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

Russell E. Dickinson
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[START OF INTERVIEW]

Herbert Evison: The conversation that follows is with Russ Dickinson, who is chief ranger at Grand Teton National Park and whom I have known since the time years ago when he came into the Washington office for Departmental training.

Herbert Evison: Russ has been chief ranger in here since 1957, late 1957, coming in here just too late to have participated in the National Park Service conference that year.

Herbert Evison: Russ, how long have you been with the Service?

Russell E. Dickinson: I started in, Herb, at Grand Canyon in 1946 as a seasonal park ranger.

Herbert Evison: How long have you been on the permanent rolls?

Russell E. Dickinson: Since 1949.

Herbert Evison: You spent three seasons as a seasonal before you came on as a permanent?

Russell E. Dickinson: That's right; actually, it turned into four seasons, before the fall of 1949.

Herbert Evison: I see. Well, now, you have been chief ranger for five years in certainly one of the most beautiful parks, one of the most interesting, and I would suppose one which lays some rather exacting demands on a chief ranger; and what I would like to get you on tape for is just some insight into what the job of chief ranger means in a rugged mountain park like this.

Russell E. Dickinson: That's a big order. First of all, Grand Teton certainly presents the most varied type of experience possible for any ranger, due to the number of unusual park uses authorized in the Act of establishment of this park, Herb. Uses range of course all the way from mountaineering, which is always a big subject, on down to specialized public participation hunting programs, an extremely large impact camping-wise at the present time, and sheer volume of people passing through. This creates law-enforcement problems and all the other things with which you are familiar.

Russell E. Dickinson: Let me say regarding mountaineering that certainly Grand Teton National Park through the years has been the pace setter in many aspects of mountaineering safety, and registration, and in rescue. And we may be overly proud in this thought of course, but we have been the pace setter, and innovator in many things. We have developed through the years one of the crack rescue teams in the United States, led by stalwart men, there's no question about that.

Russell E. Dickinson: At Jenny Lake, this registration procedure places upon the individual ranger one of the strongest responsibilities that can be imagined. Through brief interview and examination of equipment, this man must respond to a

climber's projected climb and make a judgement and decision as to whether or not this may be a practical thing to do.

Russell E. Dickinson: Now, many of these people in this day and age – this has been most apparent in the last four or five years – are novices; they are enthralled with the Tetons, as they would be with any massive mountain range, and they are anxious to get out and participate; but they do not have the requisite experience and knowledge to climb safely. So, we must assure ourselves that these people at least have that minimal amount of experience, and above all that they are properly led, which perhaps is the key to mountaineering.

Russell E. Dickinson: Actually, our rescue team, through the experience it has had here, has developed to the point where I would stack it up against any in the United States and perhaps the world.

Russell E. Dickinson: We are fortunate in having many repeaters - that is, seasonal rangers who return year after year. Lack of returnees poses for the chief ranger, in certain years anyway, special recruitment problems. Fortunately, WASO is aware of our special problem, and so we are given quite a little leeway and assistance in getting the proper type of manpower.

Herbert Evison: You can turn down people for jobs here that another superintendent or another chief ranger might not be able to.

Russell E. Dickinson: That's absolutely right. We have to presuppose that a man has a certain amount of basic skill before we can assign him to certain ranger jobs. If he has previous mountaineering experience, as opposed to an applicant without mountaineering experience, obviously, the mountaineer is going to get the nod, even though he may be working on an entrance station that summer; but at least he is available to you and you are training and developing him, expecting to hold him on the rescue team for four or five years on a season-to-season basis.

Herbert Evison: And you try to pick out people who are likely to be coming back to you?

Russell E. Dickinson: That's correct. This is important, because the investment in training that we place in a mountaineer, for example, may far exceed the amount of equivalent training we would give to an entrance station ranger or road patrolman or a campground ranger. We take this man who has the basic background in mountaineering, and we try to polish him and steep him in our own tried and proven procedures of rescue in an intensive two-day school, and then he becomes either a part of the first team, the hot-shots or the technical rock climbers, or a member of the support. And when you start dealing in terms of a six-man team, for example, and you can put 4

teams or 24 men in the field, this provides layers of support, so that you can cope with almost any conceivable circumstance.

Herbert Evison: But I take it you would agree that you have to be good to be on any of these.

Russell E. Dickinson: You have to be good to start with, that's true.

Russell E. Dickinson: Now, in my role here as chief ranger I am not, and am not expected to be, an active on-the-mountain participant. We have far better trained individuals that I, as team leaders; and in my role as chief ranger, I assume the post of organizational leader, which is well spelled out in our mountain search and rescue plan.

