



## National Park Service Paleontology Program

### *Oral History Interview – Jon Burpee – 2020 Interview – Part One*

Natural Resource Report NPS/PALEONTOLOGY PROGRAM/OHI—2020/014



**ON THE COVER**

TUSK Superintendent Jon Burpee.

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Natural Resource Report NPS/PALEONTOLOGY PROGRAM/OHI—2020/014

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The National Park Service, Paleontology Program publishes a range of reports, plans, oral histories and other documents that address a range of paleontological resource topics. These reports are of interest and applicability to a broad audience in the National Park Service and others in natural resource management, including scientists, conservation and environmental constituencies, and the public.

The NPS Paleontology Program disseminates comprehensive information and analysis about paleontological resources and related topics concerning lands managed by the National Park Service. Given the sensitive nature of some paleontological resource information, such as the specific location of fossil sites, some publications are intended for specific audiences and are maintained as restricted access. When appropriate, sensitive information is redacted from reports in order to allow greater access to these reports by NPS staff, partners and the public. This work supports the advancement of science, informed decision-making, and the achievement of the National Park Service mission.

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## Background

[Interview with Jon Burpee (Part One): This telephone interview was conducted Monday, June 29, 2020. The primary speakers are interviewee Jon Burpee (JB), who is the former Superintendent of Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument, and Vincent Santucci (VS), interviewer and Senior Paleontologist/Paleontology Program Coordinator for the National Park Service. Erin Eichenberg (EE), Integrated Resources Program Manager at Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument and Jill DeStefano (JD), President and one of the founders of the Protectors of Tule Springs were also on the telephone call.]

The interview was recorded on a digital audio recorder and a mp3 file was created. A written transcription of the interview was produced from the digital audio recording and this document contains the discussion during the interview. Jon Burpee signed a release form for the National Park Service for the preservation and use of the interview in the future. PII has been omitted.

## Transcript

**1:09:28 length of interview**

[START OF INTERVIEW]

VS: Alright, so let's begin. Today is Monday, June 29, 2020. My name is Vincent Santucci. I'm the senior paleontologist for the National Park Service, Paleontology Program. Today we are interviewing Jon Burpee, former Superintendent at Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument. The interview is being conducted by telephone from Jon's home in Oregon, where he is currently the Superintendent of Lewis and Clark National Historical Park. We are joined today on the phone by Erin Eichenberg, the Integrated Resources Program Manager at Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument and Jill DeStefano, the President and one of the founders of the Protectors of Tule Springs. So, welcome Jon.

JB: Thank you very much.

VS: So, the easiest question is the first one. And that is when and where were you born? Where did you grow up and go to school?

JB: Sure, so I was born Washington which was not too far from where I'm at now. It's where my folks live. In fact, early on though I moved to Vancouver, Washington, like at one week old. My parents had just moved back to the West Coast from the East Coast, and they were closing on a house. And then we moved to Vancouver, Washington. I was there through first grade. Then we moved to Shelton, Washington up on Puget Sound. I was there through the end of my freshman year of high school. From there, went back to Vancouver, as my dad took a transfer with the timber company he worked for and finished my high school there at Columbia River High School in Vancouver, Washington. My undergrad was actually in history at University of Washington in Seattle. And I've done a little bit of graduate work, but it's negligible at this point and doubtful I'll ever return to it. It was a good place to grow up in the Pacific Northwest.

VS: Thank you. Can you give us some background on how you wind up coming to work for the National Park Service, seasonally then permanently? What parks have you worked and the position titles that you held at those various parks?

JB: Yeah, when I became a history major in college, first of all I wondered why cause I didn't really see a career path. I didn't want to be a high school history teacher/coach of something. But I was really inspired by my high school history teacher. He got a hold of me in college and said, "Hey, why aren't you studying history? You are one of the better history students I ever had. Follow what you enjoy." And I got to thinking – so why do I enjoy history - and I could think back to two really distinct moments as a kid. When I was eight years old family visited Fort Vancouver National Historic Site and I just remember that reconstructed British fur trade post just vividly. [They] had a park ranger who absolutely brought the history to life for me. Really enjoyed it. It was very memorable. The following year, about 1980, we went out to the coast and again the family went to another National Park Service site – Fort Clatsop National Memorial, which is now Lewis and Clark National Historical Park. And same thing. As a high school, I mean college student when I just thought back, "Oh my gosh." Just thinking of the place, I could almost smell the wet, musty, moisty smell of the coast and Fort Clatsop and so those were things

