

Transcription: Grand Canyon Oral History

Interviewee: Charles "Butch" Farabee (BF)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Butch recounts events while working at Yosemite National Park, 1971-1980

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TM: Today is Thursday, June 18, 2020. This is Part 9 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Charles "Butch" Farabee. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Butch. How are you today?

BF: Hi, Tom. Good. Thanks.

TM: Great. May we have your permission to record this oral history over the phone?

BF: Yes

TM: Thank you very much. At the end of the last history discussion, you had mentioned you became friends with a climber, one of the cutting edge climbers of Yosemite at the time, a guy named Jim Bridwell. Can you talk a little bit about the climbers camp, Camp 4, and the cutting edge climbing that Bridwell and others were doing? And how did the park keep up with these people? How did the park work on its rescue skills to help these people when they got in trouble?

BF: Okay. In late '68 I believe, Pete Thompson who was Assistant Valley District ranger, which is the position I had for a long time, but was simultaneously the park's overall search and rescue officer, and of course, it wasn't too long and that turned into a full time position, but initially he was in a different job. At that time the big walls were being challenged, lots of first ascents on El Cap and Half Dome, and climbing was really coming into its own. Yosemite is one of the best places in the world to rock climb, maybe perhaps almost *the* best. So, the park rangers had their hands full with the counter-culture and all the other aspects of being a ranger. Most of the rangers did not have any real either interest and/or showed any real ability to do much climbing. Everybody knew how to rappel and some of the real basics but beyond that we really didn't, and I say we collectively, really didn't know how to keep up with these guys. So over time on some of the big missions, which there weren't that many in the late 60s/early 70s, but on the big wall rescues we had to rely on climbers from Camp 4 to go out and rescue their own. There was put into place a way to pay them for some of what they were doing. Initially, some of them would just volunteer because the mechanics for how to reimburse and organize and what have you really hadn't fallen into place yet. So Camp 4 was the climbers camp. It was also called Sunnyside. The story I've always heard is just that in the winter time, because you could camp there all year round, in fact it was I think for quite a few years the only campground in the valley that was open in the winter. There just wasn't much camping going on in the winter in Yosemite.

Yosemite, as attractive as it is and as popular as it is these days, was not that popular back earlier, the 40s, 50s and even into the 60s. So anyway, called Sunnyside because that would get the first sun of the winter morning. Now whether that's just a nice story or there's really truth to that I'm not 100% sure. But the climbers would camp there, and in the winter time or in the offseason/the shoulder seasons as well as the winter, Park Service wasn't really too hot about enforcing any kind of camping limits. In the

summertime it was 14 days, and even that was abused quite a bit. But in the offseason/the shoulder months and the winter as I said, not many people, the Park Service did not enforce any kind of camping limits. So it was a popular place and people, the younger generation particularly, and the climbers in specific, they'd spent the whole winter up there. It would take them very little to survive and to make ends meet when you're camping out of your car or out of a tent and not eating fancy. So it was an attractive place and it became a destination spot for climbers from around the world because they wanted to get in on the El Cap and Half Dome and the first ascent kinds of climbs.

In 1958, Wayne Merry and Royal Robbins, and...oh I forgot...I think it was a group of five, Bill Dolt, were the first to climb El Cap. Wayne was a student at San Diego State; ended up becoming a park ranger in Yosemite. Was one of the few rangers in the park when I was there that was interested in climbing. Some of the real colorful people, one in particular was a guy by the name of Jim Bridwell who was probably I think you could make an argument for the best athletic rock climber in the world. He was setting all kinds of standards and pushing the envelope in any number of ways. He had lots of peers that were in that same genre or same category I guess, but Jim was the top of the heap if you will. He, good looking guy, charismatic, long hair, impeccably muscled and chiseled. Would make great commercials, actually. In fact he ended up making commercials for at least Camel cigarettes which he ends up dying of, from lung cancer.

TM: Oh my.

BF: But, you know, and again this was the day when there was lots of marijuana, lots of LSD. A fair amount of drugs taking place in the park. The climbers, not that they were any much worse than a lot of the other people there, but they were tending to abuse some of these drugs as well. Over time—I'll come back to Bridwell in a second—but over time we would, I mean me personally as well as my coworkers, would have to deal with some climber halfway up El Cap who was spacing out on LSD. Would be on these little ledges, little places where they bivouacked the night and they'd drop acid. We would end up using the public announcing system, the PA system in the patrol cars. Then we had a telescope, was a Questar, which I think is actually the make. It was something like a 120 power telescope; you could read the label of somebody's underwear. So we would play 20 questions and talk with these guys up on the walls, not only those that were dropping acid but people who'd been hurt as well. It was one of these things "raise your right hand if you need help" kinds of questions. So we did a lot of that. Bridwell was on both the ends of this spectrum. There were times when he would be on the wall intoxicated or under the influence of something. I'm not suggesting he was getting ready to jump off or anything, but he was affected. But he was also the guy that we went to in order to help us out. Of course there were a number of them but he was one of the key players that we could get hold of and count on because of his abilities on the rock. He was pretty good about taking instructions and staying within certain parameters that we would set for how these rescues ought to be conducted. Although, ultimately, in I think 1977 for a short period of time, I fired him off of the rescue site. We had a group of roughly 12 or 15 of these climbers that were living in Camp 4. In the summertime we would enforce camping limits which I think was 14 days if I'm not mistaken. But if you were in the Rescue Site, then you could camp there free. So there was some desire by these people, these young climbers, to get into that Rescue Site because they could climb. The only commitment on their part was that when they were around they would be available for us to use on a rescue and occasionally a search, but mostly just rescues.

TM: That sounds like a really reasonable way to approach it. You've got a bunch of very talented people that can help in rescues and you give them a place to stay.

BF: Yeah, well that's exactly right. It was you scratch my back and I'll scratch your back.

TM: Did Pete Thompson come up with that idea, or did you? Who came up with that?