Russell E. Dickinson: This is our basic guide, and in this role, I have an over-all responsibility. The superintendent in this park has given the chief ranger broad leeway for making many types of decisions; specifically, this applies to mountaineering, he simply wishing to be kept informed as to progress and what's going on. And on-the-mountain decisions made by a leader are ordinarily simply confirmed by the chief ranger, who may offer advice or assistance based upon his own person knowledge, but again in an advisory capacity. The chief ranger would not make a contrary decision to a leader's decision any more than an outsider would come in and tell a fire boss to change his mind. Certainly, there is consultation in all phases of the operation, and the best approaches, the best decisions, are always made using the best minds available.

Russell E. Dickinson: The chief ranger here is the central point for handling all the publicity which, as you well know, the minute that any emergency of a significant character occurs, the newspapers and the press are quite interested, and this assures that the same story goes to all people; there is no three mouths giving this out; this all comes through one man. The superintendent of course receives many calls; he simply refers to them to the chief ranger. In this way we have sharpened and have excellent press relations on all the emergency matters and specifically on mountaineering. We are cautious in following all the policy rules prescribed for issuance of press releases, making sure the family is notified and all the other things, of course. But it has worked well in that respect.

Herbert Evison: Well, I judge that you don't, in case of something that is going to be big news, wait until it seeps out to the newspapers, you get in touch with them.

Russell E. Dickinson: That is absolutely right.

Herbert Evison: Of course, that requires some judgement as to what is going to be a news story, but certainly you are in a position when eleven Appalachian

Mountain Club people are in difficulty up here on the mountain to apprise the various quarters with that information immediately.

Russell E. Dickinson: The only caution we exercise in this thing, of course, is when we have fragmentary reports; and in almost every instance this is true. Of course, you get your news in bits and pieces. We try to have some kind of coherent idea of what the true facts and the identity and address of victims are before we release it. This keeps mothers and fathers and other interested family people from flooding this office with calls, wanting to know things. Certainly, one of the first things is trying to establish either the injured or deceased and making an immediate notification of families so as to clear this, and this is a story in itself, of course. We have to live with this for a while.

Russell E. Dickinson: Now, Herb, would you like to hear about any other particular aspect besides mountaineering?

Herbert Evision: I would very much, because as you mentioned earlier you are in a peculiar position in this park alone of all of the national parks, of having an Act which authorizes a whole flock of people coming into this park every fall and, in the guise of deputy rangers, kill and take out an elk. I would like to know how you organize to handle that job; and of course, I would be glad of any observations which you might make on that situation. I hear, for instance, of rangers coming across fifteen or twenty-three or forty-seven dead moose in the park after the season is over, which have enabled some hunter to say in the quiet of his home or among friends that he has killed moose. But that situation is so completely unique, I would be glad to have any of your observations on it, how it's organized and so on.

Russell E. Dickinson: Of course, there is no real precedent or parallel for this thing anywhere in the Service, Herb. And Public Law 787, which was established in 1950 and of course which is considered the Act of establishment for the new Grand Teton National Park, did provide that when necessary for the proper management of the elk herd in the Jackson Hole area, that what I shall call "public participation hunting" could be recommended by the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission, and the National Park Service, respectively, to the Governor of Wyoming and the Secretary of the Interior, who would then either approve or disapprove the proposed control measures for that year.

Russell E. Dickinson: We meet annually with the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission in the spring of each year to —

Herbert Evison: Now, who is "we?" that meets with them? You and the superintendent?

Russell E. Dickinson: "We" is the chief ranger, the superintendent of the park, and since 1958 a research biologist who has been stationed at Grand Teton; and in many instances others interested who might have facts or details pertinent to this sit in, such as district rangers and the assistant superintendent and others. But ordinarily we try to keep it to a small working group so that we can get things accomplished.

Russell E. Dickinson: Now, since 1950 and excluding the year 1962 at the moment, in nine out of the eleven years since the passage of the Act, there has been an elk reduction program in Grand Teton National Park. The law is rather specific on how this controlled reduction program through public participation can be done, as far as the specific details are concerned, and the amount of land in the park which can be opened. So, in nine of those eleven years there has been hunting.

Russell E. Dickinson: Now, in 1962, the current year, there is a hunting program again planned. This year of the total park area of 310,000 acres or just under 500 square miles, there will be 100 square miles of park open in this hunting program. In other words, one-fifth of the park is open.

Russell E. Dickinson: Sharp control is vital throughout this whole program, but perhaps the key is the initial registration process of the eligible hunter when you deputize him; and we do this by establishing a special ranger station at the entrance to the largest of the areas. This is the Two Ocean-Emma Matilda country.

