Alaska State Parks

Recollections From The People Who Shaped Alaska's State Park System

By Melissa DeVaughn—Alaska Humanities Forum

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A park system is born

Forty years later, Alaska State Parks looks back at its beginnings

"A SYSTEM OF DREAMS"

That's what Neil Johannsen, the longest-serving director of Alaska State Parks, calls the state agency that started out simply—the result of the dreams of a few hardy individuals—and now oversees more than 120 park units from Alaska's far north to the tips of Southeast. Alaska's park system encompasses some three-million acres of land and water; by far the most acreage of any state park system in the country.

Johannsen is well known for his "system of dreams" phrase. He has used it countless times in presentations, conversations and written documents. He knows it might be a tired phrase, but he just can't think of any better way to summarize it.

"If you look at every state park in Alaska, they all have a history behind it," he said. "They are all the result of a dream of a person or a group of citizens somewhere who worked hard to make it happen."

After more than 40 years, those dreams have become reality. In 2010 the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation celebrated these accomplishments by looking back at it's unique history. The people who helped shape the state park system were planners, rangers, maintenance workers and administrators. They were governors, legislators, volunteers, community activists, conservationists and historians. Each and every one, in ways both slight and significant, helped contribute to the park system we know today.

"It was in 1968 that Charles Lindbergh gave a speech to the Alaska State Legislature, and in that speech he urged them to protect the land," Johannsen said of those early years.

The speech started the movement toward a state-managed parks system. Since statehood in

1956, community members have pushed for the setting aside of some of Alaska's best real estate. The arrival of Lindbergh at the state capitol on March 19, 1968 helped further their efforts with lawmakers. Lindbergh, an ardent conservationist most famous for being the first to fly solo over the Atlantic Ocean, told the joint meeting of the Alaska Senate and House of Representatives that he was giving his first public address in 10 years to them because the issue of conservation—of land and animals—was so important.

"Alaska is one of the key areas of the world, as regards conservation, so what you do here is going to be watched very closely by the entire world," he was quoted as saying in an article published in the Juneau Alaska Empire.

"There is nothing we can do anywhere in the world," he said, "that is more important than to protect our natural environment."

There was support from many legislators. Some disagreed, however, and walked out on the meeting to prove their point, Johannsen said.

"In those years, Alaska was at a paradox of forces," he remembered. "There were those who wanted it to stay wild and those who wanted to develop it."

Lowell Thomas Jr., who was a senator at the time, remembers Lindbergh's address. He said he always supported protecting natural habitat. He introduce the bill creating Chugach State Park.

"I was very enthused about the idea," Thomas said.

Eventually, the rest of the Legislature saw the way. In late 1970 the Division of Parks came into being. Ted Smith was its first director; he started the job in October that same year.

In the years since, the agency has seen its share of progress, setbacks, challenges and accomplishments. It fought, through the booms and busts of Alaska's economy, to provide outdoor recreation opportunities while conserving and preserving the natural, cultural and historical integrity of the lands.

The Legislature established three parks the first year: Kachemak Bay, Denali and Chugach. They are the oldest, and perhaps most-loved and used, parks in the state.

Today the state park system has grown to 123 park units. They range in size from the half-acre Potter Section House State Historic Site to the 1.6-million-acre Wood-Tikchik State Park. Besides historic sites and state parks, Alaska State Parks also encompasses recreation areas, historic parks, trails, marine parks, special management areas, historic and recreation sites, and preserves. Each unit is classified for a specific management purpose. According to the people instrumental in developing the areas, each area is critical to the state parks system as a whole.

FROM DREAMS TO REALITY

In a 1988 presentation, Johannsen placed the beginning of the parks movement at 1957—although "History of the Division of Parks," written by R.K. "Dick" Alman in December 1974, suggested the move began as early as 1956 with the passage of Public Law 507 by Congress.

Regardless of the date, there was always an interest in preserving some lands for public recreation in Alaska. There was a "park system" in Alaska, albeit loosely organized, from the time Alaska became a state. That system consisted of road-accessible recreation sites—or waysides—the Bureau of Land Management transferred to the new state.

"On July 1, 1959, the BLM transferred 32 campgrounds with some operating funds to the new Alaska Department of Natural Resources," Johannsen wrote. These locations, along with state recreation areas, were the basis for the Alaska state park system, he said, and many of them still are around today.

Johnson Lake State Recreation Area on the Kenai Peninsula, Big Lake North and Big Lake South State Recreation Sites in Matanuska Valley, and Clearwater State Recreation Site near Delta Junction are just a few of the still-popular destinations that have endured.

Chris Degernes, who retired as deputy director for the Division of Parks and Outdoors Recreation in 2010, stated if any Alaska State Parks unit deserves a superlative as the "first," it would not be a park at all. Nancy Lake State Recreation Area, she said, deserves that nod. Established in 1966, Nancy Lake was the first "legislatively designated area" of the state park system. The Chena River State Recreation Area came second. The Legislature established it in 1967 at the request of the Fairbanks Garden Club.

"The true genesis of the Alaska state park system comes from two places," Johannsen said. "Article

8, Section 7 of the State Constitution says, 'the Legislature may provide for the acquisition of sites, objects, and areas of natural beauty or of historic, cultural, recreational, or scientific value.'

"And there was the Statehood Act, which allowed for the selection of public lands," he added.

As the State of Alaska became more organized the fledgling park system grew with it. Not just an agency to collect land, it also, as defined in its strategic plan, had a mission of "providing outdoor recreation opportunities and conserving and interpreting natural, cultural, and historic resources for the use, enjoyment, and welfare of the people." In 1983 Johannsen emphasized these goals by renaming the Division of Parks the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, effective Jan. 1, 1984.

"We wanted people to view us as a recreation division," he said. The year before, Johannsen, his assistant Mike Lee and Anchorage photographer Clark James Mishler brainstormed ideas for an Alaska State Parks logo. The logo would be a way for people to make the connection to their parks and feel some pride in ownership.

"We sat down and worked out the eagle decal, drawing it on a napkin," Johannsen said. "It really was as simple as that."

"We met at a restaurant," recalled Lee. "It was all pretty quick, and we paid Clark 1,000 bucks."

Soon after, the Alaska State Parks' logo began appearing on stickers, signs, hat brims and shirt sleeves throughout the state parks system, and the new name of the division emerged. This was the division's first concentrated effort to market the organization through the use of a simple, easy-to-recognize image.

THE BIG THREE

Kachemak Bay had the distinction of being Alaska's first official "park" (as opposed to a recreation area, such as Nancy Lake) when the Legislature approved 105,387 acres as Kachemak Bay State Park, effective May 9, 1970. Today the park comprises nearly 400,000 acres. The signatures needed to create Chugach State Park came on Aug. 6, 1970. At a half-million acres, Chugach is the third largest state park in the country.

"These were things that happened right at the juncture of a bust period," said Sharon Cissna, state

representative for Anchorage's District 22. Cissna is credited with being one of the pioneers behind the establishment of Chugach State Park—and who Johannsen refers to as "the mother of Chugach State Park."

"But those were the days when we made things happen without money. We saw that things needed to be done, and you just did them," said Cissna.

As Kachemak Bay State Park became an official "paper" park, and Chugach went on the books as well, another effort was under way two hours north of Anchorage.

Mount McKinley National Park, now called Denali National Park and Preserve, was one of the most popular visitor destinations in the state; to this day the trend continues. Operated by the National Park Service, the federal park introduces national and international visitors to Alaska's wilderness. When land adjacent came available under the Statehood Act, the National Park Service, according to Johannsen, was interested in adding to its acreage.

"When that talk of expansion happened, there were people who wanted to head off the National Park Service," Johannsen said. "They didn't want them to have more land."

Unlike Chugach, which came about after a citizens' initiative to create a state park, it was the state that introduced legislation to acquire Denali as a park. According to the Denali State Park management plan, "the Legislature had a strong interest in tourism-related development, as well as providing recreational opportunities for Alaskans and preserving the area's natural resources."

"The National Park Service's plans, in some ways, are responsible for the establishment of some of the crown jewels of the Alaska State Park system," Johannsen said, citing the establishment of the 1.6-million-acre Wood-Tikchik State Park in June 1978 as another example of a time when the state managed to claim an area before it became a national park.

Dave Johnston was the first ranger in Denali, hired in 1974 with the primary duty of collecting garbage and maintaining dumpsters. Johnston said there were not enough people living in the Denali area at the time to form any sort of community force to create park land, but he's glad the land was eventually earmarked as a state park.

"There were just a few families, and they were all spread out," he said. "But the state, I think, liked the

Dave Johnston and family camping on Curry Ridge, Denali State Park, 1975.

Photo courtesy of Pete Robison.

good fishing (locations) there, and people did come out to fish, especially after the Parks Highway went in."

The Legislature, on September 21, 1970, passed the bill that established Denali State Park. It was a large chunk of land—some 280,947 acres. By 1981 the park grew, through various additions, to its current size of about 324,240 acres. Today the park continues to thrive, and a planning process is under way to enhance visitor opportunities in the South Denali region.

The Denali State Park's addition made for an exciting time for the division. Not only did it have three prime pieces of Alaska real estate, there were the countless slices of land in the form of waysides, recreation areas and recreation sites that needed to be managed.

"I was always looking for more," Johannsen said. "A bigger park system is a better park system."

Jim Stratton, who followed Johannsen as director from September 1995 to December 2002, agreed.

"I was always about protecting more land," he said. "I was very interested in what we could do to protect little jewels and gems of land. I always had that in mind, given whatever the Legislature was doing."

CAPPING THE COASTLINE

Another large portion of Alaska's public lands come in the form of state marine parks, a vision shared by Al Meiners, Johannsen, Hilton Wolfe and Haines park ranger Chuck Horner, among others, from as early as the mid-1970s. Washington State and British Columbia boasted such seaside gems as parks, and Alaska, with roughly 44,000 miles of coastline (according to the Alaska Coastal Management Program), seemed a perfect fit.

"Marine parks has an interesting history," said Meiners, who was a park planner at the time and worked closely with Johannsen in Anchorage while Wolfe worked on marine park planning in Southeast. "A lot of things came together. Both Neil and I went to the University of Washington graduate school, and both of use were boaters; we paid a lot of attention to the boating in Puget Sound and all along the coast.

"But also, at this time, it was the late '70s and the (U.S.) Forest Service was not doing a very good job

with recreation; they were mostly timber oriented. We decided we ought to do something about that."

The timing couldn't have been better, Meiners said, because land selections under the Statehood Act were under way and a provision in national forest regulations allowed the state to select lands for recreation.

"We wanted to protect areas of scenic value but also send a message to the Forest Service that they needed to pay attention to recreation," Meiners said.

By the early 1980s, Sen. Vic Fischer introduced a bill in the Alaska State Legislature to establish the first state marine parks. Johannsen had just returned from a four-year hiatus, during which he worked for the California State Parks system, and found Fischer's marine park proposal well under way. That was good news to Johanssen, who before leaving Alaska had pressed the marine park issue whenever he could: With the Legislature, through editorials and in magazine feature articles. He was relieved to see that the idea had not faded during his absence.

In "Alaska Marine Park System: Potential Units in Prince William Sound, Alaska," published in 1983, more than 46 state marine parks were proposed. The Legislature whittled that down to 13, but it was a start.

Bettles, Horseshoe, Shoup and Sawmill Bay State Marine Parks were among the first to be designated on July 16, 1983, setting the framework for the 25 marine parks there are today. Much of the funding for the additions where the result of damages from the Exxon Valdez oil spill, which devastated Prince William Sound in April 1989.

MORE THAN THE PARKS

With these acquisitions came the need to create some order within the division. Division leaders began to create departments to oversee a state park system bigger than any other in the country.

"There are so many more facets to the division than just the land itself," said Deputy Director Claire Holland LeClair, who replaced Degernes in 2010.

Working cooperatively among the sections has always been critical to the success of Parks and Outdoor Recreation. Bill Evans has been a landscape architect with the Division's Park Design and

Construction section since 1980, when he was hired by Chip Dennerlein (director from December 1979 to April 1982). Evans said he often works on projects in which more than one section must collaborate.

"I work with the section of H&A (History and Archaeology)," he said. "I work closely with them because I have to understand what they are doing, and they bring in some pretty cool stuff."

Evans is currently involved in the landscape design of the new Eagle River Nature Center, a job that combines the expertise of several sections within the division. One of the goals for the area surrounding the center is to include outdoor education opportunities in which visitors can learn about the native plant life, Evans said.

"It will be an education area, and we're going to control more of the plant communities that are coming back in," he said. "The people in Interpretation and Education will help with that too. The surface water drainage ... you want to separate the oils from going into the natural water system with retention ponds, will be educational, as well."

Of Evans, and the critical role his section plays, Johannsen says: "Bill Evans has put the face on the state park units that the people see. He's the best land-use designer I've ever worked with."

The division is a multifaceted organization. Each section works with others to create a better park system. Its growth in the past 40 years has been remarkable, Johannsen said. As an agency that is constantly trying to do more with less money, and is subject to the boom and bust economy that affects agencies throughout state government, the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation has continued to provide tangible services to the public.

And while not every dream of every group has resulted in the establishment of a state park—Johannsen cited Thompson Pass and Hatcher Pass as two failed initiatives—for the most part, it is the people who have made Alaska State Parks what it is today.

"It was a time to get the land so that is what we did," Johannsen said. "We worked on the fear that it would never, could never, happen again."

While lands have been added to the state park system since then, it has not been on as large a scale as it was thirty to forty years ago. Fort Rousseau Causeway State Historical Park in Sitka is the latest to

"Most people don't realize that the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation encompasses more than the state park system. Our agency includes the Alaska Boating Safety Program as well as the Office of History and Archaeology, which is where you'll find the people who fulfill important roles such as the state historic preservation officer, the state historian and the state archaeologist. DPOR also administers several state and federal grant programs, including the federal Land & Water Conservation Fund and the state-funded Snowmobile Trails Program."

Claire LeClair, deputy director, Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation

join the ranks of the parks system.

Meanwhile, the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation continues to strive to meet its mission to "provide outdoor recreation opportunities and conserve and interpret natural, cultural and historic resources for the use, enjoyment and welfare of the people," giving Alaskans, and the people who choose to visit this state, an inviting place to play.

2

Chugach State Park

In Anchorage's back yard, this park is truly for the people

ANCHORAGE—Sharon Cissna remembers how outraged she was when, at the very inexperienced yet overly confident age of 25, she found out that a logging operation was planned for the Indian Valley along Turnagain Arm, an area she thought was beautiful. For years, Indian Valley had been a favorite among locals for hiking and exploring the backcountry. It had been part of Chugach National Forest, but the federal government had recently made it available to the state to select under the Statehood Act.

The proposed logging project could have put an end to the wilderness experience Cissna and her hiking buddies enjoyed so much. All of the old-growth spruce would be in jeopardy. She feared the clear-cutting of the area would ruin the natural landscape.

Fortunately her naïve confidence made Cissna and her friends oblivious to the overwhelming odds against them. They organized meetings that went late into the night, had impromptu conversations with important people, and built consensus with everyone from city hydrologists to geologists to local politicians; thus creating a mountain of paperwork that they took to the Legislature.

Their goal: To create a park owned by the state that would protect the beauty and landscape surrounding Alaska's largest population center.

"I think if we were to try something like that today, it would have a very hard time passing (the Legislature)," said Cissna, now a state representative for Anchorage's District 22. "But those were the days when we made things happen without money. We saw that things needed to be done, and you just did them."

That is just what happened.

State Park director Ted Smith holds a public hearing on opening Chugach State Park for cross-country skiing and snowmachining, 1973.

Photo courtesy of Neil Johannsen.

The small cadre of supporters, including Cissna, Pete Martin, Art Davidson, Mark Ganapole, and legislators Lowell Thomas Jr. and Helen Beirne, among others, went to work. Eventually the state agreed that the mountains surrounding Anchorage should be protected for generations to come.

Today we have Chugach State Park, a half-million acre jewel in the backyard of the state's largest city and surrounded by more than half of Alaska's population. It's the third-largest state park in the United States, comprising some 40 percent of Municipality of Anchorage land. It is one of the most frequented parks, attracting roughly 1.3 million visitors each year. The Legislature formally designated Chugach State Park with Senate Bill Number 388, and Governor Keith Miller signed the final document that created the park on Aug. 6, 1970.

Art Davidson, second from right, joined by Jim Kross, David Brower and Davidson's family at Rainbow Valley.

Photo courtesy of Pete Martin.

CREATING A MASTERPIECE

The road leading to the park's establishment, however, took some time to build.

"It was around 1965, and Dick Alman, who was head of operations for state parks, had often talked about the idea of a Chugach Mountains state park," said Pete Martin, who worked for the Borough of Anchorage and Alaska State Parks. Martin was one of the proponents of the establishment of the park.

"In 1969, in early May, I was driving down Turnagain Arm on a sunny day," Martin said. "Art had just read in the (Anchorage) Daily News about a timber sale in Indian Valley. They were going to sell 14 million board feet at $35 an acre. We decided that, 'Uh-oh that doesn't sound like a good idea.' "

With the timber sale looming, members of the grassroots organization made a decision to file a suit to stop the sale. Davidson got the paperwork going with the help of Russ Dunn and Warren Matthews, Cissna said.

"That (suit) started a process that we knew was going to happen one day, that we had been talking about for a long time, this need to select lands for the state," she said. "But we really hadn't come to the park idea yet. This was the beginning."

As the suit progressed, Davidson connected with Cissna, Cissna connected Martin, Martin connected with Mark Ganapole, and so on, until there was a strong grassroots group formed.