BF: No, it was long before me, several years before I got there. Wayne Merry now at this point, he'd moved from Yosemite and to Denali. I think he was the chief ranger. He was one of the few rangers at Mount McKinley. In those days it was Mount McKinley National Park. So he was up there as a mountaineer and he got offered a job even though he'd been with the federal government for now six or seven years maybe. He quit. They offered him to run the Yosemite Mountaineering School (YMS) in Yosemite Valley. They started up a climbing instruction program there. The Curry Company, which was the main concessioner at the time, for years had been running a cross country ski and downhill ski school. So it was sort of a natural jump to include rock climbing and Wayne ends up overseeing that part of the operation. He was asked to go down there by maybe like the vice president of Yosemite Park and Curry Company. So he was our go-between and spoke both Park Service and climbing and was well respected by both sides if you will. Terribly nice guy, terribly talented, although he's just recently deceased about a year ago.

I was one of probably several, but I was asked to write a justification nomination thing. He lived in Canada. I don't know if he was actually a Canadian citizen, but he'd lived in Canada for years and years and years. I actually wrote a fairly glowing nomination for some sort of prestigious Canadian government recognition. Maybe a lower level but like the Medal of Freedom that United States gives. So, as I say he was well respected by both the climbers and the Park Service.

Pete would go to him and say we've got somebody trapped on this particular spot, we really need some help. He would have several instructors that were climbing instructors and they would end up being part of a larger team; but generally they would be the ones that might be the supervisors of the climbers. Jim Bridwell was part of that group as well. So Pete would go to Wayne, Wayne would say, okay, we'll get this guy and this guy and this guy and this person and this person. That's who we would end up putting on the helicopter or equipping with gear, although a lot of them used their own gear, of course, as well. We ended up having a lot of equipment in our rescue caches which over time, not over time but in a very short time, was probably the largest mountain search and rescue cache in the country; not only just the park but in the country. That came about as a result of an incident you'll probably want to hear about here in a few minutes. That's how the relationship was for several years, including when I was there at the very beginning in the summer of '71. And, you know, I was at a spot where I could barely tell you where El Cap was, or Half Dome, and try to keep them separate. It wasn't like I was any great whizbang, but I did have some climbing experience and a fair amount of outdoor experience at this point, so it was a subject that I really enjoyed and wanted to get in on, get involved with. That's what made working in particularly Yosemite Valley so much fun is that on any given day you could be on a rescue, you could be making a felony arrest, you could be on a structural fire, you could be stabilizing somebody with a broken back. Of course that would be an exceptional day, one days period, but that sort of thing did happen with so much frequency, that's what made it so much fun.

So Jim Bridwell, as I say, was the king of the heap. He had a whole cadre of camp followers. He probably broke any number of women's hearts along the way. Most of them were these, I don't know how underage they were, but let's say 17 and 18 and 19 year olds that were up there sort of, you know, the hippie young ladies. It's be sort of a free love period of time. Lots of dope and stuff going on. Jim, we would use quite often and he would be often the focus of incidents. One big rescue that took place, it's probably one of the earliest big wall rescues in Yosemite's history, was... Hold on just a second, I'll get a book real quick.

TM: Okay.

BF: I think it's like 1972. Okay, this particular incident took place on September 22, 1972 but the story has to start in August if I'm not mistaken, when a 17 year old boy who'd been working on a trail crew up towards Merced Lake, which is in the park, when he got stung by a bee and had to be airlifted out because he was going into anaphylactic reaction. When they found out that he was only 17, and I don't know the story of how he got to be employed to begin with, but he was not 18. So they got him to the hospital, they flew him out of Merced Lake to the hospital or to the clinic there in the Valley and they found out he was 17, well he was fired. To try to get back into the saving graces of the federal government and the National Park Service, he ends up coming up with this plan to set the Park Service's barn on fire, which was housing, I don't know, roughly twenty horses and mules including the matched Morgan patrol horses which were up like eight or ten of them because Yosemite had a pretty good horse patrol. He sets this barn on fire at night and he thinks that by going in and saving these animals he will be congratulated and thanked and get back into the Park Service as an employee. Well things backfired, no pun intended, and he ends up killing I think roughly sixteen animals. The only real injury to a human was that he personally got kicked by one of these animals. I took him to the clinic, although at the time we didn't know who he was. We just thought he was one of the many people responding to this incident trying to help out. But at the same time, in addition to this barn burning down and several CCC era buildings and a couple of buildings from the 1890s that were there, quite a great big footprint was burned to the ground.

TM: Wow. So he's a pyromaniac and he's torching a whole bunch of buildings?

BF: No, no, no. Just the one building with the horses.

TM: Okay, all right. Just that one.

BF: The barn, but it spread.

TM: Oh, it did.

BF: Yeah. Well, you know, they would add rooms on to different buildings and there was a pretty good fire continuation; you could go from one building to the next. And a lot of these were very old buildings had been dried out for years and years and years. But, including the facility that had the rescue cache in it. So all of a sudden the park, at least the Valley, had almost nothing. No ropes, no biners, no pitons, minimal kinds of water rescue, that sort of thing. As I say, this was in '72, Pete was at this point the search and rescue officer. So he goes to different outlets. I have to think about this. The name is sort of slipping right at the moment, but some of the more prestigious mountaineering and outdoor places in Berkeley. Northface would be one. Went to them and called down south to Los Angeles. He was trying to get as many ropes and things as he could because we had a guy on this September 22 about 1800 feet down from the top of El Cap who had fallen and he had broken his right leg significantly. We didn't have any long ropes at that time. Everything that could be scrounged from the other districts were 150 foot lengths kind of stuff. Nothing that would really be satisfactory for something this huge, this high, this long. So he goes out and we end up getting, within a period of about twelve hours, at least two ropes, each was 4,400 feet long each, and about six or eight, perhaps even more, 1200 footers, some 600 foot ropes. The real long ropes were actually yacht boating ropes, half-inch goldlon; not goldline but goldlon.

TM: What's the difference?

BF: Well it's just the way they're constructed. Goldline is a twist and goldlon has a sheath on it. That's the way climbing ropes are done today.

TM: So this is perlon?

BF: No, no. This is a totally different. It's a synthetic, of course, and it has a lot of stretch to it but it's a totally different kind of a rope and it's not intended for any kind of climbing, but yet if something's half an inch thick and it's made of nylon, even though it's not intended for climbing it's gonna probably work once anyway. Well, as it turns out over years and years I was there—part of the time I was the search and rescue officer and I was riding the rescue cache almost every day practically it seems—we had these two 4,400 foot long ropes which we never ended up using. They were 330 pounds, we know that.

