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



Mary Herber  
June 16, 2010

Interview conducted by Michele Hartley

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Interview with: Mary Herber

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Interview date: June 16, 2010

Release form available: No (retired at time of interview)

Transcript reviewed by interviewee: No

Transcript reviewed against original audio by NPS History Collection staff: Yes

Transcript time stamped: Yes

## **PART I**

Mary Herber:	00:00	I ...
M. Hartley:	00:00	Hold on one second. We are, okay. I just wanted ...
Audio Tech:	00:04	Now we are.
M. Hartley:	00:04	Okay, I'm here with Mary Herber and I just want to confirm that you're okay with being recorded.
Mary Herber:	00:12	Yes, I am.
M. Hartley:	00:12	We have to do that. If you could tell me your name and you've probably held, you've held a number of positions here ...
Mary Herber:	00:24	Right, yes.
M. Hartley:	00:24	If you could tell us your name and start out with your position titles.
Mary Herber:	00:31	Well my name is Mary Herber. I came a week after the center opened. I arrived, I had worked in advertising. I worked for the Head Company and Woodward and Lothrop in advertising and was a layout artist. I dressed for work every day in the latest fashion. I arrived, I interviewed in Springfield, Virginia which was a temporary place that everybody was working at the time before moving up here. I arrived the first day in my little dress, all dressed up and found out I was working in the exhibit shop where they did

sawing and screen printing and everything. The first tasks we had to do were to paint the walls.

- Mary Herber: 01:22 Needless to say I never wore a dress again. We painted the walls and then they actually I had worked doing layouts and learning about specking type and photos and everything like that. There was let's just say a lack of that kind of knowledge when I arrived. They had just stopped doing hand lettered signage for exhibits. They were just starting into screen printing and sending photos out to have them mounted. I can remember one of the things I had to do when we mounted a color photo on a piece of Masonite we had to paint the edges. I remember that vividly. That was one of my first things. I was one of the only women besides the secretary in the shop. That was very interesting, very interesting because the men used to say well you can't travel with us because our wives won't like it.
- Mary Herber: 02:39 I never got to go on an installation until Grant Cadwaller came in as a supervisor, as the boss and he was an experienced architect and started really, we had so much work this was in the 70s right before the Bicentennial. We had so much work we had to start contracting out. I moved from working in the shop and doing screen printing and even some, using saws and things like that and learning how to put the lighting in exhibits and exhibit cases and all but I never went on any installations until Grant showed up. I started going on installations and then as we moved into contracting I became project manager and did that.
- Mary Herber: 03:32 After that, Grant moved on and I became division chief of production. We did a tremendous amount of work. Denver Service Center at the time was trying to sort of do more of Harpers Ferry's work because they were getting line item money. They were just sort of tacking things onto their architectural work. They called and asked if we would be interested in doing some of their work with them. We said yes. Then the money just started to flow in. There was so much money and so much work. Eventually I became chief of exhibits for Harpers Ferry Center for the Park Service. At that point I of course did no project work which was very interesting and the management thing I ended up going to meetings mostly, regional meetings and that sort of thing.

- Mary Herber: 04:46 The fun times were over as far as I was concerned. It was into management and you know while that was interesting, it was fun and there were a lot of good people worked for me, it was much more challenging. I remember one of the first parties they had at Harpers Ferry and there was a big sort of like cloth round tunnel set up and there was a fan at the end of it sort of holding it up. I was wondering what kind of place, it was out on the patio, I'm thinking what kind of place have I come to.
- Mary Herber: 05:26 This is the craziest place I've ever worked and I worked at a number of places. As I said I worked at the department stores, I worked at the Department of Defense but Harpers Ferry was something else. It was something else in the beginning days, it was like the Wild West, truly. There were just a lot of crazy things that happened. I know when I was in the shop and working in the shop before we got read and more sophisticated, the start of the Christmas season started about December first. We had one man who worked in the shop who was an artist. He started playing Finnish polkas from December first all the way through to Christmas and just drove us out of our minds. It was absolutely insane. Some of the Christmas parties I won't go into it but they are legendary, absolutely legendary that took place here at the center.
- Mary Herber: 06:29 The center has changed so much from when I first came here to what it is today. It's gotten so much more professional. I know that there were times when we couldn't find artifacts. Somebody had them but we didn't know quite who it was. Then we would track down the artifacts so we could put them in the exhibits. I'm trying to think of some of the crazy things that happened. Let me think now, without getting people in trouble. I can remember you know some of going to see some of the contractors, we had a job at Nez Perce out in Lewiston, Idaho. The visitor center was built on, a mound, an Indian mound that was a burial ground. From day one of that exhibit all the way through including the building, the architectural work done on the building, was bad karma, absolutely bad karma.
- Mary Herber: 07:55 We had a contractor who was a minority contractor who defaulted in the middle of installation and left us out there. We had to call another contractor to put all the exhibits together. We had a number of Native American artifacts,

they were beautiful, the most beautiful collection I've ever seen but some of them I know were sacred because people who knew would not touch the objects. Of course we had to install them. I always felt that I had such a love of these beautiful objects that there's no way I could be harmed by them. It was true. I guess I was lucky that bad things didn't happen to me.

