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James L. Bentley
May 24, 1972

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EVISON INTERVIEW WITH JAMES L. BENTLEY

Asheville, North Carolina

May 24, 1972

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Herb Evison: This is May 24, 1972. I'm Herb Evison and today I am in one of the offices in the Asheville, North Carolina, headquarters of the National Park Service and by a very happy arrangement with Granville Liles, the superintendent of the parkway, this afternoon I am with James L. Bentley who is chief of maintenance for a road that winds some 470 miles from way up in Virginia down to the border of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Herb Evison: Now, Jim, let's get – let's start off by getting on the record when and where you were born, and what school and college education you have.

Jim Bentley: Okay, Herb. I was born on October 3rd, 1933, in Fargo, North Dakota, and had all my schooling in Fargo. Went to North Dakota State University in Fargo and took civil engineering.

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: And graduated 19, let me see, 1957; and from there I went into the Marine Corps and went through training and got a commission-second lieutenant and spent little over three years in the Marine Corps and just – well right after I was discharged from the Marine Corps I got a job as a – engineer trainee with Sequoia-Kings National Park in July of 1960.

Herb Evison: Yeah. Who was superintendent there then?

Jim Bentley: John Davis.

Herb Evison: Oh, yes.

Jim Bentley: John Davis was superintendent at that time; Blanton Clement, ironically enough, who was former chief of maintenance of Blue Ridge Parkway, was chief of maintenance at Sequoia-Kings and my first boss in the Blue Ridge or in the Park Service.

Herb Evison: Yes, where I – where I taped him in 1962.

Jim Bentley: Well, how about that. (Evison chuckles) So I moved my family which at that time, by the way I'm married – I have four children. At that time we had two girls and we moved to Sequoia and Kings in July of 1960; shortly after – I think about a year – we had another daughter born in Visalia, California, and I stayed as a trainee under Blanton Clement until January of 1962 and then I transferred to Mount Rainier National Park as the – at that time – assistant park engineer.

Herb Evison: Oh, yes.

Jim Bentley: And—

Herb Evison: Now before we get too far into that; who was the lady whom you married?

Jim Bentley: Oh, my wife's name is Fern. F-E-R-N.

Herb Evison: Yes.

Jim Bentley: Fern.

Herb Evison: And what was her last name before she—

Jim Bentley: Kaastad. Kaastad. It's a Norwegian – a Scandinavian name.

Herb Evison: How do you spell that?

Jim Bentley: K-A-A-S-T-A-D, and she's from Fargo.

Herb Evison: Oh, yes. Where there are lots of Norwegians.

Jim Bentley: Lots of Scandinavians up in that part of the country.

Herb Evison: Yes, indeed.

Jim Bentley: And so, she's been with me all the way through. We were married right out of college and she went right with me on – and when I was on active duty in the Marine Corps right into the Park Service and—

Herb Evison: You were married all the time you were in the Marine Corps?

Jim Bentley: All the time we were in the Marine Corps. In fact, two of my children were born in Marine Corps Hospital.

Herb Evison: Now you say you were commissioned in the Marine Corps?

Jim Bentley: At Quantico, Virginia.

Herb Evison: Yes. As what – a second lieutenant?

Jim Bentley: As a second lieutenant and then discharged as a first lieutenant.

Herb Evison: Oh. Did you spend time at other places than Quantico?

Jim Bentley: We spent a year in Quantico and then I was transferred to Twentynine Palms, California, as a communications officer in a missile battalion and spent, well, just about 30 months in Twentynine Palms, California.

Herb Evison: How do you spell that?

Jim Bentley: Twentynine Palms?

Herb Evison: Oh, Twentynine Palms!

Jim Bentley: Twentynine.

Herb Evison: Oh, yeah.

Jim Bentley: Twentynine Palms – where Joshua Tree National Monument is at.

Herb Evison: Oh, right close to headquarters of the monument there.

Jim Bentley: Right. That's right.

Herb Evison: Yes. Beautiful place, too. Well, okay, we have you successfully married and you're the father of five children. You might tell me what they are.

Jim Bentley: We have – we have three girls and two boys. Catherine is age 14, Diane is age 13, Tina is age 11, Joseph is age 3, and Michael is 2 today. His birthday is today. Two years old today.

Herb Evison: (Laughs) I can't help remarking and putting on the record that up the parkway is a lady who we – my wife and I have known for a long time – who will be 92 on your next birthday, October 3rd.

Jim Bentley: October third.

Herb Evison: Mrs. Caudill – I wonder if – you must have heard of Clay Caudill who comes from along the parkway – his mother.

Jim Bentley: We have a fellow – we have a fellow who works at Bluffs and his name is Bob Caudill.

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: I don't know whether there's any relationship – I don't know – but we've—

Herb Evison: Well – they had a farmstead about two miles up the parkway from the – from the Doughton Park.

Jim Bentley: Mmhmm. Well, it must be there's some relation then because that's where Bob is from.

Herb Evison: Now, you had this training period under Blanton Clements and then went to Mount Rainier—

Jim Bentley: In January 1962.

Herb Evison: —assistant park engineer, as assistant park engineer.

Jim Bentley: I probably should correct that I transferred there still under the engineer trainee program. That's what they had going at that time, so I was transferred under the training program. It was part of the agreement.