It was the perfect time for such an effort. It was the late '60s, a time when the phrase "power to the

people" held some sway, when the population of the state was around 300,000—less than half of today's 700,000—and when small groups of people truly believed they could, and did, accomplish big things.

The time was ripe for change.

Cissna and her friends organized. Their first "proposal" was a two-page mimeographed pamphlet called "Chugach State Park: A Proposal," published in 1969. It suggested a section of land east of Anchorage, bordering Turnagain Arm to the south and abutting Eklutna Lake to the north.

The chief reasons for the formation of a park, the pamphlet said, were numerous:

1. "Private holdings on a majority of access roads into the Chugach and absence of public road access,
2. little or no maintenance or development of existing footpaths and/or scenic trails,
3. absence of developed camping and recreation areas,
4. the public hazard which usually occurs because of the debris which occurs at access points and for which there is no maintenance."

"We thought we really needed to get this timber sale stopped," Martin said. "Sharon got work done with the legislators, and she went to all the outdoor clubs—the snowmobilers, hikers, equestrian folks—to get the idea going."

"We went to dozens and dozens and dozens of different kinds of meetings," Cissna said. "We just got people in the communities involved and it happened."

As 1969 rolled into the next decade, Cissna, Martin and the others continued their quest. This group of like-minded people enjoyed the natural landscapes of their communities. They knew that the newly minted State of Alaska's biggest asset, indeed, was its geography. The challenge was getting others to see the way.

"There was certainly a citizen's movement but there were also some very interesting things happening at the time," said Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation director Neil Johannsen, who retired in 1995.

Famed aviator Charles Lindbergh visited Alaska in 1968 on a conservation mission to urge the state to protect wildlife and land. State Sen. Lowell Thomas Jr. supported the idea and helped sway other legislators to see the way, too.

"The idea was brought to me by Sharon's group," he said. "They had quite a committee going; they had done a lot of homework on the coordinates and what the boundary should be. I was very enthused about the idea.

"I introduced the bill and was the primary sponsor."

Cissna said one of the key selling points among legislators was the detailed mapping that Ganapole conducted. Ganapole, later to become Mark Hickok, made sure the best of the lands surrounding Anchorage were in those maps.

"She had been working on this for Congress as part of the land claims settlement act," Cissna said of Ganapole, who died in 2006. "She was trying to make sure conservation was in the picture."

By early 1970, the group had found support from the Legislature, not only from Thomas, but other senators and representatives too.

"They enlisted the help of Lowell Thomas Jr., who was active in the senate, and Helen Beirne came on board," Martin said. "Both were Republicans, but then that shows you how different things were back then."

"Others supported it too—Chancey Croft, Nick Begich, Joe Josephson and Jay Hammond," Thomas said. "My wife and son and daughter had been up (to the Chugach Mountains) and done some skiing, so I liked the area. And as a pilot I had a plane with skis and we used to fly out and land on the Eagle Icefield. That's all a part of the park now. There were many of us that were very enthused about this being a park."

Not everyone was excited, though, Thomas said.

"The main opposition we ran into was the mining groups. They said, 'Wait a minute fellows, there might be some gold or other minerals there,' " Thomas said. "But we overcame that in the Legislature and the bill went through the Senate. In the House, Helen Beirne introduced the bill and her's got

through too.

"The miners just thought, 'Gee whiz, don't deny us the opportunity to explore for minerals in the ground,' but our argument was this might be the last chance to protect something so close to such a large population," Thomas said.

Davidson, in an Feb. 8, 1970 article he wrote for the then-named Daily News titled "It's a Great Place for a State Park," wrote about how fitting it was to set aside the land surrounding the largest city in the state as a state park.

"The Chugach State Park would protect the area from changes that will diminish its value, especially its recreational value," he wrote. "It will help assure an adequate supply of clean water for Anchorage. It will make certain that private development will not clog the paths of access to the Chugach … It will allow protection for some of the animals and birds of the area, assuring that children 10, 30, 80 years from now will be able to see the same wildlife we enjoy seeing today."

Davidson's description is not that far off from reality. Forty years later, Chugach today is perhaps one of the most prominent and well-used parks, with close and numerous access points. It is the sight that visitors first see when landing by plane in Anchorage. Hiking is one of the most popular activities, and people are drawn to the dozens of trails. From McHugh Creek to Flattop, Rabbit Lake to Hanging Valley, and Baldy to Twin Peaks, the options span the acreage of this massive and beautiful stretch of land.

"What's impressed me the most is the quality of the experience that people take away from the park," said Chugach State Park superintendent Tom Harrison. "It has a profound effect. It doesn't matter if it's the ATVers, the skiers, the tourists who see the beluga whales, or the father trapper teaching his kid to trap, there is such a variety and duality of lifetime opportunities."

SHARING THE PARK'S BEAUTY

With Chugach on the books, the newly formed Division of Parks set about creating a plan for maintaining the half-million acres now in its possession. Doug Fesler would become one of the area's first three rangers, hired April 11, 1971 as a Ranger 1, a position he held until about February of 1976 before being promoted to chief ranger.

Dedication of Chugach State Park, 1970.
Photo courtesy of Alaska State Parks.

"Chugach State Park officially opened in August of 1970 with a dedication ceremony held at the Upper O'Malley entrance to the park," Fesler said. "We had no park rangers or superintendent initially, but Dick Alman, formerly a pig farmer from Iowa, had been hired as chief of operations and Ted Smith, a career forester, was chosen as the first director … George Hall, formerly of the National Park Service, was the deputy director. I was hired eight months later along with two other rangers, Gary Kroll and John Heiser."

Funding for the positions, Fesler recalls, was already a challenge for the budding agency.

"In fact, because there was no money to pay ranger salaries, Dick Alman devised a plan whereby the Highway Department (now the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities) would provide reimbursable services money to the Department of Natural Resources in return for DNR rangers emptying all the highway litter barrels. What seemed like a great plan, at first, effectively turned all the park rangers in the state into uniform-wearing garbage truck drivers and it would take years of hard effort on the part of rangers to redeem the loss of respect and low esteem held by their professional peers."

The Chugach was a lawless region back then, too, Fesler noted. While the Legislature may have made the park official, there were landowners whose property abutted the park boundaries and who did not like the intrusion of the state on what they had so long considered their own personal domains.

"My first year as a ranger I received two weeks of basic law enforcement, first aid and ranger training and was turned loose with a badge, a booklet of State regulations, a huge stack of maps (land status plats indicating park boundaries) and a list of highway litter barrel locations," Fesler said. "At that time, none of the boundaries of the 728-square-mile park were marked, and many homesteaders were up in arms over the park's creation. Some threatened to shoot any ranger that set foot on their property. Park access was difficult at best. The only sign indicating the presence of a park was the dedication sign installed the previous August. For years this vast area had been treated like a lawless no-man's land with no regulations posted and none enforced. Off-road vehicles could drive anywhere, target shooting was unrestricted and timber was being harvested at will. Now we were the new kid on the block and the wolves were hungry."

Fesler endured the first year, despite the stinky reality of spending much of his time emptying trash barrels and confronting angry land owners. He was still drawn to the land and doing a job that he

knew was meaningful.

"I have always loved mountains and wild areas and have spent more than two-thirds of my life in and around the Chugach," he said. "For me, working as a ranger was all about protecting the park lands from destruction and helping people to enjoy them safely."

Helen Nienhauser, author of "55 Ways to the Wilderness in Southcentral Alaska" and a longtime trails and public lands advocate, was already intimately familiar with Chugach State Park. She spent huge chunks of time exploring the backyard wilderness while researching for her book, which is now in its fifth edition. Like Fesler, she wanted people to enjoy the beauty of the land but not so much that they destroyed it.

"I started working on the book in the late 1960s, about when the idea for the park happened," Nienhauser said. "But it wasn't easy. You couldn't find your way to the park easily in the '60s."

Access to the park, Nienhauser said, was an incredible challenge. And it became a continuous challenge for rangers, Fesler said.

The "garbage-man phase" lasted another few years, but by 1974, Fesler said a shift occurred as the agency settled into its role as keeper of the lands.

"It gave rise to the beginnings of the 'professional ranger phase,' involving greater involvement in law enforcement, search and rescue, and interpretation," Fesler said of the early 1970s. "To a large extent, this transition to professionalism would not have been possible without the assistance of the CETA program (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act), a federally funded internship program that allowed the state to hire much-needed rangers, trail crews and others."

During this time, Johannsen was superintendent of Chugach State Park, and he wanted to take advantage of that funding. Fesler and rangers Alex Connors and Ed Stauber got serious about increasing patrol of the vast region.

"We were grossly understaffed and overworked but at least had a grasp of the dragon's tail," Fesler said. "Neil could see that the park was out of control and needed more patrols, more signs, more of everything. That summer he had us close the Anchorage Hillside area of the park to unrestricted vehicle use. The area was being destroyed by off-road vehicles and he wanted the area posted as

closed to all motorized vehicles. Similarly, portions of Eagle River, Peter's Creek, and Eklutna were posted as closed to motorized vehicles.

"The response was immediate: Vandalism of signs soared, and violators fled when stopped. I personally remember replacing over 25 signposts a week that were torn down or pulled out by 4-by-4s. Most riders ignored the signs, and at first we used a policy of issuing warnings, rather than citations. The word got out fast, 'Hey, you can ride all you want; all the rangers do is warn you,' " said Fesler. "Then we started citing violators and impounding vehicles as evidence. Slowly the number of violations decreased, but the seriousness of the encounters increased. Fights and flights were common, but the word was getting out: 'Don't mess with the rangers; they'll get you!' "

Today's rangers patrol Chugach State Park on a similar shoestring, although their methods for enforcement are more streamlined and their training more involved. Access remains a primary challenge.

"We have two issues facing the park," Harrison said. "One is access, two is funding. But there is good news." While 48 of 50 state parks budgets across the country dropped in 2010, two stayed steady. Alaska was one of the two.

Matthew Wedeking has been a ranger at Chugach State Park since Dec. 16, 2002, hired by then-chief ranger Mike Goodwin and Chugach superintendent Jerry Lewanski. He became the park's chief ranger in October of 2006.

"I remember I had to take a half day from working on the trail crew at Alyeska Resort," Wedeking said of his first interview for the ranger position. "I reeked of chainsaw gas mix—it must have made an impression. Jerry offered me the job a few days later. In February of 2003 I attended the Department of Public Safety Academy in Sitka. After graduating and going through the Park field-training program I was let loose to do my job on my own."

The park now has four rangers: Wedeking oversees the work of Kurt Hensel, Tom Crockett and Keith Wilson. With their shared patrol, that comes to about 125,000 acres apiece to oversee. Wedeking said that's the staff equivalent that would be found in a 15-acre park in other states.

Wedeking, who was not even born when Chugach became Alaska's second state park, said he doesn't

let the numbers get to him. His generation has never known an Alaska without Chugach State Park.

"Previous managers have always been under the impression we have to create this park and more facilities, infrastructure and trails. I feel I look at it differently," he said. "The park is created—I don't have to do that. The park must now be run more efficiently and frugally than ever. With shrinking staff and break-even budgets, park managers must get more creative than ever. We have to plan ahead with what to do with our limited resources. We have to be proactive rather than reactive. It's a generation shift."

Besides, it's the best job ever, he added, taking him to some of the most beautiful country in Alaska.

"I enjoy all of (the park)," he said. "Archangel Lakes in Upper Bird Valley stick in my mind as being remote and beautiful. Looking down into Ship Valley from any angle can make you feel small. Crow Pass has been a recent favorite due to our increased trail work. My overall favorite, though, would probably have to be Rainbow Peak. I started hiking the peak every spring a few years back. It's one of the first to melt out and it gets my head on straight for the start of summer."

Harrison said he thinks Chugach State Park has lived up to the expectations of those who envisioned its existence more than 40 years ago. Officials are currently working on three plans for the park's management—a master plan, trails plan and access plan—which he thinks will guide it well into the next several decades.

"It's everybody's park and you can't segregate it, but you can try to meet the demands of users," he said. "One of the great things going on now (in park planning) is the concept of sustainability. The park is world-class stuff, and it's right here so you kind of take it for granted; but making a sustainable plan will help it be here in the long run."

Park ranger Matt Wedeking with Chugach superintendent Mike Goodwin, 2002.

Photo courtesy of Bill Evans.

3

Kachemak Bay is born

The first of Alaska's state parks also treasures its wilderness

Clem Tillion is 85 years old, but on a spring day in 2010 he had just come inside after spending the morning offloading six tons of freight off his boat at high water across Kachemak Bay.

Surrounded as he is by some of the most beautiful land in the state, Tillion said it's easy to keep a youthful lifestyle. Something about this place—Alaska's first state park and only wilderness park—has gotten into his bones. He's lived in Alaska for 62 years—58 in Kachemak Bay—and figures he'll die here too.

"If I leave the state it's because somebody paid me to leave," he said.

In 2010, Kachemak Bay State Park and Wilderness Park celebrated its 40th anniversary with one very important superlative: It was the first.

In the year 1970, the state created its first three state parks: Kachemak, Chugach and Denali. Those parks joined an existing state-run system of smaller public lands that had been managed as recreation sites, recreation areas, waysides and historic sites. The sheer size of the parks would form a strong base on which Division of Parks could grow.

Kachemak Bay earned its designation as a state park when the Legislature, effective May 9, 1970, approved 105,387 acres as Kachemak Bay State Park. Two years later, the Legislature added nearly 200,000 acres, specifying it as a State Wilderness Park. By 1989, another 68,500 acres had been added into the mix. Today it is at nearly 400,000 acres.

And Tillion, it could be said, is the father of Kachemak. He loved the land before it was ever a park, carving out a homestead on hundreds of acres of land in Halibut Cove in the 1950s with his wife, Diana, and their four children. Later, while serving in the state Legislature, he helped craft the bill that would protect the area surrounding his home.

Sen. Clem Tillion (helm) runs a skiff from Halibut Cove to Grewink Glacier. Roland Maw (with park patch) was the second superintendent of Chugach and Kachemak Bay State Parks.

Photo courtesy of Neil Johannsen.

"I've got the original plat that I use," he said of the Kachemak Bay boundaries. "I hand-drew those boundaries."

Neil Johannsen, the longest-serving director of the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation (February 1983 to September 1995) and now retired and living on Bainbridge Island, Wash., began his career with the Division of Parks a couple of years after Kachemak went on the books. He was the park's first superintendent. He said the acquisition of that land was one of the most important park purchases the division has ever made due to the area's sheer size and beauty.

"Clem was (key), and he really is the father of Kachemak Bay State Park," agreed Johannsen. "He lived there, and he wanted to protect the land from development. Without him, it would not have happened."

HISTORY

In a presentation at the annual banquet of the Alaska Center for Coastal Studies in Homer on May 1, 1993, Johannsen talked about the humble beginnings of Kachemak as a park. As he has stated over the years, the establishment of parks in general has been the result of the people. For Kachemak, he claimed, it was no different.

"The January 1970 legislative dinner hosted in Anchorage by the Alaska Conservation Society and The Sierra Club included a presentation by Mark Ganapole (later to become Hickok) in which she pitched the establishment of four state parks, including the Kachemak Bay State Park, which was proposed to stretch from Kachemak Bay to the outer Kenai Coast, an area encompassing 300,000 acres," he said.

Tillion remembers that time vividly. He said the Department of Natural Resources was proposing timber sales in the area and there were people who didn't like it. As a legislator and resident of the very land in question, he also wanted to see the land protected. He introduced the legislation, along with legislator Bob Palmer, to create the first 105,387 acres.

"I picked out all the places that people shouldn't live and put them in the park. Anything with a harbor I left out, so there could be development."

Tillion also preferred the state be involved with protection of the land, rather than the federal government, "because I think we do need big parks but I don't support anything run by the federal government," he said. "I'm much like my forebears in that way."

Once the park was established that eased some of the worry, and in 1971 legislator Mike Rose introduced a bill adding the wilderness park acreage—some 200,000 acres—to the park, which passed in 1972.

At about the same time, though, Congress passed Public Law 92-203, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, he said. When that happened, the nearby Seldovia Native Association claimed lands back from within the park, prompting negotiations and legal battles that lasted well into the 1990s.

"Kachemak was the recreation site requested by Seldovia, and people in Homer were not happy," he said.

Still, even after the park designation became official with the state the titles seemed simply a formality. It took nearly 15 years for the cash-strapped state park system to get enough money to staff the then 300,000-acre park.

"We used to call them 'paper parks,' " said Jeff Johnson, who in 1984 would become the park's first ranger. The parks had no staff and no facilities. "Human beings decided to set all this land aside for special purposes, but of course it was there and being enjoyed by people before it was ever a park."

Johnson said patrolling the waters of Kachemak Bay and the wild lands surrounding it was the best ranger job he ever had.

"For a ranger, it was the real deal," he said of his 10-year tenure there. He based out of a cabin in Halibut Cove Lagoon that had formerly been an Alaska Department of Fish and Game hatchery and was transferred to the Division of Parks. There, Johnson and whatever crew of volunteers he could muster helped set trails, patrol the water and add just enough basic infrastructure to accommodate visitors, but not so much as to impact the character of the area.

"We did a little bit of everything because so much needed to be done," he said.

The "new" ranger station was hard to get to, primarily because of the tidal action affecting entrance to the lagoon. Their only means of communication was a low-band radio.

"It was broken half the time," Johnson recalled. "We had a mile long wire from the ranger station up to the radio transmitter, a 20-minute hike away. That line would break in 35 places each year.

View from inside Halibut Lagoon Ranger Station, Kachemak Bay State Park.

