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



H. S. Sanborn
December 1, 1962

Interview conducted by S. Herbert Evison
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H. S. Sanborn

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SIDE II

As reviewed by Mr. Sanborn

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Herbert Evison: This is Herbert Evison, at Sedona, Arizona, on the evening of December 1, 1962, and with me is a gentleman whom I have long known as Sandy, who is H. S. Sanborn; and Sandy was associated for a very long period of time with Mammoth Cave National Park and with an institution that actually grew out of the establishment of Mammoth Cave National Park, which is National Park Concessions.

Herbert Evison: Sandy, how about going back to the beginnings of this business and telling me how you became involved first with Mammoth Cave National Park and then with National Park Concessions, Inc?

H. S. Sanborn: In the years 1930 to 1936, we were employed – I mean we, Mrs. Sanborn and myself were employed – at Lake Arrowhead, California, by the Arrowhead Lake Corporation, which was the operating organization of the project. Mrs. Sanborn was the hotel manager, and I was superintendent – resort superintendent of the properties. In 1936 in February a letter that we had written to the Park Service saying that our services might be available for park work, as we had both had park experience in Yellowstone, went through channels and finally wound up with Mr. Gable who at that time was a member of the operating committee of the group that were making the Mammoth Cave area a national park.

H. S. Sanborn: At that time there were two organizations in there that had been buying land and acquiring property. One was the Mammoth Cave National Park Association, which was a civic group that were interested in preserving the area and the caves for future generations; the other was the Kentucky National Park Commission, which was the State organization that had charge of and responsibility for the State funds that went into the project.

H. S. Sanborn: In 1936 on the first of March we were invited to come to Mammoth Cave to meet with the operating committee that was made up of two members of the Commission, two members of the Association, and two members of the National Park Service. The two members of the National Park Service at that time were Mr. Gable and the acting superintendent of the area or the park-to-be. There were also two members from the Commission and two members from the Association, and Mr. William Thompson was the secretary and executive of the group.

H. S. Sanborn: We were employed after this meeting by the operating committee. Mrs. Sanborn was assistant hotel manager, and I was the hotel manager. That

was in March of 1936, and we went on then until it was decided that the park was ready for dedication, which was in the early part of 1941.

H. S. Sanborn: At that time there was a corporation formed known as National Park Concessions, Inc., a Delaware corporation of which there were five directors, of which there were two from the National Park Service and three from the operating organization, which was Mr. Thompson, Mrs. Sanborn, and myself.

H. S. Sanborn: That was the start of National Park Concessions on June 1, 1941.

Herbert Evison: Now, here was a new corporation. Where did it get its money to go to work with?

H. S. Sanborn: In the first three months of its existence, the National Park Service was not prepared to take over the guiding in the cave, and the corporation, who in the past had had charge of the guides as well as the surface accommodations, operated the caves and all of the facilities for a matter of three months. That's where the money came for the backing of the corporation known as National Park Concessions, Inc.

Herbert Evison: All of the capital it had to start operations with, then, had been accumulated just during three months of operation.

H. S. Sanborn: Approximately \$100,000, which much of it was cave receipts.

Herbert Evison: Yes, I would suppose that would have been a fine source of revenue, as it always has been since.

Herbert Evison: All right. You started in Mammoth Cave in 1941. Of course, almost immediately you ran into four war years, but also before you got through, the corporation branched out in a good many directions. And how about telling some of the circumstances under which the operation was extended; something of the philosophy of its operation, perhaps?

H. S. Sanborn: Well, it was strictly a service group that were dedicated to providing services for the public who visited national areas. Underlying it all had to be the theory and the theme that it should make money, in order to stay on its feet, as it had no appropriations from Congress, and it was on its own, so to speak.

H. S. Sanborn: In 1943 there were some opportunities presented to provide services. Among the first was limited service on the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina. Also in that year, in 1943, Isle Royale National Park was about to terminate any agreements it had with the former concessioners, as they

wished to sell their properties and be relieved of their responsibilities, and National Park Concessions was asked to consider operating those facilities at Rock Harbor Lodge and also at Windego Inn.

H. S. Sanborn: Also, in 1943 Rosemary Inn at Olympic National Park had been acquired by the Federal government and had been turned over to the National Park Service for supervision and management, and at that time we were invited to provide some of the facilities in the Rosemary Inn area of Olympic National Park. At that time the war years were pretty severe, and our people that went to these areas as personnel really had some very interesting problems and some very tough ones, from an operator standpoint.

Herbert Evison: Like what?

H. S. Sanborn: Oh, we were in food rationing. We had no priority as far as food was concerned in any of our operations, simply because we were not essential to the civilian economy. But I guess we operated and did the best we could with what we had in the way of food stamps under the rationing conditions.

H. S. Sanborn: In 1945 we were invited or requested to take a look at Big Bend National Park, which had been made a national park in 1944. And in 1946 we started by providing limited services for the visitor, and accommodations, right after, a year after, the war ended, in which the difficult restrictions placed several difficult problems to solve. One was a suggestion that we buy canvas and erect canvas tents in Big Bend. Canvas was a rationed item. Another thought was that maybe we could get enough lumber to build adequate facilities for guest use; but, again, lumber was a rationed item. So, we finally wound up by buying three carloads of collapsible sectional Dallas huts from the Oak Creek – not Oak Creek, but Oakridge—

Herbert Evison: Up in Tennessee, where they had worked on the atomic bomb?