- Jim Bentley: So I went to Mount Rainier as a trainee in January of '62 and I believe about that summer I was promoted to assistant park engineer at Mount Rainier and I'm really going to have to think back now, Herb, on date, but I think in March of 1963 or that summer anyway – but in 1963 the park engineer left Mount Rainier and then I was given his position as the park engineer of Mount Rainier and then I – we stayed there until August of 1965 when I was transferred to the Regional Office as a regional engineer in San Francisco; the Western Regional Office and I worked then for Fred Whitworth until he retired.
- Herb Evison: Yeah. Did you succeed him?
- Jim Bentley: No. They brought in a fellow from the service center – a fellow by the name of Monty Martin, and I worked with Monty until the following August and then I left the Park Service.
- Herb Evison: You did?
- Jim Bentley: I left the Park Service and I went to work with Bonneville Power Administration in Portland, Oregon.
- Herb Evison: Oh.
- Jim Bentley: And was with Bonneville from August of 1966 until July of 1970 when I came to Roanoke with the Blue Ridge Parkway. Then I came back to the Park Service.
- Herb Evison: Yeah. I'm interested in knowing how you came to get an offer or to make a transfer from the Far Western office in another Federal agency clear back to Roanoke. How did you hear about it? Or how?
- Jim Bentley: Well, before there was a – before I left the Park Service I had been – I should probably need to give you some background even why I left the Park Service.
- Herb Evison: Yeah.
- Jim Bentley: And really it was a matter of experience. I'd really felt that I was getting into some jobs and some responsibilities where some demands were being put on me and I didn't really feel I had the background and I didn't see where Park Service could give me the experience I needed and I had talked to a lot of people – different things that I could get involved with, but to no success so I really want out on my own to find something where – to fill the needs that I felt I wanted.
- Jim Bentley: And Bonneville had something for me, and to this day I'm very happy that I went with them and got this experience because I worked first in design where I was lacking, and in construction experience, and after just the first

year with Bonneville I was promoted into and given responsibilities of running about 150 – a crew of 150 surveyors spread over four states. So, I spent a lot of traveling. I had a responsibility for all the locations of the transmission lines for Bonneville Power in the four states and that gave me tremendous amount of supervisory experience – plus management experience, and then, of course, I was attending courses there at Portland State and at the – August of 1969 – I’m leading up to, you know, where I got my offer from Blue Ridge – August of 1969 the Bonneville Power sent me back to the Department of Interior training program – departmental training program – in Washington.

Herb Evison: Ooh.

Jim Bentley: And so, I went back in August of 1969 and attended that and during that time, why, I went back to the Interior Building – that’s where I was at anyway – to meet some old friends that I had known in the regional office and that, and at that time there were some offers. People asked me if I would be willing to come back to the Park Service.

Herb Evison: Uh huh. Now was this the middle management group?

Jim Bentley: Middle management program and sponsored by the Department of Interior.

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: And at that time there was some old friends that I had with the Park Service who was – asked me if I would be interested in coming back and at that time, I was happy with what I was doing. Still looking ahead for some, you know, some more challenging type of work and nothing specific was ever talked about and then in November after I got back to Portland I got a call wanting to know if I would take an assignment with the Park Service and I said, “I would consider it.” And I said, “Depending on the degree of responsibility what I would have.” I didn’t want a regional office job. And because I had been in the region and I knew what that was like and so I – in January then I was – I would say given an offer to come to the Blue Ridge Parkway and so I accepted it and came here on June – I think I reported in here around June 30th, July 1st, somewhere in there.

Herb Evison: You’ve been on the parkway a little less than two years then. Now, did you succeed Earl Batten?

Jim Bentley: Yes. Earl had retired I believe in December of ‘69 or January of ‘70.

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: Six months later I took his place.

- Herb Evison: Now let's go back a little bit. Your second assignment still as a trainee was to Mount Rainier National Park and before you left there you became the park engineer.
- Jim Bentley: Right.
- Herb Evison: Now I would like to get on the record because I don't think I've ever taped a park engineer about his duties. I'd like to get on the record something about the duties of the park engineer of Mount Rainier and I might say an introduction that that not only is the first national park that I ever was in, and I was in it 19 years before you were born – the first visitor in there in the season of 1914; but I've visited it many times while I lived in Seattle, where I lived for 16 years. So, I know physical characteristics and the roads and a lot of other things about Mount Rainier, but I'm interested in knowing what responsibilities the park engineer had in there.
- Jim Bentley: That's a big one, Herb. It really is. The basic responsibility of course is to take care of all the facilities and you do this, of course, through the people that you have working for you, and not only just in the maintenance but in the new construction when was being able to plan a maintenance program with the funds that you have. Being able to line out your work; studying your priorities on the most needed work and this is really probably one of the most difficult jobs strictly in Mount Rainier because I'm sure even to this day there's so much work that needs to be done. It's a hard park to maintain and priorities continually change because nature has a way of causing you a lot of headaches. You're trying to stay ahead of nature, so you're working with your foreman trying to get the most out of that dollar, that every dollar that's spent and working with them and getting schedules set up, setting up priorities. You're a long ways from the materials particularly road materials. You work hand in glove with procurement man and I did that because the foreman, I felt, had to be out on the job supervising it. I never have been one for overhead, where the foremen were involved paper shuffling, so to speak, and wanted them out there running their crew and we were feeding them the materials. Handling the logistics of the job and still staying ahead – weeks ahead of them – lining out the work they're going to get done with or start to do when the present job they're working on is finished.
- Jim Bentley: So, and then, of course, coupled with this, is your season that you're trying to get enough work done so that when winter sets in that you've done your summer work and you're set up for the winter schedule and you're ready for your snow removal program which is a big thing in Mount Rainier and there you start in September for example to start doing things so that when you started to plow snow that you could do that efficiently.

- Herb Evison: Yeah. That brings me to a specific question. How much road in Rainier was regularly kept open during the winter?
- Jim Bentley: We kept from the entrance at Ashford – what they call the Ashford Entrance or the Nisqually Entrance—
- Herb Evison: Nisqually entrance.
- Jim Bentley: —all the way to Paradise. Seven, boy I'm really thinking, it must have been a little over 20 miles. That was kept regularly open on a 24-hour basis and with a tight schedule particularly on weekends because our skiers would start to come in there as I can recall at eight o'clock in the morning. They were banging on the door to get up to Paradise and at that time we found it more economical to plow once you got a small accumulation of snow and you stay right with it rather than, say, get caught behind. We wanted that road open when the visitors started to come in. We didn't want them piling up at Longmire. You know where the inn was at and causing congestion problems and waiting on us. We wanted that road open to Paradise, so it was just that section maybe some 20-odd miles up to Paradise.
- Herb Evison: Yeah. Well now you not only had to keep that – where you had to plow that road regularly – you had to plow quite a lot of area up at Paradise so that cars had a place to stop when they got there.
- Jim Bentley: That's right. Well – you got 'em up there, then you had to make sure you had sufficient parking for all of them and opening up your parking areas.
- Herb Evison: And some winters that must have been a considerable chore if I remember Paradise and its – the depth of its snow.
- Jim Bentley: It was. I've seen the snowbanks there that were so high that the rotary snowplows which would put – pull the snow in through their augers and then a fan would blow it out – maybe a height of 10 or 12 feet – that the banks would be higher than where the snow could go so you'd take a crane up there with a cable and you would slope your snow back during the week so that you could blow your snow over the bank and in the parking area you had to make sure that that was all open. It was – chains were required and, but then there's icy conditions and you were sanding your road also.
- Herb Evison: Yeah. I'm glad I asked you that particular question and got that answer about how you managed when the snow got too darned high for the thing – your snowplow to blow it out – out of your way.
- Jim Bentley: It was sloping the banks with a crane. I don't know if they still do that today but that's the way we did it in those days and of course at that time