Photo courtesy of Jeff Johnson.

Halibut Lagoon Ranger Station, Kachemak Bay State Park.

Photo courtesy of Jeff Johnson.

"For the first couple of weeks every season, I'd be up there climbing trees having to patch it together so we could communicate."

But, Johnson said, "it was a ranger's dream come true, going to Alaska to be a park ranger and having the honor and thrill to have been among the first to be there as professionals. There aren't that many people in the world who have that chance."

Roger MacCampbell, the district ranger for the area since 1985, began his career patrolling Deep Creek and Anchor River to the north while Johnson watched over Kachemak. The two became fast friends and those first years working together, MacCampbell said, cemented a bond that lasts to this day.

"Jeff and I really had a great partnership and we struggled, between the two of us and great crews, because we had no script to follow," MacCampbell said. "We started building a foundation for the trails and facilities that are there now. We mentored each other."

There wasn't much development at Kachemak Bay in those early years, MacCampbell said.

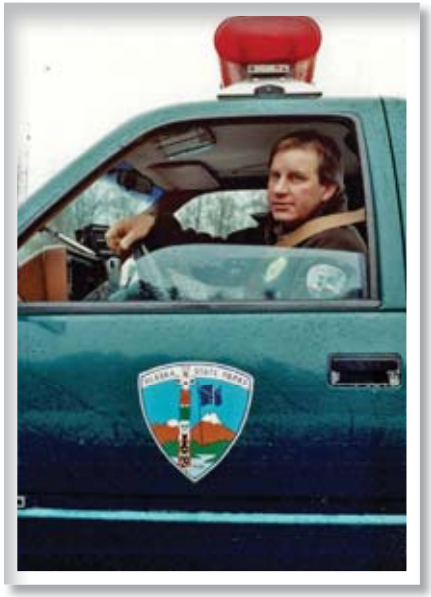
"There was 10 miles of trail built by locals. There was an old floating dock with a running line; things like that," he said. "There was just stuff but there weren't any great public facilities. So we started writing a management plan … and modeling after other simple ones that had been used before."

In the summer, MacCampbell said he and Johnson would hire crews to help flag routes for new trails. Some locals didn't like it. Most of the time, he recalled, once they would use the improved trails they changed their way of thinking.

"The thing is, back then, most of the people using the park really didn't need us, didn't want us," he said. "These were the locals, very self-reliant people who had the skill sets needed to be out there."

But MacCampbell and Johnson knew it wouldn't stay that way for long, he said. As the population grew and people became more aware of the park's beauty, more so-called adventurers showed up.

"Now somebody can be up on a very well-built trail and they'll step off the trail and next thing you know your phone is ringing," he said. "It happens two and three times a summer now."



Park Ranger Roger MacCampbell, Kachemak Bay State Park.

Photo courtesy of Alaska State Parks.

Jack Sinclair retired in 2012 from his position as the area superintendent for the Kenai Region, which includes Kachemak Bay State Park and Wilderness Park. In 1984, as MacCampbell and Johnson were settling into their positions, he too was becoming part of the overall organization.

"I started on May 3, 1984, but I was not a ranger. I was a law-enforcement-grade resource technician two—basically like a ranger but you don't get paid as much," Sinclair said. The division was in the process of dividing the state parks into districts and some semblance of order was being created. Sinclair's job was to roam the Peninsula, helping out where and as needed.

"1984 was kind of a banner year for state parks," Sinclair noted. "The bill that created the Kenai River Special Management Area had passed the year before, providing for a million-dollar increase in the state budget for creation of the (area)."

Money was finally available to add a half dozen or so rangers, and oil revenue royalties were beginning to flow, sweetening the coffers of the division.

"All these things happened at this same time, so it was this burgeoning of the parks system," he said. Those years, he said, helped Kachemak Bay State Park launch its identity with the public, who came to recognize it as one of the most beautiful places in the state.

Today, Kachemak Bay State Park and Wilderness Park remains one of the gems of the state park system. The two areas comprise some of the most stunning scenery in the state. This rich and varied region is home to a diverse fauna and flora, unique weather patterns, mountains, glaciers and water. Kachemak Bay itself is a relatively shallow, 39-mile long nutrient-rich estuary sheltered by the Kenai Mountains from the rugged outer coast of the Gulf of Alaska, according to the most recent Kachemak Bay State Park and Kachemak Bay State Wilderness Park management plan, published in 1995. The waters and tidelands of the park are also a state-designated Critical Habitat Area.

The Wilderness Park, abutting the southern boundary of the park, extends to the Gulf of Alaska and, as its name implies, is a true roadless wilderness with some 79 miles of rugged coastline.

It is the only park that has a wilderness designation (although other parks contain areas of wilderness designation, Kachemak is the only separate entity with such a management plan).

"This park is so cool," said MacCampbell, who 26 years later is still working as the district ranger

PARK VERSUS WILDERNESS PARK

Park—*State of Alaska statute AS 41.21.990 defines "scenic park" as a "relatively spacious areas of outstanding natural significance, where major values are in their natural geological, faunal or floral characteristics, the purpose of which is directed primarily toward the preservation of its outstanding natural features and where development is minimal and only for the purpose of making the areas available for public enjoyment in a manner consistent with the preservation of natural values such as camping, picnicking, sightseeing, nature study, hiking, riding and related activities which includes no major modification of the land, forests, or water development that are primarily of urban character."*

there—a job he knows is coveted. “I can’t find another park in the entire world like this. This is the only park where the entire park is wilderness. (Kachemak) is actually two separate parks. The wilderness park puts it up on a higher rung on the ladder for managing it, though. We’re not going to develop it—that’s directed—and we told the public, ‘this is to be left to its own devices.’ We’re not going to build trails and cabins. It’s going to stay wild.”

The very nature of the park is its allure. While accessible, off the road system, it’s also Alaska at its most pure.

“It’s as remote as your experience, skill set and confidence allows,” MacCampbell said.

When the weather turns bad, Johnson added, “you may as well be on the moon.”

While the wilderness park maintains its untouched status, the more developed park has continued to grow and expand as the population and demand has allowed it to.

Johnson said the park has changed in many ways since he started patrolling it in 1984, with increased visitorship, the addition of public-use cabins—and most recently a concession offering public-use yurts—and improved boat moorings and hiking trails.

These improvements appear to be what the public is looking for, too.

In a survey conducted by Hellenthal and Associates in 1991 and 1992, more than 81 percent of respondents supported public-use cabins in the park. Those same people supported more development of trails, tent campgrounds and other recreational opportunities.

In a survey conducted 10 years earlier, the wishes were less enthusiastic—respondents, according to the management plan, had “a cautious attitude concerning facility development within the park. Those surveyed strongly supported foot trails and camping areas, but did not favor lodges, marinas or docks.”

“There was a time when I would have been against public-use cabins, but that has changed for me,” Johnson said. “There is an element of the population who wouldn’t go to Kachemak without that buffer (of camping comfort). So we’re broadening a constituency with those cabins, and they have been successful.”

PARK VERSUS WILDERNESS PARK

Wilderness Park—*State of Alaska statute AS 41.21.990 defines “wilderness park” as “an area whose predominant character is the result of the interplay of natural processes, large enough and so situated as to be unaffected, except in minor ways, by what takes place in the nonwilderness around it, a physical condition which activates the innermost emotions of the observer and where development of man-made objects will be strictly limited and depend entirely on good taste and judgment so the wilderness values are not lost.”*

Tillion, however, has always been against cabins, which he thinks belong on private property only. Still, he acknowledged that the cabin program seems to be successful and allows a source of operating income from user fees to keep the park system going.

Today, as Kachemak's primary caretaker of some 400,000 acres of parkland, MacCampbell said he thinks the park has successfully grown with the demands of the people but with a respect to the land. It's something he said he is proud to have been a part of.

"Working here, they're all good years, that's the thing you have to remind yourself," he said. "When I get in that boat, in spite of no money or bosses or you're going through a divorce, your kid's a nightmare, your dog died—whatever tragedy is going on in your life, when I put on this uniform, I think, 'I'm getting paid? I'm getting paid?' None of us are in this for the money. There are some days I just have to remind myself of that."

But, he said, he also has to remind himself that there is plenty of work still to be done.

"We have to be as good as any cop on the street—not just to go out and develop the area for recreation but to protect it for future generations," he said. "We're very road-and-campground oriented, where the people are concentrated, but we have to do more resource management work and we have to have boots on the ground."

4

Rangers: Alaska State Parks' ground crew

Conversations with four of Alaska's first state park rangers

TALKEETNA—Dave Johnston emerges from the trail that leads to his cabin deep in the woods of Talkeetna wearing tattered shorts and carrying an ancient external frame backpack on his shoulders. He's tall and lean, with a bushy beard and thick hair. It's late spring and the sun is shining; its warmth urging the leaves on the birch and aspen to open in full bloom.

As he reaches the spot where the trail meets the dirt road, he apologizes for being late but smiles, looking as if he has enjoyed the stroll nonetheless.

Indeed, the mountains surrounding Denali State Park have been Johnston's home for more than 40 years, since he first moved to the state with a taste for adventure in 1969.

"We came here looking for homestead land," he said, recalling the first trip north so many years ago.

What he found was a lifelong career with Alaska State Parks that allowed him to live the life he wanted and contribute to the growth of the state park system in an area he loves. Johnston is Denali State Park's first park ranger, hired in 1974— just four years after the area became one of Alaska's first three state parks.

As Johnston puts it, he was nothing more than a glorified trash collector at the time. The budget was limited and the park new, so he spent that first summer driving a garbage truck, emptying trash containers and re-supplying campgrounds with wood. When those chores were done, he spoke to campers, built trails and fixed up cabins for public use.

He loved every minute of it.

Dave Johnston at Veteren's Memorial, Denali State Park, 1988.

Photo courtesy of Alaska State Parks.

DENALI DAYS

Johnston reaches the end of the trail, which is in fact the pathway to the cabin he and wife, Cari Sayre, have lived in for at least part of each year since they married in 1986. We make our way back, about a mile, winding along the trail in an open forest, pleasantly devoid of mosquitoes this early in the spring.

The cabin is quintessential Alaskan, with sod roof and walls made of logs cut from the property. A view of Mount McKinley is strikingly clear from the bluff beyond the property, and the mountain—with which Johnston is intimately familiar—seems to loom within touching distance. Tattered peace flags hang from the trees, giving the property an air of internationality that hints at Johnston's colorful life.

Upon closer inspection, the cabin reveals that it is also a craftsman's exhibit, with hand-carved details, built-in shelves, and benches and other small touches that set it apart from your basic bare-bones cabin in the woods. It's a home built with care, another hint at Johnston's life as a skilled carpenter.

Those carpentry skills and his innate ease at being in the backcountry were two very important assets Johnston relied upon while working as a ranger. As we sat down at an arched bench and dining table, another handmade creation, he shared some of his memories as a park ranger.

"I got the job because of Pete Robinson," he said of his longtime friend and college colleague. "I had a degree in forest recreation from Colorado State; Pete and I went to school together. Pete lived here already and told me about it."

Those early years, Johnston said, were spent mostly keeping trash barrels clean and trying to improve what little infrastructure existed. It was a job that suited him well because as a self-professed dumpster diver, he'd routinely scavenge for treasures as he worked. Once, while emptying trashcans at a wayside, he looked in and saw a half-eaten hamburger, still fresh and edible.

So he ate it.

"I was just trying to get it before Pete (Robinson, who by then worked with state parks as well) fed it to his pigs," he said. "Pete said he could judge the state of the economy by how many pigs he could feed with all that trash."

Another time, Art Davidson, a friend of his and longtime advocate of Alaska State Parks, wanted to get a message to Johnston.

"He knew how I went through garbage so he threw (the note) away, and I did find it," he said.

Johnston's territory ranged from the Susitna Bridge near Talkeetna to Cantwell, a whopping 100-plus miles of road and 325,000-plus acres of parkland for one man to patrol. It was a lot of work, he said, but he worked with good people and enjoyed the variety of what each day would bring.

"Larry Wilde was my boss," Johnston said of his direct supervisor. "He was a good boss. He stuck up for his workers."

Neil Johannsen was the department's chief of planning in 1974, and from him came a directive to build a trail in Denali State Park to timberline, Johnston said.

"There was a BLM trail that was up past the Cascade Trail in the upper valley, but at one point we came into a huge granite slide and we went straight up into the alders," he said. "I don't think it was what Neil had in mind."

Johnston said after a while he got into a groove with the job. Because rangers were beginning fresh, there were no instruction manuals that came with their jobs—"I just invented it as I went along," Johnston acknowledges. "Larry had some expectations like fixing the trails to the outhouses and decorating bulletin boards and supplying the campgrounds with firewood—mostly I was a maintenance guy."

On the drawn-out days when he drove the highway collecting garbage, Johnston said he'd often find his mind wandering.

"I'd catch myself driving practically in my sleep and I realized that was a clear message," he said. "I told myself, 'You need to learn more about the park.' "

As a result, Johnston created "get to know your park" day every Friday and he would venture into the treed wilderness beyond the pavement and discover it, step by step, by walking throughout the park. They were some of the most valuable moments spent in the park, he said, because before long he knew every inch of it.

"It paid off, especially for trail building," Johnston said. "I knew where all the views were and the neat natural features worth seeing."

Johnston said the trail building didn't come easy, but he was lucky that first year to have students from the Youth Conservation Corps led by a man of the name of Bill Wright. The program was very popular and eventually morphed into a college program, drawing outdoors-minded youth every summer.

"It was one of my favorite parts of the job," he said of working with the young people, who seemed so enthused and appreciative to be in Alaska.

As the years passed, ranger Dave Porter joined Johnston, bringing the ranger staff to two for the area. The two Daves worked side-by-side improving trails, patrolling campgrounds and getting to know their park better.

They also had to adhere to new regulations requiring firearms training, a duty that seemed to come to Porter easily, but not Johnston, he said. At police academy training, he said, "Larry Wilde once again saved my ass."

"We had shooting tests, you know: bang, bang, bang, six bullets. There was a speed loader, which I'd never tried before. I borrowed it for the test," he said. "You can dump your six cartridges and throw six more in there really fast, and mine didn't work very well. I didn't get to shoot my last six shots.

"And then, from years of bad habit when I'm out on a building project I just have a habit of chucking my hammer in the air and catching it, and I did that with my loaded gun and they came unglued, rightly so, you know, and if it hadn't of been for Larry I would have been out of there."

After the training Johnston said he carried the gun for a couple of years, but only reluctantly.

"My heart's not in it. I spent a lot of time in New Zealand where the cops don't carry guns and I just think my carrying a gun is asking the other guy to use his gun and it just escalates the whole trip. I dealt with armed drunks and all kinds of stuff without a gun in the early days, and I did OK. Maybe I'm really lucky, but I just think, 'Be low key, and you can get what you want.' "

Finally, during another shooting test in Palmer, which Johnston failed miserably, his superiors recommended he didn't carry a gun anymore, figuring he was more dangerous armed than not. It

came as a relief to Johnston.

"So I got the same pay but didn't carry a gun," he said. "This lasted a couple of years, working in the backcountry, it was great. And I still don't agree with that law enforcement trip."

Each day as a Denali State Park ranger brought a new adventure, Johnston said, but the highlight was always the time he spent in the backcountry, enjoying the scenery, the wildlife and the serenity of being in the out-of-doors.

"I've seen quite a few (brown bears) but never in scary situations," he said. "There was always plenty of room and I just got to enjoy them.

"One time I was on an all-nighter on the solstice, I like to go out and do something, climb something, on the solstice, and I was coming down the north ridge of Indian (near Kesugi Mountain) and there came a brown bear and a couple of cubs up from the other side.

"I watched the mama and one of the cubs slide off down into this cirque full of snow, and it was so cool watching them turn around and glissade with their claws out."

The second cub, though, paced at the top of the snowfield, seeming nervous about the venture, Johnston said.

"Finally the little one got brave enough to slide down and join the rest of the family," he said. "It was just so neat. They were just high-fiving and just romping; they were all together again."

Another time, he said, as he was coming off a run down Kesugi Mountain, he saw a brown bear lolling by some blueberry bushes in his path. It would eat mouthfuls of ripe blueberries, move a few yards and plop down in the trail, dazed at its full belly.

"It was right where I wanted to be, but too lazy to get up," he said. "So I just took a big detour around it. I don't even know if it ever knew, or cared, that I was there."

Bears were a common occurrence in the park, but never created too many problems, he said.

"There was one time on Troublesome Creek where we had a crew of about 20 (trail workers) stretched out along the trail and there was a big old black bear mama in between two cottonwood

trees. One cub went up one of the trees and one went up the other," he said. "Everything would have been fine except I had my two big dorky dogs along and they were out in the middle of the creek woofing at the mama, and she was pretty upset."

Fortunately nothing happened, and the bears eventually disappeared in the woods, Johnston said, as they had always done while he was a ranger.

Johnston said he loved his time working with Alaska State Parks, but later in his career it began to have its drawbacks. Already he was recognized as being a unique ranger with a quiet demeanor and ease in the backcountry that seemed almost innate. He was not your typical rule follower, instead relying on instinct and attentiveness to get what he wanted.

"The surprises came when the bureaucracy thickened," he said. In the beginning, when he wanted to enhance the park with better signs or improved trails, he just did it.

But as time went on, he had to have more of his activities cleared with the "higher ups." Once, he suggested adding a window to a second cabin he built at the point on Byers Lake. Already, he had taken flak for adding a loft to the cabin, which his superiors ordered blocked off to avoid a lawsuit if someone fell from it.

