

Transcript: Grand Canyon Oral History

Interviewee: Kim Johnson (KJ)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Kim recounts the high water of 1983, her time at the law enforcement academy, and the end of her Park Service career

Date of Interview: October 16, 2020

Method of Interview: Phone interview

Transcriber: Ashlyn Van Wyk

Date of Transcription: December 4, 2020

Transcription Reviewers: Tom Martin

Keys: High Water 1983, Kevin Fedarko, *Emerald Mile*, Glen Canyon Dam Visitors Center, Georgie White fatality, Stan Steck, Dropping notes out of NPS helicopter, Brian Derker, Gaylord Staveley, Elgin Pierce, Ted Hatch, Martin Litton, Federal Law Enforcement Training Academy, square grouper, domestic disturbance campground, Dick Marks, Curt Sauer, peregrine falcon

TM: Today is Friday, October 16, 2020. This is Part 2 of a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Kim Johnson. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Kim. How are you?

KJ: Hi, Tom. Doing well.

TM: Good. May we have your permission to record this interview over the telephone?

KJ: Yes.

TM: Thank you. Last time we wrapped up the interview, and you and I were talking. And you mentioned that you had been at Grand Canyon during the high water of 1983. Can you recall for me what you remember about that?

KJ: Yeah. Some of the things—the whole thing was pretty spectacular, and kind of a lot of it—an example of lots of people sort of flying by the seat of their pants. And I do remember going up to Glen Canyon, and at that time the release was chewing its way through the sides of the rock, and creating those great big holes there from the spillways.

TM: No, that's right, that's right.

KJ: Yeah, and I remember you could feel—we were in the visitor's center, and you could just feel the vibration in the building, from that amount of water.

TM: Wow.

KJ: Yeah, and you know, I remember when Kevin Fedarko interviewed me for *The Emerald Mile* book. I remember thinking, "Who, other than a few river people, would be interested in it?" But I sort of didn't quite get it. But yeah. I have a couple of funny stories.

TM: Please. So, hey, before you mention it, I want to say: so you were at the visitor center when there was clear water going into the spillways and sediment-laden, very, sort of tan water coming out the bottom?

KJ: Yeah. Well, I don't remember that so much. What I do remember is, the water that was—you could see down the spillway—was making itself a little hydraulic jump because of the angular velocity. The hydrologists could explain that better, but that was pretty fascinating.

TM: Wow. You mean at the bottom, or at the top?

KJ: It was kind of in the middle, as I recall. I don't remember where—

TM: You mean you could see it, though. You could see this weird—

KJ: Yeah.

TM: Huh. Wow. Okay, I'm sorry. I interrupted. You had a couple stories about that.

KJ: Probably the most famous story, of course, is the “just don't make passengers like they used to”. And my particular spin on that story is: so we were on a patrol trip, and I and Stan Steck were—I think we had kayaks. And we all go and scout Crystal. And Crystal actually was pretty washed-out. But we recall watching Georgie drive her triple rig and just get it stuck in the hole at Crystal. And she's just washing passengers off left and right.

So we kind of hurried up and decided to go—well, not decided—you know, get after the passengers. And I was wearing a Park Service shirt. And that day, for some reason, I kept putting my oar handles in the pockets of my shorts. And I really didn't want to do that in the middle of Crystal, 'cause you grab your oar... So I ran without any shorts on, and we—make a long story short, we—

TM: Well, don't. Wait, no, no. Make a long story longer. *(laughs)*

KJ: Okay. Well, we ran it, and—

TM: Well, hang on. I'm going to jump in and back up a minute. So, dress in the Park Service is important. How you wear your uniform, how it presents, is really important. And on the river, being as hot as it was, there was a move to get the river rangers into shorts, which was successful. And so what you're saying is that the shorts had pockets. When you were rowing, you would get your oar handles caught in the pockets as you were rowing?

KJ: Yeah. You could.

TM: And that would be a mess, because you need your oars to actually be doing something. Wow.

KJ: Yeah, right.

TM: So you just basically take them off, and I'm assuming you're wearing a bathing suit, and there's no problem. It's like no big deal. Yeah, okay.

KJ: So anyways, so Stan's out in front, and he's able to whip—'cause he's in a kayak—he's able to grab—it was a guy and his daughter and maybe somebody else—and paddle them over to the side. And I just remember, even in a raft—I ended up going overland to a guy that was—he might have gotten himself

out. I can't quite remember if Stan got him out, or if he got himself out. We were worried that he'd broken his leg, 'cause his leg was in a weird position. And—

TM: So this is somebody on the shore. You were able to pull to shore below them, and then hike back to this guy?