- Mary Herber: 08:43 It ended up that the superintendent hated the exhibits even though they were designed by a Native American who didn't realize that the exhibit room had been downsized so all the cases were too big for the room, that was one thing. We had to go back out and disassemble all the objects, have the cases cut down with chainsaws and recovered, they were covered in formica and they were recovered in wood. We put all the objects in. I went back about a year later and at the time that we put the objects in there weren't that many Native American Nez Perce involved with the exhibits or with the visitor center. When we went back about a year and a half later, the superintendency had changed. The relationship with the Nez Perce were much better. There were actually Nez Perce giving tours, talking about these beautiful objects and really manning the desk and just an integral part of the exhibitry and the visitor center. I was so gratified that that had happened. Truly, it's a place that just has these beautiful objects that people really should get more press personally.
- M. Hartley: 10:07 When was this, what time period?
- Mary Herber: 10:10 I can't tell you.
- M. Hartley: 10:11 How about a decade?
- Mary Herber: 10:13 It's all, it maybe was the 80s or late 80s maybe that we had it happen. It was just one thing after another. It was bad karma. Marc Sagan was the manager at the time so it must've been the 80s. We had some people come in from Denver who had worked on the building. Everybody thought that those of us that went out there, I mean I practically had voting rights I was out there so much and so the guys from Denver came through and we started talking. They started telling us about their issues with things that happened that were so unusual and everybody is standing there looking at us and we're talking about all these awful things that happened but truly I really believe in the, if you

disturb the bones of Native Americans you're going to be in trouble. That was a lesson I learned from that.

- M. Hartley: 11:10 Well whether it was your, a project you were working on or one that you were that was happening while you were a manager, is there a particular exhibition, a particular park that you find is sort of like the quintessential most effective exhibit and why?
- Mary Herber: 11:32 Not really because each park small or large had a special thing about them. I was in Yellowstone in the middle of winter, we were working on the fire exhibit to explain what had happened with the bad fires and so we were there in the middle of winter and one of the staff members was nice enough to take us around and show us the snow removal. The snow drifts were just, seemed like a mile high. That kind of treatment, being a part of that whole thing with the Park Service of getting to know the park personnel and getting to know the park and every park had a special little thing.
- Mary Herber: 12:18 I was up in New York at Vanderbilt Mission [sic] and the park staff took us upstairs into the back rooms and showed us all of what the house was really like, things like that happened to us which was very nice. The most memorable thing that we ever did and that we pulled it off was amazing was in the west wing of Independence Hall. The park staff wanted to move the portfolio of the Declaration from the second bank, I think it was that's what the papers were from the second bank over into the west wing. We had to build a bullet proof room, a bomb proof room in the middle of this existing room. It turned out that the only original part of Independence Hall was the center, that the two wings were built later.
- Mary Herber: 13:19 They were under the ownership of the city of Philadelphia. We could not attach anything to any of the walls or windows or anything like that. We essentially built what the, where the case for the Declaration of Independence is in the Archives. We built a similar case up in Philadelphia with ballistic metal, with this system, with this security system that was so sophisticated and everybody, every museum professional we talked to from the Getty to I don't know where said you can't do it, you can't do it. Well we did it. We got that built. We got it installed and I hope it's still working to this day. To me, that was you know that

was really something, a monumental accomplishment that we did. I guess everything is still on display. We had the documents enclosed in these cases with gas in them and I think they were built by a company that did underwater submarines. I mean it was so sophisticated. I was always very proud of that accomplishment.