"I oriented the cabin so you could lie up there in the loft and look at Denali across the lake," he said. "It was just beautiful."

His bosses said no to the window, too, and Johnston just couldn't understand what the problem was. A simple window would turn the dark cabin into a pleasant retreat with a million-dollar view.

"I bought the window with my own money and put it in on my own time," he said. "You just do what needs doing … Somehow that window just appeared."

Now retired, Johnston still lives surrounded by the state park land that he helped ranger for so many years. It's a job that afforded him a simple lifestyle, taking him to some of the most pristine land in the middle region of the state.

"All in all it was flipping remarkable that I lasted as long as I did," Johnston recalled. "At any other place I'd have been canned.

"But I know this job was a good scene, and I didn't want to go anywhere. I loved my commute (from home) where I'd swim in the morning and do a 1.3-mile run and I'd have 13 miles to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and I'd be at work."

THE KING OF KACHEMAK

Jeff Johnson would not call himself the king of anything, but what he will say about the years he spent as the first ranger patrolling the waters of Kachemak Bay State Park and Wilderness Park is that it was a dream come true.

"It was a big deal to me," he said. "To me, being a park ranger is not just a job, it's a lifestyle. And we were living the lifestyle."

The year was 1984, a full 14 years after the establishment of Alaska's first official state park, when Johnson became its first ranger. Before that, Alaska Conservation Corps enrollees and a volunteer served in Kachemak Bay State Park, caretaking a former Alaska Department of Fish and Game cabin in Halibut Lagoon and keeping an eye on things.

But when word got out that there would finally be a hire for Kachemak Bay, Johnson chomped at the bit to be selected. At the time working as a ranger close by, in Anchor River and Ninilchik, he was close—but not quite—to landing his dream job.

"When the job opening was announced, I was electric," he said.

But the qualifications required of the position seemed unreal. The application requested experience in boating, carpentry, trail construction, maintenance, emergency medical skills and public relations, to name a few.

"I told Bill (Garry chief ranger for the Kenai Peninsula at the time), 'I don't care what it takes, I want that job,' " Johnson said. "And I also said, 'You're probably looking for a Jedi, and you're not going to get one.' "

In the end, Garry drove down to meet Johnson, telling him he had good news and bad news. The good news was that he had the job and a boat; the bad news was that he lost his truck.

Jeff Johnson (left), Kachemak Bay State Park and Wilderness Park, 1985.

Photo courtesy of Jeff Johnson.

It was official: Johnson was Kachemak's Jedi, trading in his truck for a Boston Whaler and hitting the bay with unbridled enthusiasm.

"K-Bay was big; very big. Even for Alaska it is an extraordinarily beautiful and significant resource park with all of the challenges," he said. "Being a ranger there would require a little bit of everything, including resource management, planning, law enforcement, emergency response, boating and foot patrol, supervision of staff and volunteers, logistics, and public relations.

"I was excited about the variety and depth of challenges, the opportunity for discovery, and the rare chance of being a part of establishing a foundation for the future of the park."

Johnson had just turned 31 when hired for the job. He had started working for the state in 1981, out of Sitka, where he was a ranger who spent much of his time in law enforcement.

"In Sitka, I was the first law enforcement ranger (the former incumbent did not have law-enforcement responsibilities)," he said. "There were a lot of vandalism problems in the Sitka parks then, and I did patrol work at Castle Hill State Historic Site, Halibut Point State Recreation Area and Old Sitka State Historic Park, laid out and constructed trails at Halibut Point, administered construction contracts, and performed light maintenance. I relocated the 'tea house' from the ferry terminal to Old Sitka."

Before that Johnson worked with the U.S. Forest Service in Wrangell and Petersburg from 1978 to 1980 and in Moose Pass from 1980 to 1981. He started as a crew leader for the federal Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC) program in Wrangell in 1978 and then worked other supervisory positions until he went to Moose Pass. He joined Alaska State Parks after the YACC program ended in 1981.

Johnson was full of enthusiasm for his new job. With thick blond hair, a compact build and lots of energy to spare, he yearned to be part of one of the "Big Three"—the first Alaska State Parks to be established in 1970. While the parks in Chugach and Denali had already added rangers years ago, Kachemak—the first of the three to become official—still lacked its own ranger.

"Since the summer between my first and second year at college I had decided I wanted to be a ranger," he said. "At the time I liked to hike, camp, fish, boat, outdoor photography, hunt, really anything outdoors."

Becoming a ranger at Kachemak Bay was the realization of that dream.

In an article titled "Roughing it," written by Polly Crawford in the November 1984 issue of a publication called "Code 32", Johnson described his first season as a ranger. Photos show him smiling and comfortable in front of the old Fish and Game hatchery in Halibut Cove Lagoon, which became ranger headquarters.

"This is what I've always wanted," he said in the article. "It's one of the most challenging ranger positions in the state. There aren't many jobs like this and they're very competitive."

So competitive, in fact, that Johnson said he prepared for the possibility of getting the job months in advance. With a degree in park and recreation resources from Michigan State and already trained in boat operations, law enforcement, emergency medical care and swift-water rescue; he fine-tuned other abilities that he thought might give him an edge come hiring time.

"I'd never wanted a job so bad in my life," he said. "I'd have crawled on broken glass to get it."

Once there, the dream job proved to be the most demanding of his career but one that Johnson still looks back on fondly. He spent his first season working with three college students from Utah. They built a rough, three-mile trail from Glacier Spit to alpine country, installed outhouses and trailhead signage and improved beach camping spots.

"A lot of it was not very glamorous," he said. "We were working with very few resources. We were working really long days, 10 to 12-hour days, and we had the most basic of radio communication. That first year, we put some Band-aids in. There was human waste all around the more popular campsites. Some existing trails and campsites had serious soil erosion problems. I remember hauling 5-gallon buckets of gravel up the beach to shore up the campsites. It was elemental."

Season by season, though, the changes began to be noticed.

Like most rangers, one of the things Johnson liked best about his job was the variety—from day to day, he could encounter any situation that would require his attention. Sometimes those events—coming upon a raft of sea otters or enjoying a particularly sunny day after weeks of rain—would make his day.

Others he would rather forget. In October 1987, he was one of the first people on scene when a 3-year-old girl from the nearby Russian village of Nikolaevsk was found floating face down in the Homer harbor. He helped administer CPR on the little girl, who at the time, he told the Homer News, "looked dead to me."

The girl was taken to South Peninsula Hospital, in serious but stable condition, but later died, he said, recalling the incident somberly.

During his rangering career, he had responded to several boating and motor vehicle fatalities while patrolling between Anchor Point and Ninilchik. On other occasions he participated in cliff rescues along the bluffs at Clam Gulch and Homer overlook, once being lowered by an anchor line to assist a 13-year-old boy. He stabilized the situation until a technical rescue team could come in and finish the job.

In fact, the emergency medical training that Johnson underwent to broaden his ranger skills were indeed some of the most important classes he ever took.

"In Alaska, if you're a ranger, you're expected to be everything: mother, father, EMT, resource manager, search and rescuer, specialist, trail crew foreman, law enforcement officer, maintenance guy," he said. "For me, the quintessential ranger is the person who can perform in any of those areas because you never know when they'll be needed. That's the nature of the profession."

For Johnson, his goal was a park that could sustain itself but not choke on its own success. He wanted a rustic trail system good enough to serve users, but not so that the wild quality of the park would suffer, he said. It was a balancing act. In the first two years on the job, he and his crews of Alaska Conservation Corps and volunteers cleared nearly 20 miles of trail. They installed picnic tables and outhouses, and marked trailheads and crossings.

"The idea was to improve the park's basic facilities and trails enough to attract users and help develop the public's awareness of, appreciation for, and support for the park," he said. "At the same time you don't want to go running too far down the field and find out there is nobody is behind you."

The park was much less developed when it was established in 1970 than it is today—although even now Johnson calls it "as remote as any other wilderness park when the weather is bad." Patrolling

the area was a new adventure: Like many of his peers this early in the Alaska State Parks system, he invented the job as he went along.

"It was about exploration and discovery," he said, "(about) getting to know the park. There was only one water-taxi bringing visitors in those days. The park received very little visitation. We took on trail and facility-improvement projects every year and we even had prison inmate crews helping put in trails. It was kind of like the Wild West.

"That was a lot of fun; you got to be in on the ground floor and it was really exciting."

Today, while attracting thousands rather than hundreds of visitors, Johnson still thinks there is no place like Alaska's first official state park.

"Kachemak was an adventure then and it still is," Johnson said. "It's my favorite place in Alaska."

HAINES HEAVEN

At Chilkat State Park—which if not for technicalities also would share first-park status with Denali, Chugach and Kachemak in 1970—there always seems to be wandering bears and wayward eagles with which to contend.

It's a job that never for a moment was dull, said Bill Zack, the first ranger to patrol the area. He was hired in 1979 to take care of the existing state recreation sites and put the finishing touches on Chilkat State Park, which would open just months later.

It's hard for Zack to look back at those years and isolate his rangering experience to just Chilkat State Park. He spent much of his time at Mosquito Lake, Portage Cove and Chilkoot Lake State Recreation Sites, the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve and other locations as well. Every place he went adventure seemed to follow.

Retired since 2002, Zack—who now splits his time between a custom home he and his wife, Cris, built in Douglas, Alaska, and a place they winter at in Florida—said being a ranger in the small Southeast town of Haines was not only a job he loved, but it allowed him to live a lifestyle he always dreamed of.

"With Haines, it was love at first sight," he said. "I was so grateful to put so many years in one place.

Ranger Bill Zack with an injured friend at Chilkat State Park, ca. 1980s.

Photo courtesy of Bill Zack.

People used to say to me, 'You know, Zack, you really need to move around the state to different campgrounds,' and that cracked me up because my dad was career Navy and we moved all the time. I think I went to 14 schools before I got out of high school."

Because he moved all the time, Zack was content to enjoy the slower pace of life in one town where he could send congratulations cards to new mothers and then, 20 years later, attend the weddings of those same children.

"What I always thought I wanted to experience was to live in a small town and get to know everyone. This was my opportunity," he said.

And that is just what he did. One of his favorite parts of the job, he said, was working with children, visiting school groups or hosting them when they came to state parks. He gave presentations on bear safety, eagles, conservation and clean camping. He got to know the children of the community—as well as those visiting—and teach them, bit by bit, to better appreciate the world around them.

"I really enjoyed working with the people. Every day you didn't know what was going to happen," he said. "Most of the time people were happy to be in Alaska, excited; they're like sponges to learn more. And kids, I really enjoyed the children's programs. I gave a lot of bear programs and eagle programs for everything from Elderhostel to the kids."

Zack also spent a lot of time managing bears and eagles. While Haines has long been associated with its healthy population of eagles—the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, established in 1982, attracts thousands of national and international visitors a year—it is also home to bears, which can often be seen frequenting the areas beyond the state parks campgrounds.

Zack got to know both species well. In fact, as far as Alaska State Parks officials can determine, he is the first ranger to ever use his service weapon against a bear in the line of duty. It's a story Zack wishes he didn't have to tell: For so many years he worked hard to keep the bears safe. But one day in the fall of 1989, he had no choice.

Zack had just finished his rounds collecting garbage from the 32 cans spread throughout his patrol area. He entered Chilkoot Lake State Recreation Site and was promptly greeted by a camper there.

"There was a guy standing there and he's the color of that white sign," Zack said, motioning to a white

poster on the wall in the coffee shop where we sat talking. “There’s no blood in his face. He says, ‘Two things I have to tell you.’ ”

First, Zack said, the man reported that a suspicious individual had come around the campground the day before asking him to pay his camping fees. But the guy didn’t look official, so the camper videotaped him as he drove away in his green pickup.

Second, he said he was chased out into the lake in his boat that morning by a bear that charged him.

“It was serious stuff,” Zack said.

Zack contacted Alaska State Trooper Quentin Higgins about the so-called fee collector. Higgins came and positioned himself in his vehicle, scanning the camper’s videotape of the imposter.

“So I’m walking through the campground posting bear notices. I have my staple gun in one hand, the ‘bear spotted-in-area’ notices in the other,” he said. “I got back to the second loop (of the campground), and stopped and looked around. It was one of those feelings you get—‘Something is weird here.’ ”

Zack shook off the worry, telling himself of course he was just antsy because of the camper’s report. He continued posting notices and was just about back to the truck—where Higgins was still scanning through the rather long video from the camper’s Alaska travels—when he turned around, and there was the bear.

“Right off the bat I said, ‘That is not your average behavior.’ It’s throwing its head back and forth and acting weird,” Zack said. “So I yelled at him and said, ‘Get out of here, get out of here!’ and clapped my hands.”

Meanwhile he was thinking as soon as he could get rid of the bear, he would close the campground. Clearly, this was a rogue animal and people should not be near it.

“But he didn’t give me a chance, he came on in, he charged,” Zack said. “Quentin turns around, throws the (video) camera down, gets his weapon and is yelling, ‘Shoot him, shoot him!’ He didn’t have to tell me. As much as I love bears, as much as I’ve taken the time to save them, he was doing all of the slobbering, snapping the teeth, all the stuff you read about. He hesitated a couple of times, did a

couple of pops and then he came on in. At that point I was like well 'I guess this is it'."

Zack emptied his .357 into the animal and it dropped.

"I felt horrible. He went down. From where I was we measured and it was 6 feet, so it was not a bluff," he said.

Zack said he is sure the animal was dead. Still, Higgins, to be safe, fired his shotgun into the bear to make sure. The meat was donated to the local food bank, Zack said, offering some consolation: "At least it became a soup."

One of the unexpected outcomes of that incident, Zack said, is that he became thankful that he had weapons training from the Alaska State Trooper Academy. He had never been too keen on having to be armed as a park ranger, but because of that training, he said, he hit the bear clean and is alive to still talk about it.

"All that training on the clock paid off," he said. "If (my reactions) hadn't been automatic, who knows how it would have turned out?"

Aside from that adrenaline-inducing encounter, though, Zack said his relationship with bears was always one of healthy respect. When troublesome bears wandered into the campgrounds, he could generally yell at them or use an air horn to get them to move on, or, in the case of the more stubborn bruins, use a noise-making pop shell to scare them off.

Mostly, he felt lucky to be surrounded by such beautiful creatures.

"Cris and I went out one evening and saw 12 bears," he said, remembering fondly that evening sitting by the road in his car with his wife, watching the bears feeding down by the river. "They'd tiptoe out on the weir like cats."

Zack and his wife also spent a lot of time helping with the rehabilitation of injured and sick birds, mostly eagles, but sometimes owls, hawks and other birds. It all started one day when he noticed a downed eagle and called the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to come get it and take it to the closest raptor center, at the time in Sitka (Haines has its own now). Two days later, neither had come to pick up the sick bird, so Zack and a technician he worked

with decided to go get it themselves. They covered the eagle, wrapped its talons well and hefted it six miles from where it lay on a beach to their vehicle. Zack said he'd read somewhere that covering the birds eyes would calm it down. So he used his cap to do so.

Back at the truck, his friend noticed the hat was slipped and said, "Hey Zack, the hat's coming off."

"So I reach over to adjust the hat and no one ever said, 'Beak!' so this thing quicker than that ripped a piece of skin off my finger," he said, laughing at the memory now. "And of course the local clinic got a kick out of that."

Zack soon got training in how to properly rescue the birds.

"Cris was an angel because she would always come to help me with these eagle rescues. Most of them turned out that they would happen either on my day off or on weekends," he said.

Perhaps Zack's most memorable eagle encounter involved not one, or two, but three rescues in one day. He thinks it occurred in the early 1990s.

"This one day I got a call on an eagle down, so I went out and got the eagle. I had two dog kennels set up for eagles," he said. "I put it in the dog kennel … then about an hour later, I got a call, 'There's an eagle down.' I said, 'I already shipped it out,' and he said, 'No I'm standing here looking at it.' So I went back to the beach and got it."

Zack described the birds as looking drunk, "like they're on drugs," so he scooped it up and put it in his remaining kennel. As he was readying to send this bird off as well, he ran into a friend who was on his way to fly his Great Pyrenees to Juneau in his helicopter. He offered to take Zack and the eagle along, too, to be dropped off at the Juneau Raptor Center.

"So I get the eagle in … and put the word out that, 'The eagles are getting into something, see if you can find out what it is,' " he said. "No sooner do I get home and the phone rings: There's an eagle down. Right before that a couple calls and said they found the food source. It was a dog that was wrapped up in a blanket and it had been euthanized. The eagles are having a feast, but the problem is the eagles are getting the drugs."

Back down to the beach Zack went, out of kennels but armed with a large toilet paper box. He went

after the eagle, which tried to fly away but fell on its face. Zack then called his friend asking if there was room for one more bird in the helicopter.

"So I put in the kennel, the box and a great Pyrenees who had never flown in a helicopter before and we all head to Juneau," he said.

Just before taking off, though, the bird in the box began fighting to get out, and Zack was terrified that it was going to rip through the box and wreak havoc among the humans, dog and bird on board.

"I thought, if this thing gets out of the box with a Great Pyrenees, this will be the last they ever hear of us," he said.

The flight went smoothly, though, the birds recovered and were released a few days later.

Zack's time with the eagles never ceased to amaze him. Once he was driving along and noticed an eagle sitting out by itself in the snow, rather than down at the river where eagles usually congregate. He knew, from years observing the animals, that it was not normal behavior, so he stopped and checked the bird out.

"I'm running after it and I finally throw the blanket over it," he said. "It turned out to be a she, and it had a 90-inch wingspan. They told me at the center, 'You know, Zack, that's the largest eagle we've ever gotten."

