

## National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

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### NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817) Harpers Ferry Center's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Oral History Project



Tom Gray  
June 16, 2010

Interview conducted by Michele Hartley

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Interview with: Tom Gray

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Michele Hartley: 00:00 Maybe even 10 or 11, 12.

Tom Gray: 00:02 But his oldest son has got to be in his 20s, at least.

Michele Hartley: 00:05 Yeah. I think he's probably creeping more up to 30 actually.

Tom Gray: 00:09 Yeah.

Michele Hartley: 00:09 So-

Audio Tech: 00:10 So we're rolling if you want to identify yourself, yourselves and-

Michele Hartley: 00:16 Yeah.

Tom Gray: 00:16 Okay.

Michele Hartley: 00:16 Well, since this the first on the recording I'm Michele Hartley doing the interviews here. It's June 16th, 2010. We're at the Harpers Ferry Center's 40th Anniversary Picnic Celebration. I'm here with Tom Gray. I'm going to have you introduce yourself, Tom. But I just want to make sure that you're okay to be recorded.

Tom Gray: 00:44 Correct. I'm okay.

Michele Hartley: 00:45 Okay. Thank you. If you could just tell me your name and your title.

- Tom Gray: 00:52 Tom Gray. I was hired as chief of branch of visual production services, I think. I might be wrong but I was a branch chief when I first came here. Then I later became an assistant division chief. But my primary purpose here at the Center was as a photographer, either video, stills or motion picture. I did more motion pictures while I was here than anything else, also was the coordinator of park quality in relation to motion pictures and shows done in the national parks.
- Michele Hartley: 01:35 How did you hear about the Center?
- Tom Gray: 01:37 Well, the Center didn't exist. I didn't even know anything about the National Park Service. I had visited the parks quite a bit when I was young because I grew up fairly close to the Great Smokies. In fact, my parents took me there the day that Roosevelt dedicated the park in, I believe, 1939. But I had worked in the commercial world in Atlanta. I worked at the University of Georgia for four years, worked at a commercial television station in Atlanta and several production companies.
- Tom Gray: 02:15 One of the productions companies I had met a gentleman by the name of Carl Degen who later became chief of audiovisual for the Park Service. I was in freelancing for a while. I had been hired by CDC in Atlanta and happened to be in Swiftwater, Pennsylvania doing a film on the 10 best biological labs for the United States for NASA when Carl called me and asked me if I'd be interested in going to work for the National Park Service. I said, "Anything to get me out of these biological labs." He says, "Well, we need to get together and talk." I said, "Well, I'm going to be in Fort Detrick in Frederick, Maryland probably in a couple weeks and maybe we can get together." Carl was living in Rockville, Maryland at the time. So we did and he told me what was involved and what I could expect and I got real excited and decided to do it.
- Michele Hartley: 03:18 So you were talking a little before we started about where you actually were located. Could you talk a little bit about where you started to physically work and how you eventually moved to the location here in West Virginia?
- Tom Gray: 03:34 Okay. Before I came to the Park Service, Carl had asked me to give him a recommendation on camera equipment that we needed. We didn't have anything at all. There was

nothing in the way of audiovisual equipment. So I had put together a list of motion picture camera with, including film that we needed. He had told me about a film that we had to start immediately when I came to work here. So I met Carl on July the 12th, 1965 at Interior Building, my resume in hand and we went through personnel. He gave me the new equipment and I opened it and ran some tests with it. He had it ran out to Kodak. So everything at that time was ... audiovisual, the unit it was in, in Interior Building in Washington up on the eighth floor, I believe. It was in the old studios. It had been a radio studio at one time. It was rumored that we might move to Harpers Ferry.

Tom Gray: 04:39 Anyway, on the second day, Carl and I left on a trip and ended up in Albuquerque and did some filming at Grand Quivira and went to the Rocky Mountain National Park and met George Hartzog, who was the director of the National Park Service at the time and filmed him in Rocky Mountain. We were working on a film called Parkscape USA, which is a film he wanted produced for park employees to encourage better park manners towards the public. We spent two and a half weeks on the road filming for that film. Then we came back to DC and found a place to live in Virginia and then left on another trip and went to Williamsburg, did some more filming.

