Staff Research Architect.
- Herbert Evison: Lyle, I am going to ask you a little later just what the scope of that job of yours is, but I am going to ask you to start off by a sort of quick run-down of your Park Service career, including how you happened to start working for the Park Service in the first place.
- Lyle Bennett: Well, I started in the Park Service in 1927 in Mesa Verde National Park. It came about through a rather peculiar series of circumstances. I had been working, was going to school in the University of Missouri; I was also working for an architect there who was an instructor in the architectural department of the school. In that manner I earned my room and board. Those two jobs, going to school and working, eventually led to some sinus trouble and a considerable period in the hospital, and I felt that I had to give up my education at the time temporarily until I was in better physical condition.
- Lyle Bennett: My sister, who was in Colorado, I contacted, and she referred me to a friend who lived in Mancos, Colorado; and I wrote to him and I got an application blank from him, since he worked at this park; I filled it out and I got a telegram a few days later after the application was received, asking when I could report if I was selected. I sent a wire back, said I would be there in three days. I didn't wait for them to accept me. When I arrived at the park everything turned out all right and I was put on as a temporary ranger.
- Lyle Bennett: That fall I decided not to go back to school, that I felt much better, so I took a permanent ranger examination; and on my way to Durango where I took the examination, Jess Nusbaum, the superintendent of the park, queried me on a number of questions which sounded rather ridiculous to me; they were things most of which I didn't know, and we discussed these things; but as it turned out he knew more about what these questions were than I had realized. It was a Forest Service type of examination but fortunately, with the assistance of Jess – I mean his prior briefing, which I still suspected – I managed to pass the examination and was put on as a permanent ranger. I stayed through over through that winter and went back to school then the following year.
- Herbert Evison: Tell me this before you go ahead: Was it at that period that you did some work in connection with the museum there, or was that later?

- Lyle Bennett: That came later. I'm going to have to refer to my history statement here before I can tell you where I have been if you are going to get into details.
- Herbert Evison: Well, we won't, but—
- Lyle Bennett: But I came back in 1929 as a museum assistant; that is, I was in charge of the museum up there during the summer.
- Herbert Evison: That was just a summer job?
- Lyle Bennett: A summer job. And it lasted only through that summer, then my appointment terminated in the fall. At that time Jess Nusbaum was transferred to the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe. Well, with nothing during the depression period, or at the beginning of one, at least – with nothing in sight to keep me employed, I drove one car that Jess had and wanted transferred down to Santa Fe, I drove it down for him.
- Lyle Bennett: Jess found some odd jobs for me, and then I met up with an architect in Santa Fe and went into business with him for a period. Well, due to an accident from which this architect died shortly after, the partnership was dissolved, and it was in '31 that I applied to the park again and got a job as landscape foreman. Well, this job was rather interesting in that it consisted of eradicating or planting out of a lot of old roads. They were doing a lot of construction and changing the routing of the road through the ruins area, and they gave me about a half a dozen Navajo Indians, none of whom could speak English. This presented a little bit of a problem. They finally gave me an interpreter, but the interesting part was we seemed to get along very well even although I couldn't understand what they were trying to tell me. I did learn a few words of Navajo but not enough to converse very well.
- Lyle Bennett: But they liked to play tricks on me, which is rather characteristic of the Navajos. One day we were trying to plant out an abandoned road which went through some sagebrush and burned area, an old burned area, and I tried to explain to them that this was a different situation than the other places where we had been planting. We didn't want trees and shrubbery; we wanted sagebrush and could even stick up some old burned trees in the road, anything that would blend it in with the surrounding vegetation. Well, I was absent for a little while to go get a load of water. I got back, and they had plenty of time to get the plants that came from adjacent to the road; but none of the Indians were around. Well, they eventually appeared and started planting, and they were planting things that I didn't realize ever grew in the park. I don't know yet where they got them. I started to protest, and they all leaned on their shovels and just gave me a good ribbing. They thoroughly enjoyed the joke on me. But they knew what I wanted, so they got the right plants after that and did the job.

