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



Marie V. Smithson
November 8, 1978

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

Dorothy Huyck: 00:00 The date is November 8th, 1978. I am Dorothy Huyck. I will be interviewing Marie V. Smithson, who is safety officer for the George Washington Memorial Parkway, National Capital Region.

Dorothy Huyck: 00:17 Can I ask how you first became acquainted with the National Park Service?

Marie V. Smithson: 00:22 My father was a national Park Service employee. Well, he was in the Washington Office and then went to Chicago when they moved the office to Chicago during the war, and then instead of coming back here, he was sent out to Santa Fe, the regional office there as chief of concessions.

Dorothy Huyck: 00:42 And you grew up therefore as part of the Park Service family, so to speak?

Marie V. Smithson: 00:49 So to speak. Yeah.

Dorothy Huyck: 00:50 So you were second generation?

Marie V. Smithson: 00:53 Right, right. Actually, I didn't come into the Park Service though, until after he died. He died in January of '48, and I came in September. September 20 of '48.

Dorothy Huyck: 01:05 In what position?

Marie V. Smithson: 01:08 Secretary in the history division of the Washington Office. Worked for Herb Kahler and Ronnie Lee. That was only for two or three months, and I found myself around in the front office and working for Mr. Demaray, who at that time, I think was called associate director. I went from there to—

Dorothy Huyck: 01:36 At what grade did you come in?

Marie V. Smithson: 01:38 I came in at a four and I went from there to the chief council's office. Then that office was transferred up to the solicitor's office. I think it was called branch of parks. Then I finally went to Defense Solid Fuels for two years, and then back to—

Dorothy Huyck: 02:03 Was that in the Department of Defense?

Marie V. Smithson: 02:06 No, in the Interior Department.

Dorothy Huyck: 02:07 Not under the Park Service?

Marie V. Smithson: 02:09 No, it was in Interior Department, and I worked there two years and then when the emergency was over, they were disbanded, and I went back to Park Service.

Dorothy Huyck: 02:21 When was that?

Marie V. Smithson: 02:24 Let me see. It must have been – Trying to think when I did come back to Park Service. It was in the '50s because I went to National Capital Parks, February 10th of '58 and I've been with the region ever since through the name changes.

Dorothy Huyck: 02:59 You returned to the Park Service, not the region initially?

Marie V. Smithson: 03:04 No, I was with the Park Service, the Washington Office to begin with. Then I went, as I said, to Defense Solid Fuels for two years and back to Park Service. I didn't come with the region until February of '58.

Dorothy Huyck: 03:17 When you moved to the region, in what position were you situated then?

Marie V. Smithson: 03:25 Let's see. I came in as, what was that? Statistical assistant.

Dorothy Huyck: 03:36 What grade was that? Do you remember?

Marie V. Smithson: 03:37 That was a seven. I had a six in Park Service and a seven in Defense Solid Fuels and back to Park Service as a six and then a statistical assistant. Then I went from that to safety and tort claims assistant and a grade nine, and then to safety officer specialist, or what have you. Every time you turn around, they're changing the title.

Dorothy Huyck: 04:12 Which is your current title?

Marie V. Smithson: 04:15 Right.

Dorothy Huyck: 04:16 What is your current grade?

Marie V. Smithson: 04:16 11.

Dorothy Huyck: 04:16 Would you tell me what a safety officer does?

- Marie V. Smithson: 04:25 Well, a little bit of everything. We're charged with the safety of the employee and visitor as well. I had the George Washington Memorial Parkway, the Maryland and the Virginia side. In addition, I was saddled with Catoctin and the Baltimore Washington Parkway. The only safety officer who had more than one area. Well, let me see.
- Dorothy Huyck: 04:53 Can I interrupt that?
- Marie V. Smithson: 04:54 Sure.
- Dorothy Huyck: 04:55 You were concerned with safety in those specific areas, but not within the whole of the National Capital Region?
- Marie V. Smithson: 05:02 No. There's another safety officer over at the NCP East. One for the Park Police. We were all in one office before decentralization and they started sending us out to the different parks. There still is a safety officer in the regional safety office who is responsible for the other parks who do not have a safety officer on board. Anyway, employee safety, you are always looking for unsafe acts, practices, have scheduled safety meetings, bring films, or people to come in and present different programs and that whatever would tie in with the work.
- Marie V. Smithson: 06:05 Just recently, I had two programs scheduled out at Great Falls, the auditorium, and then notified the other parks in the region so that they could send people if they wanted to. The last one was on fire prevention. That was very interesting. We had 87 people over from the other parks now. Of course, as far as the public safety is concerned, I have the Arlington House, Turkey Run Farm, Great Falls, Glen Echo. You have inspection programs at Glen Echo, is something else again. I'm getting a little bit more cooperation now. I made an inspection out there last year and wrote up a report. I guess it was about a half an inch thick and went back this year to see how much had been done, how many of the recommendations had been followed through on and just threw up my hands.
- Dorothy Huyck: 07:22 Glen Echo being an outmoded, maybe some correct word, but having been an amusement park, probably posed particular problem?
- Marie V. Smithson: 07:31 It does. It does. They brought so many of these users and they're similar to a concessioner, but they really don't call

them a concessioner. They operate under contract, and they have classes and people coming in and they're charging and so forth, but they've been left to do whatever they wanted. As usual, safety is the last thing that's even considered.