TM: Oh my gosh.

BF: We had them weighed and we had them up so that we could sling them underneath the helicopter if we needed to. So we had that but we ended up never having to use them, although we did have some long drops and we used the 1200 footers all the time. Well, the ropes are a poor design for mountain rescue and it didn't take long to recognize that because the sheath that would protect the inner core would separate real quickly. Although I don't have any personal photos of them anymore, I've seen photos where there'd be these 10 and 15 foot long stretches where the sheath had been pulled back. That really didn't substantially affect strength from a practical standpoint but it's a little unnerving if you're hanging off a rope 600 feet up.

TM: Hey Butch, can we back up for a minute to the guy that set that barn on fire?

BF: Yep.

TM: How did you figure out that he did it?

BF: Well of course I didn't figure it out. I think that Lee Shackleton who was the law enforcement specialist somehow... Well, I guess I don't have a great answer for you which is sort of surprising now that I think about it. I actually should know this but I don't, exactly how he was found out. I don't know, actually. I do know that you know he was found out. They brought in the fire marshal. They brought in some arson investigators. Because, you know, it was a significant fire. I've always written that in a city setting it would have been at least a two alarm fire, maybe even a three alarm fire. And, of course, we were attacking it; and I say we, actually I wasn't even part of the fire response. My wife was a dispatcher when this was taking place. I was home asleep and didn't even know the fire was going on until I heard people outside my window running down the street; which is only a long block away from where this fire was taking place. But I did end up responding. Cause I was one of the helpers there, I ended up taking this guy to the clinic. I think somewhere I might even have his name. But he wasn't high on my radar screen.

TM: Eventually he was discovered, but that burned up the cache.

BF: Yeah, burned up the cache.

TM: So now you've got this climber, he's got a broken leg. He's, what, 1,800 feet down from the top. Well how far is that up from the bottom?

BF: Well actually it's about 1800 feet from the bottom, it's about 1200 feet from the top. It's the other way around. And I was mistaken when I said that. So he's roughly 1200 feet from the top. It's about a 3000 foot base at that spot, and he's roughly 1800 feet. So this fire and the incident are taking place roughly maybe three or four weeks in between the two events, and in the meantime Pete is moving to get equipment brought in and what have you. But, when this guy got himself hurt halfway down El Cap,

that really expedited the need. The California Highway Patrol provided assistance. They put equipment in their cars and drove them to the helicopters. The Marine Corp base there in El Toro flew two ships up, two big Jolly Green Giants with equipment up for us.

TM: So I'm going to back up for a minute here. When I think of these cliffs like El Capitan or Half Dome and I think of a helicopter, I don't put the two together very well because the helicopter rotor blades are going to keep that ship away from the cliff face by a good enough distance; and that cliff is kind of straight up and down. So it seems as though your only option is to climb up from the bottom which is going to take time or rope down from the top with a very long rope and hope you're at the right location or pendulum your way over to somebody if you can get over there. All that sounds complicated and terrifying.

BF: Well some of your suppositions are not quite correct. There are places on El Cap where you can actually get in close enough with a helicopter, particularly a smaller helicopter. And today, 2020, beginning in 2015 or even earlier I guess, Yosemite has taken the lead and has pioneered perfected some helicopter maneuvering and use of rescuers—most of them are the park rangers—rescuers who are actually placed on the face of El Cap by using a helicopter. So having said that, in 1972, with two exceptions while I was there, the ten years I was there, we always went to the top... We never made a helicopter-to-the-wall kind of an exchange except twice while I was there.

TM: So I'm assuming then that there must be some sort of like a nose that comes out away from the wall far enough and is flat enough that you can actually get a skid on and get someone off onto the nose? How does this work?

BF: No. No. No.

TM: Or does the wall actually lay back enough...?

BF: Well what are you talking about, are you talking about back then or now?

TM: Both.

BF: Back then we didn't do any of that. We would go to the top and, as I say, there were two exceptions to that. One exception was, the one that I was involved with, one of the two, but the only one that I was personally involved with that I actually remember was there are pedestals up there or there are ledges that stick out 20 or 30 feet. On one occasion we ended up taking a climbing rope with a bag full of equipment, a backpack or a big knapsack, I guess it was probably actually a duffel bag, with equipment and a 600 foot rope and some water and a radio and miscellaneous stuff because two guys had gotten themselves trapped on this big ledge. We were able to pendulum the equipment in to them. So we could do that, and the Navy was the one that did that. I was actually the SAR officer at this point. I asked, I said, "Rather than spending all day going down from the top, how about we try something new." They said, "Yeah we'll try it." Which was this pendulum, which worked. As it turns out there had actually been one before this time. I was out of the park and I wasn't familiar with it. But in years since I've since learned about that. But those are the only two that we went to the wall. Every other time we'd go to the top.

In this case the Jolly Green Giants were taking the equipment up there and dropping them off with manpower. I'm trying to remember this guy's name, Neil Olsen was his name. He, as I say, broke a leg about 1200 feet from the top. A rescue team of about twenty, mostly climbers, were taken to the top. The whole thing was orchestrated by the lead instructor for the mountaineering school, Loyd Price, and Pete Thompson. They end lowering Jim Bridwell down to... Let me backtrack for just a second. So this

guy's on a ledge and he's got a climbing partner, I think maybe two climbing partners, but at least one. So they put five or six climbers onto that ledge. They lower them down about 1200 feet to this big ledge. So now you've got six or eight people on this ledge including Jim Bridwell. Then they end up putting this guy in a stretcher and then lowering him and Bridwell as the attendant down 1800 feet. At the time it was the longest single stage rope lowering in mountaineering history. The whole thing took over two days to orchestrate and then to engineer and then get this guy down. So Bridwell, and there's these famous photos of Jim no helmet, being lowered with this guy in the stretcher. The guy in the stretcher is keying the microphone for Jim as he's being lowered. There must be 500 people laying in the meadow below watching this whole thing. I was the assistant on this, assistant to Pete, which meant that mostly I was just a gopher because I could hardly spell El Cap let alone really do much with it. They ended up lowering Jim all the way down. Then, some of the climbers that were on the wall itself, not on top but on the wall itself, some of them wanted to come off that night so the park electricians built a light bank that illuminated the entire face of El Cap.