In May, 1993, hikers found another eagle, this one estimated to be about 28 years old. Zack brought it to the Juneau Raptor Rehabilitation Center, where it was determined to be the oldest of its species ever to be recovered. Further research revealed that Fred Robards banded the bird in the winter of 1965 along the Chilkat River, just 20 kilometers from where it was found. It died two days later, at the center.

"You know what was neat?" Zack said, a hint of pride in his voice for the very creatures he came to care about so much. "It had a fish in its talons when they found it."

More than eight years since he retired from Alaska State Parks, Zack still looks back on the memories fondly. For him, becoming a ranger at the infancy of the parks system, and in a small town, suited his personality well.

"Cris and I like to stay under the radar, it's not in our nature," he said. "But you do get involved in the politics of things sometimes, especially living in a small town.

"When I went to lunch, I'd take my (ranger) shirt off because I just wanted to get over and get to lunch and not be stopped on the street and be asked about firewood by someone who doesn't live there," he said.

When Zack received his 10-year service pin, it was mailed to Kodiak, an event that makes him chuckle to this day.

"I could just imagine someone saying, 'Haines, where the hell is Haines? I think it's down in Kodiak.'"

Zack and the office assistant in Kodiak had a good laugh after the confusion was cleared, but to Zack it said a lot about where he lived and why he lived there.

"The people in Haines are just fantastic; the scenery is fantastic," he said. "I've had people walk up to me and say, 'Do you know where you live?' I look up and it's one of those clear days and it looks like the Swiss Alps. It still has that small town atmosphere. It has a real taste of Alaska."

CHALLENGING CHUGACH

Doug Fesler doesn't consider himself a violent guy. But he loves the outdoors and when he saw people trashing the very state park that he was charged with protecting, another side of him came out.

Fesler is retired now and sailing his boat across the world with Jill Fredston, his partner and co-founder of the Alaska Mountain Safety Center, which evolved from the Alaska Avalanche School that he founded. It's a lifestyle well earned after contributing to the early success of the park.

"I hitchhiked to Alaska in 1966 from North Dakota," he wrote from Chile, where he and Fredston had anchored to work on boat repairs. "I arrived with $7.28 in my pocket and didn't know anyone. I worked any job I could get, but by 1970 I was employed by the Alaska Division of Corrections as the recreation coordinator of McLaughlin Youth Center, a prison for adjudicated delinquents."

Fesler kept that position until April 1971. Then he was hired as one of three rangers for the half-million acre Chugach park. Gary Kroll and John Heiser joined him. They moved on, but Fesler was

Doug Fesler and Pete Panarese, Chugach State Park, ca. 1970s.

Photo courtesy of Alaska State Parks.

there for the long haul.

"That first summer I worked six days a week, approximately 10 to 12 hours a day, for a whopping $4.65 an hour. I was responsible for maintaining all of the highway litter barrels and rest-stop outhouses from Anchorage to Hope, to Cooper Landing, to Seward and return, plus taking care of McHugh Creek Wayside and Bird Creek Campground. This included three weekly runs to the south, plus three trips to the prison camp at Sutton to load 2-1/2 cords of firewood for the campgrounds.

"Meanwhile, one ranger worked the northern (western) end of Chugach from Eagle River to Eklutna, and the other ranger was responsible for roving the entire park during the evening hours and filling in for us on our one day off. Needless to say, the work was dirty, smelly and unrewarding, but I could see the potential for a much more interesting job in the future."

It was that potential that brought Fesler back for a second season. The spring of 1972 brought two new rangers to accompany him, Dick Hitchcock and Ed Stauber, and a new daughter, Lahde.

"That summer I was assigned the responsibility for the northern half of Chugach, with one large campground and picnic area at Eagle River, another one at Peter's Creek and a large picnic/beach wayside at Mirror Lake, plus the three campgrounds at Eklutna Lake. Each of these areas was heavily used by the public; more so then than today."

Complicating matters was the fact that the U.S. Army had a contract with BLM to use the Eklutna drainage for military training, which meant that Eklutna was overrun with military vehicles and personnel.

"This resulted in a huge amount of illegal activity and abuse within the park," he said. "Because most of the land in the park at this time was not state-owned, but tentatively-approved federal BLM land, we had only limited management control. The public, of course, was thoroughly confused.

"Again, I worked six days a week, emptied hundreds of garbage cans each day, cleaned dozens of outhouses, hauled many tons of firewood from Sutton and picked mountains of litter. In my spare time I got to know the park."

By 1973, though, Fesler said he began to get in a groove with the job. By then, Neil Johannsen was the superintendent of Chugach. Fesler said Johannsen recognized the need to create some order within

the park. Understaffed and overworked they plugged ahead, closing areas of the park to motorized use that were getting damaged by overuse, posting signs and trailheads, and basically letting the public know that the area did indeed come with some regulations.

"Law enforcement posed its own obvious risks," he said. "Simple violations often escalated into serious, potentially life threatening situations (the common violations were drunken, reckless or negligent driving, assault, littering, illegal target shooting or hunting and fishing, operating vehicles in closed areas, and destruction of natural material). Once I had a man try to run me over with a ¾- ton truck. Another time a man tried to break a beer bottle over my head. Twice people pulled out concealed guns and pointed them in my face.

"Other times, bullets whistled past my head out of the trees from careless target shooters," Fesler continued. "One time a man took a baseball bat-like swing at me with a pair of pruning shears and narrowly missed cracking my skull open like a melon; only because I slipped backwards. Another time a bullet hit the windshield of my truck as I was crossing Potter Flats. Several times my vehicles, both personal and work, were vandalized.

"Many times drunk violators would try to duke it out or take flight. Sometimes these events would turn serious. One of our rangers was beaten up in a campground and, another time, a ranger was sent to the hospital after being driven over by a snowmachine operating in a closed area. After a while, it became difficult to keep a positive attitude toward my fellow man—particularly teenagers. You never knew when a seemingly benign situation was going to erupt into a fight or worse. The stress was insidious and posed another unanticipated impact on my life as a ranger.

"I loved catching the bad guys, but now I don't miss law enforcement at all," he concluded.

Equally challenging in those years was the increased backcountry use and, with it, the tragedies that come from accidents there.

In 1974, Fesler, working with Stauber and ranger Alex Collins, continued with the park management reining in the overuse and working interpretation programs whenever possible. While a good year—Fesler's second daughter Sunna was born—it also was taxing.

"By necessity, I became more heavily involved in both law enforcement, and search and rescue as

the number of incidents skyrocketed," he said. " The pipeline-boom era had started and people were flooding to Alaska. Our campgrounds were overflowing and tons of unsupervised pipeline orphans loved to push the party-animal limits.

"By the time snow came, we were ready for a break. That winter and the next, we created a series of marked cross-country ski trails in the hillside area of the park and set track each day with a homemade track setter pulled behind our Bombadier snowmachine. I also spent more than a month working on improving the ski trail to Indian Creek Pass. I used to ski to where my last work ended, then take the snowshoes, chain saw, fuel, and pruning shears off my pack and go to work.

"Some days it was so cold that the steel pruning shears would just break in half," said Felser. "Of course, we almost always worked alone because the luxury of having a partner usually didn't exist."

During that time, two avalanche fatalities also occurred within days of each other, he said. One happened at Glen Alps and the other a few miles away in the north fork of Campbell Creek.

"I was involved with both in a minor way, but the impression they made on me made me realize my own ignorance and vulnerability," he said. "Ironically, later that winter I was suspended from my job for three days without pay, allegedly because I 'had failed to notify my supervisor' that I was involved in a multi-group avalanche training exercise in the park. I filed a grievance against the state, won the grievance and was paid for the three days I was suspended. I interpreted this as a form of harassment, because I had previously filed a more serious, pending grievance against the state for not providing necessary safety equipment and training for rangers involved in law enforcement."

That tumultuous time paid off for Fesler though, because his differences with the state—a subsequent grievance he filed resulted in more safety training for all rangers who joined the suit—ended in perhaps one of his greatest contributions: the Alaska Avalanche School, which he founded in 1976 with state support. The much-needed program provided backcountry users with education and training on recognizing avalanche dangers. Budget cuts eliminated the program in 1979, at which time Fesler and Fredston continued it as the Alaska Mountain Safety Center.

There were exciting times while being a ranger, Fesler noted. While he worked the front lines—in the parks, interacting with people—management was all about portioning budgets and making sure what limited money the division had was spread as far as possible. One of those managers in particular

struck a chord with Fesler, who looks at the summer of 1975 "as the beginning of a new era for the rangers of Chugach State Park."

"During a short time we moved from a ragtag bunch of garbage-collecting ranger wannabes to a top-notch, well-coordinated group of professional park rangers," he said. "The man largely responsible for this change was Dan Robinson, a retired U.S. Air Force senior master sergeant with no previous park management experience but with an ability to listen to his people and get what they needed.

"As the new superintendent of Chugach State Park, (Robinson) was a master at ferreting out government funding sources and working the system. But none of us knew any of this when he showed up for his first day of work driving a shiny black Cadillac, wearing a bright-blue pair of coveralls, a military-style baseball cap, and dark-gray sunglasses. He was ready for a field inspection of the park, he told us, but first he wanted to meet with us in his office.

"If we weren't careful, you could almost see our eyes rolling and hear our thoughts: 'Who is this guy?'"

We gathered around our new boss in a circle like wary deer caught in the glare of a bright light on a dark night. Then he started to talk:

"'I don't know anything about running a park,' he said. 'That's your job. You're out there every day. You know what you need, and what works and what doesn't. Your job is to tell me what you need. My job is to get you the necessary tools so that you can do your job. You leave the money to me. That's my job. Do we have a deal?'

"Our collective reaction was, 'Who is this man? Does he walk on water?' How many bosses would stand up in front of their employees and tell them that they don't know anything about what they were hired to be in charge of? How many bosses asked their employees to tell what they needed so he could get it for them? Damn right, we had a deal."

Over the months, Fesler said, Robbie, as he liked to be called, kept his promise. He got the rangers what they needed, purchased equipment, hired more help, contracted out the trash removal, outhouse cleaning and firewood delivery, and provided much-needed special training.

"We felt like kids in a candy shop," Fesler said. "Most importantly, he trusted us and expected us to perform to high standards. Looking back from where I stand now, Dan Robinson was the best boss I

ever had, bar none, and that seemed to be the collective opinion of all who worked for him. He had our respect and our attention."

By the next year Chugach State Park had 14 park rangers and park technicians, a superintendent, a chief ranger, a large trail crew and a maintenance crew. It also had new trucks, new snowmachines, new law enforcement and search and rescue gear and training, and the beginnings of a good naturalist interpretation program. It was a time like no other, with the largest staff in the park's history, even today.

Today, Fesler looks back on his time with Alaska State Parks with both pride and regret. While he accomplished so much as a ranger, he also—able to look back nearly 40 years later—sees where he paid a price for the job.

"As park use increased, the number of search and rescue missions and law enforcement incidents rangers had to respond to also grew," he said. "All of these missions have left their scars on our psyches and, in some cases, on our bodies. I think if I had the opportunity to live my life over again, I would not be involved in either law enforcement or search and rescue. Having experienced around 200 body recoveries over a period of over 35 years of mountain rescue activity, I can't travel anywhere in Southcentral Alaska without looking at a mountain, traveling down a highway, or running into certain people without encountering the memory of death. This, of course, was something I had not anticipated as a young ranger starting out—and it never goes away."

Fesler also recalled a different type of death; that of some of the wildness in park areas he loved.

"Perhaps the greatest challenge was to keep the human element—both park planners and park users—from loving the park to death. If you love an area, the human tendency is to want to share the beauty of that area with others," he said. "I was to learn, early on, that this often resulted in the destruction of the very quality that I loved. Instead of beauty, we were left with the ugly scars of slope erosion or garbage-strewn remains of fire pits or the weakened trunks of girdled trees and vandalized signs.

"Unfortunately, I was guilty of contributing to the decline of natural beauty in many areas of the park because of my youthful enthusiasm for building trails so that others could enjoy the same areas that I had enjoyed before any trails were built.

"If a trial already exists, then make it the best trail possible," he said. "Keep it well maintained, and help the public to enjoy it safely. But don't try to put a trail or backcountry cabin in every valley. Once a trail or a road or a campground is built it is very hard to take the land back to its original state.

"I learned that if you really want to keep an area nice for long-term enjoyment, it is essential to *not* develop it—to not put a dot on a map, not build a road or destination trailhead, and not pollute the view with signs and billboards. It is important to let the people discover for themselves what hidden beauty lies around the next bend or over a far ridge."

5

Behind the Scenes

Alaska State Parks volunteers responsible for much of the organization's success

Ed and Betty Clark sit at their dining room table in Charlotte, N.C., a thick photo album on the table and a collage of photos that have been framed into a large poster leaning against one of the chairs. Now 89 and 87, Ed and Betty don't volunteer with Alaska State Parks anymore. Their traveling days are over, "but we have lasting memories of our time there," Ed said.

The couple first came to Alaska in 1989 and for most of the next eight summers they continued caretaking the campgrounds in Haines, which they consider one of the prettiest places on earth.

"We loved it," Ed said. "We kept coming back because what enticed us as much as the scenery was the people. The people are more of a carefree, happy go lucky people you've ever met."

The Clarks represent a massive cadre of Alaska State Parks supporters who help prop up the park system by giving their time and sharing their talents for free. While an official Volunteers in Parks —or VIP—program began taking shape in late 1983, people like Ed and Betty have been helping out since the park system's infancy.

In "Mission 1990: A Five Year Strategy for Alaska State Parks," the VIP program was still growing. The goal: "Expand the Volunteers-in-Parks program from 220 volunteers in 1985 to 350 per year to help meet increasing need for campground hosts, trail crews and other projects."

It was a goal easily met. By October of 1990, when Alaska State Parks published a brochure on its amenities, it claimed that "Alaska State Parks operates an ambitious volunteer program, which contributes more donated hours of labor than paid staff hours." Also in that document: "Volunteers donated more than 100,000 hours of labor" making it the largest volunteer program in Alaska.

Today, more than 800 volunteers donate more than 80,000 hours of labor annually, an estimated

Ed and Betty Clark, 2010.
Photo courtesy of Melissa DeVaughn.

saving of $1.5 million per year, according to the 2008 publication, "The State of Alaska State Parks-Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation."

It is a program that undoubtedly had its challenges in the beginning but is critical to the success of the Alaska State Parks system today.

"We launched into volunteerism when I was superintendent of Chugach," said Pete Panarese, who with operations chief Sandy Rabinowitch was tasked to develop a volunteer system to "be a reality" by the summer of 1984, according to notes from a superintendents meeting Dec. 1, 1983.

Panarese worked with Alaska State Parks from 1976 until 2004; first as a ranger, then as superintendent of Chugach. He moved to chief of operations after Rabinowitch resigned in 1984, and eventually was reclassified to the similarly high-level position of deputy director of the entire division.

"The impact there (among rangers) was 'What else do you want us to do?'," Panarese said of the VIP program. Rangers were already busy, and to have to train and monitor the work of volunteers would only add to their workload, they feared.

"I was guardedly optimistic because we had done some research on it, but it was hugely successful," Panarese said. "But it was a hard sell for the staff."

By March of 1984, the VIP program was marching along.

Kathryn Reid, who was a volunteer at the time and went on to work with Alaska State Parks as an employee, is credited with getting the program up and running, said Neil Johannsen, director of Alaska State Parks at the time.

"She was wonderful," Johannsen said. "Al Meiners called her the 'volunteer volunteer coordinator,' which I always thought was such a great name."

As the program developed, rangers throughout the Alaska State Parks system worked on ways to get more volunteers involved in basic park maintenance and operation. Ranger Mike Lee, for example, had experience with the Alaska Youth Conservation Corp. He used that experience working with those crews to implement a volunteer program in his region.

"I started using a youth corps before they even existed," Lee said of his early days as a ranger patrolling the Nancy Lake State Recreation Area. In those days, before there was a parks-run volunteer organization, rangers would take help whenever they could get it.

"My first days at work (as a ranger in April 1970) coincidentally coincided with the first Earth Day," Lee said. "I was teaching at nearby Willow School, so I grabbed a group of kids from school, put them in the back of my pickup, and headed to Willow Creek Wayside to do a spring clean-up. By my second year I was using neighborhood Youth Corps kids to do park maintenance. The biggest problem with this was how to haul them to the job site. I somehow managed to haul five to seven kids to Big Lake waysides in my ten-yard garbage packer truck. (Imagine trying that today!)"

By March of 1984, the "uniform" of state park volunteers had been established. They consisted of a blue baseball cap with the Alaska State Parks eagle logo on it, as well as two sizes of "Volunteer" patches for caps and shoulders.

"I brought the VIP program directly back from California," said Johannsen, who spent four years there as deputy director of California State Parks before returning to Alaska as director of the division. "It was a program that would save revenue and I knew it could work."

In May of 1984, the first volunteer trail crew, totaling 11 people, gathered on the east fork of Eklutna River to build a trail, according to Johannsen's periodic "Greensheet" reports he sent to staff while he was director. Momentum for the program was gaining, he said. In a July 1984 issue of "Greensheet," Richard Hacker, a Juneau-area volunteer, was hailed as the first "official" volunteer for that region. Throughout the year, Johannsen continued to highlight area volunteers and urged his staff to voice their need as well, whenever possible—especially to those in government who could help fund a state-run program.

Meanwhile, unofficial volunteers flourished. During a four-year stint in the late 1970s as superintendent of the Kenai and Kodiak parks, Lee got to know volunteer Al York, who with his wife, Bernice, volunteered at campgrounds in Cooper Landing and Soldotna.