- Lyle Bennett: Well, it was during the winter then that I was assigned to a different job as an archaeological technician. Now I don't think the Civil Service ever had such a position on their rolls, but that was the one that was shown on my job sheet at the time. At that time, I was measuring and recording, making measured drawings of the prehistoric ruins there, and I worked through the winter. Paul Franke helped me on that.
- Herbert Evison: What was he, park naturalist at the time?
- Lyle Bennett: At the time I think he was park naturalist, as I remember. And believe me, that was a cold job. You could feel the cold in the caves. Of course, they were pretty much in shadow, and the weather was cold, and eventually this cold would creep up your legs until by the time you got home you could hardly walk.
- Lyle Bennett: But later on, that was when Paul and I constructed the diorama in the museum for the Basketmaker culture – representing the Basketmaker culture.
- Herbert Evison: Just that one diorama?
- Lyle Bennett: The one diorama. I did the cave and modeled the small figurines. Paul worked on vegetation and baskets; these are very miniature things, of course; a lot of the sculpture work of course is done under a magnifying glass. But the proportions are, even when they have been photographed – and I have seen them thrown on a screen life size – they don't look contorted or out of scale.
- Lyle Bennett: This is one of the interesting things: they took quite a little ingenuity, particularly on Paul's part, on some of these details. He wanted to reproduce the fur blanket, which the Basketmakers wore, so he trapped and caught a mouse, the smallest thing he could think of that had fur. Well, after he caught it, he skinned it and dried it and he made a blanket out of it, but after he got it all done it was completely out of scale.
- Herbert Evison: Way too big.
- Lyle Bennett: Way too big; you know, even a small mouse didn't represent at that scale a good fur.
- Herbert Evison: Tell me, Lyle, was this the first of the Mesa Verde Museum dioramas?
- Lyle Bennett: It was the first diorama, that's right. I made casts of the figures, and they were used to some extent by others in making the figures for other dioramas.
- Herbert Evison: Well, were you concerned with the making of any of the subsequent dioramas there?

- Lyle Bennett: No, I was not.
- Herbert Evison: Do you know who principally were?
- Lyle Bennett: Well, Guillet, Meredith Guillet, worked on one of them, and I am sure that he did one. I have forgotten now who might have worked on any of the others.
- Herbert Evison: Well, the reason I asked you that question, Lyle, is that that series of dioramas seem to me to be one of the very top museum exhibits anywhere in the National Park Service. There is such a wealth of detail in; the proportions are so beautifully done. Now, you speak of having seen photographs of the Basketmaker group. I have seen photographs of every one of those and I don't care how you use it the proportions seem to me always to have been good, the figures well done, and the story extremely well told. That certainly goes for the one that you worked on.
- Lyle Bennett: Well, I think that they are excellent for interpretive purposes, all of them. After Paul and I completed this one, Ansel Hall, who was in charge of the museum division – I have forgotten the title exactly, at the time – he came up there and later wrote me a letter and commended me very much on it, both Paul and I; I'll have to share the credit with him, certainly.
- Herbert Evison: Well, he was a man of good judgment on those things, too. He had some fine museum training. All right, what's next?
- Lyle Bennett: I have forgotten now – some time during this – it was about that same period that I was on some archaeological excavation trips. I think it may have been that same winter, but we did a lot of work over on the west side, a group of us packed in; and also worked on the southern part of the park, a surface ruin was excavated there. The ones on the west side – the Long House and Mug House and that series which they expect to open up soon for the visitors to see—
- Herbert Evison: The Wetherill Mesa.
- Lyle Bennett: The Wetherill Mesa. I spent a good part of this one winter after we had brought the material back from the excavation, I worked on pottery, assembling that, which is certainly a fascinating thing. You get thousands of shards, potsherds, and lay them out on the table and then try to pick out the pieces to go together and rebuild the pot; and places of course where you can't find the shards to fill in the open holes, why, you fill that with plaster and then paint it.
- Lyle Bennett: I played a trick on Jess, who was superintendent at that time, too. I made – I found a rim of a rather unusual small pot, and I made it even further unusual by reconstructing all the rest of it in a shape which was entirely