that really inspired me. And so, post-college I would have liked to have thought I would have been smart enough there to go, “Hey, you enjoy history because of National Park Service site visits and you should become a park ranger.” But I actually had plans to become a - I was gonna go to law school like most of the people in my history program at University of Washington. I was gonna go to law school. I decided to take a year off after law school after my undergrad and just kind of work and save up money. And lo and behold I had a pretty interesting time. I worked for a company that folded almost immediately – was kind of bummed out about that. Went down to Fort Vancouver. I’d taken this job back in Vancouver, Washington – went down to Fort Vancouver on Saturday – the company folded on a Friday. So, Saturday I knew the types of jobs that I wanted to work probably weren’t going to be hiring on a Saturday. So, I decided, hey, that place inspired me as a kid and it can inspire me again. And so, I went and took a tour with the ranger. A ranger I later worked with who did a fine, fine job but was having a really off day. The tour was terrible. He just wasn’t bringing the history to life. And that night I called my folks. And I wasn’t complaining about the fact that I just signed a one-year lease or that I wasn’t going to be able continue working for this company that just went bankrupt. I was complaining about how bad the tour was. So, my mom said one of those things that only a mom can say which was, “Well, I hear you complaining. I just don’t hear you doing anything about it.” So, the following day I went down to Fort Vancouver and asked them if they utilize volunteers, and they did and they signed me up as a volunteer. That was kind of the beginning of my Park Service journey. That was, gosh, sometime in 1995. And started volunteering there. Was having a great time. And then someone told me what a seasonal ranger did. Well, I am currently unemployed and sounds pretty cool and maybe I can make a career out of this. So, I applied to be a park ranger—GS 3 park ranger—and was accepted. They always joke they ruined a perfectly good volunteer cause I would have kept doing that forever, but that was a pretty extraordinary summer. Had a great mentor, a lady by the name of Lee Taylor. Was kind of the supervisory interp ranger there. She really encouraged me. So, I kept coming back during the summers. There in the winters I was working at the Washington State House of Representatives as a committee clerk. So, I had a summer gig, a winter gig. Really enjoyed my time there at Fort Vancouver. But, also realized, “My gosh, there are so many great sites out there,” So, I thought I might be able to get out and go see a bit of the world. So, I hatched on a plan to become a long term seasonal, just moving around to different parks. Went off to Death Valley National Park. In fact, that’s where I first heard about Tule Springs. One of the rangers told me about it so on one of my trips I, actually driving into town, wandered over the desert there. Not knowing what I was looking at nor even if I was fully in the right place. That was my first kind of wanders in 1998-1999 through the washes. From there a season in Death Valley, that’s where I met my wife. Got hired on as a term at a new partnership up in Vancouver called the Vancouver National Historic Preserve, which was a partnership between the Park Service, the City of Vancouver, the State of Washington and the U.S. Army to tell an expanded story beyond the fur trade story of Fort Vancouver. Was there for most of my term, as it was about ready to end, and I knew there was a position open at Fort Vancouver I jumped into school to make myself eligible under the old student employment program. At Clark College I took a certificate of – I can’t even remember the name of it now – supervisory leadership or something like that, which made me eligible to be picked up as a SCEP for Fort Vancouver. And from there I pretty much decided that this was going to be my career. I was at Fort Vancouver a little longer, until 2002, went off to – left that position there and went off to Fort Fredericka National Monument in

Georgia. Was a park ranger – so a GS 7/9 park ranger interpreter. Stayed there a lot longer than I thought I was going to; ended up leaving in 2012. For the last three years there I was chief ranger interpretation program – chief ranger. Went from there to Castillo de San Marcos [National Monument] and Fort Matanzas [National Monument] in Florida. Was there for – again, just like Tule Springs, a place I could've easily spent the rest of my career—fascinating place—but an opportunity came up. One of the Associate Directors who I knew for the Park Service kind of recommended I apply for the Bevinetto Fellowship, the Bevinetto Congressional Fellowship with the Park Service. Went to D.C., worked for a year over in the Senate – sub-committee on National Parks. In fact, sub-committee for National Parks, Energy and Natural Resources Committee. That's where I learned of the Nevada bill. The Harry Reid bill to create Tule Springs, amongst many other things. And I got to work a little bit on that, mostly on other pieces of that larger bill for the defense authorization. And then the second year, after passage of that, I went over to – back over to Interior. Spent half a year working for legislative affairs and had just started up applying for that actually when I was working for legislative affairs. Just started up my six-month rotation on the Director's Hall when I was – got the interview for—gosh, I think that was in June—interviewed for the position at Tule Springs and then that's where very nice folks hired me to come out to Nevada and serve as the first permanent Superintendent. Kind of taking over after Vince Santucci had been the first interim Superintendent. Which was a beautiful set up because I got to follow somebody who'd really paved the way for some exciting things to happen right away.

VS: What was that name again?

JB: Oh, Vincent Santucci. I always said 'SAN-TWO-CHI' but I've come to know the error of my ways since that time. (Laughter)

VS: Thank you. Oh, thanks for that background. Before we jump into the specific Tule Springs discussion, had you had any sort of involvement with paleontology or fossils during your Park Service career prior to Tule Springs?