"Al was a campground host for the Izaak Walton State Recreation Site in 1978 and 1979," Lee said. "He was probably the state's first campground host.

"It wasn't legal," Lee continued, "but we recruited him and he was a nice guy."

Another time, said Dale Bingham, superintendent of the Matanuska and Susitna Valleys District, one of his rangers recruited a volunteer from Japan.

"We were trying to get the program going up our way and I told the rangers, 'you go out and find people,' " Bingham said. One of my rangers, Alex Connors, came to me excited because he had found this guy from Japan, Tadao Ishada. He was a World War II descendent, but he didn't speak a lick of English."

Still, Bingham was hopeful that Ishada's volunteer efforts would still be useful. Connors picked Ishada up at the airport and brought him out to the Valley to teach him what to do. It wasn't until a few days later that Bingham got to meet the man, who he came upon in a campground painting tables.

"I saw him, and he had this terrified look on his face. He was scrunched over the table," Bingham said.

It wasn't until later, after finding a local resident to help interpret, that Bingham was able to get the full story. Because of the language barrier, Ishada stepped off the plane and was greeted by armed rangers. He mistook them for military officers of some sort. He was terrified. Then he was sent to the campgrounds to do manual labor, which also confused the man.

"It turned out that he though VIP meant Very Important Person, not Volunteers in Parks," Bingham said. (Ranger) Dennis Heikes thought this was hilarious. We all did. But once we got it worked out, (Ishada) stayed and did his work even though he thought he was coming here to be treated as a very important person."

A WIN WIN "OCCUPATION"

For Ed and Betty Clark, though, volunteering for Alaska State Parks was an adventure from start to finish. And it came to pass serendipitously.

"Haines was one of our final stops on the ferry," Ed said. "There we met (longtime Haines ranger) Bill Zack and he made an impression on us. He asked us to volunteer and we decided that, 'yes, we'd like to volunteer.' "

The first thing the Clarks had to learn to understand was how to live in bear country. And there were plenty of bears. With the salmon-rich waters of the Chilkoot and Chilkat rivers nearby, bruins wandered the lakes and river shores like loiterers at a drive-in.

"In one of my first encounters there were 32 campsites in this particular campground (Chilkoot Lake State Recreation Site) and I was walking to the back of the campground. I looked down and my shoe was untied," Ed said. "So I stooped down to tie my shoe and when I looked up there walking toward me 10 feet away was a brownie."

Instinctively, Ed said, he did everything he'd been taught, waving his hands to shoo the bear away and backing up—"I did everything," he said. "Directly behind me, five feet away, there was an outhouse—."

"And he went into the women's room," Betty finishes for him, laughing at the memory of it.

Another time, the Clarks heard a commotion and they looked out their camper window and saw people crowded around a bear that had wandered into camp just 30 to 40 feet away from them.

"There were people everywhere, and everybody wanted to get a picture," Ed said. "So I went out with an air horn in one hand and pepper spray in the other hand and I told people, 'Get in your motor home, you're too close. Get in your motor home.' "

One guy, however, kept moving closer and closer to the bear. Ed was losing his composure. As a campground host, he said, he felt responsible for the safety of the people—and the animals. The guy walking toward the bear was headed for danger.

"This guy was in front of me, and I was trying to get him to leave. In my excitement I sprayed the pepper spray instead of the air horn and he got pepper-sprayed," Ed said. "He's yelling, 'It hurts, it hurts!' and I'm feeling horrible."

Betty Clark said she has her share of bear memories, too. One day, there was a couple set up in the campsite next to them. She looked out at their setup, which consisted of an odd teepee-shaped tent with a border surrounding the perimeter of the campsite marked in thick, white clothesline rope.

Upon further investigation, Betty learned that the woman was terrified of bears, and her husband had laid the rope around the campsite assuring her that "bears won't cross a line like that."

Later that night, as the campground settled down for the evening, there was a huge commotion, Betty said. It was a bear that had run directly through camp and specifically through the "rope barrier" the creative husband had laid down.

"As soon as I could, I went and checked on them," Betty said, "but they had already left and gone in the middle of the night."

Bill Zack, who was a ranger in Haines from 1979 to 2002, said the Clarks were some of the best volunteers he ever had.

"They have some fun stories," he said. "The campground hosts got to know the bears. We had one host, Jeannie Stoner (from 1996), who wrote an article about it called 'Six Weeks With Omar.' That was one of the campground bears and we named them."

CREATIVE ASSISTANCE

Campground hosts were some of the most interactive volunteers in the VIP program because they met and got to know campers on a regular basis. But there were other ways of getting volunteers too, as Johannsen and the rest of the division's administration worked on attracting free help.

One such idea, outlined in "The Mission 1990" called for "using a greater number of low-security prisoners and court referrals for park maintenance and improvements." It was a great success in some areas, especially maintenance.

But not every area had success in this type of volunteer use, said Jeff Johnson, who was a ranger at Kachemak Bay State Park from 1984 to 1994 and now heads the Office of Boating Safety.

Because volunteers were not being paid there were certain demands that could not be made of them, he said. With so much work to do to improve the parks, rangers often had to take whatever help was offered to them.

One year, he recalled, Roger MacCampbell, his supervisor, asked him if he would like to enlist the help of prisoners from Kenai's Wildwood Correctional Facility to help build trails across the bay.

"(The prison) agreed to provide food—it sounded great, it sounded good," Johnson said. "It was a 10-

day deal and we had 10, 13 inmates who volunteered."

Johnson's assignment seemed simple: Take the inmates across the bay, work on trails and other upgrades for 10 days, and then bring them back and enjoy a few well-deserved days off himself.

But that's not how it worked out. When the prisoners arrived in Homer, the original group had been winnowed down to just six—Johnson can't remember why—"Change of heart, I don't know," he said.

"We gave them a list of food items ahead of time that we asked them to bring with them," he said. "So that first day, we show up and they have boxes of stuff. We load it up and we get this stuff across the bay."

Once there, the crew began to unpack the supplies. Johnson looked on in horror as he realized that the list he gave the inmates must have gone unread. Instead of easy-to prepare camp food, they had hauled across such items as a 5-gallon plastic bucket of barbecue sauce, a case of No.-10 cans of unpitted olives, a case of No.-10 cans of yams and a case of No.-10 cans of salad dressing, but no lettuce.

"I said, 'Did you guys bring any meat?' and they pull out this wrapped quarter-cow, frozen solid," he continued, laughing at the memory of it. "I got a bow saw that I use for cutting firewood trying to cut a chunk of meat off this thing so I can feed these guys."

Feeding challenges aside, Johnson had other problems with which to contend. He quickly discovered that the inmates were not going to be much help.

"We get to work, and these guys are not in shape," he said. "In the first 10 minutes, one vomits and passes out, right on the trail. The second day, three of them quit. And now I'm down to three."

The remaining inmates, Johnson said, were good, though, and one even came back for a second 10-day stint. While those three were helpful, Johnson said, he considered it a failed experiment.

"But you know, if you think about it, it was a good idea to try," he said. "If it had worked out, it could have been a real good way to get a lot of trail built in a short period of time. Part of the problem is they don't have any skills, any trail building skills. They're willing to go out and labor, but then you've got the responsibility of supervision. These are low-risk—but they're still inmates."

Another time, Johnson said, an out-of-state volunteer had signed on and by this time—Johnson thinks it was the late 1980s—parks administration required background checks on any incoming volunteers.

"So we find out that there is a warrant for his arrest," Johnson said. "And I'm told, 'You've got to go arrest him.' I was so nervous. That guy could have peeled me like a grape."

Fortunately, the man did not resist when Johnson approached him with handcuffs.

Still, Johnson said, those horror stories aside, volunteers were a critical part of the park system's success—then and today. While the prisoner idea may not have worked out well, others were shining examples of what works when people who care come together.

"I wouldn't even guess where we would be if we hadn't had the commitment of those volunteers," he said. "They served in a lot of capacities over there. Some of them would care take the ranger station while the trail crews were up the hill. In some cases, it was someone that I could have with me to help transport materials and supplies over to the bay, which was a multi-step effort."

In many cases, Johnson said, those very volunteers proved to be stellar employees later on. Joe McCullough, who now works as education coordinator for the division's Office of Boating Safety, is one such example.

"There are a lot of people in this division today that either started off as a volunteer or an ACC (Alaska Conservation Corps) or both," Johnson said. "On a lot of different levels, from that glamour perspective, it gives people a chance to experience what its like to do this work."

McCullough came to Alaska in 1991 with a buddy who planned to volunteer—McCullough was just along for the ride. But the friend didn't work out. McCullough did.

"He brought me up here and I did Dave's job," he joked of his friend. "We worked 10 days on and we were all business. But then we had four days off and it was time to celebrate."

McCullough remembers those days as some of the hardest of his life, but it launched his career. Twenty years later, he's still with the division.

"It was, without a doubt, exhausting," he said. "I had the best dreams and everything was awesome."

Johnson said the volunteers came from all corners of the world, with varied experiences and their own stories to tell. There was the Microsoft executive who worked for two weeks as a tax write-off, the private-school teacher who dedicated her summers to the Kachemak, a concert pianist from the New York Philharmonic Orchestra—even Christopher Reeve's (aka Superman's) nanny.

GOOD NEIGHBORS

Locals, too, are involved in their parks. Dick Griffith has been giving his time and money to Chugach State Park for more years than he can remember. Now 83, Griffith said he started volunteering for the simple reason that he wanted to give back.

"I've always been interested in Chugach State Park," said the longtime Alaskan who is known for his extreme adventures—including skiing from Unalakleet to Barrow in one trip and from Barrow all the way across Canada in another. "I've walked from one end of Chugach State Park, every which way, and I just love it.

"That's the reason I care so much about it, and I have to give something back, and that's my way of giving back."

Griffith downplays his contributions, but they are huge. As a volunteer, he is a fixture at the Eagle River Nature Center, where his yearly "Dick Griffith Challenge" helps raise funds for the nonprofit center. Each year, he matches dollar-for-dollar the donations that come into the center—a contribution that has cost him close to $60,000 over the past 10 years or so since he's been doing it. It's money, he says, that is well spent.

He helped maintain the popular Crow Pass Trail, from Girdwood to Eagle River, for years before a dedicated crew was finally hired, he said. He works with Eagle Scouts, specifically in the Chugach, to build bridges, clear trails, construct outbuildings and anything else the park system might need.

"Mostly I like construction projects," he said. "I'm getting too old for chain sawing."

Pete Panarese, who has worked with Griffith clearing trail on Crow Pass, doesn't see it that way. Just two years ago, he and Griffith spent a memorable day with their chain saws clearing trail on the Crow Pass Trail.

"I go out there and I have to get to Turbine Creek," he said, "and I have my new, lightweight chain saw with me. I'm working away for several hours and I hear the chain saw (from Griffith's end of the trail) and we rendezvous."

The two had noticed bear signs and were just talking about it when a brown bear comes thrashing through the woods and into the creek, followed closely by a wolf.

"It was a show," Panarese said. "Then it alerts on me and here it comes. I'm looking at him and Dick says, 'Hey bear!' The bear stands up, then gets on all fours and bashes through the woods."

Dick, he said, was unflappable.

Volunteers like Griffith, the Clarks, McCullough and the thousands of others who have donated their time are the key to making the Alaska State Parks volunteer program work.

"Volunteerism worked long term very well because we learned how to screen the volunteers well," Panarese said. "We recruited campground hosts to take over the campgrounds ... and they did great. It came in and we flourished under it. There is no denying it."

For McCullough, who is now a valued long-term parks' employee, the hours he spent volunteering paid off—he said it led to a great job *and* helped him better understand the park system because of it.

For Griffith, volunteering is a way of saying thank you to the state for creating such a special place for him to have his countless adventures over the decades.

And for the Clarks, who relish their time in Alaska and call it some of the best days of their lives, it provided memories—and friendships—that endure to this day.

"We got to know the other campground hosts and every Sunday we would get together and visit," Ed said. "We considered it our second home.

"Betty took an awful lot of slides, and when we came back she would show them to nursing homes, to hospitals, to church groups. I think we've been pretty good PR folks for Alaska. We've spread the word about those beautiful state parks to everybody we know."

"I had wanted to go to Alaska since I was young. Volunteering for parks allowed my husband and I to experience Alaska in a way you don't get as a visiting tourist. Parks gave us the opportunity and the back country training to really experience the beauty of the land. The rangers and all employees of ASP have been so nice and appreciative and it has been a pleasure to be involved with parks. We hope to continue in the future."

Mariah Johnson— Nancy Lake SRA volunteer May-August 2008; Caines Head SRA volunteer May-August 2009

6

Devastation to the land

Exxon Valdez oil spill changes forever the landscape of the park system

Rick Steiner was packing his gear for a day with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game on the morning of March 24, 1989. The Cordova resident planned to spend the day on a fry dig. Digging stream gravel to see the success of overwintering salmon was part of his job as University of Alaska's marine adviser for the Prince William Sound region.

Then he got a call that changed the course of his life. At 12:04 a.m. earlier that same day, the oil tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh reef, just 7 miles from the closest community of Tatitlek. The tanker was carrying 53 million gallons of oil bound for Washington; 11 million gallons of which dumped into the Sound.

"Obviously, as soon as I heard about this, I headed to Valdez and we flew over the tanker," said Steiner, who is today one of the foremost experts on the spill and works as an environmental sustainability consultant. "I ended up spending the next month in Valdez as the local representative with the emergency command team trying to do what we could in way of response."

The Exxon Valdez oil spill would prove to be the most devastating environmental disaster ever to strike Alaska. According to the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council, the spill stretched 460 miles, all the way out the Alaska Peninsula, impacting about 1,300 miles of the 1,900 miles of shoreline in the affected region. The Council estimated that the oil killed "250,000 seabirds, 2,800 sea otters, 300 harbor seals, 250 bald eagles, up to 22 killer whales and billions of salmon and herring eggs."

For those interested in preserving the recreational and natural aspects of the land—the very backbone of the Alaska State Park system—the spill also represented the very worst thing that could happen to such pristine of an area.

"On the morning of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, I was in a meeting with Steve McAlpine, the lieutenant

governor, and he got a phone call from (Governor) Steve Cowper," said Neil Johannsen, who was director of the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation at the time. "He left the meeting; then came back and told us what had happened."

The meeting came to a quick close, Johannsen said, as the enormity of the spill sank in.

"The next day, Steve and I flew out to Valdez and Prince William Sound and circled it to look at the spill," he said. "From the airplane, we could smell the oil."

In one of Johannsen's period departmental newsletters, "Greensheet," dated May 31, 1989, he blames the Exxon Valdez oil spill for making "this the saddest of springs for me."

"To many people it was the end of the world, and it really felt that way," Steiner said. "It *was* the end of the world for many hundreds of thousands of animals. It was a pretty stark time."

By 6:30 p.m. Sunday, March 26, 1989, Gov. Cowper declared a state of disaster for the spill area, clearing way for state funds to speed up a cleanup effort. The following day, he sought federal relief requesting President George Bush to declare the spill a federal disaster. That aid would not come until nearly two weeks later.

"It wasn't until that Sunday that the state decided what to do," Johannsen said. "Then a storm came and blew the oil out of the Sound."

Once in the Gulf of Alaska the oil marched onward, washing up on distant shores and fouling hundreds of miles of beaches. It headed 300 miles to the west, toward Kodiak, and slithered along the Gulf of Alaska hitting Kachemak Bay's outer reaches.

"We've sustained severe impact in many places, but none worse than Kachemak Bay State Wilderness Park," Johannsen wrote.

Indeed Kachemak Bay suffered the brunt of the oil's destructive path. For Kachemak district ranger Roger MacCampbell watching the oil come and being overwhelmed by the job of containing it was one of the most helpless feelings of his career.

"The oil spill was just incredibly traumatic," said MacCampbell, who has overseen the South Kenai

District since 1985. “I remember we were working 24-7; we were the first ones down here to really respond to it.”

MacCampbell said the spill, and the response to it, happened over the course of several days. But because he was familiar with the way weather patterns play out on the South Kenai Peninsula, he quickly deduced that the oil was headed his way.

“I called Bill (Garry, chief ranger and his supervisor), and said, ‘This oil is headed to the park,’ ” MacCampbell said. “We immediately started flying out and looking at the spill’s approach. The commercial fishermen were gearing up, and Fish and Game wanted to boom off all the creeks and salmon streams. We had a lot of people concerned about the health of the fishing. I’m calling Neil (Johannsen) up, saying, ‘you need to set up an incident command.’ I was able to throw a temper tantrum to get my way and convinced them to send me as many rangers as they could.”

The rangers set up monitoring camps along the coast, he said. They were trying to be ready when the oil came, but they would soon learn they were facing almost impossible odds.

MacCampbell and ranger Jeff Johnson headed up the efforts. Between their own experience on the water and the advice of the locals, they knew the first place the oil would likely wash up was a rough beach called Gore Point, which, as MacCampbell described it, “sticks out there like a first baseman’s mitt coming out of the Gulf of Alaska.”

The catchment beach acts as a sieve for all the detritus of the sea, including glass fishing balls, driftwood, kelp, old nets and other discarded ships’ supplies. Sure enough, the oil beached there, too.

“All this oil came ashore at Gore Point and Jeff’s wading though this oil to his knees with a cormorant looking at him like it’s saying ‘help me,’” MacCampbell said. “The crews were picking up 300 dead birds a day.”

The work seemed futile, MacCampbell said. He estimated there were about 40 people at Gore Point. They worked with buckets on a mile-long beach three feet high of oil. Their efforts barely made a dent.