Tom Gray: 05:29 When we got everything completed, we came back to Washington. Then Carl said, "Well, we got to have a place to edit film. This film we're working on has got to be done in a very short time." And he said, "I found a place in Harpers Ferry at the training center." Well, I didn't know where the training center was. Although, Carl had mentioned that we had ... as I say, had planned on moving to Harpers Ferry. So we came up here and the training center director gave us a room in the bottom basement of the library. There I bought some editing equipment, very basic, and we started putting together this Parkscape film. Wilbur Dutton was also hired the same time that I was. We were the first two employees, other than Carl, with the new division of audiovisual arts. There was also a branch of still photography in Washington that eventually came under us and some other audiovisual people in Washington that came into the division.

Tom Gray: 06:33 We came up here and worked for several months, finished that film. Before the year was out, I would say, we had the

entire basement of the library occupied with audiovisual people. Then within the next year or so, the entire division was occupying the entire building, which is now the library building. During that time, of course, the building was contracted for and John Brown's fort, which is set up here in this location, was moved down to Harpers Ferry and we filmed that. Fortunately, we were here when the building was built, because we got to watch over and became very good friends with the contractor of the building because we could watch over AV and made several changes that he questioned us about, which would have been big mistakes that would have, it was great to be to correct during the construction of the building. So we were actually here before the building was ever starting.

- Michele Hartley: 07:39 When you were in the building, we've kinda changed how we get work done. But it sounds like you constructed a fully functioning production and postproduction house. Is that true? What kinds of things did you have here and what all did you do to get your produce your films here?
- Tom Gray: 08:02 Well, eventually and I say the next ... Carl was the original first producer/director. We hired producers eventually and directors. We had film editors. We had a full production facility here. We had audio mixing. We had our own sound engineer, Blair Hubbard. We first hired him as a freelancer. He worked with us in Yosemite, I remember, on the first film we did there. He eventually came in the Park Service in the audio branch. He helped also eventually establish the equipment services branch of AV. So as I say we had producers, editors, writers on staff. We did a film from beginning to end, editing, sound mixing. We had no processing facilities and never wanted to have any processing facilities but that was all handled under contract. But everything else was done here at Harpers Ferry.
- Michele Hartley: 09:11 You talked about your family trip that we didn't record. Would you consider that your first big Park Service project outside the one you did with George Hartzog? Or-
- Tom Gray: 09:22 Definitely, George Hartzog one was the first big one. There were other trips in there for other films like Olympic and it's-[knocking sound]
- Michele Hartley: 09:33 I'm sorry.

Tom Gray: 09:34 Interrupt.

Michele Hartley: 09:34 Hold on one second.

Speaker 4: 09:34 I made you a recording sign.

Michele Hartley: 09:40 Thank you. Because we are recording.

Speaker 4: 09:42 Sorry.

Tom Gray: 09:43 You gotta put it at eye level.

Michele Hartley: 09:48 Yeah, that too. But I thought about that. That we've been doing this a little on the fly. I'll need to make a sign. So I'm sorry. So the first big project you worked on you were talking about-

Tom Gray: 10:02 Was a George Hartzog, Parkscape USA. I can't remember which was the second film that we produced. In my 30 years here at Harpers Ferry, I did, they say I did around 300 projects. Now I did not film all those projects but part of those were contracts. My responsibility to the contracted projects were as far as quality control, seeing that the cinematography was good, that the editing was good and the lab work was good, then we turned out a quality product. We had other people who also inspected sound quality and Blair Hubbard and things like that.

Michele Hartley: 10:55 Well, it sounds like you were out in the, you traveled quite a bit and were out in the field for quite a bit. How did you guys produce your shoots? What were the kinds of things you were thinking about? Did you already have a script written? How long of a time did you go out for?