TM: Wow.

BF: So these guys were able to rappel down, all the way down. There are bolts in various places where there is a rappel system; you can go from one to the next to the next to the next to get down. So they all come down, everybody's safe and sound, nobody gets hurt. Jim is recognized for what he has done. But the whole team was recognized, mostly these twenty climbers, were recognized for this incident, which in mountaineering history, not just Park Service, but in mountaineering history around the world this is really quite a precedent setting thing.

TM: Nice. Yeah. Yeah.

BF: So anyway, so Jim is in the middle of all that. As I like to always say, every one of these incidents is a team effort. Jim might have got the play but the truth is that there were a lot of other people helping him out as well. Okay, so you want to talk about, well I guess I don't know much about the guy that started the fire. We've already gone through that.

TM: Yep. Yep. No, this is very helpful. It really brings home a collegial cooperative effort between people with skills and the agency for a good benefit of all it seems like.

BF: Well these guys lived in Camp 4. They didn't live so much for the rescues but they lived for this kind of exposure, this kind of climbing and this kind of pushing the envelope. Most of the rangers didn't have that...well none of the park rangers had that skill level for sure. One, they didn't have the time to develop it. There was just too many other things going on. Because the climbers in Camp 4, they'd spend three, four, five, six months every year doing nothing but climbing.

TM: Right. Right. Day in, day out.

BF: Yeah. Sure.

TM: And they knew where the routes were on the faces and...

BF: Oh, they were putting them up.

TM: Okay. Yeah. Yeah. So they knew the wall really well.

BF: Yeah, and Jim would have been right at the top of that scenario.

TM: One other thing that I want to ask you about at this time period in the mid-70s was hang gliding off of a place called Glacier Point. Is that right?

BF: Yes, Glacier Point. Right.

TM: Do you have any thoughts or remembrances about that?

BF: Well, let me give you one more real short story on Bridwell.

TM: Okay. Please.

BF: I told you I'd fired him.

TM: Yeah, why did you do that?

BF: I think it was 1977, we had three... I think I mentioned the helicopter crash maybe yesterday or the day before.

TM: You did. You did. The Navy Huey.

BF: Yeah, the Navy ship. The very next day, we had three guys killed in three separate incidents, three separate days, back to back to back. The first two I didn't go out on, and the helicopter was the second day. But the third day the training which I was coordinating, which was on drugs and stuff, and of course I wasn't teaching, I was just facilitating it, but we had a guy who was not really a climber but he was trying to learn to climb. He didn't even have climbing shoes on. He had these big Vibram soled hiking boots. He was climbing in an area called the Penny-Nickel arete which was one pitch long, roughly 100 feet high. It was up a side canyon so you just couldn't walk to it; you had to scramble up through the rocks and the boulders and stuff to get to it. He and his girlfriend were climbing up there and he was doing something that he was not prepared to climb and he didn't really have the right shoes, at least. He was doing like an upper mid-level climb when he should have been just doing a basic elementary climb. So he ends up falling and killing himself.

So I take a recovery team to go get him. We're definitely sure he's dead, I mean his climbing partner said there's absolutely no question this guy is dead. I've got Bridwell with me and I've got a group of maybe six/eight/nine other people as well, several rangers as well as climbers, because at this point all we're looking for is manpower just to carry the stretcher down through the rocks and eventually to the road in the valley. So Jim and I are up there and the equipment is still tied to the top of this cliff. I'd have to go back and look at the report exactly to know how this all happened. There was a rope still hooked to the top so Jim, rather than climbing with protection, meaning that in some way he was going to protect himself going up, which he could easily have done, he ends up free climbing this without any protection. It's a 5.7 route; today they do 5.15s although that's the exception, but they still do that so they've really graduated considerably. So he scrambles up this 5.7. Before I hardly look around he's already on top; I mean he was just that good. He retrieves the equipment and rappels off. There's a way you can pull the rope behind you, that kind of stuff. So, we end up taking this guy down/this body out. When we get to the rescue cache, I tell Jim I said, "You know there was absolutely no reason why you did that. You did not need to be doing this free. There was no hurry, there was no emergency. This is a team effort kind of a thing. You do not need to be risking your neck even though you're very capable. You don't need to be risking your neck and then putting the rescue team in jeopardy." So I said, "You're no longer in the rescue cycle." I fired him. I mean, you're no longer there. Well of course, everybody knows everybody, and to some degree you're good acquaintances or even friends with some of these people. It's kind of hard to be too harsh but... And I know that Jim and his... Since he had so many friends and probably several girlfriends, all he had to do was say okay, I understand and then go hide out with somebody else in somebody else's tent. Which I'm sure is what he did. Well a couple of weeks later, and I don't recall the incident, but I had to go back to Jim because we had some big mission on El Cap or Half Dome or

someplace where we needed his expertise. So I basically with hat in hand, if you will, "All is forgiven, Jim. We need your help again." So as I say I fired him, at one time I cited him into court. I was willing to take this kind of stances, I guess.

TM: Now you rehired him.

BF: Well I did rehire him. Although I reinstated him more than rehire cause we didn't pay anybody until we had to use them anyway, but reinstated him to the site. So now again he was technically legal to camp and whatever. There was some prestige, although today they've got yellow T-shirts that I think they say YOSAR, Yosemite Search and Rescue. Which, actually, I'm on the board for the Friends of YOSAR now. In those days there was no real recognition other than word of mouth but the climbers knew who was what, and what kind of hierarchy there was.

TM: It must have been prestigious for those guys in their own world.

BF: Yep, exactly. It was. What was your question now? We were talking that I told you hold on just a second.

TM: Well, we were asking about hang gliding but this is interesting about Bridwell. Did he just look at it as if nothing had happened and said, yeah how can I help, let's get going?