too we had buildings to worry about. Is that these buildings were all CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) construction and weren't structurally able to withstand too much of a snow load and you'd have to get up there and the men would have to take the snow off the roofs.

Herb Evison: Yeah. Now did the Rainier National Park Company take care of the job of keeping snow off Paradise Inn?

Jim Bentley: No. That building was sufficiently strong to stand any of the snow that was on it. It was old and it was creaking and you could get in there in the wintertime and our maintenance had to go in there in the winter and we would go through to check it during the winter months to make sure that, you know, moisture problems or anything that might be happening we would check during the winter and although there's – we'd find evidences of deflections but never of any severe stress that would might be impending failures.

Herb Evison: I had a correspondence with David Whitcomb who was long ago was president of the Rainier National Park Company back when I worked in – just after the war and there had been a good deal of discussion, of course, about at that time or during the early days of Mission 66 of eliminating the Paradise Inn providing a substitute – even somewhere outside of the park.

Jim Bentley: Take the impact off the – to take the impact off that that delicate area – very sensitive area.

Herb Evison: And he was – I just had this correspondence with him about it – but he was very emphatic in his insistence that it just didn't make any sense to remove the old inn. There was still a good building and had a lot of life left in it yet and for the amount of space it occupied it took care of a lot more people than the campground did.

Jim Bentley: Well and then the campground at Paradise might open up the 1st of August if you're lucky and close again right after Labor Day because you get snowed in.

Herb Evison: Yeah. Well now you were the park engineer. Essentially you were the maintenance engineer.

Jim Bentley: Maintenance engineer, right. That.

Herb Evison: That was maintenance was the principal job of the park engineer except that you meant in some supervision of construction too.

Jim Bentley: Well, we were – we would take on construction jobs. At that time, we got into the accelerated public works program.

Herb Evison: Oh, yes.

Jim Bentley: Where we would layout the work and where we had to do some design work ourselves. Of course, you know, at that time WODC (Western Office of Design and Construction) was I'm sure had its full workload. They couldn't provide us, say, with the necessary engineering drawings and we would do that ourselves. I – myself and one other fellow and we would spend quite a bit of time on that providing the necessary drawings or sketches or just anything that you could give to the man who was going to build it and he knew what you wanted and of course in the planning of the construction program we'd work – I'd work with the superintendent on what's going to be needed next year, two years, five years from now.

Herb Evison: Mmhmm. Who was your superintendent in there? Rutter?

Jim Bentley: John Rutter.

Herb Evison: Mmhmm.

Jim Bentley: When I got there, I believe he was acting superintendent. That was right after Preston Macy had retired and then he was made superintendent and he was superintendent the full time I was there.

Herb Evison: Mmhmm. I knew him well.

Jim Bentley: Well, he's in Seattle now.

Herb Evison: He was first at Lassen.

Jim Bentley: At Lassen.

Herb Evison: He was chief ranger there. Well I'm – do you have anything else in connection with your experience there at Rainier that we ought to get on the record – either events that you participated in. I'm not insistent that they necessarily be something connected with your engineer job, but—

Jim Bentley: Well, let me see. You mean something unusual or—

Herb Evison: Yeah, did you have any avalanche experiences – and of course I could expect that there would be snowslides along the roads occasionally during the winter that you'd have to clear off. Would that be the case?

Jim Bentley: Yeah. Snowslides – this happened quite often – one of the most probably critical problems that we would have and we would have to watch very carefully every year – is if we would get an early snowfall in the mountains up around Paradise and above the Stevens Canyon Road and by early I mean September 15 and on in – you keep getting a good snow pack build up until November and then all of a sudden you get a warming trend and you get warm rains come out of the South in the middle of November and melt all that snow and the, you know, the thousands of millions of gallons of water that would come off of that mountain – I personally

witnessed a slide that came off of Stevens Canyon and completely obliterated a 100-foot section of the Stevens Canyon Road and just left a half circle in the middle of your road and it carried it right down to the bottom of Stevens Canyon.

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: And of course we'd – what we would do during the winter time, we would have snowslides that would come in Stevens Canyon and I would at least twice a winter take a Piper Cub – rent a Piper Cub and fly over the canyon to see what damage it was accumulating during the winter so I could let region know what I'm – what I'm going to be faced with when I got read to open it up in the spring. Try to give them, you know, as, enough of advance notice with some cost estimates on what we were, you know, so that they could go ahead and get us some money if we ran into certain things and the only thing that really comes to my mind right now. I enjoyed the tour of duty there and a lot of things happened but one thing of interest that happened during one winter is that we had a real bad earth slide on – in the White River side in the campground and it completely covered many of the campground sites and picnic tables. All this mud came – for no reason that we could find.

Herb Evison: Like the – somewhat like the one on Kautz Creek earlier.

Jim Bentley: Yeah. A small one.

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: A smaller size where you had a mud flow that came in, but there was no reason that we could see what caused this and I remember I walked up into it to see where all this stuff came from and I saw the breaks in the earth. It was obvious that it had been saturated with water, but we checked the weather, the rainfall; and they just hadn't had any of that kind of rain. And so, going further to find out where this water might have come from, why, we went – I went back with another fellow on snowshoes and went up to this lake. I forget the name of the lake out back at Sunrise.