Tom Gray: 11:12 Generally speaking, we traveled, yes, I'd say on an average of maybe, if you averaged it out over a year, it would probably be a week and a half to two weeks a month. But it usually came in bigger blocks. We stayed here more in the wintertime than we did in the summertime. Our films were usually seasonal in nature. You had to have fall, spring, summer, winter shoot. In most cases we wanted a script to be written before the film was ever started. But because a lot of time because of money restraints and the way funding came in, which was always a problem, you'd get funding for one part of the project one year and you'd get funding for the next part the next. And sometimes you didn't get the

funding the next year. So the film set on the shelf for another two or three years until funding came down for the editing phase of post-production.

- Tom Gray: 12:13 In most cases, the ideal situation was that a planning trip went out from planners from the Center. They did an interpretive plan for a park, and it was determined what was needed in a way of audiovisual and exhibits, wayside exhibits, publications and so forth. Then eventually money was funded for our portion of the project either through the region or directly to us.
- Tom Gray: 12:38 Originally we were funded, we got a lump sum of money and then we determined on what films or regions. They'd submit lists of films they wanted on their priority, and we would determine what films got done that year. But that eventually changed, and the money came from the regions, and they decided what parks got films done and how many each year.
- Michele Hartley: 13:03 Well, I think budget problems are, sounds like that's nothing new.
- Tom Gray: 13:07 Nothing's changed I'm sure.
- Michele Hartley: 13:09 I know when I started here, we always had a lot of creative ways to handle budgeting issues from volunteering our family members to using duct tape and just improvising.
- Tom Gray: 13:23 We did a lot of that in my family. I had two kids when I first came here. They were quite small. They're in a number of the films and so is my wife. We would even ask visitors to do things that probably nowadays you wouldn't. I remember I was once at Colorado National Monument and I needed a group of people at an overlook. I asked this family standing behind me. I said, "Would you mind being in this scene we're doing a film for the park? Would you mind standing in this scene?" It was a nice-looking family. He says, "Well, I feel a little bit funny because I know you're using Kodak film but I'm a representative for the Kodak film on the West Coast and I'm moving to the West Coast with my family. But I'll do it." So he agreed. He said he felt kind of self-conscious I guess being that we used Kodak film. That time it was the only decent film available.
- Michele Hartley: 14:19 Yeah. That's quite a coincidence.

Tom Gray: 14:20 Yeah.

Michele Hartley: 14:21 Do you have a favorite park?

Tom Gray: 14:23 I have a favorite park according to regions.

Michele Hartley: 14:26 Okay.

Tom Gray: 14:28 Southwest, northwest, northeast, southeast. If I went to the northeast, it would be Acadia. If I went to the southeast, it'd be the Smokies and then the Everglades. Southwest would be Canyonlands and Arches. Northwest would be Olympic. Olympic is probably my favorite park in the system.

Michele Hartley: 14:53 You did a project at Olympic is that right?

Tom Gray: 14:54 Several.

Michele Hartley: 14:55 Okay.

Tom Gray: 14:56 Several, yes.

Michele Hartley: 14:58 When you're thinking of memories of that, any of those projects at Olympic, is there anything that you often recall for yourself or convey to your family or your grandkids when you're talking about being out in the field and some of the things that happened?

Tom Gray: 15:13 Well, there are a lot of things that happened. Right now that I can recall it right off the top of my head. Olympic, one of the projects that I did out there was to do a time lapse from sunrise, starting out dark, to sunset. We put up a time lapse camera. Because it was done in the wintertime, we put it in the visitor center at Hurricane Ridge. Tom Kleinman and myself spent three days out there because somebody had to stay with the camera all the time to keep the visitors from coming up and moving it. So we relieved each other during the day and watched the camera. Well, weather never cooperates. We ended up getting a good morning and a good afternoon. So we ended up putting those two together.

Tom Gray: 16:12 But the interesting part of that experience was that Tom and I spent the night up there and they close that visitor center in the winter time, the ski area at dark. We went out one evening and it was the most deathly quiet that I had ever ... location I had ever been in with 10 or 15 feet of snow on



the ground, no wind, standing outside there you could hear your heartbeat, feel your heart beating in your body. It was a real nature experience. There are a lot of other experiences I had in parks too. But that was one that I remembered in Olympic.