Marie V. Smithson: 08:07

For instance, they have a writer's center out there and during the inspection last year, went out and they had the walls covered with floor carpeting and flush around the electrical outlets and all. Well, if you've ever pulled a cord out of an electrical outlet, especially at night, you can see that spark. That's all you'd need. One spark could set that carpet off and that whole place would go up in nothing flat. I go back a year later where I had said that it must come down. A year later, it's still there. We got that ironed out this year. We got the chief of I&RM on it. He went out there 27th of October and started through the list that I had written up last year. They're making progress. The one thing in particular, that carpeting, that was all gone.

Dorothy Huyck: 09:15

Safety seems to have a breadth of concerns.

Marie V. Smithson: 09:18

Yes. Yeah. I can give you another example. There's an employee there at Turkey Run headquarters where I'm located, who broke a pair of glasses a year ago. He needs those for operating government vehicles. Several times, I had several – my gosh, dozens of times I had asked, "What are you doing about getting your glasses?" I also reminded him that since his permit called for glasses, that he should not be driving a government vehicle. I mentioned it to the supervisor.

Marie V. Smithson: 09:58

A few weeks ago, coming into the yard in the morning to work, and here's this young man driving a government vehicle and his supervisor sitting in the pickup truck with him and they had stopped, and the fellow was talking to another employee there. I walked up and his supervisor rolled the window down. I said, "Do you know that he's not supposed to be driving the government vehicle, that he doesn't have his glasses?" I said, "I had mentioned it before." I went on and then to my office and shortly thereafter, I saw the chief or acting chief of maintenance mention it to him. The next day, I heard through the grapevine that the employee had been grounded, but this had been going on for a year.

- Marie V. Smithson: 10:52 I don't know. Sometimes I think that because I am a woman, that they have the idea, she just doesn't know what she's talking about now. You make recommendations and then nothing is done.
- Dorothy Huyck: 11:08 You think a man could make the same recommendations and something would be done?
- Marie V. Smithson: 11:13 I do, really. I really do.
- Dorothy Huyck: 11:17 Is this peculiar to the field of safety or do you think it's more widespread?
- Marie V. Smithson: 11:21 No, I don't think it's just safety. I've probably noticed it more now, but I don't know. It's changing little by little, but—
- Dorothy Huyck: 11:37 What's changing?
- Marie V. Smithson: 11:39 The attitude.
- Dorothy Huyck: 11:41 Toward a woman's recommendation?
- Marie V. Smithson: 11:42 Umm-hmmm.
- Dorothy Huyck: 11:46 Have you found ways to bring about that change yourself?
- Marie V. Smithson: 11:53 Making a nuisance of my stuff. Just repeating and continually hammering away and every—
- Dorothy Huyck: 12:06 Other areas?
- Marie V. Smithson: 12:17 I don't know. Maybe it's just because safety has always been the bottom rung on the totem pole. Has never gotten the recognition or the emphasis that it should have.
- Dorothy Huyck: 12:41 You have the Arlington House under your supervision. Now it's a nice old house. Does it have a particular problem?
- Marie V. Smithson: 12:48 Every place has its own problems. Yeah, because we are charged with the preservation, a fire there could destroy everything, and it would be irreplaceable. We have the Clara Barton House now over there in connection with Glen Echo and that's another area that could go up in

nothing flat. I think it's mainly that the emphasis hasn't been put on safety and little by little, that's being changed.

Dorothy Huyck: 13:35

At an area such as Catoctin, are there peculiar problems found?

Marie V. Smithson: 13:42

Yes, because they have these camps. You have round meadow, and you have students. I think they have the fourth or is it the fifth and sixth grade students they bring in from schools in the surrounding area. They also have youngsters from DC schools going up there. In the summertime, I believe they are up there for close to a week at a time living in the dormitories and so forth. You have a problem there, making sure that the dormitories and any of the buildings there that the youngsters are using are safe. You can have electrical hazards, fire hazards. You're constantly looking for things like that.

