

Transcription of interview with Maxine Newell

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[A.K.] What year did you start at Arches?

[M.N.] I went into the Park, I believe it was '68 and I retired in '85. But I worked at Canyonlands for a couple of years in the front office. I started in the mail room and from there went out to Arches.

[A.K.] What was it like at Arches then?

{M.N.] There were only three of us there. There was an interpreter who's name was Charlie Parkinson, and a District Ranger, Wayne Norton, in charge, and then we had a summer employee named Mikesell. Carl Mikesell was out there and he was the seasonal employee and very knowledgeable about the Park and the area and everything. All in all it was a great staff but we didn't have near the visitation you have now. Dave Baker was in charge of maintenance.

I went by a few different titles. I ended up a Park Technician. I did the secretarial work and took care of the desk and did some interpretive writing. I did the museum and the library and the historic files and it was all just interlocked. Just made time for what you had to do. Sounds like I was the head but I wasn't as busy as you might think because you could spread it all out and there was no staff to do these other things.

I had my desk in the front and I had that little window put in that maybe is still out there, so I could work at my desk and watch the door for when somebody would come in. Then I'd go out to the Visitor Center.

I'd go in the morning, open the place up, put up the flag and always somebody was waiting at the front door. Even in the winter, it seemed like we always had that early visitor. Get that taken care of and go back to the desk and start the day. Sometimes you got right back to your desk, but if it was busy, it would be the middle of the morning.

I did not go on searches. I did the radio for searches and it was one great experience. There is nothing more thrilling than "all is well" when they have found whoever they were looking for. One time they called me out at two o'clock in the morning, had me stop for 50 ham sandwiches, and we kept in touch with Park rangers by radio. Finally they called other people in – the Grand County posse, the sheriff's posse, out to help. By this time Larry Reed was in charge and it happened to be the son of a Park ranger that was lost. I don't think they wanted to find him any more than anybody else but it made it a little closer to the people because they knew his father. And when he tried to brief the posse, Larry would almost break down, just almost couldn't talk, just so emotional. They were just ready to take off and they heard a helicopter outside the back door. They had called a helicopter at daylight to come in and help with the search. And the helicopter pilot had come in from the north and he saw some activity down below so he dipped down and this man was down there waving to him. So they set down and picked up the injured hiker who had made himself a crutch and had a broken leg and they brought him in and sat him right at the back door before the posse had a chance to go out. Well, that was a celebration. We all ate ham sandwiches for breakfast. I might add that a helicopter landing strip had been improvised and when the copter ignored it and landed at the Visitors' Center, I said, "How do we expect him to find a lost hiker when he can't even find the landing strip?" My face is still red.

That's just an example of what goes on in a search, the emotion that goes into it and the know-how to get people out in the field. They almost always found them. Once in awhile there'd be a fatality but I don't know that there was ever one involving a search. It'd be more like a heart attack on the trail or something. But they always got their man. We had a lot of happy endings out there.

A little boy was lost all night and that was really a traumatic experience. He disappeared and it was the Devil's Garden hike and he'd gone the wrong direction. He was gone all night up until sometime in the morning and they found him. He must have been eight or nine, exploring, and he took a wrong turn which is very easy to do up there. And that was another happy ending. Finally he had found a ledge to sleep under all night. He was quite a hero after he got over being frightened and got something to eat and drink. He was pretty proud of himself.

At that time I think the Park Service had the town's respect. It was a long-time thing. They had wanted the Monument so bad to become a Park and it was Arches, and they had wanted Canyonlands to become a National Park so it was sort of an elite group./ I was always proud to be part of it and never felt I had to apologize for being in the Park Service. I think it [negative feelings toward the NPS] has a lot to do with the tightening up of regulations. We only used to charge a dollar entrance fee and that was the second living room for Moab when company would come. It always included the trip out to Arches.

In those days, law enforcement was really low key. They'd have somebody make a patrol a couple of times a day and, during busy weekends, we might have somebody stationed up at the campground. I'll tell you a really funny story. For a couple of years in a row they had some kind of training class and they pulled off all the personnel they possibly could and just left a few in the Parks here. And, of course, Easter is the biggest weekend of the season at that time. So Carl Mikesell and I were left on duty and we were the only ones there that morning. So Carl came in and said, "Well, I'll tell you what. You go on patrol, go up to the campground, see how it's all doing and then you come back here and I'll go up and you can take the desk." That desk got to be real tiring with a hundred visitors in the building all the time. It was just a madhouse. So I went up to the campground. Of course, I didn't have any law enforcement training and it was a madhouse. Every campground was full twice. There were people parked in the roads and it was a swarm of people and I didn't know what to do. I knew we had to move some of them out but I just didn't know where to start. So I radioed Carl and I said, "Carl, I don't think I can handle this" and I gave him a little idea of what was up there. I Said, "I better come back and trade you places." About that time, somebody came running up