BF: Well, I don't know. He might not have even paid much attention. I'm pretty sure we didn't use him in between time, but whether he took it as seriously as I intended it to be, I'll never know. How the interaction was when, metaphorically I guess is the right term, is that right, when I'm standing there asking him to come back, all is forgiven. How he reacted, I frankly don't remember that. We were probably in such an emergency state and quasi-panic that...

TM: Right. Right. Did he leave the Valley before you or was he still in the Valley when you left?

BF: He was still around. I don't know that he was necessarily living in the Valley the whole time because he would go out, he was a carpenter by trade, really. He ended up, along with a couple of other climbers in the park, ended up becoming not stuntmen, but they would help fix, not scaffolding, but they would help on movie sets and on TV shows.

TM: Rigging.

BF: Rigging. There you go. That's the right term. They would facilitate those kinds of things. There was one show, it might have been *That's Incredible* that they had people in the river and so these guys would be working on the cliffs nearby and that sort of thing. So he did some of that as well, but when I moved on to the Grand Canyon he was still around the park but not necessarily 24/7.

So hang gliding... I've got this all written down. I guess I should have looked this up before we spoke. About 1970 or so, which again is the time of the riot, there's all kinds of hippies, and there's all kinds of law enforcement problems, and climbing is just starting to mushroom. The park is just overwhelmed by business and new experiences for the rangers, for sure. The hang gliding community came to the park management and said, "How about, can we do this?" The park said here's a trial, we'll let you do twelve each day. You guys will have to self-police. The only people that can go off is a certain high-level in hang gliding circles, certain kind of a rating like you're the best in that you've done X number of hang glides and stuff.

TM: Right. I think at that time it went from hang 1 to hang 5 or something like that.

BF: I think then that hang 5 was the highest or the best. I think that our requirement was that only those people who had hang 5 credentials could jump. They were limited to 12 a day and they had to do it before say 7:00 in the morning so that there wasn't too much of a visual impact. And they had to land in the El Cap meadow as opposed to right below the Glacier Point. Glacier Point you could drive to in the summertime. It's got enough vertical cliffs and there's a little place where you can just run down this sloping rock and then launch yourself. So they started doing this and they are actually pretty good. I mean, they self-policed. They still do this and over the years there have only been one or two serious accidents. I don't think anybody's been killed, even, in fifty years roughly. Trying to remember, I could actually visualize the first... We had a seasonal ranger who we hired because he had hang gliding experience. He could talk the language and knew who was who and could tell when somebody was pulling our chain in terms of their credentials and stuff.

TM: Right. I think that's right. I seem to remember there was a park service employee that would kind of check people out.

BF: So are you a hang glider?

TM: Well, we'll talk later. But yeah, I'm just kind of putting this together after a long, long time. But it seemed like it worked fairly well.

BF: Well it did. For a number of years, I mean quite a few years, I mean longer than I was there, at least ten or twelve years maybe longer, they actually had a ranger who was responsible for the hang gliding program. That's not all he did because it was over by...

TM: Right. Seven in the morning.

BF: 7:00 it's over with. And there was no equipment to clean up or anything. He still had to be a regular protection ranger so we used that person on rescues and road patrol and whatever, too. He just didn't sit around waiting for the next hang glider to jump. But, it was limited to twelve a day, there might have been some other restrictions that I can't recall, but basically that's all they had to do. Ultimately the parachutists, skydivers got in on that picture too and sort of screwed themselves over, which I can come back to. The hang gliding itself was all from the same spot. Now that doesn't mean that occasionally somebody didn't try to do something from some other spot but they didn't really have to because they were legal by going off Glacier Point. Do you have any questions about hang gliding since you...

TM: No. I think that about covers it. What happened with the jumpers and the parachuters?

BF: Well, and I got to remember, I have 111 jumps myself so it wasn't that I wasn't empathetic to skydivers. [Pause] I spoke skydiving and parachuting pretty good, actually. The first jump in Yosemite was I think in 1965, actually no 1966 I think.

TM: And this was just like running off a cliff with a chute and then you just simply deploy it and you're on your way.

BF: Actually it was 1965 and two guys went off of El Cap. They both ended up hurting themselves. They went into the rocks. Their parachutes deployed and everything but they went into the rocks at the base. It was the landing that screwed them up.

TM: Oh right. Cause they can't... Hang gliders you can steer those things and go someplace where you want to land, but parachutes have a tendency to go straight down back in '65.

BF: Well not totally. They had parachutes even in those days, because I was jumping in 1960, you could steer but they weren't as steerable as a hang glider. I'm not sure exactly what kind of rig they had, but

even so when you're only five feet away from the wall, you only have X amount of room horizontally to get out to the meadow. And in this case they didn't. So they end up getting banged up. So that's in 1965. It wasn't illegal, at least not the way it was interpreted initially, because nobody wound up seeing it. We didn't even know it was on the radar screen. But there is a provision in the code of federal regulations that does say something about delivery by parachute or something like that. I can't cite it off the top of my head exactly but it ends up being the misdemeanor law or regulation that we ended up citing the parachutist. But over the years, of course, illegally people would try to sneak in and they'd jump off late in the evening right before dark or perhaps real early in the morning. It became sort of a cat and mouse game with the parachutists over the years. It finally... Well just to backtrack for just a second, I think that the park estimates that there are between 50 and 100 illegal jumps made every year.

TM: Wow.

BF: In 1980 for I think it was for 48 days it turns out, if I'm not mistaken, the chief ranger with approval of the superintendent give the parachutists an opportunity to prove their point which was: Okay, twelve jumpers; you guys will self-regulate; there's a certain level in parachuting as well just like there is in hang gliding and only the most experienced can do this. So this was done as an experiment to satisfy the parachuting community. I have a sign framed in my home, a cardboard sign that was put up which is an original which I probably ought to donate to the park I guess...

TM: Yeah.

BF: ...that says that hang gliding is permitted between this month and this month for a 90-day period that was going to be permitted. Now the thing I worry about a little bit talking to you, Tom, is that what I just said, 90 days, truth is I'm not 100% sure it wasn't 60 days.

TM: Okay, but there was some time period.

BF: I make these statements and most of them are as accurate as I can make them but that doesn't mean that they're foolproof.

TM: Relax. It's an oral history interview. We're not looking at pieces of paper here. You're good.