foreign to the Mesa Verde culture. I took it over to Jess after I had painted it. He couldn't find where I had painted it and where the original part of the pot was, and looked at it and he looked at me, and knew very well there was something wrong: that I had made a great find or there was a joke. And he kept questioning me about it, and he would look at the pot and hum and hum to himself like he usually did, then he would look at me out of the side, the corner of his eye. Finally, I broke down; I couldn't contain it any longer, and I told him it was something I had created out of my imagination.

Herbert Evison: Would it by any chance have been in the shape of a common modern creation, sometimes referred to as a pottie?

Lyle Bennett: Not quite that; a little different shape than that.

Lyle Bennett: Well, it was in '33 that Tom Vint was up there He was the one that persuaded me to get into the plans and designs. In fact, I think he was up there the year before in '32 and was talking to me about it; but it was not until around '33 that I actually joined the plans and design branch, which had an office of course in San Francisco.

Herbert Evison: You were employed then as an architect, were you?

Lyle Bennett: I was assigned to Mesa Verde, so in fact I continued on in Mesa Verde but with the branch of plans and design.

Lyle Bennett: Well, they told me at the time they had no architectural position, but they had a lot of landscape architectural positions. Well, I was not too concerned about the title as long as it had a salary with it. So, I continued on under that title for some time. It was several years before they finally got me in my correct profession. But then I was doing a lot of work which concerned landscape architecture in the field as well as architecture.

Lyle Bennett: From Mesa Verde I was transferred to Bandelier and was there during the construction of the entrance road into the park. Prior to that time, you had to go into Bandelier by trail, walk in.

Lyle Bennett: There was a rather interesting incident associated with my beginning in there. Tom Vint and I went from Mesa Verde to Bandelier – or rather to Santa Fe – in a pick-up, and he had just bought a new Gladstone bag of which he was very proud. Well, we threw our luggage into the back of the pick-up and covered it with a tarp. Only the way toward Bandelier, or Santa Fe which was to be our first stop, before we had even gotten to Albuquerque I happened to glance out of the rear window and saw the tarp on fire, and I yelled at Tom and stepped on the brakes, and practically before I had gotten the car stopped, he had jumped out and jerked the tarp

off, but he was a little bit late. It had burned a hole completely through this brand-new bag of which he was very proud.

Lyle Bennett: Well, we went on into Albuquerque and then into Santa Fe. After we had checked in in Santa Fe, we got a call telling us the custodian at Bandelier had committed suicide. I don't recall the fellow's name now. We stayed in Santa Fe for a few days, arranged for a funeral, and later on went out to the Monument, to Bandelier. We walked the line for the new road, and Tom wanted, after we had gotten near the bottom of the canyon and the end of the line, Tom wanted to climb a tree to get a better view back up the location. It was a small piñon or juniper tree, and after he had gotten up into it a limb broke and he fell out on his back, and that was when he injured his back very severely.

Lyle Bennett: We got him down the canyon to the camp, and the problem then was to get him out. He didn't want to have us carry him out up the trail but he decided that he would ride what had been constructed in there – a lift, an aerial lift, which the occupants or the people who had a lodge in the canyon had built. It was a cable, a very small cable which ran from the rim down to the canyon floor, and a low platform which was on a trolley which was about probably two feet wide and four feet long; it was barely large enough for Tom to sit on.

Lyle Bennett: Well, we gave Tom a few good drinks from a bottle, left him with the rest of the bottle, and strapped him on this little platform. They started the engine and he was pulled to the top of the rim on that, and we took him back on into Santa Fe to a hospital in a pick-up. But that was one trip I don't think I'll ever forget.