Jim Bentley: It was the water supply for the whole Sunrise development and though the level of water was down from where it should have been, and we got to checking – one of the pipes had broken – it froze. The water – apparently there was water in it. Somebody had made a mistake and closed the valve and drained the line. It cracked the pipe and it had just about completely drained the lake and the water had, of course, gone over into this area and it completely saturated it and then just flushed out in over this campground. So, we sweated that summer on this lake because this was our main water supply and we had to be very conservative, but it was a

wet summer, so we made it through the summer. (Evison chuckles) But that was – that's one of the problems that we had. One of them.

Herb Evison: Well that's—

Jim Bentley: But we managed to cope with it, and we made it through.

Herb Evison: Yeah, yeah. I would have supposed that where there was any damage to the Stevens Canyon Road that repair would be a very difficult job.

Jim Bentley: It was dangerous in a lot of respects because it was – the road itself was built on a steep side hill that in order to get a foundation to rebuild your road on; your dozer operators would have to bench way down and build a bench and put material in and you'd dump it in and they would just keep building it up and up and up until you got to the final grade that you wanted and here you have dozers almost literally hanging off the side of Stevens Can and you have to start way out, of course, in order to come up to maybe your 20-foot or 22-foot width of road and this was always a problem on the repairing parts of Stevens Canyon – is bringing that up.

Herb Evison: Yeah. I don't want to get you away from Mount Rainier too early. If there's anything else about your experience there, you still remember as interesting I want to get it on the tape.

Jim Bentley: Okay. I haven't really thought about Mount Rainier until – in so long. I guess as far as the experience goes I guess if anybody's ever going to get any maintenance experience that's about one of the best places that I know of – I've been in several parks – digress from there because when I was in the regional office I tried to get as much as in as I could to a lot of the parks that didn't have any engineer or maintenance experience – they didn't have any chiefs of maintenance and so I saw a lot of the areas but Mount Rainier was really a tough one to maintain, but personal experiences I just right now can't – I really can't think of anything right offhand. I will as we go along.

Herb Evison: Yeah. Now one of Stephen T. Mather's great hopes about Rainier was a road along the west side connecting up with the Carbon River Road.

Jim Bentley: This is our West Side Road.

Herb Evison: West Side Road.

Jim Bentley: West Side Road and—

Herb Evison: —Now I know some of it was built and then they gave up the idea long ago of actually running a connection clear north to hook in with the Carbon River Road.

- Jim Bentley: That would have been the – would have tied in with the road that went up to Lake, oh—
- Herb Evison: Mowich.
- Jim Bentley: Lake Mowich. Mowich Lake right. Mowich Lake, but I think it would have been a mistake. I'm glad to see that they really never did build the road.
- Herb Evison: I've always have been glad that they gave it up.
- Jim Bentley: In fact it, probably, the West Side Road, probably should have been, you know, closed really to traffic and opened up for, maybe bicycles or some other type of use rather than to put cars that go back to a dead-end where there is no facilities and you spend we spent an awful lot of money on that West Side Road just for the few visitors that actually went back in cars. I think that's a—
- Herb Evison: Now it had – it was unsurfaced.
- Jim Bentley: It was an unsurfaced road.
- Herb Evison: Yeah, well I was – I should think that that would be—
- Jim Bentley: —A lot of people go to the end and get out and leave their cars and go back in and camp in those areas there, but I think the – of course, I know what the thinking was probably at that time was to open places for people to drive to to see, but I'm glad it was never done. I think that it's better left the way and the people can either use it for a bicycle and then get back on trails and walk and get, really, a better experience.
- Herb Evison: Yeah. Incidentally, when I was doing some taping back in 1962, I taped Preston Macy and one of the very interesting things that he discussed was the improvement of the Nisqually Road between the entrance and Longmire and the great battle that he had with the Bureau of Public Roads people, particularly, to keep them from making it too darned good a road, letting the forest remain up to the edge of it.
- Jim Bentley: Right.
- Herb Evison: And I wonder what your impression is of that stretch of road.
- Jim Bentley: Maybe I can best answer that the way we maintained it. What we did – we never allowed a piece of equipment to do any maintenance on that road. I'm talking about the ditches.
- Herb Evison: Yeah.
- Jim Bentley: On the surface itself, of course, we used equipment – graders, but when you got into the ditches on the slope it was all hand work. We cleaned the

ditches with shovels and wheelbarrows and we – so that we wouldn't scar – it was very delicate, very hard for that to come back and you didn't want to cause any erosion. So, everything was done by hand and so that the impression that you had when you came into the park – it wasn't something of a county road so to speak – where you—

Herb Evison: Yeah. And that you were really in the heart of that marvelous forest along that impressed me about it.

Jim Bentley: The emphasis – I always felt that when you drove that road up into Longmire that your – you had a feeling for the forest and what was around you and you weren't aware of the road you were on and it wasn't anything that we had done that would detract from that.

Herb Evison: Yes. I'm glad I asked you that question. Now let's, let's come to Blue Ridge Parkway and as I said the maintenance job on here is except you might say the Natchez Trace might be similar except that it goes through very different terrain. And here you have a 460-mile string park with a road going the length of it, a large amount of road also to campgrounds, picnic grounds, that the widenings of the parkway and I'm wondering if you could give a little thought for a minute to how you would characterize this as a maintenance job. Its differences from other things.