“I asked the Coast Guard guys, ‘why don’t you get over there with front-end loaders and scoop this up? If you just got some heavy equipment out there we might get somewhere.’”

The Coast Guard, he said, balked at the idea because of Kachemak Bay's status as a wilderness park. Wasn't it against code, they asked? MacCampbell said he didn't care. The Coast Guard still wavered.

"They said, 'we need permission to go over to Gore Point and clean up that oil. And you're saying we can use equipment in a state park,'" MacCampbell said. "I happened to have a blank special park use permit. So I wrote (the admiral of the U.S. Coast Guard) a permit with a crayon because it was the only thing I had on my desk. I wrote, 'Please get this done. I authorize the admiral of the fleet to go clean this beach.'"

Jack Sinclair was a seasonal park ranger in Seward when the oil spill hit. He was gearing up for a season of upgrading trails and parks project on the eastern shore of the Kenai Peninsula.

"When the (Exxon) Valdez oil spill occurred, I think it changed all of our lives and affected State Parks as much as anyone else," said Sinclair, who retired in 2012 as the Kenai-Prince William Sound Area superintendent. "I had summer plans coming together with my staff but then April comes along and the Governor's office and commissioner's office said, 'we need a representative from Seward, and you're it.' I said, 'I'm a ranger, I can't do this stuff,' and the said, 'actually yeah, you're going to do this stuff.'"

Instantly, Sinclair's job description changed. He became a natural resource manager. He oversaw 100 miles of coastline and arranged any cleanup efforts in state parks lands that he could.

In 1989, Dale Bingham was superintendent of a region of state parks that covered the Mat-Su as well as Copper River area; all the way to Valdez. Some of the division's marine parks in Valdez were under his jurisdiction and threatened by the oil as well.

"I got the call real early in the morning from a friend of mine," Bingham said. "He was a pilot, and we arranged to fly over the spill and inspect the damage. It was one of those things like the Challenger (explosion). I love the ocean, and it just tore my heart apart."

With an inland division of State Parks to continue operating, Bingham could not be pulled into the oil spill cleanup efforts full time. Instead, Al Meiners, the regional manager for Mat-Su, Kenai and Chugach at the time, was sent in to help.

As devastating as the oil spill was, today there are some bright spots, some reason for celebration,

among Alaska State Parks. In what would turn out to be a strange irony, it took a harrowingly destructive environmental disaster to keep another potential disaster from happening. It's impossible to know if the tradeoff was worth it, said Steiner, the marine adviser who has worked for the past 20 years on the oil spill. But it's a victory to be claimed amid the devastation of the oil spill.

Because of a strange tax code called the Net Operating Loss Sales, instituted during the Reagan administration, Steiner said logging companies were cutting timber in nonprofitable areas and using their loss as a tax write-off. It helped Native regional corporations, which had plenty of land but no real profitable way to log it, he said.

"They were losing money doing the logging," he said. "But the Alaska Native corporations could make losses, thus earn some money, then earn money by selling the losses."

Coincidentally, the oil spill happened just as that tax was being fought. Opponents of the logging feared that it would destroy the coastal habitat of some of Alaska's most pristine areas.

"It would have been a forest fire of the logging system, a lot of the coastal community would have been ruined," Steiner said. "That's part of the irony of the whole thing: Without the oil spill, we would have lost the coastal community to logging."

In the months following the spill, Steiner and others with the Coastal Coalition proposed a $2 billion settlement to create an Alaska Restoration Fund.

"The bulk of the funds were to be used for habitat protection," Steiner said. "It got some significant buy-in from people, and gubernatorial candidate Wally Hickel took it on as one of his principal campaign issues. I salute him for doing that. It was the right thing to do."

In October of 1991, there was a successful settlement. About half of the funds were used for habitat protection. Some of that money went to Alaska State Parks to purchase land.

Steiner said on paper, 600,000 acres of coastal habitat was protected using Exxon Valdez oil spill funds—"but that doesn't tell the whole story."

It was the location of those sites, he said, that were key. Some purchases filled in gaps within existing parks, where there were small pockets of private in-holdings or Native regional corporation lands.

"Seldovia owned a huge chunk within Kachemak Bay and we were always trying to figure out a way to get that protected," Johannsen said. "The EVOS funds gave us $22 million to purchase that land and have that doughnut of ownership complete."

Other successes included the addition of Afognak Island State Park, he said, as well as thousands of acres of land added to Nuka Island, on the outer Kenai Coast, essentially adding another 100,000 acres to the Kachemak Bay State Wilderness Park.

"The only reason that (Nuka Island) bill passed was because it was a green vote as a result of the Exxon Valdez oil spill," Johannsen said.

Additions to the state park system would continue into the 2000s, after Johannsen had retired and Jim Stratton took over as director. He said he continued the mission to add as much acreage to the state park system as possible—not only to put the lands in the hands of the state but also keep it from being logged.

"We had opportunities to expand with the Exxon Valdez Trustee Council, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Forest Legacy program and other cooperative agreements," Stratton said. "Our budget was so tight, so we had to get creative."

Between 1995 and 2002, Exxon Valdez oil spill purchases totaled 60,607 acres and included such gems as Sawmill Bay State Marine Park, Lowell Point and Afognak Island State Park. Lands in Chenega (16,268 acres) and Eyak (4,331 acres) were purchased, as well as parcels in Ninilchik (8 acres) and along the Kenai River (426 acres), among others.

"Way more land came to us through Exxon Valdez than we would have been able to get without it," he said.

Still, it's the irony of the spill that damaged to so much land only to lead to protecting other land that is hard to reconcile even now.

"There are two things I remember so clearly," Johannsen said. "It was silent. I was used to a lot of racket with birds and the cacophony of gulls. And the smell. Those were two profound things that I remember that will probably never go away.

"We had some magnificent achievements (in gaining lands) and the cloud was dark, but there was a silver lining. It's the best you can come up with in a situation like this."

"That's all you can do when you're dealt this kind of hand," Steiner said. "The best thing we could do, the least we could do, is get more land protected."

7

State Recreation Areas: The People's Playground

With specific management purposes in mind, these state park units offer a range of activities

NANCY LAKE STATE RECREATION AREA—At the South Rolly Lake campground, only a few people remain. It's a shame, though, because it is a beautiful fall day in late September and vivid yellow leaves tumble from the birch trees, collecting in crisp drifts along the side of the graveled road winding through the campground. The sun reflects off the mirrored brightness of South Rolly Lake, and the few campers there, standing outside their recreational vehicles looking out over the water, smile and wave; their expressions seeming to say, "Can you believe we have this place all to ourselves?"

Indeed this small corner of the Nancy Lake region is one of the many special places that Alaska State Parks has fostered over the years. Once a simple roadside pullout under Bureau of Land Management control, the Nancy Lake area today is home to one of the most popular state recreation areas and sites within Alaska State Parks. For its many users—boaters, anglers, campers, dog mushers, snowmobilers and hikers—it's a convenient place to play, just on the outskirts of one of the state's most heavily populated regions.

But for those who have been with Alaska State Parks since its inception, Nancy Lake represents the beginning of what is today that largest state park system in the country, with some of the most pristine and scenic land on earth.

"It's a special place," said Ira Edwards, a Nancy Lake ranger who grew up in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley and as a child wandered the very area he now helps protect. "There's a lot of things you can do. There is the motorized aspect, where you can get out and snowmachine, but you can also get away from everything. Our canoe system is pretty much nonmotorized and within minutes you can be completely alone and quiet."

Cliff Giles and unknown seasonal worker at Nancy Lake SRA, ca.1973.

Photo courtesy of Mike Lee.

The Nancy Lake State Recreation Area has the distinction of being the first tract of land the state took over for recreation—in essence the true "first state playground" for visitors and Alaskans alike—as part of the Statehood Act in 1959.

The year 1959 was a busy one: Alaska became the 49th state of the United States; Congress passed the Alaska Omnibus Act (which transferred more than 30 federally-run roadside campgrounds and waysides from the Bureau of Land Management to the state); and the first Alaska Legislature passed the Alaska Land Act, setting the stage for future parks development.

It was on July 6, 1966 when the state finally settled on its first land choice—the 21,175 acres of land surrounding Nancy Lake, near Willow. The Nancy Lake State Recreation Site, a 30-site lakeside camping area on 36 acres that attracted visitors year-round, adjoined it. At the time, the only access to the area was through the recreation site. Today, the Nancy Lake State Recreation Area comprises 22,685 acres.

Mike Lee became the first ranger for the Nancy Lake State Recreation Area on April 13, 1970. To him it was the fulfillment of a dream he'd had since he was a kid growing up in Idaho reading Jack London stories and listening to "Sgt. Preston: Challenge of the Yukon" stories on the radio in the late 1950s.

"I wanted to emulate them," he said. "I was in junior high, and we had an outdoor club. I had a teacher who really influenced me to love the outdoors, and by the time I was in high school I was doing trips by myself to (Mount) Rainier. I always knew I'd come to Alaska."

Nancy Lake—and the other park units that were under Lee's management at the time—was the perfect backdrop for him to live the life he imagined. Soon after moving to Alaska in 1967, he started collecting sled dogs until he had enough to form his own team, just like Sgt. Preston. He mushed them along trails through Willow and even patrolled by dog team whenever he had a chance.

"As far as I know, I was the only ranger patrolling by dog team," he said.

Once, while patrolling with his dogs near Nancy Lake, Lee said he came across a group of moose hunters, unknowingly breaking the law by hunting in illegal territory.

"This was about 1972, 1973," he said. "The Nancy Lake Parkway wasn't open yet, and my lines were old. As I was hooking the dogs up to leave, they were lunging and jumping like they always do and

One of the first public use cabins, Nancy Lake SRA, 1982.

Photo courtesy of Mike Lee.

they broke the line. I barely had time to grab the sled, but I did."

Running swiftly, but without the backup of his line and snowhook that had been left behind, Lee rushed down the snow-covered path and into the recreation area. He came upon the hunters after traveling a few miles. He drove his team toward the men. When the dogs spotted the moose carcass on the ground they went wild with excitement, wanting to rip the animal apart for a feast.

"I had no rope and no anchor, but those guys were really surprised someone had come in by dogsled," Lee said. "I tried to stop and consider whether I'd write them a ticket, but the dogs wouldn't stay still and were barking and lunging. As we often did in those days, I just gave (the hunters) a good talking-to and told them not to hunt there. As rangers, you had to use your head."

Another time, Lee used his team to chase down a snowmobiler riding in a nonmotorized area. That, too, came as a surprise to the snowmobiler, he said, who took Lee's warnings to heart and left the area.

"There's so much about this job that you had to create as you went along—you dream this stuff up," he said. "We were the first rangers there and had to use our judgment."

Those early days were in fact a time of development for the Alaska's park system. With the establishment of Nancy Lake, thus began a sometimes convoluted but systematic picking-up of land that would be used with the purpose of recreation in mind. It would be four years later, in 1970, before the first official "parks," a different designation than "recreations area," would be established. Kachemak, Chugach and Denali were the first three. Joined by Nancy Lake and other recreation sites and areas already established throughout Alaska, the lands developed under the Department of Natural Resources' Division of Parks department (later to become the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation) began to take shape.

Neil Johannsen was chief of planning for Alaska State Parks when he presented a talk in 1976 titled "The Alaska State Park System: A Basis in Nature, A Goal for People." In it, he explained the various labels given to the land "units" under park management. To the general user, it is hard to distinguish between a State Recreation Area, State Recreation Site or State Park, among other designations. What is the difference, people wanted to know? Does it really matter?

"Just as a painting is a composite of numerous brush strokes and a novel of related chapters, so should a park system be composed of integrated elements," he wrote. "State parks, historic sites and recreation areas, both existing and proposed, should follow themes of human history, and pre-history, as well as contain representative seashores, lakes, rivers, mountains and forests."

During his 20-plus-year tenure with Alaska State Parks, Johannsen, who went on to become director from 1983 to 1995, helped amass a huge influx of lands to be managed under the Alaska State Parks banner. Among the recreation areas added under his leadership were Willow Creek and Upper Kasilof, and additional acreage tacked on at Lake Louise, Caines Head and Clam Gulch, among others. The division was growing rapidly and the goal was to get as much land as possible, Johannsen said. But with those acquisitions came the need for maintenance.

It was Jim Stratton, who followed Johannsen, serving as Alaska State Parks director from September 1995 to December 2002, who recognized the need to not only acquire the state-owned land but also to then "brand" it.

"I was a political appointment … I was really an Alaskan park user who was now in charge of the parks," Stratton said of his beginnings as director. "As a park user, I didn't realize that every state recreation area, every state recreation site, every boat launch, every state historic site is a park unit. So that was one of the earlier things I did—to put Alaska State Parks signs on all of these places.

"We had to brand ourselves with the public because they're the ones who will help fund us."

Today, state recreation areas account for nearly 294,000 acres of Alaska's 3.2 million acres of state recreation land**.** To the general user, these are public places (some charging fees, others not) where recreation opportunities such as fishing, hiking, camping, skiing, snowmobiling and boating abound. State recreation sites, which tend to be smaller and often include campgrounds, boat launches or trail heads, account for 5,650 acres. The designations may seem irrelevant.

To the Alaska State Park system, though, the differences matter. The "Alaska State Parks Framework," published in 1982, differentiates a state recreation area as such:

"Definition and Purpose: A state recreation area is a relatively spacious unit and possesses a diversity of outdoor recreational opportunities. The dominant management objective of the unit is to provide

a maximum level of outdoor recreational opportunities based on the natural values of the unit and its ability to sustain use without significant adverse effects on natural systems."

Development and activities is these areas, the document goes on to say, "allows for carefully planned and controlled resource modification to enhance outdoor recreational opportunities as long as the intensity of modification does not diminish the unit's natural and cultural values.

"Such modifications must be based upon formal decision to enhance public enjoyment of the state recreation area's natural values or to provide for site-appropriate outdoor recreational activities. Lands within the unit will be developed to provide diverse, high quality outdoor recreational experiences in keeping with regional use patterns and preferences. Other than state recreation sites, state recreation areas are generally the most intensively developed type of unit in the state park system."

By that definition, then, state recreation areas differ from other designations in that they allow the most use of public recreation possible. Other than their similarly managed yet smaller counterparts—state recreation areas—they are the most developed, with as many roads, campgrounds, marked trails and infrastructure as possible, while still maintaining a natural feel. They differ from state historic parks, which attempt to preserve Alaska's heritage; and state parks, which tend to be larger, more untouched and offer recreation consistent with the natural habitat and its resources.

Also, added Edwards, "State recreation areas and state parks are very similar in what you can do in them, and they offer a lot of the same activities. They are both created by the Legislature.

"State recreation sites are smaller and they can be purchased or acquired through director's orders," he continued. "They don't have as many restrictions on them, either."

State recreation areas, though, by their very names, invite users to enjoy them—to recreate. Situated in some of the prettiest spots in the state and often easily accessible, these areas are the prime places to explore the natural surroundings. Some, such as Kasilof's 325-acre Johnson Lake State Recreation Area, are smaller, more secluded and not as heavily frequented. Others, like Nancy Lake, are quite popular, yet manage to maintain a sense of Alaska wilderness.

Jeff Johnson was a ranger in 1982 and 1983. Among his patrols was the 1974-created Deep Creek

State Recreation Area, an immensely popular area for halibut and king salmon fishermen and clammers during minus tides. At 172 acres it is a smaller recreation area, but one of the more crowded places that Johnson managed. It is an example of a state recreation area that today is run by a private concessionaire providing boat-launch services that the state park system, under current budgets, is not able to handle. Such relationships continue today at such areas as Kepler-Bradley State Recreation Area and Eagle River Campground.

Chena River State Recreation Area, east of Fairbanks, is another popular destination. The state snatched this riverfront parcel in 1967, just a few months after the Nancy Lake acquisition, in response to concerns from local Fairbanks residents who feared growth in the region was going to slowly erode the wilderness feel of their surroundings.

The Chena is a year-round draw to visitors despite its off-the-beaten-path location, near the end of Chena Hot Springs Road. The Chena started off small, in 1967, when groups such as the Fairbanks Garden Club and Alaska Conservation Society asked Alaska legislators to save some of the wilderness surrounding Fairbanks. The Legislature agreed, designating 15,360 acres for the establishment of Chena River State Recreation Area.

FROM HISTORY

With the discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay a year later, another boom ensued and Fairbanks' development rushed along. This again created fear among locals that the quality of their frontier lives would be diminished if it got too crowded, too quick.

In 1975, the Legislature responded to concerns of Fairbanks residents by adding another 240,000 acres to the recreation area. Today, Chena River State Recreation Area is a quarter-million acres—by far the largest state recreation area in Alaska.

"Chena River State Recreation Area provides a myriad of outdoor opportunities close to Fairbanks," said Brooks Ludwig, Northern Area superintendent of Alaska State Parks since 2008. "You can still hear wolves howl, catch big grayling, see abundant wildlife and enjoy a wilderness experience within 45 minutes of Fairbanks."

Residents of Fairbanks have proven that the land they wanted to set aside for recreation is not going

wasted, too. Ludwig, whose parks career began in 1982 at Chena River State Recreation Area as a trail crew leader, said the 397-square mile recreation area is one of Interior Alaska's favorite recreation destinations and has an annual visitor count of at least 150,000.

"According to a statistically representative visitor use survey of Fairbanks North Star Borough residents conducted in 2006 by the University of Alaska, 78 percent of borough residents had visited the Chena River SRA," he said. "Twenty-eight percent of residents had visited within the past year and 75 percent of them visited multiple times in a year."