- M. Hartley: 14:49 Who was involved in that project?
- Mary Herber: 14:54 Scott Harmon, Ben Miller, Colleen who was my part time person and Color-Ad was the company that built the exhibits. It was truly something else. It really was.
- M. Hartley: 15:15 Well it seems like exhibits what I've come to realize from the installing the AV portion in the exhibits is that they're kind of like a performance, right at the end where you just have to, at some point the lights are going to go up and the curtain is going to open and there was a gazillion and five things that could go wrong that you had to fix within five minutes before the ribbon cutting.
- Mary Herber: 15:36 Well no, it was more drawn out than that. There were a lot of crises as the project moved along. It's you know very different crises. The worst thing was when you arrived on scene for installation and usually it was a new visitor center or a newly remodeled space and so it was very pristine and the park was very proud of it and then these trucks arrived. All of the accumulated mess of putting together an exhibit was spread out in their nice exhibit room. The park staff just never knew no matter how much you told them that it was going to kind of be difficult, they never understood. The park staff would walk around you know at night, after you worked every day and there was mess on the floor. The contractors did clean up but there was still a mess.
- Mary Herber: 16:41 You could just see that they were starting to panic. It never looked like it was ever going to come together, ever. Then magically over time a little bit more, a little bit more and then finally it got cleaned up and it was beautiful. They were finally happy. It was just such an intense work situation. We would arrive at six o'clock in the morning and not finish til midnight. A lot of the staff was so tired and you know worn out that they would just leave the park. We finally as managers said look, take some time either in the beginning or the end to see the park because you've got to

get something out of this, something meaningful for yourself out of this.

- Mary Herber: 17:32 You've got to see where these things are going and what they're going to do for the park. People did start to take some time to just visit and you know what I mean, to just see what the park is like. It was interesting to stay around when the exhibits opened and the public came in to see them enjoying and getting something out of what we had worked so hard on. That was a nice experience as well.
- M. Hartley: 18:01 Yeah, that was what I wanted to, my last question would be what do you think the relevance of the Harpers Ferry Center is in the Park Service or beyond?
- Mary Herber: 18:13 I think it's definitely a service oriented kind of effort because working with contractors you have to be smart enough to know first of all when you've got a good one. We developed a system where we didn't go for lowest bidders. We went for getting proposals and reading and understanding the business enough to know this is, you know, bullshit in one proposal and this is for real in another and these people are quality performers.
- M. Hartley: 18:55 Sorry, go, Winnie's just bringing people in. Please go ahead and ...
- Mary Herber: 19:01 Also, I mean to be able to deal with issues not you know, I had one superintendent tell me I've got this contractor and he's going to build these or do these exhibits and he'll fall on his sword for me. We always knew better. We always knew better that they were in the business of making money which is fair enough to let them make their money, make their profits but also to get good work for not only the Park Service but for the public. We had the knowledge, a lot of accumulated knowledge about what to look for, the dangers, how to solve problems before they happened and also an eye for what was going to work and what was not going to work and then also to take somebody's dreams in a park, somebody who really cared a lot.
- Mary Herber: 19:54 You could tell, the way they showed you their park, they way they showed you their objects, the way they talked about the history. You knew they cared. You wanted to be able to make sure that that got turned into something that the public could understand that wasn't so dedicated as



some of the interpreters were, so into it that was easy enough for the public to understand and appreciate. That's what we did, really the kind of service I feel that we did. I feel now that I've retired to look back on a life that was dedicated, from going from advertising to the Defense Department and then to be in the Park Service to have done something so worthwhile with my life, you know it's good feeling when you get older and look back on your life and say what have I done. It is something really good, really good so that's it.

M. Hartley: 20:56

Thank you, Mary that was wonderful.

Mary Herber: 20:57

You're welcome. Not too many of the wilder stories.

END OF PART I

## **PART II**

M. Hartley: 00:00

Of the center on the yellow walls. So maybe we'll put little soundbites in it.

Audio Tech: 00:06

Okay we're on.

M. Hartley: 00:07

Okay. So what, Mary, would be your most exciting event that happened to you in the Park Service?

Mary: 00:15

Well I love trains, and we did an exhibit at Steamtown. It's a wonderful place in Pennsylvania. In Scranton, Pennsylvania. It's got a turn table, and it's got a big yard, and lots of Canadian trains, but that's okay. They have-

M. Hartley: 00:36

I'm just going to put this here.

Mary: 00:38

They have a little short rail line, with a steam engine. I've always been in love with steam engines, and I got to ride in that engine, right with the engineer, on that line. It was about a mile-long ride, but that was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me in the Park Service. I will never forget that. To just ride in the cab of that steam engine.

M. Hartley: 01:06 Cool.

Mary: 01:06 That's it.

M. Hartley: 01:07 Thank you. That's my hometown.

Mary: 01:09 Is it?

M. Hartley: 01:09 Scranton, Pennsylvania. Yep.

Mary: 01:11 Have you been to Steamtown?

M. Hartley: 01:12 Yes I have. As a visitor. Not as an employee.

Mary: 01:16 Hopefully it's done something for the town.

M. Hartley: 01:18 Well...

Mary: 01:18 No?

M. Hartley: 01:20 You know, it's a tricky place.

Mary: 01:22 I thought it should, because Scranton is near New York.

END OF PART II