Russell E. Dickinson: Now, this year, beginning Friday, September 28, we will start operating that station for the issuance of the special permit, the deputization process, plus a map of the area which is open to this man, plus an exact indication of where this man is going to camp, because as you realize we do pinpoint the exact camping spots, plus safety information regarding respect for his fellow hunters and for the wildlife in this area, the use of established roads only – he cannot drive his vehicle off of the established roads, – and all the other things, you see, that we want to get across to him.

Herbert Evison; Now, he has already been picked.

Russell E. Dickinson: He has already been picked, and this is done by the State, and again this is a quirk of the law; the law provides that the State shall provide the Secretary of the Interior with a list of "qualified and experienced hunters." Now, in actual practice the State has taken these names of people who are interested in this on a first come-first served basis, without reference to any other particular qualifications or experience. In other words, if a man buys a hunting license and applies to the State of Wyoming, his name can be placed on the list if he falls within this quota, whether it is 1200 or 2000. For example, this year it's 2000 names.

Russell E. Dickinson: Why did we go from 1200 names, which was used during the earlier phases of this thing to the early 50's, to 2000? Herb, in the summer concentration areas in southern Yellowstone and the Teton Wilderness Area the Jackson Hole elk herd is producing serious range damage. This is the situation that our research biologists are studying. The Teton National Forest is well aware of this, of course, and you can make a pretty good case for a reduction of animals which are causing these damaged areas.

Herbert Evison: Now here the situation is that the damage is being caused to summer range, whereas in the northern Yellowstone elk the damage is to the winter range.

Russell E. Dickinson: The migration paths southward in the fall out of the currently damaged areas of southern Yellowstone, for example in the Red Creek Area and the Chicken Ridge Area, which are landmarks well known to everyone in this area, - the elk when they migrate from those areas in the fall southward to the Jackson elk Refuge, do pass through Grand Teton National Park. From this standpoint you can make an awfully good case of reducing the number of animals in order to alleviate the pressure on those damaged areas. Now this is the basis of our current management plan for this Jackson Hole elk herd. In other words, by law, here is a procedure set up for reducing elk in Grand Teton National Park as they pass through, - purely a migratory situation. And this enables us to forestall the build-up of this problem in the future in southern Yellowstone. I think it's a wonderful thing. I think we are headed in the right direction.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, with respect to the northern Yellowstone herd, they determined a long while ago that the winter range there could carry effectively without being greatly damaged not more than 5,000 elk. Now, presumably limits for proper use of the summer range have also been set. How many animals?

Russell E. Dickinson: Unfortunately, you cannot get agreement among the various agencies involved as to what this number should be.

Herbert Evison: Of course, that's one of the beauties with respect to the northern Yellowstone herd, that there is just one agency that has to make the decision.

Russell E. Dickinson: That's correct. One of the most interesting features, if you want to call it that, of this whole problem – and it is a problem – is that there are several land management agencies who have a real stake in this herd. And of course, this is the great hope coming out of this Jackson Hole cooperative elk studies which was established in 1958 as a way of pulling the various Federal and State agencies together in a cooperative effort to attempt to come to some mutually agreed upon conclusions and facts and figures.

Herbert Evison: Including how big the herd should be.

Russell E. Dickinson: And including how big the herd should be, what level it should be maintained at.

Russell E. Dickinson: Now the other really interesting thing about this herd and this situation is the Federal Wildlife Refuge at Jackson. Historically, the elk who summered in the Jackson Hole and southern Yellowstone area migrated out of this area in winter; this was not typical elk winter range. The elk went south a hundred miles or more to the Red Desert country in southwestern Wyoming. With the advent of settlers and barbed wire and other things in the late 1880's and 90's and early 1900's in this area, this so restricted the elk movement to the south through their natural migration routes in the Hoback and Gros Ventre ranges, that large numbers of elk begin to build up and try to stay here during the wintertime. What did they feed on? The ranchers' haystacks and such natural vegetation as remained.

Russell E. Dickinson: Now the last natural migration which left this area was some time along about in the 1910, '11, or '12 era. It just so happens that the Federal Elk Refuge had been established for fifty years now. In 1912 the first Federal feeding program was inaugurated here, and that almost coincides with the last natural migration. So that we have an artificial winter environment in this area. The elk are totally dependent upon aid from man during the winter. This number is artificially high, in my opinion; this is a personal opinion, but based upon conversations with many researchers and others who have knowledge of this.