BF: But I like to be as factual and accurate as I can.

TM: That's appreciated but don't worry.

BF: So anyway, they've got this 90 day window to prove themselves. Well just as luck would have it and over the 48 days now—48 becomes significant here in a second—but during this period of time we start understanding that one, there are more jumpers than twelve; two, we understand people are using pogo sticks and bicycles to parachute off.

TM: Why?

BF: Well, just for the fun of it, just because you can do it. It's not enough just to run off a cliff and throw yourself over and parachute. Once you've done that once or twice, it probably becomes more exciting to ride a bicycle off the edge.

TM: Maybe you get further out. I don't know.

BF: Well, that's probably true, too. There's a great photo that exists that I have a copy of, anyway, of a guy named Rick Sylvester skiing off of the top of El Cap.

TM: Oh my gosh.

BF: There's a whole story attached to that, too. That's 1972 I think. So fast forward to 1980. That's where we've got this experiment. It's legal for a 90 day window. Well, it turns out they were abusing it so badly that they're just hanging on by teeth when it comes to permission. And at this point I'm now the district ranger out at Mather which is the high country, everything north of Yosemite Valley; Tuolumne Meadows, Hetch Hetchy, etc. is all within this district that I'm the supervisor for now. I'm just on a road patrol and it's late in the afternoon in the fall I think and I drive by a small, little campground up on the Tioga road, which is the only road across the Sierra at that point. I see this stake-bed truck with roughly 15 people in the back of it and they're trying to sneak down... They've driven between some boulders which outline this campground. The boulders have actually blocked off an old road that goes out towards the top of El Capitan. It's very fortuitous, I guess, that I actually run across them at this time as they're driving into this area that's now been blocked off to vehicles. It doesn't take me very long, with the skydiving background that I had, to recognize the fact that these are parachutists. What they were ending up doing was trying to film an episode for a TV series called *That's Incredible* which for that time was a pretty fun real life kind of adventure thing. So I ended up stopping the vehicle, and at this point nobody had parachuted so I really couldn't do much with that. I did cite the driver but I also talked to these guys. By the time I got done with them they recognized that I, from a parachuting standpoint, knew what I was talking about. So we turned it around. I got ahold of the chief ranger and at that point he terminated this entire 90 day experiment which turns out to be I think only 48 days. So these guys screwed themselves because they weren't able to police and take responsibility for their actions like the hang gliders had been. Still over the years there've been parachutists...skydivers have been trying to jump from Zion and Toroweap. I think I actually identified one time probably 15 different national park areas that have had illegal parachuting; Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

TM: Right. Well of course now, too, there's paragliders.

BF: Yeah.

TM: You have these parachutes that are basically wings or airfoils that are steerable. Now you really do have the ability to kind of go where you want to go a little bit. You're still dropping but you actually have a rate of glide with forward progress. That would have happened I suppose after you left. But I'm just curious if you know how the park handled that.

BF: Well I don't think the park handled it. That's something that happened and they did all these cat and mouse... The rangers, it became sort of a game. Some rangers took it more seriously than others. But I think over time there've been five people killed parachuting and then one drowned trying to escape from the rangers. Several recordings back I talked about taking my parachute to the top of Rainbow Bridge I think.

TM: Yes. Yeah.

BF: Well that's the reason I remember that the first incident off of El Cap, the first known parachuting/skydiving incident in a national park was on this date in 1965 by these two guys that ended up landing in the rocks. The reason I know that is because before them I had taken my parachute to the top of Rainbow Bridge. Even at 23, I recognized I was probably going to kill myself but I also knew, in retrospect long years later, that I would have been the Park Service's first base jumping fatality or paraplegic.

TM: Yeah, as an employee.

BF: Well, I think the Park Service would have disowned me and said I was on my own time or something at that point.

TM: Right. Right. Yeah. Did you ever jump in Yosemite?

BF: No. But frankly, when I was doing the parachuting this would have been attractive to me. I was at a spot in my jump career, because we were pushing the envelope every day when we were parachuting in '60, '61, '62, that I would have found this attractive had I known about it. It would have been easy kinds of stuff. That would have been something I would have certainly considered. I even considered parachuting in New River Gorge. They had jump days. One day a year, the main highway that crosses this bridge that's about 800 feet high, the park and the state of Virginia, no West Virginia, whichever, they actually closed the road down, half a road. The highway patrol's there managing...

TM: One of the lanes.

BF: ...so that people end up parachuting off of this bridge. It's really quite a profit making thing for the local economy and it's touted every year. It's a big deal now. It's legal, but it's the only time you can legally jump off this bridge. I was the superintendent at Padre Island at the time in Corpus Christi and I got hold of...because I was starting to work on one of my books, my first book I guess.... I talked to the guy that was the head parachutist guy, the one that was doing all the illegal jumps, he said that if I would show up/if I would come he would outfit me and talk me through this. So I was sort of mentally gearing up to parachute off of this bridge just because I could do it legally. Well again, I think by this time I was old enough and smart enough to know that I could get seriously hurt. I had two kids I was raising and all that, so I never did it. Sometimes I look back and say, "You know, that would have been a nice thing to have tried." But I didn't. So anyway...

TM: Well this is really fascinating to put in the concept of river running and backpacking and horseback riding and some of the recreational activities that happen in national parks, climbing, big wall climbing and hang gliding and parachuting, some of which are more dangerous than others and some of which are more popular than others. I was just thinking about backpacking in Yosemite. There's tens of thousands of people doing that every year.

BF: Yeah.

TM: All year round. So this is really interesting just thinking about where the service says all right we're going to allow this and you're going to police yourselves. We are only going to allow so many a day and we want to protect the viewshed. Protecting the resources is what the Park Service is all about.

BF: Right.

TM: That makes sense. But again, if the public can't handle it themselves then the agency has no choice but to step in. Very fascinating pondering that.

BF: The land management agency is not just the Park Service but BLM and Forest Service. These agencies have got real headaches because they're trying to manage different missions. Park Service trying to manage the resource as well as let people do stuff, too, and enjoy. Sometimes those don't jive. Sometimes you can't allow both things.