JB: Just a really minor extent – in fact that was one of the things that almost kept me from applying for the Tule Springs job cause I really had the feeling that, you know, somebody that shows up there probably should really have a more of an extensive background. I just was so intrigued by the place. My little bit of interaction with kind of the larger fossil story and indeed the National Fossil Day was at Castillo de San Marcos. So that fortification started in 1672, was made out of really one of the most interesting building materials you could build a Fort out of – called coquina. Which is essentially a fossilized shell rock. Small little coquina that had set there for so long, their shells had left – essentially the calcium leached out of them forming into essentially a soft rock formation and that's what the Fort was made out of. So, that's one of my first things at Castillo de San Marcos – In fact I was really interested in that and had a gentleman – I can't remember the organization – but a paleontology organization in Florida who said, "Hey, can we hold National Fossil Day event at your Fort?" We had just this great little set up and it was really interesting to see how people so were attracted to the stories of the fossils of the Florida's coast. I just remember that as being kind of interesting and something that, you know I'd, as an historian I was intrigued by the story of geology. The difference between short time and long-term time, right? Recorded events of the past from the human perspective and then this larger geologic story that the paleo site fits in. So, I hadn't had a lot of experience but I was



intrigued by it and definitely open to learning quite a bit about the geology and the paleontology of the area.

VS: Do you remember the name Paul Roth, R-O-T-H?

JB: Yes, yeah. That was the gentleman that we worked with there in Florida.

VS: And did he produce a fossil education kit for Castillo de San Marcos?

JB: Yeah. In fact, thank you for reminding me of that. Paul provided this great little kit that came in a handy little box that I know particularly our folks down at Fort Matanzas used quite often, within some public programming. Again, it was just such a cool little thing that – it never would have been put together because we were so focused on the 1.2 million people that were coming in the door. We never had time to put together stuff like that. So, that's something I was really appreciative of.

VS: Excellent. Shifting to your position in Washington as the Bevinetto Fellow, in the Office of Legislative and Congressional Affairs for the National Park Service. Do you recall when you first heard about proposed legislation to establish Tule Springs as a national monument?

JB: Yes, once I started working for the sub-committee, I was working for a guy named David Brooks who's a long-term staffer for the sub-committee. Definitely, in my opinion, one of the most Park Service, non-Park Service people around. Really, somebody, who for so many years has worked both on the majority and minority within that committee. And he was the one that kind of introduced me to it. He described it as the Harry Reid bill or the Nevada bill that contained—it was a really carefully put together—it contained so many different elements to try to win over a coalition that would help preserve and conserve more resources around particularly Las Vegas. In fact, it was so carefully put together that when it became possible, a window opened up that we could put this within the National Defense Authorization, something that would get passed. And it was so well written, or carefully written I should say, that we were basically told that, “you know, we could change anything within the package of bills that were being put into Title 30 of the National Defense Authorization, but don't touch anything on the Nevada bill”. So, we couldn't negotiate in any way that would mess up the delicate balance that was put into it. I put together a – as part of that—the one hearing, it was a very strange year for a Bevinetto Fellow because during that whole year we only had one hearing. Many fellows in the past had talked about a hearing every two to three weeks. And so, you're constantly working on things. It was an election year, things were kind of at a standstill. Our chair, [Senator] Mary Landrieu for the full committee, was running what ultimately was a losing race. She was so incredibly busy campaigning that she really did something that—I think it would be interesting to ask David this—but I think it made him feel a little uncomfortable. She basically said, “Just get what you think is best.” Which was not really his role as a non-legislator. But he excited me about a lot of elements of that bill. You know, it created the most new National Park units in a single bill from like the late 1970's. And was really interesting. So, preparing for that hearing allowed me to delve in a little deeper about Tule Springs and figuring out a little more about what it was actually all about in terms of you know the resources. I was just blown away by the breadth of resources. As a non-paleo person, I had always heard about La Brea [Tar Pits] and La Brea, California had such incredibly preserved artifacts. But what intrigued me even from that kind of cursory reading of—I went to the Department of Interior library and got the 1960's notes

from the Nevada Museum that were published and I read through that—and what intrigued me more than anything else in reading some of the online stuff I could find about the San Bernardino Museum work with BLM, was it was a preserved eco-system. And I think a lot of the people there probably laughed a little bit about how just excited I got about micro-fossils and pollen and seeds. It was just intriguing from the very get-go. Also knew, because of my work on the committee, what some of the challenges were gonna be in terms of working with a really diverse constituency. And really naively I thought, “Oh, there’s a few right-of-way issues”. I didn’t realize there were that many right-of-way issues ‘til I got on site. But, working on the bill and presenting, getting it ready, talking a lot with Senator Reid’s staff really made me excited. Also, once it got passed and people in the Park Service, I knew of that said they were going to apply for that job when it came open. And several of the people were applying, innocent conversation, for what I considered to be for the wrong reasons. They thought it would be fun to live in Las Vegas and they thought, “Oh, a new park would be cushy.” Which there’s nothing, that’s not true at all of course. And it made me, soon after the bill passed, I pretty much said, “I’m putting in for this job”. Because I thought, you know, that in not so humble way perhaps that I could at least bring some excitement and enthusiasm in what I knew was going to be a tough, tough, time. Because the reality of a new park and waiting on funding and having really excited local partners and trying to keep that excitement up but also trying to stay a bit realistic. So I pretty much decided I was gonna apply for the job since it came open. I never saw it come open for a long time and then all of a sudden I heard again Vince Santucci walking down the hall, the Legislative Affairs hall. This was my second year of my time. And heard Vince talking to somebody out in the hall—can’t remember who it was; someone from our Coms shop—because at that time Legislative Affairs and Coms shared a hall in Main Interior. And I think I stuck my head out and introduced myself and said—at that time I was the Pacific West Leg affairs person in D.C.—“If there’s anything I can do to help during your acting time out there let me know.” And then not too long after that is when the job announcement hit the street and I applied for it.