KJ: Yeah, he must have been below me. I remember a couple things distinctively. Stan came back, and the guy was really shaken, obviously, but he was really scared for his daughter. And Stan was able to say, "No, I got your daughter. Your daughter's fine; she back on the raft with Georgie." And I'd hiked up to this guy. So now we got to get him back to my raft, which is parked. And the only way we're going to do it—because it was a wicked ass climb to get to him, and he didn't have the ability to climb so we put him back on the river, which he didn't want to do.

So Stan was kind of like playing lifeguard to the left of us. And I just shoved him in the river and swam behind him. And we floated down the eddy and got back to my raft. And then we all caught back to Georgie and gave her back her people, whom she didn't even know she was missing all of them. And that's when Terry hears the famous line, "Well, they just don't make passengers like they used to," which was a classic.

But my point was, we were obviously pretty visible that day. And kind of all the hairy stuff gets over with, and I reach around, and I realize that in the whole thing of the day, I've kind of torn out one side of the butt of my swimming suit. So here is this park ranger, kind of with her bare ass hanging out of her swimming suit. So I ended the whole thing kind of mooning the passengers and everything.

TM: Well, you got done what need to be done.

KJ: Yeah, we sure did.

TM: When did you first become aware that there was a problem with the dam?

KJ: You know, that's kind of way above my paygrade. I think we could see, looking at the forecast, and looking at the fact that they hadn't put enough of a hole into the lake—but I don't remember if that was really clearly predicted. And I don't remember, or I wouldn't have been involved, frankly, in Bureau of Rec in the Park Service.

TM: Right. No, I was thinking more—Reclamation wanted the reservoir to be full on the 4th of July. That was their goal back then. And snowpack, who cares. It's up there, who cares. We want to be full for the 4th of July. The water started coming down. Reclamation eventually started opening up the generators, and then the jet tubes. And that got them up to 40,000 CFS. Anybody on the water would have been wondering, "What's going on? Why is the water so high?" When did you guys first get the inkling that, "Gee, I wonder why the water is so high?"

KJ: Oh, I think we had information come from the Bureau of Rec because—this is also sort of a little funny little thing—we knew we had people on the water. We knew the water was going to come up. We knew that they didn't know how high it was going to come up. So we went and flew the river and dropped notes to all the parties.

We're going out to fly that mission, and we flew it out of Tusayan. I'm not sure why. We go in the little Seven Eleven there, and we're buying baggies to put the little notes in. And the grizzled clerk at the store goes, "Well, you know, you're going to need some gravel to weigh those things down." Like, "Oh yeah. Duh, duh, duh." So I made the notes—

TM: What did they say? Do you remember what they said?

KJ: "Glen Canyon dam release expected to go to whatever the number was by this time out of the dam. Camp high, stay high, National Park Service," which was very much of an insider little tee-hee joke on my behalf. *(TM laughs)* And somebody, about 10 years ago, kept their little note. And they put it up on my Facebook page. And they just thought it was hilarious, as did I.

TM: Oh fun.

KJ: Yeah. Little inside fun.

TM: I'll look for that. I'd love to see that.

KJ: It's somewhere buried on my Facebook, yeah.

TM: Okay. Wonder if I can find it. That's great. So you're riding in a helicopter, and you must be going downstream, I'm supposing. And you would come across a river trip either on the water or on shore, and then you would like drop this baggie with some gravel and a note in it out the helicopter door?

KJ: Yes. Well, we probably ran it without doors, but it doesn't matter.

TM: Okay. Right. So there's no doors. You're strapped in, and you just kind of—did you have like a bullhorn, saying, "Hey, water's coming up. Catch the note"?

KJ: I don't think so. I think it went pretty smoothly, and people were like, "Oh, it's the Park Service come to tell us something." *(TM and KJ laugh)*

TM: Okay. And you guys did that throughout the entire Canyon.

KJ: Yeah. I think we only did that once, though, 'cause that was a big move up to 53 or whatever it was. So I think we only flew in them once.

TM: So this is when Reclamation decided to actually start using the spillways to basically start spilling.

KJ: Yeah.

TM: Okay. Then eventually the spillways started to fail, and Reclamation realized they needed to stop the water going through the spillways. Because the water that we mentioned was going into the spillways clear and coming out of the spillways cloudy with lots of rock.

KJ: Yeah, exactly.

TM: Did you see that, down on the river, that the river had turned color? Or did it clear up again pretty quickly?