TM: That's right. But the resource comes first, I mean unimpaired the resource comes first. That's clear. But again, Park Service is trying to figure out how to manage this. It makes sense. I mean, it's a really interesting approach which puts the responsibility on the people that are doing the activity and lets them handle it if they will.

BF: Yeah. Well you know as you were talking, Tom, I actually looked up a little couple of pages I have in one of my books about parachuting. In this book, which is dated now, of course, like 1999, but I have 12

areas that were listed as places where people have parachuted. Amistad, Arches, Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Canyon de Chelly, Glacier, Glen Canyon, Grand Canyon off of Navajo Bridge, Jefferson Expansion, New River Gorge, Statue of Liberty in 1912 before it became an NPS area, Yosemite, and Zion. I suspect there are a couple places since then that have experienced this as well.

TM: Right. Gee. I wouldn't want to parachute off the Navajo Bridge because there's going to be some swimming involved and you're going to have to figure out how to get home once you get down.

BF: Sometimes these people that do these things think that far ahead and sometimes they don't.

TM: Interesting. Well, once again we've had a wonderful hour and ten minute discussion here. Very fascinating. This sounds like maybe a good place to sort of wrap up the climbing and other sort of airborne adventures...

BF: Airborne adventures, yeah.

TM: ...in Yosemite. Is there anything else you want to bring into this?

BF: Well actually, to sort of cap off the parachuting thing for just a moment...

TM: Please.

BF: ...and to put myself back in the center of attention which I don't necessarily like to do, but I do a lot of stupid things so... In this case, in the fall of 1980, roughly October of 1980, I am approached—because I'm now the district ranger out at Mather, which is the Tuolumne subdistrict, actually the Mather district—I am contacted by some cavers from the southeast part of the United States who as a group, about eight or ten of these guys have taken off on a couple of week vacation. They had been doing these deep rappelling drops into some of these deep caves in Mexico, as well as some that may be 500 or 700 feet deep in the United States as well. They contact me because they are going around the country rappelling and ask because I still belong to the National Speleological Society, or the NSS, the national caving group. To this day I still belong, although I'm not an active caver but I support the operation. They get ahold of me in 1980 and want to know if I can help them orchestrate rappelling off of El Cap. So, "Okay," so they show up. I said, "Yeah come on out, we'll work out something." They come out. I've been there almost 10 years by this point; I'm pretty senior when it comes to the ranger operation. Things are a little more lax in those days as well, but we weren't hurting anything. So we end up—I say we, I'm not going to take any credit initially—they end up lowering a rope. They have a parachute cord, several thousand feet of parachute cord that's tied to a tetherball that they lower down the face of El Cap. At the bottom, they tie on a rappel rope that's 4,000 feet long and they pull it back up. So now they've got this long rope running the entire...

TM: Hold. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. I'm just thinking about this. They've got 3,000 feet of rope. These are going to be really strong people to haul that rope up.

BF: Nope. They have a windlass at the top.

TM: Oh my gosh. What smart people.

BF: I mean, they've been doing this now for a while. Some of these guys are engineers, you know, smart people but they love caving. This is their thing in life. So they end up getting what will amount to a 2650' long rappel that they are going to do, which ends up becoming the world's record.

TM: Wow.

BF: They ask me if I want to make the drop. I say, "Well yeah." I'm on my own time. I'm sure that I signed a leave slip.

TM: So Butch, hang on. Wait. Let's back up a minute. How long does it take the average caver, very skilled caver, to rappel 2,650 feet?

BF: Well nobody knew at the time because nobody had ever done it that far.

TM: Well there's a problem with heat buildup in the climbing gear in the rappel bar and stuff. How do you handle that?

BF: You're too smart for your britches, Tom, because you are right in most ways except that this has already been taken into account.

TM: Okay, well these guys are smart. They have a windlass. I'm thinking about pulling it up by hand.

BF: No, they don't do that. Let me describe what's going on. There's roughly ten or twelve that are going to rappel and some of them are going to climb back up, going to jumar back up, too. I do not do that. Now, I've done a lot of things and I'm not afraid of heights particularly, but from my climbing standpoint once I got more than 400 or 500 feet off the ground on a climb, I really started getting nervous. Even though I did some big wall stuff, I would never be considered any kind of a big wall climber. So making this rappel, over the years they had developed a thing called a descending rack or a rappel rack. What it amounts to is a U-shaped bar, a metal bar, that's been tempered with the proper alloys and whatever, that is perfectly strong. It's got a loop at the end so it can be hooked to a carabiner, more than one probably. Then on this U-shaped rack, which is bent, the interior is about 2-2½ inches wide.

TM: Right. There are a bunch of brake bars across it.

BF: That's exactly right, there are brake bars. So, for the general audience you just weave the rope through the brake bars, which is actually pretty easy to do. Then as you're going down the heat is dissipated among these brake bars.

TM: Wow that's amazing.

BF: You can adjust them. By clinching one or two of these bars together, you can slow your speed down and even stop. I'd never even seen one of these things, but yet I'm about to drop 2650 feet all on the say so of these guys that I'm trusting because I'm not mostly very smart. So I end up making this rappel. It takes me 45 minutes. The fastest was something like about 15 minutes. The problem with that is—and we were warned not to do that by the people that owned the equipment and the ropes and whatever—because it will glaze the rope. There will be enough heat that the nylon will melt a little bit. It doesn't become super dangerous necessarily but it's not good for the equipment. At least one guy was ostracized. He was not allowed to participate with this group, at least here, any further because he went... He was showing off because he could go real fast and at the very bottom he ends up glazing this rope.

TM: Gosh, I think you'd want to kind of smell the roses on that one once you'd gone over the edge.

BF: Well, yeah, but these guys had a heck of a lot more experience in long drops. By this point I'd made a number of 600-foot drops, but nothing of that magnitude. But, it ends up becoming a world's record which only lasts for about a year. So I'm making this rappel, and there's no safety, so because of the way this rappel rack/this descending rack is designed, for most drops/for most long rappels, anything over 500 feet or so, there's so much weight on the rope that you can't move, you can't go downwards. Anything over say 600 feet, for a rescue, now we're talking about rescues, or for rappelling I suppose,

you have to have one of these rappel racks. The little mechanism is designed to accommodate this weight factor. I was told about this. So I'm rappelling over and the first 50 feet as I'm going over the ledge it is a little difficult. I had to sort of pull the rope through the system. But not too far down, I'm able to start moving along and I sort of quickly get used to how to adjust this thing to dictate my speed. I had been warned about a couple things. One was that there's so much rope played out in this entire thing, you know 2600 feet worth of 7/16-inch rope.