Jim Bentley: Well, the parkway just has –well, like you say; you have your main line road of about 470 miles that goes through so many different types of terrain. It goes through your valleys which are very easy to maintain and your higher mountains, meadow country which is not bad to maintain; but then when you get into your mountainous country – we have sections on the parkway that are probably equal to some of the problems that we had at Mount Rainier because going through this mountainous terrain and probably the—

Jim Bentley: —let me say this about; I think the Blue Ridge Parkway has the advantage over a lot of other parks and it's true with maintenance I think from my experience is that if you can keep something that what we call now a standard but if you keep it at the way you want it to be and never gets fallen behind and keep it at that rate all the time you're a lot better off than if you start falling behind; and Blue Ridge Parkway over the period of time probably, because of Earl Batten, Blanton Clements, Sam Weems, and the superintendents and the whole staff from when it was started were able to stay right on top of it, so they never had a backlog. In other parks that I've seen they had had a backlog. And just really tough to keep up with it because you're fighting nature. Things are constantly deteriorating and you've got to stay one step ahead of nature and this is one of the problems and the Blue Ridge Parkway has been fortunate in, I would say,

probably better than 90 percent of the areas to stay on top of it and to keep up with it and this would always become a serious problem if we ever started to fall behind. And so, this is one of the – maybe a problem that I always look at right now when we program work on priorities and schedule what work we're going to do, and how the money is going to be spent – is that we are taking care of things that don't become a problem next year. That we're solving them as they happen, and we have good people on the parkway, so they have the same ideas. They work along those lines.

Jim Bentley: That's right. I'm keeping our overlooks, our campgrounds, every place where the visitor is to keep it clean and I think and I think it's proven itself, particularly on the Blue Ridge, when things are clean, they stay clean!

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: Now we do have incidents, of course, where it doesn't but on the whole we keep the litter out of the ditches; we kept the overlooks clean; and we don't have that much litter to pick up 'cause people see it's clean – they're not so apt to throw it out.

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: And – but if they stop at an overlook and see junk all over, why they're more inclined to – they're going to throw it.

Herb Evison: Why not?

Jim Bentley: Why not! Sure. But that's one thing you see that we've concentrated on that; but really, we don't – you would think that we probably spend a tremendous amount of money and man-time on keeping it clean, but we really don't. It's – that's not really a big problem on the Blue Ridge and it is clean. You can drive and go for miles, to find a can in the ditch, or some paper or something like that.

Herb Evison: That's the most remarkable thing because I have known some stretches of highway that would average a beer can every 25 feet in the ditch or on the shoulder. And that's really one of the wonderful things about the Blue Ridge Parkway that you get away from the omnipresent beer can.

Jim Bentley: It's interesting. It was last summer where we had volunteers that came from the Sierra Club, and they wanted just to come in. They weren't going to be paid. They wanted to use the campground and they would work on the Blue Ridge Parkway to go and pick up litter and so we put them in the areas where the litter was probably the worst – at the overlooks – the bottom of the overlooks where you can't see it. People – it accumulates

over a period of time which they'd go in there and get it and it's surprising that they went in. They found material but they didn't find near what they saw and were able to clean up and move – and they had – they came to us and they said they had to go to another area because they had found – they couldn't find any more. So, we moved 'em up to Peaks of Otter. They worked Rocky Knob and had built a big pile of litter there in one place and with a sign that advertised, you know, that, "Here's litter that has been picked up." Then they moved to Peaks of Otter and I would have thought that they would have probably spent all summer just in this one district picking it up, but I would have thought that when I first came here that they'd probably have at least two men in each district a day just doing nothing else eight hours a day running the road picking – picking litter up, but it isn't that way. One man three days a week and really no big accumulation on Monday morning like I've seen in other parks. Mount Rainier especially – Monday morning was terrible. We had men that we – we used motor scooters there for ease and run the road and we had a regular schedule and we had to, you see, because just to keep it clean. It maybe is improved now because of course national advertising on litter and that has helped and—

Herb Evison: Yeah. Of course, there's still an awful lot of heedless people abroad (chuckles).

Jim Bentley: Yeah, their outdoor manners aren't very good.

Herb Evison: Yeah. I remember several years ago talking with Earl Batten up in the Roanoke office about one particular phase of the road maintenance – parkway road maintenance – and that was mowing and he, I remember him making the point, that that was not the thing that was casually done, but that it was done from a definite plan for every mile of the parkway.

Jim Bentley: This is true. We have land use maps for every section of the parkway and it's shown; it's right on the plan; how far out they mow; which bays they mow; we have a mowing policy which we update every year saying exactly what the superintendent's policy is on how high we're going to allow the grass to grow, which areas are going to be cut, and the land use map is annually reviewed – actually taken out and to see if it's being done and certain bays are mowed, certain areas are mowed in the spring and mowed again in the fall, other areas are mowed continually; let the grass get up six inches, you cut it down.

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: And so, it is. There is a definite plan on our whole mowing scheme.

Herb Evison: Yeah. Now how much of a force does the mowing job itself take?

Jim Bentley: Generally, we have four districts on the parkway and within each district we have two subdistricts. So, we have, and then one district has three. So, let's let me count them, Herb. There's nine subdistricts and we have two mower-operators per subdistrict. So that's 18 mower-operators and that's principally their job.

Herb Evison: Eighteen mower-operators and 18 mowers?

Jim Bentley: Eighteen mowers.

Herb Evison: And probably a few spares too.

Jim Bentley: We have the 18; well we have the 18 tractors and then of course lots of hand mowing as on your entrances. All of our entrances off state highways those are all trimmed with hand mowers and of course along guardrails, signs – that's all done by hand.

Herb Evison: Quite a complicated and quite an extensive job.

Jim Bentley: Expensive operation, too.

Herb Evison: Now, are most of your mowers people who have been with the parkway quite a while?

Jim Bentley: Most of our mower operators are seasonal. They come on in, oh, whenever we need them depending on the season if we see we need them the 1st of May we bring them on the 1st of May. If we need them the 15th of April, we bring them on the 15th of April and then they go off the payroll around the middle of October.

Herb Evison: Yeah, but the same people come back to you year after year.

Jim Bentley: But they—. They have been up until about two years ago and now some of them haven't been coming back. We've had to get new people and train 'em and this has gotten to be a problem because—

Herb Evison: —I could imagine the training to the rather exacting demands of your mowing program would be quite a chore.

Jim Bentley: —when. Because in, one man might have 25- or 30-mile section and in that you have many different types of mowing that have to be done. You don't want 'em to get out too far. You want 'em to do this, you want 'em to do that; so, he has to be re-trained and some of our mower-operators haven't come back. Probably the biggest reason is that they've been looking for a permanent job, Herb. They want something 12 months a year and we haven't been able to get it. They've been able to get a job someplace else on a-round the year basis.