VS: Very good. I want to dig a little deeper into this because I think there’s some additional part of this story, prior to you being offered the Superintendency that I want to talk about a little bit with you. Once I complete that, Erin and Jill, I’ll also ask you if you have any questions before we go into Jon’s Superintendency, if that’s ok.

JB: Sure.

VS: Alright, great. So, in terms of your time as a Bevinetto, as best you can, to try to forget about everything you learned about the park once you came on board. If you can remember back during that pre-Superintendency period, were there any hot or controversial issues associated with the Tule Springs portion of the Defense Appropriations Bill?

JB: So, one of the challenges—there was a lot on that bill in terms of – kind of at least implicit restrictions on what the Park Service could do there. So, Rob Bishop was the representative who is over on the House side. He chaired the Natural Resources Committee for the House – Republican from Utah. There’s what we always called the Bishop language, was attached to this. Which essentially said—well to boil it down real quick and easy, what happens outside the boundary is outside the boundary. The Park Service shouldn’t have a direct role necessarily in speaking out about land use issues, things like that. And so, I knew that was going to be very difficult for not only the first Superintendent but, you know, down the line, the fifth and sixth Superintendent and beyond. Because that language really restricts what traditionally is the role

of the Superintendent in being able to speak out about things that are affecting the resources within the park boundaries. And those resources can be broad, you know. Not just groundwater coming into, the viewscape from the boundary, the soundscape. The other things that it provided was for really explicit ability for the U.S. Air Force to continue training operations over the site. Which a few times while I was there (laugh) boy, jets coming really close off the deck and that was a challenge. The other big challenge was the, that I saw in the bill at the time, was the right of way for the transmission line, high tension transmission line that runs through the park. That kind of cuts the park into two sections, a north and a south section. And the possibility that additional—if I remember right, it's been so long since I read the legislation—that within 13 years of enactment, these additional lines will be run through the area. Those were the biggest things. I had seen a lot of footage by that point of shooters using the North Unit and just trashing the North Unit. Those were the big challenges I saw. There were a lot things that when I got there that I realized some of those weren't as big a challenges at the moment anyways. But there were other things that, kind of in my time there, that tended to be more challenging than a lot of those.

VS: Very good. Again, sticking to the pre-monument discussion, during your time as a Bevinetto, did you have any conversations or see or participate in any conversations that related to Park Service vs. BLM [Bureau of Land Management] management of the monument?

JB: A little bit. One day we had some visitation from some BLM folks. That was kind of the weird thing about being on staff there was nothing on my little name badge that said I was Park Service. It said I was Bevinetto Fellow which is hardly understood, known in the Park Service let alone outside. I did have a BLM—BLM was just rotating in and out people who were kind of their legislative folks and I did have a BLM person complain pretty openly to me and a small group of staffers the Park Service was trying to steal that land. You know there had been so many different versions of that, earlier versions that would have had a northern section that was BLM part of the monument, southern section was the NPS part of the monument. An even earlier one that had a national monument meant for all of the BLM land and so I think that coming into that position I had a little bit of recognition about how it could be viewed by some of the BLM folks. It had taken quite a different—after all that work that they had done in terms of paying for paleontology, I could see how that could be a problem. But once I got on the ground I found Gayle Marrs-Smith to be just an incredible ally and really helpful in any moment. I never really experienced that heavily, again beyond dealing with issues of the San Bernardino collection of fossils, that was one area where I kind of saw the rivalry kicked back up.

VS: Very good. And as best as you can remember, interaction with Senator Reid's staff in regards to Tule Springs, did you get a sense of any motivation behind why this proposed monument was going to be going forward by Senator Reid?

JB: So, at that point—and it's terrible, I can't remember her name. I want to say her first name was Sara. Jill probably remembers better than I do.

JD: Sara Moffitt.

JB: Yeah, thank you. Sara Moffitt. So had some conversations with her. She was really the Speaker's main liaison with my boss, with David Brooks. And so, I had a lot, at that point it was more, because I wasn't attached to Tule Springs at all, of course. It was more listening in. A little