and said, “That boy’s got a gun down there. Can he shoot up here?” And I said, “My heavens, no!” So I went up to the other end of the campground and I called him and said “You can’t shoot that gun up here!” and that was my way of handling law enforcement. Anyway, I radioed Carl and he said “Well have him break the gun down and put it away. Don’t take it away from him. Play it low-key.” So I did that and then the boy said, “Can I shoot a bow and arrow?” so I told him no. And I looked around and there was a boy way on top of a high rock in the middle of the campground and I thought, “Oh, my word, he’s going to fall off!” So I got in my car and I headed back down as fast as I could go and Carl headed up there and got there just as a woman fell and broke her leg. That was the type of thing we had. We just switched roles and so I had the Visitor Center the rest of the day and was glad to have it, too.

Before I worked for the Park I worked for the local newspaper for six years and I remember going out there [Arches] one time and they were celebrating their first 100,000th visitor for all times, during the whole era of the Park. And, of course, now they have more than that in one year. So the Park just grew but it never stopped being a pleasure.

We had a thing about Tuesday. Everything bad that happened in the Park happened on a Tuesday. I wonder if they still have Tuesdays at the Park, just a black day usually.

I got involved in the Wolf Ranch history and was absolutely fascinated by the story. I interviewed people in connection with that a lot. We interviewed the descendents of John Wesley Wolf at Columbus, Ohio, and we ended up with a lot of pictures and everything with no deed of gift for them. Esther Stanley Rison was the little girl who lived in the cabin and was still alive and she’d have us [Dave May and me] out to her place for dinner and just pull a few things out of a box and say, “Here, take these back” so we just ended up with a little museum full of stuff before we even knew what was happening.

[A.K.] What was your uniform like?

[M.N.] The first uniform I wore they gave me a regular official Park Service green skirt and told me to go out and buy a white blouse and some brown shoes and we had a hat that kind of looked like the old airline hat with a little peak that you wore down on your forehead and it matched the skirt. Brown shoes were really hard to find. The next one they came out with these beige dresses and they had round collars and that's when they put the Smokey Bear hats on the girls and they wore the dresses and the Smokey Bear hats. I had a Smokey Bear hat but I never wore mine, left it at the Park when I left. It was an identification point. People would recognize you immediately. Seasonals didn't wear the official uniform. They had something in the badge that was different.

The only grazing in Arches was that there'd be a sheep herd come in once a year. Then, of course, the George Whites had a long-time permit to bring their cattle through the Park in the spring. They'd drive them right down the Arches road into Courthouse Wash and across the Colorado River bridge. When they'd go across the bridge, they'd put hay pit so the cattle would go toward the hay to cross the bridge. There was a year or two that I went up on patrol to drive ahead of the cattle when they were being driven and I was on patrol with the flashing lights to warn the public that there were cattle coming. Well, I found out that every time they saw this cattle drive, they (the public) were more interested in that than they were in the features of the Park. Some of them had never seen a cow outside a zoo. And this cattle drive became a real event for the interpretive part of the Park. We just drove in front of them but I always thought it would be a good thing to have had a special program around this cattle drive. When they turned down into Courthouse Wash, it would have been fun to do something with that because cattle drives...Bates Wilson recalls the last cattle drive that went from the Needles through Moab (3000 of them) and what happened to the cattle drive is that they were replaced by trucks. (Bates didn't see much of it as he was too busy keeping the cows out of the Park!) So this was one of the last cattle drives some people will ever see. We were bringing these cattle down through the Park all the years I was there. I don't know if they still do that.

There were great experiences. In the wintertime, I'd close the Park. I'd be there alone and I'd close the Visitor Center about three o'clock and make a swing through the Park and if anybody was up in the Park, if there was a car, I had little tags to put on

saying that the Park gate shut at five o'clock and to be sure to be out. Most times you wouldn't see anybody, but one time I drove up and there was a camper parked at Devil's Garden and I stopped and reached up and was just about to put the tag on the window when somebody spoke from behind me, a man's voice. He said, "Did you want something?" I turned around and, like the efficient Park Ranger who was out to patrol the Park, I said, "You scared me!" He was out of the Park by five o'clock.

One morning I went on a morning patrol and went into Wolf Ranch and there was about three or four inches of new snow. I took off and drove down the hill into Wolf Ranch and there wasn't a sign of a car track. Only sign of life I saw was one deer track that went by the cabin and went through the ditch and up over the hill and you could just imagine the family living there and waking up one morning and looking out and seeing that beautiful sight. It was lovely. The land was unmolested. Great experiences like that.