TM: So that's just under half inch.

BF: Just under half an inch. There's so much rope played out that it actually acts like a sail.

TM: Okay, wow.

BF: You actually can get lifted up, which is what happens. So I was told about this. I was told that as I'm rappelling even with just a minor breeze, if there's enough breeze on the entire face, you've got this big sail. Even though the rope is going through the system and in theory you're going down, because of the sail effect you actually could be going up. So I was told just be alert to that.

TM: Is the bottom end of the rope tied to a tree or something?

BF: No, there's actually somebody monitoring it there at the bottom. Now at this point I don't have a radio. I'm not talking to anybody. Once I go over the edge...

TM: You're on your own.

BF: ...other than yelling I'm on my own. But in theory, for me somehow when I first went over the first 50 or 100 feet or so, the guy at the bottom...when you hold on to that rope, you put enough resistance that you can't move. You are tied to that spot. It's just the mechanics and the physics of all this. You literally can't go up or down until that person at the bottom releases the hold. Well somehow there was a miscommunication. The guys at the top watching me start off thought that I was in trouble or needed some help or something so they told the guy at the bottom by radio to hold onto this rope which stops you from rappelling. Well that was 180 degrees off what I wanted, totally opposite of what I wanted or needed. That was finally resolved, it took a couple of minutes before everybody realized that I was doing fine. Just let go of the rope at the bottom and let me keep going. So the sail effect is one thing, but the thing they didn't warn me about that actually got my attention more, perhaps, was I'm down maybe starting to go down 1000 feet and on these big cliffs. Even though they look fairly flat, they're actually what they call a book or a corner. There'll be a ledge, a cliff will be going from left to right as you're facing it and you're only four or five feet away from the wall because... I was told don't put your feet on the wall because that'll add to a spinning effect which you don't want to do.

TM: Oh interesting.

BF: So even though the wall was right there, it's like four or five feet away, I was not touching it. But, you build up a certain amount of comfort knowing that the wall is right there, even though if something happens, you're dead.

TM: Right. Right.

BF: So as I'm going down, in addition to this sail effect, you end up getting into these long pendulums; very slow, but you've got maybe a 50 to a 75-foot arc that you're going from like left to right, right to left but you're doing it pretty slowly. It's not like you're going back and forth real fast but, but it is happening. So you're going down, you're going down. The wall's four feet away, it's four feet away. You're not touching it but there's some comfort knowing it's right there. Then as you're sort of

pendulumming left to right let's say, which in this case is the one that caught my attention, is that all of a sudden...you know I'm four feet away, four feet away, and the next thing I know I'm like 40 feet away from the wall because of this corner, this big crease in the rock that you really don't know is there, actually. But all of a sudden what was somewhat comforting to me with this rope and wall being just being a short distance apart, next thing I know I'm 40 feet out and I'm still 2,000 feet up, but all the while I know that if anything happens I'm totally a goner. So I made this drop, got down to the bottom 45 minutes later. I hadn't told anybody in the park except one person because I needed to borrow his camera which I ended up never using. I think I was either too scared or too preoccupied or both probably to actually use it cause this was a little pocket camera thing.

I talked to my wife later on when I get home, and she said that she had gone into the Valley—because we didn't live in the Valley anymore at this point—she'd gone into the Valley to do something. We had two little kids at this point. She comes back by and can sort of see where this is all taking place from the road. I think if you looked you could probably see the rope but it wasn't something that most people would notice. As she's standing there outside the car trying to see what's going on, the guy who has mostly taken Jim Bridwell's place, oh geez I think my mind is slipping. Well, at this point he's probably the best climber in the world himself that I've used on rescues. I've been on rescues with him personally, just he and I, and all kinds of fun stuff attached to that. He also knows my wife. He stops and says, "What's going on?" "Butch is up making this rappel off of El Cap." Here's a guy that is probably more comfortable on the face of El Cap than he is standing on the floor of the Valley. One of the world's best climbers literally, this is literally true, not total hyperbole. He tells her, I don't think it's tongue in cheek, maybe it was, "Jesus, you would never get me to do that." So I think this probably makes her a little nervous because the father of her children is up there probably about to kill himself, which fortunately I didn't do.

TM: No kidding. Butch, how did you keep from spinning?

BF: I don't think I kept from spinning, I don't think it was going to spin.

TM: Okay. Was that the type of rope that didn't spin I suppose?

BF: It wasn't, that's correct. I mean, it's not a twist rope for one thing. It's got a sheath.

TM: Right. It's a Perlon type or Golon type.

BF: It's not Golon. But, yeah, it's got a sheath to it like...

TM: A sheath type with fibers in the middle and a sheath coating on the outside.

BF: Yeah. And it's also a static rope which means that there's no stretch. If I said early on that this was a stretch rope...

TM: No, no, you didn't.

BF: No. But our rescue rope back in 1972 was. But, in this case this is a caving rope. It's designed for making rappels. It's not designed for rescue work.

TM: Right. Fascinating.

BF: Anyway, we were going to stop at that point a long time ago.

TM: Well, did anybody get a picture of you up there?

BF: I have a picture of me at the bottom.

TM: That's great.

BF: Although I hadn't really thought about it, I suspect if I... Since I belong to the NSS still, the National Speleological group, and I have the names of these guys, I could probably go on there and find one or two of them and see if perhaps they've got some photos from that, not necessarily of me but from that whole thing.

TM: That would be fun.

BF: But I've never done it. I guess I should have. It's not like I don't have enough projects.

TM: I'll give you more things to do.

BF: Yeah.

TM: This has been wonderful. I think then with that this will conclude Part 9 of a oral history interview with Charles "Butch" Farabee. My name is Tom Martin. Today is Thursday June 18, 2020. Butch, thank you so very much.

BF: Well, my pleasure, Tom. Thank you.