bit later when I kind of finished my time on the Hill, since I was initially assigned to the Pacific West legislative liaison, then I had a lot more conversations over issues like the Corn Creek Road. But that early it was mostly listening in and listening about how carefully negotiated the Nevada section of that bill was. Sara was so incredibly professional. I do remember David asking about the, you know, how everybody felt in Nevada about it going NPS instead of BLM. And I really got a kick out of Sara's very professional answer which was essentially that BLM wasn't really well-liked within Nevada so changing to NPS was actually a potential benefit. Although, for some people who were used to using the land, or misusing the land in many cases, a switch from BLM land to NPS land was far more restrictive but she said there is enough – more support for it becoming NPS than BLM. At that point, like I said, it was mostly, there was nothing we could do. If that bill, Title 30 of the National Defense Act, if that had hinged on that Nevada thing, about people wanting us to negotiate parts of it away or exchanges, there was a no go on that from the Majority Leader's office. So, we were kind of fortunate in that and really nothing really popped up in terms of negativity towards that. There were so many elements to that – creating more off-road vehicle space and of course the shooting area had already been addressed with the Las Vegas Shooting Range [Clark County Shooting Range]. It was so carefully worked out that there really wasn't that much discussion of it. Really, the majority of the negotiation around that bill came for the other six units and to a lesser extent re-authorization funding for natural heritage areas.

VS: Great. Did you participate in any Congressional Hearing that involved discussions of Tule Springs?

JB: You know, it's funny looking back on it, I'd really have to dig deep. I don't remember in our hearings. Our hearing, the only one I had the whole year, was really fascinating because it was massive. If I remember it, we heard 27 bills and the funny part is, looking back at it after these several years, I, for the life of me, can't remember if Tule Springs was actually included. I think it had already been heard within the committee and so I wasn't there for that. That happened prior to me.

VS: Do you recall the discussion ever coming up with Jon Jarvis or the NPS leadership during your tenure?

JB: The few things that I had heard was essentially, you know, the Park Service was not as supportive of making it directly a unit yet, but they want more of a study. There had been a reconnaissance study. They wanted a larger study of it. Best of my memory, there was a push for it, particularly amongst the Legislative Affairs office. But I think it really came down more to, at that point, rather have a study but Harry Reid's the Majority Leader. That was a pretty big side of it.

VS: One final question before I turn it over to Erin and Jill. So, do you recall anything prior to the monument being established regarding some of the motivations at the local level? Whether they're political or community related? Were you aware of NPCA's [National Parks Conservation Association] role and interest? Had you ever heard of Protectors of Tule Springs? What was your general sense of things related to the political and the social aspects of this proposed Monument?

JB: NPCA had been pushing for a couple of different Monuments. Honouliuli was one of them. Bears Ears was another one. They actually had come by their legislative folks had come by multiple times. And amongst the many things they had said that – I didn't know necessarily about their specifics on it. And I didn't realize at the time other than seeing the name and a few things that Lynn Davis had been working on it out on the ground. Unlike, almost every bill we considered we heard pros and cons. Those who were for and those who were against. The Tule Springs one was funny to me because I just assumed based upon Nevada that there would be a certain level of opposition. It never got to me in the Senate. Nobody showed up against it. Nobody spoke out. I don't even remember. I handled a bit of the correspondence on different proposed areas during my Senate time and nobody was, nobody spoke out about it through correspondence. But when I was in there talking with Sara Moffitt that was the first time I heard the organization Protectors of Tule Springs. It was kind of interesting to see that there was such an advocacy group. Almost every National Park Service site that comes in through the legislative process or even through the Presidential Proclamation of a national monument has a really strong advocacy group. That was kind of my first introduction to the Protectors of Tule Springs. Kind of liked what passion I saw, even early on just with some of the things that Sara was passing over to us on the committee.

VS: Great, thank you. So, Erin do you have any questions pre-monument for Jon?

EE: Pre-monument, I guess, was there ever a history of military operations in the Tule Springs area that was gathered? As far as, I know the WWII Gunnery Range was to the east of Tule Springs, and right now I'm currently trying to figure out if there's – anybody's uncovered history of how the military may have used Tule Spring's lands in the past.

JB: I never actually saw anything that said that they had utilized it. I know once I got there, we started finding .50 caliber casings and stuff. That we assumed were probably dumped out, kicked off of a plane coming back from the gunnery range during WWII. Never saw something specific. Later during the monument period, I did see a PJ's [Para Jumper] helicopter rescue going on in the middle of the monument which was surprising. Got buzzed by a drone and he fired at that time up above. But never on the ground that I ever saw. And particularly during this period there was – in the Senate there was no discussion about it at all.

EE: Ok, thanks.

VS: Ok, Jill do you have any pre-Monument questions?

JB: No, I don't think so. Thank you.

VS: Great. So, Jon we've been going a little over an hour. Are you able to go longer?

JB: Yeah, absolutely.

40:35

VS: Ok, I think we are just starting into some of the important stuff. So, appreciate it. Erin and Jill, you're ok in terms of time?

EE: Yes, I'm good.

JB: Yes, I'm gonna to have to drop off at about quarter to eleven. But, obviously let you guys finish it, please.

VS: Yes, a little bit before you have to drop off give us a reminder a few minutes before. So, if you have any questions you can ask those of Jon before you depart.

JB: Ok, thank you.

VS: Thank you. So, Jon you did share with us a little bit about your interest in applying for Tule Springs. So, let's get to the point where you received an invitation for an interview. Can you tell us your reaction to that and how you prepared for the interview?