Herb Evison: Still the—

- Jim Bentley: —the majority of ‘em are all old-timers. Old-timers, right.
- Herb Evison: And, of course, that’s one of the economic benefits of the parkway that has provided so much of that employment.
- Jim Bentley: All local people. All local people! Of course, a lot of ‘em are getting old. A lot of ‘em are retiring.
- Herb Evison: Yeah. Yeah. But generally speaking, I suspect you find them good workmen – I mean you don’t have to stand right over them to get a job done.
- Jim Bentley: No, most of them – they know what their job is. Like I say, most of ‘em have been – they worked last year, two years ago, five years ago. When they come on, they’re given the tractor and they’re responsible for the tractor. They turn ‘em loose and they know what their job is. On rainy days they know what they have to do. There’s other work lined out for ‘em on rainy days, but they know what it is. So, they require very little supervision. It would only be some of the new fellows. I think this year we have three new people that require a little closer supervision.
- Herb Evison: Yeah. Well, now who gives them that supervision?
- Jim Bentley: Our subdistrict maintenance foreman. We have a district maintenance foreman – he’s responsible for the whole district and then under him is a subdistrict foreman and these fellows work for them. Of course, along with this mowing, Herb, I might just mention that not only is mowing and this might seem like a never-ending thing that we maybe perpetuate a maintenance expense, so to speak, is that we fertilize and that encourages the grass to grow and we seed and re-seed – that encourages it to grow and then we come back and then we cut it and so we’re kind of – you know we have a cycle here but then of course if we want what we have on the Blue Ridge Parkway you have to fertilize it.
- Herb Evison: Yes, of course. Incidentally, is there any – are there any places along the parkway where there are embayments or widenings that have to be mowed? Where there is enough grass for it to be sellable; usable by anybody along the parkway or is the – in most of the cases is it just allowed to lie?
- Jim Bentley: It almost – in what we try to do in most of the areas now is to put on a use-permit, is to let a local landowner use the land and use it for his hay. It creates the farming scene and he lets it grow up, he cuts it, he bales it, they stack it. You’ve probably seen the stacks of hay and so in this way they help us and of course in return they get the hay and they have special use permits now for using the parkway land.

Herb Evison: Yeah. I was just wondering if there weren't some intermediate areas, really not extensive enough, to interest a farmer alongside to come in and cut it but where your forces might cut it and he might come in and just take off the hay. But that I judge there isn't that type situation.

Jim Bentley: No. Now we have had some problems where leases have expired, and the farmer didn't particularly care to renew it. He didn't want it anymore. They're getting out of the farming business as he does not have any money in it, you see. So now we're getting some of this area back that we have to take care of, and I mentioned earlier where we cut it in the spring, and we cut it in the fall. That's how we handle those areas and there – if depending on the amount of grass that's cut and if we let it lay it's going to damage it. We have to pick it up to rake it and either bale it or stack it and either get rid of it some way and use it for mulch. Most of this is if we do that, we collect it and store it and use it for mulching and eroded areas.

Herb Evison: Oh, yes.

Jim Bentley: Each year we seem to – since I've been here in talking with other fellows that each year it seems like we're getting just a little more back because of the farmers; they're just – they're getting out of the farming business.

Herb Evison: Of course, so much of the nearby land is getting so attractive to people who want summer homes. That, I imagine is, you share in the worry about that – of the impact on the parkway of some of these developments which use authorized accesses. Like the one at Groundhog Mountain for instance where I imagine you're familiar with it.

Jim Bentley: Oh, yeah, well we have a grade separation structure program and I believe the contract has been awarded for that which will help that problem where we won't have a grade problem. They'll be going underneath the parkway but I can see that in, say from Granville's point of view that as the time goes on; well, actually, really it's our concern too that if we want to keep what we have of the parkway – people wanting to build in closer to our narrow right-of-ways and where you want to go through a country scene, a mountain scene, that now you'll start to see brand new homes, you know, 150 feet away from the parkway and you see this in Roanoke now. You go through sections of Roanoke and beyond you start seeing subdivisions building up right up to the edge of our parkways.

Herb Evison: Yes. (Chuckles) Bringing you to the conclusion that there are lots of places where the parkway isn't near wide enough.

Jim Bentley: No. The only way that – well, one way that can be controlled is through working with the cities, counties, on zoning. Zoning controls and this is a long step to do this. The quickest way, is, of course, if you get the money

and to buy the land and widen and give yourself a buffer zone. But you're talking about a lot of land on 450 miles.

Herb Evison: Yeah. (Chuckles) Where the state feels that it has fulfilled its obligation and that if Uncle Sam wants it wider, he has to pay for it.

Jim Bentley: Just I think probably maybe one of the best solutions is many, many avenues you can take on it but I think a lot of it is in zoning to get the cooperation of that because I think it's to the advantage of the cities, as to the counties, that the Blue Ridge Parkway remain what it is.

Herb Evison: When I talked with Granny Liles over the phone last week, he was telling me that about a very recent effort to persuade some county officials to adopt some zoning there. He had a pretty tough time of it and didn't even get away from home plate.

Jim Bentley: No. I don't personally get involved with that but I hear it at our meetings though when we talk about these things and what the particular county supervisors are thinking about I'm not really sure, but I'm – I imagine it's commercial interests really.

Herb Evison: Oh, yes. Of course, there—

Jim Bentley: Short-sighted.

Herb Evison: —I would expect the county supervisors just to love it where everybody comes in and puts up a nice summer home right smack up against the parkway. That's one—

Jim Bentley: Parkway, sure, more business.

Herb Evison: —One of the desirable places to put one.

Jim Bentley: Yeah. More business for the town.

Herb Evison: I can see their viewpoint all right even though I'm not a bit happy about it.

Jim Bentley: No.

Herb Evison: Now you've been here not quite two years. Do you like this job?

Jim Bentley: Very much so. Oh, I enjoy this job—

Herb Evison: —I would suppose that it would have enough challenges and enough problems coming all the time to keep you interested.

Jim Bentley: It – continual variety; every day there's something new – I mean every day is different from the day before whether it's – like right now working on a radio system – you know putting in a whole new radio system for the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Herb Evison: Oh, really!