KJ: You know, I just don't recall.

TM: Okay. And of course it would have been high, so it would have been churning up all kinds of river sediment as well. Okay. And they just sort of made this—it spiked up, went up to about 90,000 cubic feet a second, and they put the plywood out across the spillway.

KJ: Right. Yeah, I remember that. I remember thinking, "Yeah."

TM: And the river dropped right back down again.

KJ: Yeah.

TM: But at Crystal, where there was a fairly large rapid that had formed in the 1960's, a lot of river companies—like Georgie is a good example, sort of—you know, she'd just go down the middle of everything in her giant elephant rig of the three big pontoons tied together. That run didn't work so well in Crystal.

KJ: Right. She surfed that boat in there, I don't know how many—maybe three—sloshes back and forth with people getting washed off every time. I mean, I think we were all thinking if this boat flips, we've got a really big problem on our hands. But she didn't.

TM: But then a Tour West boat did. And did Georgie have a fatality? Did she have a drowning?

KJ: That summer? I'm not sure. She had had other drownings throughout her tenure, yeah.

TM: That phrase about "They don't make passengers like they used to"—there's a story somewhere about one of the park rangers trying to interface with Georgie and a drowned passenger. And Georgie was like "Get that body out of here. Get that covered up. You're scaring my passengers." But again, that's rumor from me. I wasn't there.

KJ: Yeah, she was a class act. So I spent quite a bit of time with her in her trips, actually, because the Park Service was concerned about safety, A. And B, the Park Service was concerned about whether or not the quality of her trips was on par for what people were paying. And it was a super interesting juxtaposition, because, in some ways, who were we to tell Georgie White how to do things. She'd been running commercial trips since the '40s ['50s].

And she was the real deal, and probably more adventuresome and courageous than all of us snotty little ranger kids rolled up in a ball. I mean, I remember she wasn't—I'm about 5' 8". She wasn't as tall as I am. And I've got ginormous hands for a woman. Her hands were even bigger than mine. And they were like hammer claws. And her hands were just unbelievably strong.

But then you'd sort of be in camp, and she had all the weird practices that her trips are known for, including she would serve Manischewitz brandy at four in the afternoon. They would camp in these godforsaken beaches with no shade. Manischewitz brandy, and I want to say canned fruitcake. And then they would also make a punch with everclear, right. Maybe that had the Manischewitz brandy in the

punch. But in some ways it wasn't Georgie, it was your grandma serving this stuff. It was a real juxtaposition. And the boatmen really liked it when I would show up, because she would improve—or so they would tell me—there'd be more food around, 'cause that was also one of the complaints, was just that the rations were a little scant. But, you know, her people loved her from that. They weren't necessarily people who wanted ice cream at night. They wanted the real experience. So yeah. She was a character.

TM: Interesting. Yeah.

KJ: Get Brian Derker sometime to tell you about the day that Georgie bet who could stand in the water longer. Brian Derker's a great big—you might know him; he's a great big guy. And so Brian picks up Georgie and carries her into the river at Lee's Ferry. And you know how cold it is at Lee's Ferry, right?

TM: Very cold.

KJ: And you know, it was big old Brian Derker that got back out first. 'Course that might have been helped by a little bit of gin on behalf of Georgie, or—I can't remember what she drank. But yeah. She was a character.

TM: Of the other river—let's see. This is in the early '80s. Gaylord Staveley would have been a long-time river runner, started running in '57 or '58. Georgie's first trip in Grand Canyon was in '52 with Elgin Pierce, just the two of them on a raft. She flipped in Hance, but then started commercially mid-50's in Grand Canyon. And Gay Staveley, Frank Wright had sold out. Don Harris might have still been doing a couple trips in the 80's. I'm trying to think of who other of longtime—from the people from the '50s. Ted Hatch, if you could see him on the river. Then of course the people that came in later would be Martin Litton and George Went and these people that came in the '60s. For the people in the '50s, do you have any recollections of them?

KJ: I mean, I knew Staveley and Martin, for sure, and Georgie. I don't recall meeting Hatch.

TM: I should actually regroup for Martin, because his first river trip was in the mid-50's.

KJ: That makes sense. I don't know, I...

TM: Okay. Just if you had any stories about those people...

KJ: *(laughs)* Yeah, no. I have a Martin story, but it's not up for publication.

TM: *(laughs)* Okay. What else do you remember about that high water of '83?

KJ: Oh, I don't know. Silly things, like the eddies were just full of crap. I remember floating around in some eddy and picking up boxes and boxes of beers and frozen French fries.