H. S. Sanborn: That's right. And those were the first shelters that we had in Big Bend.

Herbert Evison: Of course, as I remember it, when you went in there in Big Bend there were some cottages that had been constructed during the CCC days, weren't there?

H.S. Sanborn: Yes, there were five, and one that was fractionally, only partially completed. And those were the nucleus of the beginning of our services. In

those days if you went into the park you took your own food and you did your own cooking.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, if I remember rightly, you have taken on, or the corporation has taken on, additional responsibilities at Olympic. Don't you have the Lake Crescent Lodge there also?

H. S. Sanborn: Yes, now.

Herbert Evison: And also, you operated for a while at Vanderbilt.

H. S. Sanborn: Yes; during the war years when they felt there was need for services for the visitor, we operated a dining room at Vanderbilt.

H. S. Sanborn: Then later on when the facilities in McKinley National Park in Alaska were in a period of change, we sent our manager and some of our crew there for a matter of three years.

Herbert Evison: Now, am I correct in my understanding that your arrangement there at McKinley was a little different than it was elsewhere. Wasn't the corporation just paid a management fee?

H. S. Sanborn: Yes, that's true.

Herbert Evison: Well, now, was there anything about that arrangement that you think would be wise to apply in other situations?

H. S. Sanborn: Yes. We felt that it would have merit again, if the Service saw fit to want to request that we undertake certain things. We always have been quite receptive to suggestions of the Service in providing additional facilities for the visitor in these areas, for we felt that we have a trained organization that was young, that was interested in what they were doing, and interested in giving service to the visitor.

Herbert Evison: Now, I guess it isn't any secret at all that in the years of the operation of the corporation, Mammoth Cave has been your standby for profitable operations. Isn't that so?

H. S. Sanborn: That was true for quite a number of years. Then there are some of the other operations that have gotten on their feet and have become profitable. I also might add that during the years we were in Everglades National Park, providing services for three years down there.

Herbert Evison: Now, that of course was provision of a very badly needed service in a new park. How did the corporation come out there?

- H. S. Sanborn: I don't think we made any money over the long run, but I don't think that we went in the hole very badly.
- Herbert Evison: The corporation, I know, for a long while – and I suppose it still does – has a board of directors of five members.
- H. S. Sanborn: That's right.
- Herbert Evison: And I know that you mentioned, I think, that when it was organized there were two Park Service representatives on the board. But I believe also that some years ago – and I don't remember just when – the decision was made - I don't remember whether by the director of the Park Service or by the Department - that the Park Service should not be represented on that board by an active employee. Is my memory of that correct?
- H. S. Sanborn: By an active employee of the Park Service?
- Herbert Evison: That's right: a person who is still employed. I don't mean a retired person; there was nothing against that. But as I remember it, Mr. Demaray was one of the still active employees, and I forget who else – Judge Knox.
- H. S. Sanborn: Well, during the early years of the corporation, the help that the organization got from the Park Service was very valuable. For example, the counsel and guidance of people like Charley Gable, Mr. Demaray, Judge Knox, with their background in national parks, was extremely helpful, because during that time they set up the system of accounts and audits and so forth. In fact, the twenty-year audit was completed last year. And many of the methods that were installed in early years by the government auditors have stood up even under the private audit system - that we now use. So, we have felt that it has been extremely valuable assistance.
- Herbert Evison: Do you feel that that would be a desirable arrangement even today to have a Park Service employee or two on there?
- H. S. Sanborn: Well, I think one might be might work out very well.
- Herbert Evison: Demaray was on the board after his retirement, wasn't he, until his death?
- H. S. Sanborn: Yes, that's right.
- Herbert Evison: Of course, you and I both knew him well and knew that he was a very canny, very wise individual, so I can readily understand why he was on that board as long as he was.

H. S. Sanborn: And incidentally, he was very much interested, and devoted a great deal of his time and efforts to the affairs of the corporation in many of the trying years.

Herbert Evison: During recent years – now let me start again: The National Park Concessions just within the last year or so has been granted a new contract. It was nip and tuck, I guess, for a while as to whether the organization was going to get a new contract. Isn't that correct?

H. S. Sanborn: Oh, I think, as with contracts, renewal of contracts, this contract that we had that expired on December 31, 1961, was materially changed when we got into the standard language of the present-day contracts; and the new contract that is in vogue now was strictly a standard-language contract like any other concessioner has.

Herbert Evison: Isn't there still provision in your contract for property of the corporation to go to the government in case the corporation itself is dissolved? That is not standard language in a contract.

H. S. Sanborn: That's probably very true, but that factor is one that is in the present contract and was in the other contract too. So, most of the other language, most of the other clauses, are standard language.

Herbert Evison: Yes. And you feel – you and the members of the board feel – that it is a contract that you can live with and that you can even go out and borrow money under, I judge.

H.S. Sanborn: Right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]