Russell E. Dickinson: Another interesting feature, too, is where does the hay come to feed the elk on the Federal Fish and Wildlife Refuge? Why, it comes from 1600 acres of Grand Teton National Park, which under cooperative agreement of 1952 with the Fish and Wildlife Service set aside those 1600 acres to grow this hay.

Herbert Evison: Here at the elk ranch?

Russell E. Dickinson: No, it grows on the east side of Black Tail Butte in what we call the Mormon Row area. This lends another little angle to our desire to see the herd held at a somewhat lower level, too, you see, Herb, because the fewer elk you feed in the wintertime, the fewer elk go to the summer range, and the fewer acres of Grand Teton National Park which are devoted purely and simply to an agricultural procedure.

Herbert Evison: Of course, fortunately it is over at one edge, where the park kind of merges into —

Russell E. Dickinson: From our standpoint it is sort of hidden, and this is a good thing. It is not in the foreground of the Tetons at all, which is fine.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, the old elk ranch up here is no longer used for growing hay?

Russell E. Dickinson: Again, this is another interesting story. Public Law 787 provided for the long-term continuance of domestic stock grazing. In other words, the lands for which permits were issued by the Forest Service and which were taken into Grand Teton National Park in 1950, provided for the continuance of these permits. Now a man who held a permit for the grazing of domestic stock in Grand Teton in 1950, if his base land retained certain statue – in other words, he held onto his base land, whether it was inside or outside the park – he could graze stock for his lifetime, plus the lifetime of his children who were living with him at home and dependent upon the grazing operation. In other words, this extents on into the year 2000 and beyond, in certain cases; a long-term deal.

Russell E. Dickinson: Many of the areas which were grazed were in the foreground – immediate foreground – of the Tetons, west of the Snake River; cows running through Jenny Lake campground and String Lake. In the Pacific Creek area, cows running through the Bay area, and that sort of thing. So, something had to be done, and it was decided in 1957 that the three largest grazers would be approached on an experimental deal to see if a fenced pasture program might not solve some of this open range business that was causing our problems.

Russell E. Dickinson: So, the Elk Ranch area lent itself quite well to this. Now this is not a process whereby you cut hay and bale; this is grass consumed as it stands; the grass is grown through irrigation. And what are we talking about? We are talking in terms of 1200 animals on for a period of six months of a year. As a part of that program there are two other pastures used, but of course the rain impact occurs at the Elk Ranch. And the entire area is fenced now; the entire area at the ranch is fenced, so that this restricts the movement of the cattle. They come on it in the spring from the south, these 1200 animals; they go into the Gros Ventre pasture, which is 4,000 acres; they stay for a couple of weeks; they move on north in the early part of June into what we call our Lower Cunningham pasture; they stay about ten days, and then they go into the Elk Ranch where they remain until the early November period.

Herbert Evison: Now, all of those places you mentioned are areas within the park?

Russell E. Dickinson: All areas within the park; they are fenced; and those animals are the ones which used to be causing our problems. So, let's just say it is one solution to removing the animals from direct conflict with visitor use of this area; not a perfect solution by any means, but something we can now live with under the terms of the law for the long future, and it is working very satisfactorily. As you realize, when you are dealing with permittees, some

ask and grasp for more and more and this grazing setup is no exception to that. But the Service is on pretty firm ground now on this grazing program.

Russell E. Dickinson: Those are some of the little interesting features.

Russell E. Dickinson: Since the time I have been here, certainly the visitation has increased. We have had to cope with the rapid expansion of boating recreation; the mass of people traveling on the highways has caused us to think in terms of traffic control more than we used to, Herb; the growth here has simply been tremendous. It has been a great honor and a pleasure to have been stationed at Grand Teton.

Herbert Evison: With respect to traffic, hasn't the existence of a good new travelable road on the east side of the Snake River made a great difference in the management of traffic within the park proper?

Russell E. Dickinson: There's no question; one of the finest management features that could have happened to this park, in my opinion, because this bleeds off, the through traffic and the commercial type operation.

Herbert Evison: And yet gives them a magnificent experience in driving through here at the same time.

Russell E. Dickinson: Oh, wonderful; those parking areas are filled throughout the summer; the interpretive work goes on just as it did before; at the same time, it allows a more leisurely passage through the inside road, as we call it, the Teton Park road, at the foothill area of the mountains, and I think it has just worked fine all the way around.

Herbert Evison; Well, I have kept you past your lunch hour, but I have gotten a lot of insight into what goes on here, Russ, that I am very much obliged to you for.

Russell E. Dickinson: It has been a pleasure, Herb, to talk to you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]