TM: From the jetsam coming out of boat coolers.

KJ: Yeah, exactly.

TM: Okay. After the boats were destroyed. Wow, okay. So you got in on a couple rescues. I know that Butch Farabee had talked about the Grand Canyon scuba diving club, which he and J.T. Reynolds were members of. And I kind of laughed, but he said, "No, no, wait. This was real, legit—we trained, we practiced, we had the gear: tanks and fins and masks and all that stuff." And he mentioned launching out of a helicopter into the river while—it sounds like while you and Stan Steck were boat-based, he and J.T. were helicopter-based.

KJ: Oh, in the high water stuff. Yeah.

TM: And then I guess everybody got stopped at Phantom. All the trips got stopped at Phantom for a while, while the Park kind of figured out whether it was safe to go ahead and run on down. Did you meet Sam Steiger—let's see; no no. DeConcini. I guess it was Dennis DeConcini that came in, Arizona Congressman.

KJ: No, I didn't. Uh-uh.

TM: Okay. Did you get a chance to go down to Phantom and see the big cluster of people down there?

KJ: No, uh-uh. We might have been on the other end of the river, I just don't remember.

TM: Yeah, okay. Alright. So besides all the gear in the eddies, what else do you remember about that?

KJ: The power of the river was certainly impressive. In some ways a lot of the stuff was just washed out. I think we all just didn't quite completely grasp the seriousness of the situation.

TM: And it's interesting, because Georgie was on the water in 1957 during the high water of '57 that went up to 122- or 124,000 cubic feet a second. She'd actually gotten tangled up, as had Frank Wright and Gay Staveley, in '57—I think that was his first rowing trip with Frank—in a place just above Deer Creek. Down below Tapeats Creek, the river goes into a place called the Granite Narrows. And the river's pretty wide, and then it tightens right up and goes right into this granite section. Did you get a chance to row a boat through there at high water?

KJ: You know, I must have, 'cause we had to get out of there somehow, but I don't remember—on the "They don't make passengers like the used to," I don't remember—I mean, I'm not remembering anything. I don't think we were quite that high at that point.

TM: Okay. Yeah, the water ends up coming up on river left, sheeting across the river surface into river right, and then dropping down. So the whole current, instead of going downstream, is sort of doing a corkscrew thing in the river.

KJ: Yeah. It seems that 120,000 would be a lot different than 50.

TM: Yeah. Okay, that makes sense. So probably 50,000 it probably hadn't started to form that way yet. But certainly by 70/75,000 it was starting really kick in gear there, that corkscrew effect in there. In '57 Georgie, her triple rig actually got pushed up against the wall, and one of the—she started doing a Georgie sandwich there against the wall. People ended up in the water. It was an interesting deal there in '57 for her. She would have known that. She would have remembered that: to be careful through

there. Okay. Alright, well, any other Georgie stories? The guides were happy when you showed up, 'cause the food was better.

KJ: Yeah, right. *(laughs)*

TM: So in the end the Park Service must have said, "Well, her trips are different, but her passengers really enjoy the experience their getting, and so we're going to call it good."

KJ: Well, yes and no. To some degree, jerking the permit of a concessionaire is a big deal, and you'd better have your ducks in a row. Let's just put it that way.

TM: Yeah. So did the Park Service just decide to let it slide?

KJ: I don't think "let it slide" would be the way I would describe it. I think that the Park Service felt like they had worked and encouraged boatmen and Georgie to be professional, up their skills, think a little bit more about safety, improve the quality experience, toe the line a little bit, I guess.

TM: Okay. That makes sense. And when did you go to the Federal Law Enforcement Training Academy?

KJ: You know, it was probably '83 or '84. I don't remember the dates.

TM: And this was in Georgia?

KJ: Uh-huh.

TM: Can you describe your experience there, how that all worked out?

KJ: Well, yeah. The Park sends rangers to a law enforcement—it's a nine-week course. It's law enforcement for Land Management agencies. So that's us, BLM, Forest Service, I don't know. Something else maybe. And it's at the FLETC center, which has everything from border patrol to park police to—I can't remember whatever else. So it's a pretty—I liked it. I liked the classroom study stuff a lot. That's a lot of law, which I enjoyed. And we lived in the dorms and met some interesting people. And we had a—

TM: Who did you meet?

KJ: Oh, like I had a good friend who was a ranger at Biscayne Bay in Florida. And he was always talking about writing up reports for finding square grouper, which was those ranger's terms for bales of marijuana. Actually, I have a funny little story. We got done; I went to stay, after FLETC, with him and his girlfriend or wife in Biscayne Bay. And the next day he's driving me in the runabout boat from his island to fly back to Miami.