JB: So, I had a—and just to let you know a – go back, I just checked the committee memorandum about bills that were heard in that July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 hearing and no, there was no Tule Springs on that. But I had applied. Of course, I was talking to my family and the background on the Bevinetto, when I got there, there were four Bevinettos there. Which was weird cause there's normally only two Bevinettos. But there were four cause the two Bevinettos two years before me were having a horrible time getting jobs. I think, talking to a lot of Bevinettos I think you almost have this assumption going into it that hey, once it's your time to be done they're gonna just lay out this little, here are the parks that are open. What are you interested in? That wasn't the case at all. You still had to get out there and apply for jobs. I have to admit that I did not want to be somebody who—those two who were two years ahead of me were just going off and doing two-month details here, going to a different park and doing two-month details. And I think for both of them they didn't have children. That was ok. It was semi-terrifying to me to do that. So, I pretty much early realized, 'Boy you gotta make your own magic.' To get out if you're going to get out. So, I had a really funny moment of that recognition that I'm gonna have to go ahead and go forward with finding a job. I applied for one other job which was the Superintendency of Saratoga National Military Park. And I prepared for that one. I over prepared for that one. So much so that I think I really fouled my chances for that one. I think I had applied for the Tule Springs one kind of contemporaneous with that so it worked out well. I had more of a background in terms of the legislative process that created the park. By that point I had worked, had helped author the letter that goes out to the Regional Director notifying them to start operations in the park. So, I had a lot of background for Tule Springs. I didn't spend a huge amount of time preparing. Mostly because in addition to the Pacific West legislative liaison I was on, I was assigned transportation issues. And one of the big transportation issues I was working really hard on at the time was the repair of the Arlington Bridge in Washington D.C. Big money ticket thing. We organized tours with members of Congress and their staffs to get underneath to see how bad the bridge was. We worked to coordinate a press conference. I was just so busy I didn't have time. And I think that probably actually helped me out, cause I was a lot looser than I was with the Saratoga interview. Often when I applied for a job, I pull up the General Management Plan and the Long Range Interpretive Plan and Foundation Document, whatever to get my head. Of course, there wasn't any of that. That was kind of exciting with Tule Springs was get to be in on the ground floor.

VS: Thank you. Just briefly does anything stand out to you in recalling participating in the interview itself?

JB: So, it was kind of interesting because I took this interview down the hall in one of the little break rooms on the Legislative Wing. I had to already prepare my boss, Don Hellman, who was the Chief of Legislative Affairs for the Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs. That, “Hey Don, I think I’m going to apply for this.” And it was going to be difficult because I was going to be leaving early. One of the first things Don said when I and Brandon Flint, the other Bevinetto Fellow my year, got there was, “This is a 24-month commitment and you better be ready to do a full 24 months.” I think I left at 17 months. Fortunately, a few people before me, being stuck on his payroll, that didn’t bug him. He was ok with that. So, when it came time for the interview. By that point I had the chance to meet Patrick [Gubbins] who was the Acting Superintendent at Lake Mead. Because Patrick is an Acting for the SCS Superintendent at Lake Mead [he] attended the National Leadership Council meetings. And as a Bevinetto Fellow I got to attend those as well. So, I had already met Patrick. On the call was of course Vince Santucci. You know it’s funny, I can’t remember who else was on the call but those two really stand out. The interview process itself was pretty fascinating cause I had people literally walking in and out of this break room cause I couldn’t figure out any place else to really have semi-privacy. So, I ended up having people walking in and out while interviewing. It was a – of all the interviews I’ve ever had in my career, it was the most conversational interview. It was a really comfortable interview. And it was kind of fun to talk about the challenges that they saw. Patrick stressed that starting up a new park it really comes down to some really specific things that will be challenges for me. Oh, Martha Lee, Deputy Regional Director, was also on the call. And I think she, actually probably more than Patrick, made this point. Which is you’re going to have people on the ground who are going to say, “Great, now it’s a National Park”. And just expect a Visitor Center to drop out of the sky and all these rangers and staff. And she really stressed how challenging it will be because the money won’t quickly forthcoming with our three year legislative lag process for being able to get funding. There’s going to be a lot of really lean years. And I think what kind of struck her more than anything else was that I was pretty optimistic about that. And ready to be realistic with folks, but just look for the opportunity. That was really pretty good. Now, after the call, I’ve never had this. All three of the people called me after the call and said, “Hey this isn’t official, but boy you did really good. I think you’re going to get an offer.” (laughter) So, that just absolutely cracked me up. And sure enough it was just a few days later that I got the offer to come out and take on this challenge.

VS: Thank you. So, just for matter of record, Patrick Gubbins, G-U-B-B-I-N-S was the Acting Superintendent at Lake Mead that was part of the interview? And I do want to confirm that you did a great job in the interview. I think all of us were thrilled to speak with you and knew that you were the right pick for that position. So, thank you for applying and great job.

JB: Let me just throw in, it was such a pleasure to talk with you guys and just see the excitement over it. I had the weirdness of a Bevinetto Fellow, a year before me, had also applied for it and he was the first person I ran into post-interview and I knew he had already had his interview. I asked him how his interview went. He said, “Oh gosh, it was really rough.” After that, it made me feel pretty good about my prospects as well.