Dorothy Huyck: 14:45

Going back to just a second to Arlington House. It seems to me that at Christmas time, it's traditional. They have a candlelight singing ceremony. I assume that this is done under your supervision so that there are no safety factors involved.

Marie V. Smithson: 14:57

Safety is taken into consideration there. I wouldn't say it's done under my supervision. They have traditionally held that event. It is supervised, controlled. Also, they're limited in the number of people, invited guests. They send out invitations and we've had some of our own employees who wanted to attend and were told, no, we couldn't.

Dorothy Huyck: 15:32

They had already exceeded the number of persons would be allowed?

Marie V. Smithson: 15:33

Mmm-hmmm.

Dorothy Huyck: 15:33

Where did you pick up your background in safety?

Marie V. Smithson: 15:43

Well, I was more or less interested in it, and I got in as statistical assistant. That was when I really got into the safety aspects, and it interested me. I thought it had good possibilities and would present more advancement opportunities than the secretarial field, so I started taking courses.

Dorothy Huyck: 16:14

Were these courses that were provided by the Park Service?

- Marie V. Smithson: 16:19 Some of them, yes. Now I went to Department of Agriculture. I took a course there. That was nights. Let's see from September through, I think about February. Something like that, but my own time, but I figured it would be worth it. Then there are other courses that were offered by National Safety Congress and Park Service paid for that. Went to Chicago. There've been others, the International Safety Academy in Macon, Georgia. I'd say that they have paid for all of the courses I have attended. I belong to two professional organizations, National Safety Management Society, and the other is the American Society of Safety Engineers. I just finished a term as president of the local chapter of the American Society of Safety Engineers. I held the office of secretary for several years and various committee chairmanships. In the National Safety Management Society, I was the second president of the local chapter. Then I went into the national organization and held – Let's see. What did I have? I had secretary and treasurer.
- Dorothy Huyck: 18:22 Has the Park Service given you opportunities to attend these professional trainings?
- Marie V. Smithson: 18:26 Yes. Yes. Luckily, I guess they've considered it part of my job. I have a National Safety Management Society meeting today. Well, I think they actually start at 11:30. The luncheon is at 12 and then the speaker is after that. I figured as long as I was coming down here, I might as well take that in.
- Dorothy Huyck: 19:00 Can I go back in history for a minute?
- Marie V. Smithson: 19:03 Sure.
- Dorothy Huyck: 19:04 Where and when you were born?
- Marie V. Smithson: 19:07 I was born in Rochester, New York, April 6th, 1916.
- Dorothy Huyck: 19:17 Were you, by chance, an only child?
- Marie V. Smithson: 19:20 No. I had three sisters and one brother.
- Dorothy Huyck: 19:25 Which of these children were you?
- Marie V. Smithson: 19:28 I was the second one.

Dorothy Huyck: 19:33 How many years younger is the next child?

Marie V. Smithson: 19:40 Let's see. It was my brother. He just died a year ago. I think there was two years.

Dorothy Huyck: 19:47 You grew up in Rochester?

Marie V. Smithson: 19:52 No. Came to Washington when I was about a year old, and I've been in the area ever since.

Dorothy Huyck: 19:58 Were either of your parents college graduates?

Marie V. Smithson: 20:09 No. Let's see. Mother went to business college and my father was a CPA.

Dorothy Huyck: 20:20 Did your mother have a professional life in business?

Marie V. Smithson: 20:23 Not really. She went to business college and then got married and that was the end of that. Raising five children.

Dorothy Huyck: 20:32 That's quite sufficient. You attended high school in Washington?

Marie V. Smithson: 20:39 In the Washington area. I went to parochial schools for most of elementary school and then we moved out to the country, and I went to Sherwood High at Sandy Spring, Maryland.

Dorothy Huyck: 21:01 Did you attend college?

Marie V. Smithson: 21:03 No, I did not.

Dorothy Huyck: 21:06 Business school?

Marie V. Smithson: 21:06 Business school. Yes.

Dorothy Huyck: 21:08 Here in the district?

Marie V. Smithson: 21:10 Yes.

Dorothy Huyck: 21:12 You graduated from a business school?

Marie V. Smithson: 21:14 Yeah. The Washington School for Secretaries. I went back after I got out of high school. Well, I was only 15 when I graduated from high school. I had skipped, I think, three grades altogether, but I went back and took a postgraduate

course at the high school, and I got my bookkeeping, shorthand, typing, commercial English. Then later on, I went to the Washington School for Secretaries. Brush up and all that stuff but at 15, you can't get a job.