And they kind of warn you, "Okay, you've just be trained in law enforcement. Be careful. Don't have a hasty trigger finger. Don't get yourself in trouble. You're a newly minted officer; you're kind of a danger to yourself." And so here we are, we're not in uniform, we're not on patrol. He's just giving me a ride in a boat. And he looks up, and he sees what looks like possibly drug smugglers possibly throwing evidence—throwing square grouper—off in the ocean.

And I'm like—I don't remember his name—"Don't even think about making that contact, because if anything happens to you—well, A, we've got no cover on this boat. It's aluminum—or fiberglass boat. How do we do the arrest stuff again? And I thought: and if anything happens to you, it's going to be me on the radio going "Hi, this is little Kimmy Johnson, and I'm not sure where I am, but we're in the water here somewhere. And we've just taken down a bunch of drug runners and they're coming after us. And the other guy's been shot. But I don't know where I am. Can you come and help me?" "Come on dude." So anyway.

And the other funny sort of FLETC story—FLETC was keeping a guy who had worked under cover and had taken down a bunch of Hell's Angels types. And so because he needed to be protected, they went and hid him in Glynnco, Georgia. And he came, and he lectured us about—the parks at that time were handing a lot of, not necessary problems, but big groups of motorcycle gangs would come in. And he was trying to get us to not take these guys lightly, and sort of, "You girl rangers, you have no idea how much the drug gang guys"—or, I'm sorry, the motorcycle guys—"would love to chalk up raping a law enforcement officer." Like, okay, we'll quit driving patrol all by ourselves and kind of knock it off and be more careful.

And he was all still dolled up like a Hell's Angels guy, and he's passing around to us—we're like in a stadium seating. And he's got his colors that he wore or was part of—he ended up with it. And you know, it's a motorcycle colors jacket and vest. And it was pretty interesting. And we're all looking at it and pawing it and passing it around. And he just laughs, and he goes, "You all are such idiots. If you knew how many times that thing's been shit on, pissed on, come on..." The thing just goes flying through the air and lands on the floor. *(TM and KJ laugh)* Kind of a character.

TM: I would imagine that the didactic training there would be very educational.

KJ: Yeah. You learn how to drive a car fast. You learn to shoot and PT. And then a lot of it's the law of law enforcement.

TM: Yeah. And this is a country based on laws, and to get a chance to be educated in how those laws work, how they're applied—that's a great education.

KJ: Yeah.

TM: Yeah. Who do you recall from your class?

KJ: There's a guy from Colorado. He was a forest ranger in Leadville, I remember that. And then this guy that I hung out with who worked in Biscayne Bay. And I was tutoring a guy who was from the Park Police, who was a great big strapping weight-lifter guy, and he was just dumber than a box of rocks. And he could not pass his—he was doing a unit on drugs, and 'cause he didn't have any practical experience—and he was not that smart anyway—he'd be like, "Okay, meth is a hallucinogen?" "No. Meth is an amphetamine." "Okay, okay. Is LSD a hallucinogen? Yeah, very good. You're learning." Just didn't have it.

TM: Oh. Did he pass?

KJ: Yes. And the other thing I remember really clearly was the Secret Service—we'd be in the locker room, changing for gym or something, and the Secret Service girls who were trained there for a long

time—and the border patrol also would come in—the Secret Service girls were pretty badass. These girls that were training for the border patrol were hardcore, little, 110 pounds of Hispanic angry energy in a ball. You know, it's like, "This is gonna scare these girls, but..." They had a tough curriculum. I mean, they would take all the candidates for border patrol, and put them in a bus and tear gas them.

TM: Wow.

KJ: So yeah. They're all beat up, they all had shin splints. They were a mess.

TM: Wow. Yeah, and the PT, as you mentioned, the physical training—running, push-ups, pullups, just a whole drill of things—some people wouldn't pass that.

KJ: Yeah. And we did hand-to-hand martial arts, and did some training on that kind of stuff too.

TM: Okay. So certainly tactical training—how do you take somebody down. And you have to do that in real time, and when people get taken down, they're wearing padding and—I'm assuming they're wearing some sort of padding and helmets and whatnot.

KJ: Yeah. I don't know that we did a whole hell lot of that, but I do remember we did weapon takeaways, and what you learn really quickly is if somebody really has the guts, and they really want to take a weapon out of your—your little pistol out of your hand, it's not that hard to do. You've got a ton of leverage.