Jim Bentley: We're getting involved now, of course, pollution abatement is a big thing so we're looking, you know, at all our water supplies, our sewage systems, disposals, our garbage collection disposal; you know, that's a big problem. What do we do with our garbage, and we have a lot of it. And we have problem's—

Herb Evison: —Well what are you doing with it or going to do with it?

Jim Bentley: Well, we're building incinerators. I can't tell you really honestly that this is going to be the answer because we burn garbage and of course what goes out of the stack the manufacturers claim very pollution; they've been approved by the HEW (Health, Education and Welfare agency). We don't know; we'll probably fire our first incinerator up at — we just put in — probably in another week and we'll see how that goes.

Herb Evison: Where will it be?

Jim Bentley: Up at Peaks of Otter. We're also putting another one in at Bluff. We don't have — now, I'll take that back — we have one area where we built, maintain a landfill. Most of the others are taken; the garbage is taken off of the parkway and put into a county dump, but this is a short-range thing because restrictions are going to be put on those counties and they're going to have to meet certain standards and we're taking our garbage and putting it on somebody else that's not a standard so this is a problem and we face up to that and we try to do something with that and we have — so that's the one thing that we do; one day, and then the next day we might have a sewage problem and the next time it might be a surface problem or a drainage problem or well like last fall for example, well, we had some heavy rains in Roanoke and it washed out a section of the parkway. It — a crater about a 100-foot long, 35-foot deep, and it cost us \$29,000 to repair. Just washed the parkway right out. We have a section right now Heintooga Spur that's being repaired by the bureau. We repaired ours down in Virginia with our own forces and erosion problems — something comes up. We have a section of the parkway where in construction it was done poorly, and you can think of it as Fancy Gap where the — right in the middle of the parkway the bottom falls out. Fell underneath it; just fallen out, and so you know there's something you wouldn't expect and there it is! It has—

Herb Evison: No! Because that's a rather mild type of topography in there around Fancy Gap as I remember it.

Jim Bentley: Yes, it is, very gentle, but in the drainage — just in the way it was constructed the water comes down the parkway and it can't get off the

parkway until it gets down to this one bridge. The water goes into the shoulders and it percolates through and in the fill is sand and it washes the sands all out. Creates all these voids and what we do is put bleeders to get this water off and, but you see, you get your settlement over time – it creates a canal, concave shape and it, you know, it in a – it just brings the water right down in there. But so – but that's a problem; we've repaired it. I mean there shouldn't be any more problems with it now, but I mean that can come up at 8 o'clock in the morning. This particular time it happened it happened at 4 o'clock in the morning. The ranger happened to be on patrol at 6 and saw it; but if a car would have been going through at 5 o'clock in the morning say at 40 or 50 miles an hour and hit that hole it would have been pretty bad!

Herb Evison:

Yeah!

Jim Bentley:

And it – you can't predict something like that because up until the time it fell out—

Herb Evison:

—Looked good, huh?

Jim Bentley:

Yeah, well there may have been some cracks but then you can't walk the parkway and look for all the cracks either (both chuckle).

Herb Evison:

One interesting thing about your current assignment is that it's your first in the East. Are you one of these guys from the West who is just looking forward to the time when you can go to some other job back in the West again?

Jim Bentley:

No, I have no ties. I have no ties in the West. The East – this area, Asheville, Roanoke – not much different than Oregon, northern California, parts around Seattle. The terrain is pretty much the same. This country reminds me a lot, say, of the Black Hills country. I – well I should have went back. Now I digress.

Herb Evison:

Yeah.

Jim Bentley:

You see my first job really with the Park Service was during the summer when I was going to – between my junior and senior year I worked for the Park Service at Devil's Tower and at Mount Rushmore and the Badlands, South Dakota, so when you talk about the Badlands, now this country kind of reminds me of the Badlands. Up around Roanoke, compare it with northern California, parts of Oregon, so I'm not a Westerner. Basically, I'm from North Dakota but that's not my home anymore. My parents still live there, and my home is here where my family's at.

Herb Evison:

And you – I remember when Leif were invited to come, I was invited to come East in 1929 after 16 years in Seattle. I had the feeling that at first,

gee, I can't, I think it would be hard for me live outside of these forests and mountains. I just wonder if it's been your case, as it has in mine, that you find this very pleasant country to live with.

Jim Bentley: Very true.

Herb Evison: It's been lived with for a long time for one thing which isn't so even in Portland or Seattle.

Jim Bentley: Right.

Herb Evison: 1851 Seattle started, and heaven knows there's plenty of relief to this country.

Jim Bentley: I've always liked the mountains, the hills. Of course, coming from North Dakota where I was from it was flat. Flat as a pancake. Just like a tabletop, and, near as I remember it, it liked to be in among the hills and the mountains.

Herb Evison: Yeah. Did you transfer down here with the rest of the [inaudible] office?

Jim Bentley: Right. We moved here in – I moved down in the latter part of January, so I've been in Roanoke about 18 months before we moved down here to Asheville.

Herb Evison: Uh huh. Now, did you find a pleasant place to live?

Jim Bentley: Very pleasant. We live out at Weaverville just north of here about ten miles and so—

Herb Evison: Now, I don't want to end this up without asking you at least one question and that is during your two years do you think of any special incidents, special events; that were of unusual interest to you or that were unusual – that we ought to get on the record here of your own personal experience?

Jim Bentley: Really ought to have something, shouldn't I? (laughs).

Herb Evison: No! Not necessarily because while I'm sure that your life doesn't necessarily have to be filled with shocks to be lacking in monotony.

Jim Bentley: Okay. Let me, maybe the most significant thing, Herb, might be this and it would be a personal thing – is that when I had the job at Mount Rainier, that's where we kind of started off with, and I had full responsibility for all the maintenance. I mean I could go to a foreman and I could say, "Well we've got a section of ditch up here and it has to be cleaned out and we've got to do it by this certain date." I could say, "Let's get with it." Or I mean I had, I was the one that called the shot, you see, I was responsible. The superintendent could look at me and say, "Why isn't this done? It's your responsibility." See?