- Dorothy Huyck: 21:53 Yeah. While you were in high school and also at Washington School for Secretaries, was there someone who encouraged you in that educational period? A parent, a teacher, someone in the community? Was there anyone who lent support and encouragement during the educational process? Maybe not?
- Marie V. Smithson: 22:25 Not really. I always liked school. I'd say in grade school, I went to parochial schools and at the sisters. Maybe that paved the way. I don't know, but I went from fourth grade to fifth grade, and I went to a public school then in fifth grade. They put me into the sixth and they said if I hadn't been so young, they'd have put me into the seventh.
- Dorothy Huyck: 23:13 While you were in high school, did you take math and science courses?
- Marie V. Smithson: 23:17 I took academic all through high school, figuring I'm probably going to college, but at 15, I really didn't think that I would get that much out of it. Then too the Depression. I figured there was an unfair burden, and so I didn't pursue a college education.
- Dorothy Huyck: 23:43 Were the math and science courses that you took in high school often considered more appropriate for boys?
- Marie V. Smithson: 23:53 No. We had other girls in the class. Not too many, I guess, but it was part of the curriculum for the academic course.
- Dorothy Huyck: 24:06 These were algebra, geometry, advanced algebra. Calculus?
- Marie V. Smithson: 24:11 Not calculus. No.
- Dorothy Huyck: 24:12 Chemistry, physics, biology.
- Marie V. Smithson: 24:17 Also, we had Latin and French. Latin, I detested. French came very easy for some reason.
- Dorothy Huyck: 24:31 Did you do well in the math and science as well?
- Marie V. Smithson: 24:32 Mmm-hmmm.

- Dorothy Huyck: 24:32 Did you play with boys as a child?
- Marie V. Smithson: 24:35 I was the biggest tomboy you could find. Climbed a tree better than any boy.
- Dorothy Huyck: 24:44 You did play with boys in addition to being a tomboy. As you grew up into the teenagers, were you expected to become something more of a lady?
- Marie V. Smithson: 24:59 I don't know. I guess I carried the tomboy part most of the way through high school. I was 15 before I went out on my first date. Only then, because I was in my senior year of high school. I wasn't really too interested in boys.
- Dorothy Huyck: 25:28 After you graduated from high school, you went back and took a postgraduate course, and you went to the Washington School for Secretaries.
- Marie V. Smithson: 25:34 Later on.
- Dorothy Huyck: 25:35 Later but you were still quite young.
- Marie V. Smithson: 25:37 Yeah. I couldn't get a job. You had to be 18 to get a Civil Service job.
- Dorothy Huyck: 25:42 What did you do with yourself?
- Marie V. Smithson: 25:49 At that time, daddy was working for an insurance company, and I went down and worked in his office just to get a little practice.
- Dorothy Huyck: 26:04 There must have been a period then, before you came on duty with the National Park Service, something here.
- Marie V. Smithson: 26:10 Let's see. I came in September of '48. Yeah. I worked for a union prior to that. International Union of Operating Engineers.
- Dorothy Huyck: 26:24 That accounts for that period?
- Marie V. Smithson: 26:28 Let me see. What else? Prior to that, I worked for county commissioner's office in Silver Spring.
- Dorothy Huyck: 26:39 Were you active in any extracurricular activities that, later on, were helpful in you Park Service career?

- Marie V. Smithson: 26:43 Not really.
- Dorothy Huyck: 26:51 Had you been in national parks at all before you've entered the Park Service?
- Marie V. Smithson: 26:56 Only the local parks here, I guess. Let's see. No, I guess I had visited Yellowstone. I guess that was the only one outside of Shenandoah here.
- Dorothy Huyck: 27:23 I'd like to ask about your supervisors during the years that you were with the Park Service, and I suggest we not name them at all. Have you found them to be encouraging or discouraging or have you encountered some of both?
- Marie V. Smithson: 27:43 Some of both, I guess. My first couple of supervisors were fine. Helped me in advancing. I stayed at grade seven for an awfully long time though. Then in '66, a new supervisor came in. He started pushing me because I was the only one in the office. In the meantime, had sent everybody out, decentralized, and I held down the office for three [inaudible] while they were trying to select another chief of safety. As he said, if it hadn't been for me, he wouldn't have been able to cut it because he came here from San Francisco and completely foreign to the operation. I finally got to an 11 and I've been stuck there.
- Dorothy Huyck: 29:16 When you've encountered people who were encouraging, how did they show that encouragement?
- Marie V. Smithson: 29:29 Well, they recognized the work that I was doing and responsibility that I was willing to accept and encouraged me to take courses and so forth to bring about the further advancement.
- Dorothy Huyck: 29:56 When you encountered discouragement, how was that evident?
- Marie V. Smithson: 30:05 Well, I can remember one person in particular who shot down my boss' attempt to upgrade me. I finally did get a nine. It was just the--

[LAST C. 3 MINUTES OF THE TAPE ARE INAUDIBLE]

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[END OF INTERVIEW]