TM: Oh, right.

KJ: So yeah. You hold that gun, you'd better be really committed that you're going to actually use it.

TM: Right, right. Interesting. So did you come away from that—I guess, was it a good course?

KJ: Oh yeah. Yeah, it was good. So we all ended up—so I ended up with a commission, and the inner Canyon people—the South Rim guys, the South Rim law enforcement guys, that's a pretty hard-core law enforcement gig, right? *(laughs)* And one time the South Rim guys wanted to have a barbeque. So they put all the inner Canyon guys in charge of the South Rim, cause they're at a party and drinking and having hot dogs and stuff.

And so I'm driving around in a patrol car, and you know. Look at us hippie-dippie backcountry rangers. And I go to the barbeque to get a hamburger, and the dispatcher comes on. Of course, all the South Rim guys got the radios on as well. And one of the things they train you in law enforcement school is, a domestic disturbance is where you will get shot.

So I get sent to a domestic in the campground. And the dispatcher says it's three girls. I'm like, okay, that doesn't sound too bad. And I get there, and it's a woman, her sister, and the sister's girlfriend, who are together, and they're having a big ol' row. Irrelevant to the story. So I tell them to knock it off and quit fighting and blah-blah-blah. So I go back to the barbeque to get another hamburger or something.

(laughing) And the dispatcher comes on and says, "Uh, yeah, that domestic you just went to, they're back at it." All the South Rim guys are going, "Oh, you inner Canyon people do not know what you're doing." So I go back over there, and the three of them are just covered in sangria. And they've been

fighting again. And the one woman, who looked like she was the victim—she had had a physical disability, and maybe walked with a cane of something—and so we assumed that the other women, the couple, was beating up on the poor cripple girl. Guess I can't say that anymore.

Anyway, now we really separated people. And I got a little bit of help with us. And I'm talking to the young woman with the disability, and I'm thinking she's just gotten the crap beaten out of her by her sister, who was drunk and stuff. And she looks me straight in the eye, and she goes, "You don't think I bit my sister too hard, do you?" Anyway.

I used a technique taught to me by Curt Sauer that night, and took her out and gave her a sleeping bag and parked her in the far corner of the farthest campground I could ever find—'cause I couldn't find a hotel for her; I couldn't find anything for her; it was a very busy weekend—and then used the famous "Don't you ever set foot in my national park again" line. And we never heard from her again.

TM: It's interesting that there was sort of a turf difference. And any of those South Rim law enforcement guys, if you put them on a boat and said, "Well, this is Crystal. Good luck..."

KJ: Oh yeah.

TM: (*laughing*) So it's like, wait a minute. Yeah, I can appreciate the different areas and they need different skills. And you get good at that. So it's kind of a good-natured humor. But yeah, very different: South Rim road patrol versus inner Canyon river or backcountry wilderness.

KJ: Right.

TM: And so, coming out of FLETC, you mentioned a commission. What does that mean?

KJ: Well, gosh, your making me feel like I'm back in class. Basically, the agency—in this case the Park Service—has the charter to establish requirements and training and stuff, to then give you a law enforcement commission. And that's the same process that anybody that's a—you hear the phrase "sworn law enforcement officer"?

TM: Yep.

KJ: That's the same thing.

TM: Okay. And that comes with a lot of responsibility, because you have a weapon, and you may be shot at. But it also comes with some benefits of early retirement. I think it's a 20-year retirement track, is that right?

KJ: Yes, I think so.

TM: Okay, so it has its perks, but it also has its challenges.

KJ: Yeah. Fair enough, fair to say, yeah. And you know, once I was on a trip— I think I told you last time we talked about Larry van Slyke carrying around a new shipment of ceramic inserts for bullet-proof vests, because at that time—this was in the '80s—park rangers in Utah were being hunted down by militia members. And there was a very serious threat that, "We're not going to stop until the Virgin River

runs red.” So they were very serious about it. And a ceramic insert for your vest is an inch thick and weighs about seven pounds, and it’s made to stop hollow points. So yeah, that was a very serious threat.

TM: Right. And you know, you have to carry a duty belt, which weighs a number of pounds, pinches you when you sit down in the patrol car. *(KJ laughs)* And if you have to go for a run after somebody that’s flying around as well. And you have to know where all that stuff is if you’re having a defensive tackle with someone. Different type of responsibility there entirely, yeah. So with FLETC, with a commission now, did you take that back to the river, then?

KJ: What’s that?

TM: Your commission—did you take that back to the river, meaning, now you’re on the river as a commissioned officer?