Michele Hartley: 16:54

You guys did a lot of backcountry work. Would you say that's true?

Tom Gray: 16:59

Yes, we did. Very seldom did we do a lot of hiking in the backcountry. We generally were helicoptered in and then did hiking in and camping in there. The reason being, for instance, in Sequoia and King's Canyon, we had an entire crew in the backcountry for four or five days. It takes so long to get into the backcountry that budget-wise it's cheaper to fly personnel and the equipment into the backcountry, have a horse team, the packers, meet us there with all the camping gear and then spend the time in the country and fly us out. We were capable of hiking into the country, backcountry, but it was just not feasible.

Tom Gray: 17:54

I did, once in Olympic, walk into the backcountry over 12 miles to the first camp. I carried part of my equipment. I had a ranger carry batteries and film and another ranger, in fact, he was chief of interpretation there, Hank Warren. He hiked with me into the camp. And we did a film, a lot of filming on elk in the backcountry and the film got canceled and was never used. But the footage got used later in one of the films that was done there.

Tom Gray: 18:35

That was a disappointing thing too, is to be, to do a project and the funding get canceled for it and never get finished. One we did, which I think is worth mentioning, is that when Nixon was president he decided he was going to form a new Department of Natural Resources. The Department of the Interior was going to be the main stay for the new Department of Natural Resources, which the Department of the Interior would become part of. So we ended up doing a film on how this new department would be, look on paper and how it would be with each division and each part of the new department responsibilities would be. So we ran around all over the country, went out in the oil fields in the Gulf and research centers and Fish and Wildlife. Great job filming. We had a lot of fun doing it.

- Tom Gray: 19:33 All of a sudden one day, they said, "It's over." So the film, what we call "in the can", never got to the editing stage. Fortunately, we did, was able to use a lot of the film in upcoming productions later that actually didn't relate to, material didn't relate to the Park Service, but we had a reason to use ... maybe show excavation of oil or something in another location in the country.
- Michele Hartley: 20:04 So you started in '65. When did you retire?
- Tom Gray: 20:08 I retired in December 31st, 1994 and from there on became a volunteer in the national parks in the summertime.
- Michele Hartley: 20:21 So of course, it sounds like ... I mean I love the Park Service. I wouldn't want to speak for anyone. But sometimes people move around and you stayed for ... What made you stay in the Park Service?
- Tom Gray: 20:34 Well, there was nowhere for me to go in the Park Service as far as internally. I had the job I wanted. I liked what I did. I could have made more money on the outside. I thought at one time I might freelance a little on the outside but that became impossible. There wasn't any way that I could do that. I enjoyed the Park Service. I traveled all over the entire system from Guam to Northern Maine to the Virgin Islands. I enjoyed traveling. I traveled all that time. I'm still traveling now that I'm out of the Park Service 15 years. I'm here in my RV.
- Michele Hartley: 21:14 I guess I just have one more question, unless you have anything to add. I know 15 minutes hardly does this justice. But coming from the AV department of the Harpers Ferry Center, what would you say the value of our films throughout the Park Service system might be?
- Tom Gray: 21:34 Well, I think it's one of the most valuable interpretation tools in the Park Service. You can do a lot of things with it, from motivating the visitor to interpreting what the park has to see and offer and how to get around the park. I think that we could have done a lot more work had funding been more forthcoming. We were held up on projects at times and stymied by other political activities within the government. But I think we were quite efficient. We never wanted to be a large department. Our plan was never to produce everything that the Park Service did. We had hoped not to produce more than 50%. We believed in

contracting out because contracting gave a variety of styles and techniques to the audiovisual program. Even though, we thought we had a diverse group of producers and writers and individuals, you still kinda seem to see a pattern in a film or production. By contracting out, you get a variety of products. I think through the efforts of our contracting people and help that they gave us in getting to the right people that we made some good choices.

Michele Hartley:	23:05	Thank you so much, Tom.
Tom Gray:	23:06	You're welcome.
Michele Hartley:	23:07	It's really good to have you back. Yeah.
Tom Gray:	23:09	Thank you.

END OF TAPE