VS: So, I think it will just be fun to capture this on tape. Once you were offered the position and you accepted, there was a special event held in Las Vegas. That was announcing the review of some collections from San Bernardino Museum and can you tell us what happened and how you became involved in that public event.

JB: Yeah, that was kind of a fun moment for me I have to admit. It showed Vince's true showmanship. That was something I actually did worry about a little bit. Like, "Oh, my gosh. I got to follow this guy". I was invited out by Vince to be a surprise guest for this event. And it was mid-July, I think it was July 18<sup>th</sup> at the Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas. And the main point of this event was to celebrate this moment of return of fossils that had been dug under BLM by contractors from San Bernardino. That was a great celebration. In true showman style, Vince wanted to have a little extra and had me hiding around the corner, in the waiter's corner, in the event room at the Nevada State Museum. It was pretty cool getting to come out. It felt a little bit like being announced in an NBA game or something: "At six foot one, Jon Burpee, the Superintendent". And it was so fun coming out. It was the absolute just warmth in that room, excitement, that really made me realize how this is something. And I met so many folks. Jill wasn't there. She couldn't be there that day but I met a lot of the POTS [Protectors of Tule Springs] folks. I believe I met Erin there that day. I met the two Geoscientists-in-the-Parks: Aubrey Bonde and Fabian Hardy. And it was just so fun. It was also really great because it allowed me to do some house shopping. (laughter) As I was trying to figure out where exactly we were going to live within Las Vegas. I spent a lot of time there that trip. I went out and walked. Did the thing you're not supposed to do in the midst of July, went out and spent a lot of time hiking in the park. I think that's the first time I realized solely the sheer amount of trash. I went up Durango and also off of Horse—oh, I can't think of the name of that road—but, got down into the wash and was amazed at the sheer amount of stuff that was dumped out there. And the amount of work. My earlier trips out there in 1998 and 1999 there wasn't nearly that much trash. Or I don't remember it being that trashed. And also went up and stood at the edge of the shooting area. The gallery, illegal shooting area at that point and just saw the sheer amount—had a brief moment, after the excitement of that day, a brief moment of me going, "Oh, man, there's a lot of work to do." (laughter) That was a great event though. So exciting to see how excited folks were at that kind of kick-off.

VS: So, I think you touched upon – well, I am just going to ask it again to have a specific answer, how did your perspectives about this new future that you were going to have at Tule Springs Fossil Beds change after stepping out and having that warm reception and after seeing the actual monument? How did things change after those few days in Nevada?

JB: So, it was, I think if I had gone straight out to look at the site before I – having that (laughter) I probably would have been pretty downhearted. Because there was so much work to be done. But, that moment. But one of the things I've often believed is I can work with passion, right? Even if it's passion in a way that is difficult. But I saw such passion for the place. Such optimism for the future there that it meant that I realized, "Ok, this is something I can really work with and do a good job". Now I have to admit, during that period I'd heard—and I almost hate to even say this out loud but—I'd heard from some folks at Lake Mead about, "Oh, you know, you're gonna really have to rein in some of the supporters." Primarily Protectors of Tule Springs. And boy did that reception and in my first meeting with Jill DeStefano, did that concern absolutely went away. Because I saw a passionate, partner who truly cared about doing what was right by the place. I was really thankful to have that opportunity to have that early taste of excitement that was there on the ground around Tule Springs; something most first time Superintendents do not get that type of opportunity.



VS: Thanks for that. So, I'm going to let Jill jump in before she has to go. Jill, do you have any questions for Jon?

JS: Well, that was my major question. Had you heard about Protectors prior to you and I sitting down early and so you kind of answered that. Because that was our concern too. And so, you know, seeing the passion of all the supporters what became like your first priority when you actually started and were going to meet all these people?