KJ: Yeah, I think we were—we never wrote a lot of tickets. *(laughs)* Sam and I one time found a guy who was doing an illegal trip. He was running an inflatable—a type of boat that you would use, like a dingy; it wasn’t a river boat at all—and he had a 20-horse motor on it that was sinking. We pulled all that in. *(laughs)* And we cited the guy for running without a permit. And the law enforcement officer—he’s the guy that kind of liaises, if you will, with the judge—wanted him cited into federal felony court in Phoenix. Which, I could just see this judge going, “Okay, we had murder one, we had rape, we had assault and battery. What’s our next case?” “Umm, it’s illegal boating, sir.” “It’s what?” I mean, it was the equivalent of really throwing the book at the guy. And the Park was pretty serious about making these arrests and citations for illegal boating stick. Don’t mess with that law enforcement officer.

TM: Yeah. And do you remember who the magistrate was at the time?

KJ: I don’t.

TM: I wonder if that was Steve Verkamp?

KJ: I don’t remember.

TM: Thomas McKay was a magistrate, but he was there—well, could have been McKay.

KJ: Yeah, could have been.

TM: Would have been an older gentleman.

KJ: Yeah, I don’t remember him.

TM: Okay. And do you know if that went to federal court, of whether they just handled it right there at the South Rim?

KJ: No, it went to federal court, I think. I don’t remember the disposition of the case.

TM: Okay. And we were talking last time; you mentioned Verlen Kruger. What do you remember about his story?

KJ: Oh, he and whoever he ran with, they'd come to South Rim. And we met them, and we were like, "They're going to run upstream in open boats?" We're like, "That's impossible, and—"

TM: These were open canoes, right? They were like paddling a canoe.

KJ: Yes. And they went to their senator, who said, "Uh, quit picking on the canoeing people." And so we gave them a permit and went, "Bet you can't do it." And sure enough, they did it. And they had a huge—he was an impressive guy. And I don't know a lot about the details of the some of the places that we thought would be impossible, but they did a ton of portaging, and they made it work.

TM: He ended up writing a book about that. They were making basically a figure of eight around the country: up the Mississippi, down the Pacific Coast, up Baja California, up the Colorado, and down the Atlantic Coast back to the Mississippi. This giant figure eight around the country. And so that was the one place they couldn't get access—was Grand Canyon National Park.

And I think it was Sheer Wall Rapid—was the one place that gave them the hardest time, because you know, it's a sheer wall section of the river there in the Supai gorge and up in Marble Canyon. And they're in these little canoes. And they couldn't just get out and go portage, because there's a waterfall right into the river at the rapid there, from the side canyon. But they made it.

KJ: Yeah. There's other places too that we thought they could never do, like Sockdolager and those granite gorge rapids above Crystal. But they did it, somehow.

TM: Right. They crawled up into the schist in the granites and basically just were a couple hundred feet above the river, working out portages. Really tough, but absolutely amazing. Yeah. So more power to them for managing a muscle-powered uprun.

KJ: Right.

TM: What do you remember about superintendent Dick Marks?

KJ: You know, not a lot. I don't know—at the time I think the rank and file didn't have—didn't see him as sort of, you know, our congenial, soft superintendent guy. But he was quite close with Curt and Curt's wife at the time.

TM: Right. And Connor their son?

KJ: —Connor. And that kind of softened my impression, but I don't have a lot of—I wouldn't have had a lot of interaction with him, and I don't remember taking him—well, maybe we did. So we were taking a bunch of Bureau Reclamation big-wigs down. And I managed to flip in Crystal with the guy from the Bureau of Reclamation. Hit my head, and for whatever reason, the guy was very Mormon, like a lot of the Bureau of Rec guys were at the time. And all I could do was swear, and not like polite little-girl swearwords, pretty salty stuff.

And we flew back in and were doing some more trips with people. And I remember—I think it was Dick Marks—wanted to ride with me, 'cause he figured there's no way I could get through Crystal again right side up. And if anybody was going to flip, it was going to be him with me. So, yeah.

TM: And of course you didn't flip.

KJ: I didn't flip.

TM: Good deal. Fun. And then how did things go from there? Did you stay on in the river unit? Then what happened?

KJ: Yeah, I did. And the river unit kind of slowly—J.T. moved to an enforcement position; Curt went to probably Cascade. A guy that—

TM: Right. This was early 1984. I guess it was January. Yeah.