Herbert Evison: Was that the first of the rather numerous falls and broken bones—?

Lyle Bennett: I can't remember whether that was the first of that trail of broken bones or not, but I know it was one of them.

Lyle Bennett: Well, we are talking there about the CCC days. I was transferred from Bandelier back to Mesa Verde, and somewhere along during that period I was in the San Francisco office for a short while. I got back to Mesa Verde because the museum addition was being built at that time, and the fellow who had been supervising it quit, and so I had to leave San Francisco and go back to Mesa Verde to finish the job.

Lyle Bennett: Incidentally, I had made the preliminary plans for this addition, working with Jess Nusbaum, even before I joined the Branch of Plans and Designs. So along with my archaeological work I was still doing a little architecture.

- Lyle Bennett: And then in 1936 – I believe that's right – they established the district office in Santa Fe, and I was transferred down there as soon as that opened.
- Herbert Evison: As a matter of fact, that's right, that was a district office. The regional office, when it was established, was established first in Oklahoma City.
- Lyle Bennett: In Oklahoma City, yes. And I stayed on in Santa Fe from '36 until this office was established here in '54 and I transferred out.
- Herbert Evison: And you served under a considerable number of regional directors during that period, didn't you?
- Lyle Bennett: Quite a series of them, – Tillotson,—
- Herbert Evison: Well, of course Herb Maier acted as regional director for a while there.
- Lyle Bennett: Herb Maier.
- Herbert Evison: I guess Hugh Miller became regional director before you left, didn't he?
- Lyle Bennett: Hugh Miller, yes. I can't think of the names off-hand of all of them. I can picture them all.
- Herbert Evison: Did you participate in any way in either the design or the supervision of construction of the regional office there?
- Lyle Bennett: I had very little to do with it at the time, although Herb had asked me to sort of coordinate the work on it. I was also responsible for a number of jobs which were going on in various parks and monuments and which required my being in and out of the office. I would say I was spending probably half my time in the field, rushing here and there with respect to some job. There were many jobs of course being built on WPA, PWA, CCC, and they required a little inspection, supervision; and I was out of the office a great deal, not only checking on work that was going but gathering information for new work. So, my participation in the regional office construction was rather slight.
- Herbert Evison: By the way, was Alex Pesonen the man in charge of that district when it was set up, do you remember?
- Lyle Bennett: George Collins was. Well, that's kind of the highlights, maybe, though probably not all of them. Sometimes when I want to reminisce or sit back and think about those old days, I think I could write a book on them. There's certainly a lot of events which would take a lot of time, of course, to tell.

Herbert Evison: Well, of course I want some of those events, the ones that stick out in your memory as of more than average interest or of more than average significance if you can think of them now. I hope you can.

Herbert Evison: Lyle, we mentioned right at the beginning that you had the title of Staff Research Architect, and I am wondering if you could give me some idea of just what that job involves and what research there is to be done in the field of architecture.

Lyle Bennett: Well, one of the things that was stressed was concession development. One of the problems, of course, in developing parks is the provision of what kind of accommodations are – what kind of accommodations should be provided and how these can be obtained within a cost that which permit say a reasonable return on the money, or determine whether they can't be built as an economic proposition. I think the difficulties there are pretty well known. I have been trying to find some answers to all these various ramifications; they are a very complex problem and highly variable from one place to another.

Lyle Bennett: It is one of the things I am principally interested in right at the moment. There are a number of others – research on projects suggested; there are a lot of things, a lot of questions about construction, whether it is better to do it this way or that way, that haven't been answered; a lot of things that we don't know enough about: the problems of heavy snow country, heavy snow area; the drifting snow and how buildings should be designed to reduce the snow loads or the snow hazards; buildings get pushed over by drifting snow.

[END OF INTERVIEW]