JB: It's funny you ask that Jill, cause one of my first priorities was to sit down with you and kind of feel out what type of a role that you saw for the Protectors because there's a long history in National Parks of the groups that advocated for a park. They were so built into that advocacy role, the political role, that I have to admit when I first sat down with you up there at Aliante, that I sat down I thought I was going to have to start the process of switching you guys from advocacy to support. And you, initially when you said, before I even really started talking about the future of the place, you were already addressing that. It was so cool to hear. It was one of those moments, and there were moments throughout that journey, where my confidence kept building and building and building in what POTS could do to help. Particularly bridge that whole period, right? "Oh yeah, it's a National Park. Oh here's one interim Superintendent with support from Lake Mead. Ok, so they are putting in budget stuff. Here's the permanent Superintendent with no other". That flow progression without a group like the Protectors, I think would have been really painful to go through. But everything was opportunity and I think that was pretty cool to see. To have essentially a Friends Group on the ground that was ready for that. The other challenge we'd had and one of my other first priorities was to kind of deal with—one of my mentors while I was there was Alan O'Neill and former Superintendent at Lake Mead and has been involved with a lot of land use issues around Las Vegas. And I think Alan had drafted a Friends kind of agreement with POTS. It was actually out of date. It wasn't actually like the present agreements we were using. It needed – worse than that, they were about to change the Friends agreements one more time and we went through that process. That was pretty early. My biggest thing was to try to listen as much as I could to the community. And then try to see where the communities were to create good, while we were waiting for the other much slower process. Speaking with the new Superintendent a few days ago a phrase that entered my mind that I hadn't uttered in a long time which was, 'The planning will take us where we need to go.' Because the other big thing I realized was once I got there, everybody had vastly different ideas about what the park should be. Some of those ideas were really narrowly defined in their own interest, right? So, Las Vegas. North Las Vegas. I think within a day of being there I had a call from both Mayors' office about where the Visitor Center was going to go. (laughter) So, that phrase became kind of my crutch. The National Park is thrilled to be here and believes that this park should be planned not only for everybody in the country but of course for local folks. In fact the legislation calls for a planning process to determine these things. We believe in community engagement so much that we're not gonna just start making these decisions. The planning will take us where we need to go. But, I leaned on that crutch pretty much my whole time there. The biggest challenge for me was, there was just, it was so hard to kick off the planning process. You know, we kicked off the Foundation Document but that really wasn't what really was going to define how the place would look. There were challenges within the Park Service cause I read the legislation to really call for a classic General Management Plan. At that point I had folks from planning who were more, "It's more of an array of planning projects that make that up". And I'm like, "No we need a General Management Plan". Pushing for that was a bit challenging.

And here we are, you know, six years after? And we're still kind of waiting on that. So, that to me was one of my absolute failures there was to be able to move the planning beyond where it was. So, knowing the planning was slow, boy I jumped at every shiny object that came my way, every opportunity. Including things like the Mammoth money drive, the Penny Push. There was another moment where, my gosh, POTS is amazing. I couldn't believe the opportunities that were showing up. And then the other things was my initial kind of plan was to speak to as many community groups as possible. One, to get a sense from them what they thought this national park—importantly get out the amazing story of what was out there. In a way that wouldn't encourage people to just go out and do their own digging. I spoke to so many Homeowners Associations in that first month and a half. With some really interesting moments. Any Homeowners Association that was on the boundary of the park I tried to get ahold of and offered to speak at their next Homeowners Association meeting. Most of them were really poorly attended. Some were greatly attended, which led to some hilarious moments of recognizing that I was now living in Las Vegas. All of it was really worth-while.

VS: Great. I wanted to propose something. Jon, clearly there is at least another hours' worth of interview in terms of the questions I had hoped to ask you. Do we want to reschedule for another day that both Jill and Erin are available? So we can all participate. Do you prefer to continue now?

JB: I think that would be great because when you look at the history of this park. More than anybody else, Jill DeStefano is, and she is so humble. She will never admit to this. But was such an important part of the shining star that always kept us moving, that I definitely want her involved in the interview process because I suspect she's going to come up with some more questions based upon what I am saying. So, I'm totally good with doing this for as long as we need to capture as much as we can about this history and the work we did together.

VS: So, this is kind of a good point then to wrap up and we can pick it up again when you land on the ground in Las Vegas with your family. Jill, did you have any other questions before we lose you?

JS: No, not at all and thank you Jon for the kind words. Now, you got me crying again. Sorry Vince. (laughter) So, I would love to be part of the whole thing, yes.

VS: Thank you. And then Erin do you have any questions up to this point? Before we start talking about Jon taking over his new position.

EE: No, I don't.

VS: Ok. This has been fantastic. I really enjoyed listening to you Jon and brings back a lot of good memories. So, I'll send out an email trying to pin down a time that we're all available again and I look forward to that. Part Two of the Jon Burpee Superintendent story.

JB: Absolutely, and we also have to figure out how to get your interview done too, Vince.

VS: Thanks. Appreciate that.

JS: That's for sure.

JB: You know, let me know how I can participate in that as well. Because those first couple of months with you on the ground were extraordinaire.

VS: Thank you. Appreciate that. And if you have a photograph of you in uniform Jon at Tule Springs, I would like to use it on the cover of the transcript.

JB: Ok, let me see what I can find. Hopefully I've got something that is copyright free. I stole several from the newspapers. (laughter). They're far better than my selfies that I was attempting to take. So, let me see what I can find.

JS: I may have some too. So, I'll look.

VS: Ok. Well thank you everybody for your time. This was really enjoyable. I'll look forward to our next call. Everybody have a great day.

JS: Love you, Jon.

JB: Love you too, Jill.

(Laughter from all)

JS: I hope you like Derek [Carter] as much as we do. We're really – I really feel much more relaxed these days.

JB: Absolutely. My first interaction with him, he was just so different from my interaction with previous folks. I think you guys have a gem there and I'm just thrilled. Boy, he was asking the right questions too and just couldn't be happier. Wish we could have done that earlier but.

JS: Yep.

JB: Awesome.

JS: Onward. (laughter)

JB: That's right.

JS: Thanks, every—

JB: Thanks.

Santucci: Bye-bye.

JS: Bye.

JB: Bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]



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