KJ: Yeah. A guy that maybe wasn't well-liked came from Yosemite and ran—which was then the Canyon District. I don't remember his name. I felt like it would be tough. I felt like there was a class of guys ahead of me who were all competing for the same 20 jobs, and that it would have been very tough to continue to move up in the Park. So, you know, kind of end of an era. And so I quit the Park Service and went on to eventually end up in private business.

TM: Okay. Alright. Looking back now, do you think that was a good idea? I mean, looking back is always—hindsight's always difficult.

KJ: Well, like I said, I didn't quite get that the affirmative action advantage would have really helped me. But on the other hand it's a little—hindsight's 20/20. I think one of the things that would have been tough for me is, because you moved around so much, it's a very—if you bring a partner who's got a portable job into the Park Service—teachers, doctors, stuff like that—when you do move around from park to park to park, that works well. But other than that, it might be kind of a recipe to stay single.

And I was aware of that. I probably would have had a very successful career and enjoyed it. And you know, now all the guys that I worked with and around, they did—Curt did well. Butch killed it, at the DC level. I mean, I don't know that I had the chops that those guys had, but—Kate, whatever her name was. Kate Cannon. She was a superintendent. I probably had a pretty significant disadvantage in that I didn't have a college degree. And at some point that might have been a disadvantage.

TM: Yeah, you would have needed to go back and get that degree to keep advancing. Yeah. That was something that Curt mentioned, was, in order to advance—I mean, he met Larry van Slyke at college. Larry was back to get his degree because he could see it; he wasn't going to proceed without it. And Curt eventually did the same thing.

KJ: Yeah, it's interesting, because I was always told—there was a Bureau of Reclamation guy who—I'll tell you a funny peregrine falcon story one time—but he was like—or no, it was a guy from Resources Management, Larry whatever-his-name-was. Anyway, he said you'll regret not getting a degree. And in some ways, I ended up in technology working for companies that—I was hired out by my consulting firm as a consultant, them not knowing that I had no degree, because if they had known, they would not have hired me as a direct hire. I always thought that was little bit ironic, but yeah. So you want to hear the peregrine falcon story?

TM: Yes please.

KJ: And then I've got to go.

TM: Okay.

KJ: So we got this guy from Bureau of Rec, and he's a natural scientist guy. And we're down the middle canyon somewhere maybe around Tapeats. And the guys were back hiking, and they come back. And they have a peregrine falcon with them that's sick. And the guy says, "You've got to call a helicopter. We've got to get this thing out of here." I'm like, "No. That's crazy. Do you know what that's going to cost?" He's like, "Do you have any idea how much money we spend on peregrine falcon reintroduction, habitat management, peregrine falcon management in general?" I'm like, "Okay, but if I get fired it's your fault, and your agency's going to pay for the helicopter."

At the time, the way we got ahold of the Park was we would—'cause we didn't have sat phones—we would mirror flash aircraft. And so Curt gets a mirror flash, knows we're on the river. The mirror flash was from the location that was close to where we would be, so now he's thinking, "Oh God. Who's hurt?" So he and the helicopter named Tom—I can't remember his last name—come barreling in on us pretty hot. And they got on the radio—and they go, "What's wrong?" "Uh, we have a hurt peregrine falcon."

The guy flares the helicopter up, goes up to about a thousand feet above ground level. You can hear the silence. Curt finally comes back on the radio and goes, "You got a what?" So I go on to explain. The Bureau of Rec guy says we got to get this peregrine falcon out of here, and he's going to pay for it. So finally Curt and the guy land the helicopter. And by this time they brought the little—well, he wasn't little—brought the peregrine falcon down.

And somebody put a bandana around his head as a hood, like you do with birds with prey. And they get in the helicopter. Think it was pretty skinny. He obviously was pretty sick. And the funny little coat over that story is, they get about two thirds of the way back. And finally Curt just can't stand it. He grabs the hood, picks it up. The peregrine falcon just nails him on the chin and bites him. *(laughs)*

TM: Wow.

KJ: But I always thought it was very ironic. You know, peregrine falcons are the fighting machine of the air of the birds of prey. They'll take out a duck, and here's a peregrine falcon in a helicopter. I thought that was pretty hilarious.

TM: Trying to take out the guy in the helicopter. Yeah.

KJ: Yeah, exactly.

TM: Yeah, nice.

KJ: Well, Tom, I've got to shove off for now. So we can pause. As always, it's been a pleasure to talk to you.

TM: Ok, this is going to conclude Part 2 Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Kim Johnson. Today is Friday, October 16, 2020. My name is Tom Martin. And Kim, thank you so very much.

KJ: Thank you.