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: And so that's the way I was trained and that was the way I was trained under Blanton Clements. That was the way the organization was. Well organizations change, methods change, and I came to the Blue Ridge Parkway. So, where you introduced me as the chief of maintenance, I'm – you can't really say that's true anymore. I'm – because I don't have line authority over the Blue Ridge – over anybody in the Blue Ridge – on the parkway. I'm a staff specialist to the superintendent.

Herb Evison: Oh, yeah.

Jim Bentley: Maybe I'm similar; you mentioned earlier that you were in the regional office. Well, you used to have your regional engineers. They had no line authority over the field. Okay, maybe you could draw a similarity. I can't go out into the field. I don't have line responsibility but if I see something wrong out there on the parkway.

Jim Bentley: Something they're doing wrong, I can't go to the maintenance people and say, "Fix it. Do it tomorrow." Or I can't say, "The way you've got your forces organized, we better change it because it's inefficient. We better organize this way because I think it's more efficient."

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: I work – I'm the superintendent's eyes and his ears and so, now, you see what I've had to do – maybe this, like I say, is significant. To be able to change from one method of maintenance, engineering, or maintenance management to a different way of managing maintenance on a large scale; the Blue Ridge Parkway I think is probably on the maintenance budget I would think is probably second in the whole system. I think Yellowstone has a little larger budget than ours.

Herb Evison: Yeah.

Jim Bentley: So, in trying to maintain the same standard, trying to get the same amount of work done, dollar for dollar, and get your value, now I work through the superintendent and he works through his unit managers who are responsible to do this. So, I've had to change my gears, so to speak, and change my way of thinking and my approach and it wasn't a big adjustment, really. It might be a little bit frustrating at times when you're – when you want to see something done. You see something that you would rather see it done now or maybe-maybe quality in the way you want. You can't work directly with the man that, so to speak, got the shovel and you – but you know I change, I adapt, and I think we're doing all right.

Herb Evison: Yeah.

- Jim Bentley: So maybe in that respect it's a – it might be time—
- Herb Evison: —I'm very glad you made that point because I think it's a very basic point about your job.
- Jim Bentley: Yeah, well I think in change I think that everything changes, you know, and you've got to be ready for change. This is a significant change and I know for a fact that people that I work with – it's hard for them to adjust to a change like this if they worked under it for five or ten years. Some of them just probably won't change and yet you have to.
- Herb Evison: Yeah.
- Jim Bentley: And it's interesting to look into yourself and be able to see that that what you have to do in order to accept these things and get the job done.
- Herb Evison: And yet I presume you have to know these all of these people who are involved in maintenance operations and be on pretty good give-and-take terms with them.
- Jim Bentley: That's where it makes it touchy because, you see, if you're the superintendent's eyes and ears and yet you go out and find something that's wrong, you find something that's being neglected, priorities aren't in the right order, money's not being spent to – in your opinion, you know, to the best use; being put to its best use that you don't want to alienate, become ineffective, and so you've got to be objective then, and be able to get the message back to the people responsible so that it is an objective approach, not a subjective approach, that they feel, well, you're out to – you're picking on them, so to speak, and but – that's the technique you have to work with and you go out and you point things out and still keep the superintendent informed of it and far enough advance so way that that the parkway isn't deteriorating around the superintendent's ears, so to speak.
- Herb Evison: Yeah. This thought occurs to me – at Rainier you worked directly with the men who were doing the pick and shovel work of maintenance. Here when you find something wrong you have to report it to the superintendent. Do you ever get the feeling when you're with these people that they feel like you're kind of a tattletale?
- Jim Bentley: No. I haven't. At least they've never given me that impression. I feel that I have a good working relationship with our district supervisors, and, of course, with the unit managers that I'm selective I should say and be honest with you about what I tell the superintendent. I mean I don't tell him everything. Most of this I can work on a lateral basis with the unit managers and recommend and suggest and say, “now you better get on this,” and you know it would be done informally. Nothing documented.

The only problem they can run into if they don't take my recommendations. And that's all I can do is recommend. If they don't take my recommendation, or if I'm strong on my recommendations and I'm convinced that this should be done then I go to the superintendent and say, "It must be done." And then, of course, now the superintendent can say, "You can talk to the unit manager and he can talk to me," and then he makes the decision. And he'll maybe say, "Well, Bentley, you're all wet." (Both laugh). All right, so I'm all wet. So next time I'll, you know, try another approach, see.

Herb Evison: Well, I would be dubious – I would doubt that if any – very many instances where he's told his engineer, in whom I gather he has a good deal of confidence – I don't think there are many instances where he's told you, "You're all wet."

Jim Bentley: No. No. No, but it does – it does create some kind of problem on getting the word across and setting priorities. I see things that I would do – I would be organized differently. I mean I would never tell somebody how they should do their job, but I think I would probably be organized differently, and I would give suggestions on, probably, they should be organized this way to get the job done. That they purchase it this way, they schedule this way, they redefine their priorities and most of 'em, like I say, I think I have pretty good working relations with because most of the time they seriously take what I tell 'em and they try it. And—

Herb Evison: Well, I would think that they would. I would opine that, by golly, it takes a good public relations man to get along in a job like yours.

Jim Bentley: That's right. It becomes that. Yeah. It becomes that, but one way it worked that way in Rainier, you know, it worked and it seems to be working this way and it's a lot of – it's just in people and people relations and so – but if your relationships break down, you start having alienations and there you have problems.

Herb Evison: Yes.

Jim Bentley: You can't – you can't build up these walls.

Herb Evison: Well, Jim, I would like to tell you that this has been one of the most interesting tapes that I've made in a long time.

Herb Evison: It's a pleasure to sit down and talk with somebody who is articulate in the first place and somebody who thinks his own thoughts as you do. I'm immensely obliged. I'm awfully happy that you were able to take this time this afternoon to do this with me.

Jim Bentley: Well, I'm very glad to. Very glad to.

Herb Evison: I feel that it's been a very profitable expenditure of time from my standpoint. So, we're nearing the end of the tape and again, I'll say, thank you very much and cut it off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]