Recreation at the Chena River State Recreation Area is available year-round. It boasts three developed campgrounds, miles of navigable river for kayaking and canoeing, and several popular trails that can be accessed both in summer and winter. Dog mushing, ice fishing and skiing are popular in the winter, while hikers, anglers and boaters flock there in the summer.

"The Chena River State Recreation Area has always been a favorite for river floats and water-based recreation," he added. "Over the years all-terrain vehicles are becoming more and more popular. Today we see as many ATVs in the CRSRA as we do canoes and rafts. This type of recreation is becoming more popular as the baby boomers grow older. The CRSRA is developing multiple-use trails to provide opportunities for this growing user group."

The Northern District includes several other recreation areas, including the popular Quartz Lake, Harding Lake and Lower Chatanika River state recreation areas, Ludwig added. Those areas, while smaller, see similar activity.

"Northern area park units are located on bodies of water where residents recreate during Interior Alaska's hot summer months," he said. "Water-based recreation is very popular at Birch, Quartz, Harding and Fielding Lakes along with Chatanika, Salcha, Chena, Clearwater, Tanana and Delta Rivers. In the winter ice fishing is popular with eight icehouses available for rent at Birch (Lake State Recreation Site) and Quartz (Lake State Recreation Area). Public-use cabins are also extremely popular with Alaskans. There are 12 cabins for rent ranging from backcountry to roadside."

In the 40-plus years since state recreation areas and their smaller counterparts, the state recreation sites, came into Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation management, the goal has been to allow the areas to maintain a natural feel while still allowing users to receive the most enjoyment out of the

amenities available.

But at times, planners seemed to get a little overzealous with their visions. The original planning document for Nancy Lake State Recreation Area, written in 1967, far overestimated the public use that would come. Written by Sam L. Huddleston and Associates, it called for the construction of 2,900 picnic sites, 1,750 camp sites, a lodge with heated pool, a marina with slips to accommodate more than 150 boats, a golf course and 20 miles of road to provide access.

The "Nancy Lake State Recreation Master Plan," published in 1983, estimated only 50,000 to 70,000 combined annual visitors from 1978 to 1981; hardly enough users to justify such development.

Fortunately that development did not happen. The only primary improvement made to the area was the 6.5-mile Nancy Lake Parkway, which was finished in the early 1970s. While other amenities to Alaska's state recreation areas have been added as the needs and funds have arrived, these areas still retain a certain amount of serenity and beckon visitors to enjoy the Alaska outdoors simply and easily.

"There are pacific loons and common loons that nest on the lake, grebes and all sorts of other birds," Edwards said of Nancy Lake State Recreation Area. "There's pinks and coho (salmon), and there were a lot of black bears this summer in the more remote areas.

"It just still can be very peaceful."

STATE RECREATION AREAS, ACREAGE:

1. *Nancy Lake, 22,685*
2. *Harding Lake, 169*
3. *Chena River, 254,080*
4. *Captain Cook, 3,620*
5. *Caines Head, 5,800*
6. *Clam Gulch, 122*
7. *Deep Creek, 128*
8. *Ninilchik, 97*
9. *Eagle Beach, 590*
10. *Lake Louise, 511*
11. *Willow Creek, 2,953*
12. *Anchor River, 211*
13. *Johnson Lake, 325*
14. *Morgans Landing, 279*
15. *Kenai Keys, 249*
16. *Quartz Lake, 600*
17. *Kepler-Bradley Lakes, 272*
18. *Lower Chatanika, 400*
19. *Upper Kasilof, 281*

8

Marine Parks

Making the most of Alaska's varied coastline

With nearly 34,000 miles of coastline, it is no wonder that people are drawn to Alaska's maritime environment. Here is a place where, within minutes, a person can reach true wilderness. The coastline includes some of the most pristine land in the country and scenic landscapes of the state.

It was one of the things that attracted Neil Johannsen when he came to Alaska in 1971. Drawn to the contrast between stark mountains and turbulent seas, he became enthralled with boating soon after arriving. He built his own sailboat, the sloop Nellie Juan, in the years 1973 and 1974, and sailed it through Prince William Sound, Resurrection Bay and Kachemak Bay for years. Johannsen got to know the tucked-away treasures of Alaska's coastline. Setting aside some of that coastline as state park land was one of his goals when he became chief of planning for Alaska State Parks in 1975.

"Many areas that were to become marine parks were explored on Nellie Juan," Johannsen said. "The concept of creating marine parks evolved to a great degree aboard that 31-foot sailboat."

Today, there are 36 state marine parks, ranging from the 62-acre Joe Mace Island State Marine Park east of Wrangell to the massive 103,600-acre St. James Bay, about 30 miles northeast of Juneau. These parks, mostly undeveloped, can be found in protected coves, outer coastlines, hidden bays and along vast, open stretches of seashore. They represent some of the state's most pristine coastal areas. Because they are protected, they will provide recreation opportunities for generations to come.

The parks also offer an economic boost to the state, attracting resident visitors as well as those living outside Alaska.

In "An Economic Report: How State Park Visitors Impact Prince William Sound/Resurrection Bay Communities," presented in 2008 by researchers Lee Elder and Bob Gorman, the study showed that in 2006, visitors to state parks, particularly marine parks, spent an estimate $12.2 million.

The majority of Alaska's state marine parks came into being in large chunks—the first being added in 1983 and the second in 1990. The state carefully chose, through the Statehood Act of 1958, the lands that it thought would make the most of Alaska's coastline park. The first 11 state marine parks were a result of the dream of several very dedicated people—including Johannsen —who worked tirelessly to get the idea of marine parks in the collective consciouness. Seven years later, some 15 parcels would be added to the mix. By 1993—due, ironically, to the devastation of the Exxon Valdez oil spill—even more were added.

Gov. Bill Sheffield signs the first marine park bill, 1983.
Left to right: Executive director of the Alaska Environmental Lobby Jay Nelson, Gov. Bill Sheffield and director of Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation Neil Johannsen.

Photo courtesy of Neil Johannsen.

MARINE PARKS GAIN HOLD

Al Meiners was a park planner when he first met Johannsen in the mid 1970s. The two worked in the Alaska State Park system, both had gone to the University of Washington graduate school, studying parks and forestry, and both were avid boaters.

"Marine parks has an interesting history," said Meiners. "Both Neil and I were boaters and we paid a lot of attention to the boating in (Washington's) Puget Sound and all along the coast.

"It was in the late '70s, and we noticed that the (U.S.) Forest Service was not doing a very good job with recreation; they were mostly timber-oriented. We decided we ought to do something about that."

So they did.

What followed was a combination of public-media campaign blitz, legislative bargaining and budget reorganizing to shift marine parks from an idea to a reality.

"It was my *dream* – but not *just my* dream," Johannsen stressed. "Others, I learned, shared it. The concept for a system of marine parks through Southeast Alaska up through Prince William Sound, Resurrection Bay and even to the west from there, evolved from the collective thinking and research of four people who deserve the merit badge for these parks: Hilton Wolfe, a former English professor at University of Alaska Fairbanks and then Southeast superintendent of parks; his Haines district ranger, Chuck Horner, a former Methodist minister; Al Meiners, active ocean kayaker and planner with parks; and myself."

The men were smart about branding the state marine park idea. Johannsen, through contacts in the media, began writing articles touting the idea.

In one such article, "Marine Parks for Alaska: The International Connection," written in 1979 and printed in Alaska Magazine, he proposed a waterways connection from Alaska to Canada, using state marine parks as the stopping points.

"Planned for boaters and fly-in recreationists will be 163 marine parks; most an easy one-day boat trip from one to another," he wrote. The marine waterway system he described would stretch some 1,600 miles, connecting boaters in the Lower 48 states to those in Alaska.

"In Alaska, 54 percent of all residents participate in boating, a rate far higher than the national average," he wrote. "Boat ownership in the Seattle area is the highest of any large city in the nation."

The vision that Meiners, Horner, Johannsen and Wolfe had for the series of marine parks was grand. The Statehood Act of 1958 allowed the state to select up to 400,000 acres of federal land to be set aside for community expansion or recreation, and it was this act that the men set their sites toward. Then Governor Jay Hammond and attorney general Avrum Gross supported the idea, and in December 1977, the state submitted its selections to the U.S. Forest Service.

"Areas were carefully selected for scenic quality, productive sport fishing and protection from prevailing winds," Johannsen wrote. "Recreational opportunities include beachcombing, crabbing, shrimping, hunting, camping, scuba diving, observing wildlife or visiting historical areas."

The selections included 25 areas in Prince William Sound and 39 areas in Southeast Alaska, a dream that has yet to be fulfilled. In late 1979, the Forest Service had approved only three of the proposed 64 parks.

But the foursome did not give up that easily. Alaska's coastal regions simply had to be represented as part of the state park system.

"Chip Dennerlein was the community involvement coordinator for that project," Meiners said. Dennerlein went from town to town drumming up support for the project. "Cordova was supportive, Valdez was on board. Seward was a little coolish at first but then warmed up to the idea."

Meiners used whatever connections he had to protect the land that he saw as being overlogged. Not only was it ugly, he said, but also the shallow soil could not support the clear-cutting and created an environmental mess for the coastline.

"The clear cuts were horrible out there," he said.

Meiners confided that he had a classmate from college who worked for the Forest Service at the time. "He gave me all the proposed timber sales, and we filed selections on a number of them. I think we got a few, and that stopped their timber sales. It was an interesting little land grab."

The key to moving from earmarked parks to actual parks, though, lay in the support of the Legislature,

and the men had that in Sen. Vic Fischer, who was an avid ocean kayaker and supporter of the state marine parks concept. He'd spent time paddling the waters of Glacier Bay and Prince William Sound and recognized the latter as some of the most beautiful country in the state.

"I remember I was working with Neil on something else park related," said Fischer, now retired from the Legislature and living in Anchorage. "We got to talking about ocean kayaking, so he said, 'we need legislation to introduce it, would you carry it for us?' and I said, 'of, course,' because I thought it was a great idea."

To Fischer, leaving some of the coastal regions of Alaska open for recreation seemed like an ideal use of the land. Not only would these parcels give recreationists a place to go, but also the landscapes would be protected from further timber development and degradation.

"The state was entitled to selection of lands (under the Statehood Act) for recreation purposes," he said. "We were essentially taking land from what was closed Forest Service land so that it wasn't really affecting any private ownership or miners or anyone who might have an interest in it."

In the Senate, Fischer said he had no trouble getting his fellow lawmakers to agree on the state marine parks idea. He remembers it being a pretty easy sell.

"The spark was given to me, and I just carried it through," he said.

Eleven state marine parks—five in Southeast and the remaining six in Prince William Sound and Southcentral Alaska—passed the House and Senate and were passed into reality on July 16, 1983.

"I remember being totally obsessed with working that bill through the Legislature; nothing mattered more to me at that time," Johannsen said. One of the high points to his career with state parks, he said, was watching Gov. Bill Sheffield sign the marine parks bill.

EXPANDING THE PARKS

Johannsen, still director during the late '80s, continued to push for more state marine parks. The project was not complete, he said.

"I was totally, absurdly nuts that the bill came to be to get more of these marine parks," he said.

In a fit of inspiration, Johannsen called Craig Medred, a well-known outdoors writer in Anchorage, to accompany him on a marine park scouting trip. The two went to Prince William Sound and Johannsen showed Medred, also a boater and lover of the sea, the areas he favored.

"I remember it well," Medred said. "Whittier was nothing. The Sound was a wilderness. … There might have been one or two charters then doing kayak drop offs out of Whittier, but there couldn't have been more than that."

Medred and Johannsen explored areas of the Sound that could be potential sites.

"We hiked around in a bunch of places and talked about what to do to make the Sound a little more accessible," he said. "There aren't a lot of good places for camping, and there weren't then any easy places for someone to tie up a boat."

Still, even Medred saw the value in adding more parks. A former Juneau resident, he had come to appreciate the state parks forming in that region.

"The state park system had already begun to pioneer marine parks in Southeast Alaska, and I was well familiar with them from having used the docks in Taku Harbor and Funter Bay while sailing all over that region. So we talked a lot about how to make the Sound more accessible, like Southeast."

Medred supported the idea, and former Anchorage Times publisher Bob Atwood approved an editorial in the paper backing it. By April 1990, Gov. Steve Cowper had signed Senate Bill 42 into reality creating 13 more parks, and by June 14, 1990, it was official: Those 13, plus two more, expanded the marine park system by 15.

DEVASTATION LEADS TO PROTECTION

On an early spring day, March 24, 1989, the oil tanker Exxon Valdez slammed into Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, spilling an estimate 750,000 barrels of crude oil. The devastation it would leave behind in the waters and along the shoreline of the Sound could not even be fathomed on the day of the incident.

But within 24 hours, the reality set in. The oil would pollute nearly 11,000 square miles of water and spoil 1,300 miles of coastline.

Rick Steiner was one of the first people to realize the enormity of the problem. A University of Alaska marine adviser, he immediately, upon learning of the spill, set about making sure it was never to happen again.

"We realized you can't clean it up, you can't fix the damage, the only thing we can do and the minimum we can do is to protect (the region) from more damage," said Steiner, who today works as a consultant and has helped advise cleanup efforts on oil spills worldwide.

After the spill, Steiner, along with a cadre of defenders of the Sound known as The Coastal Coalition, helped craft a $2 billion settlement from Exxon Corp. in October 1991. Paramount to their argument was that work to restore the damaged land should begin immediately.

"There is an immediate opportunity to protect, through acquisition, threatened habitat within the region," the Coalition wrote in the draft proposal for settlement.

Of the settlement, Steiner said, about half of that money went to habitat protection, in the form of new marine parks, and purchases of inholdings in existing parklands that completed vast regions of protected land.

"It's the one shining lining from the entire oil spill," Steiner said. "We were able to protect coastal habitat that needed protecting."

Today's marine parks continue to be one of the most unique aspects of the Alaska State Park system. Because the majority of the parks are left in their natural state, they retain the early Alaska wilderness feel that Craig Medred, Al Meiners, Vic Fischer and others recognized and sought to protect.

"Certainly in Southeast Alaska the marine parks were huge," Meiners said; in Prince William Sound they are now blossoming. They add a variety the park system lacked in its early days.

Fischer agrees.

"It was a marvelous idea," Fischer said. "Subsequently, I kayaked right into some of those places that we helped create and I said, 'wow, we have preserved this for recreation.' That is such a good thing. It's great to know that somebody can kayak through the inland waters, through Prince William Sound, and know that there are state parks; that there is a good, secure, safe place to camp out, to come ashore or

even if you're with a boat, a safe place to anchor.

"It's good from a recreation standpoint and as an Alaskan to know there are these protected areas."

For Johannsen, who has spent a good part of his retirement aboard his current sailboat, the Detour, there is still work to be done. He says 36 marine parks are a good start but there are many more areas along Alaska's spectacular coastline that merit park designation.

"There are many more awaiting action by today's Alaskans," Johannsen said. "The 'system' is not done."

9

Narratives by Past Employees

Employees recount their experiences working for Alaska State Parks

CHRIS DEGERNESS: THE KENAI RIVER SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREA

Management of the Kenai River Special Management Area (KRSMA) is unlike any other park unit within the agency. There is no other park unit like it in the State of Alaska. When the KRSMA was created legislatively in 1984, an extensive public involvement process followed to help determine how this unit of the state park system would be managed. The KRSMA is unique in that Department of Parks and Outdoor Recreation (DPOR) is charged with providing for recreational use of the river as well as protecting the important fish and wildlife resources and habitat of the river. While habitat protection is one of the core missions of Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG), it is usually not one of DPOR's missions. The dual mission requires a careful balance of use and protection. After some of the big decisions were made and implemented in the mid 1980s (horse power limits, non-motorized zones, Kenai River guide permitting program, etc.), DPOR settled into a routine, but active, field management program.

Chris Degernes, Kenai area superintendent, 1989-2004; deputy director/chief of field operations, 2004-2010.

Photo courtesy of Neil Johannsen.

In the early 1990s, it became clear that development on private lands along the river and the growing recreational use of public lands was having a measureable negative affect on important riparian habitat along the river: Simply put, the river was being loved to death. A study done by ADFG's Habitat Division documented that 12% of the available king salmon rearing habitat had been lost due to human impacts in the riparian area, and those impacts were on both private and public lands. It was clear that if we wanted to maintain healthy rearing habitat for the world-class king salmon sport fishery, we needed to change how we were using the lands along the river. A significant area of public land along the river was closed to bank angling to protect it for its riparian habitat value. In many areas that remained open for bank angling, elevated light penetrating walkways were developed to protect the riverbanks from the trampling by thousands of fishermen. "Bioengineering" techniques were used more and more along the river to protect and restore natural riverbank vegetation and

provide for the important nearshore fish habitat, which is so important to salmon fry and smolt.

The challenge for DPOR's management of the KRSMA continues on many fronts. The growing tourism industry of Soldotna and Kenai continues to place more demands on a limited amount of public land on the Kenai River, especially during July when the peak of king salmon and sockeye salmon fishing is underway. The local chambers of commerce invite more and more visitors to the central Kenai Peninsula when the capacity for accommodating these visitors has not continued to grow.

Everyone wants more and more access to the finite resource, and DPOR is often pressured by businesses, sportfishing organizations and others to accommodate this growing demand. Many anglers continue to push the edges, looking for new places to fish; the result impacts fragile riparian habitat or encroachment into closed areas or onto private lands. The growth of the Kenai River sportfishing guide industry has also continued, with nearly 400 guides registered by DPOR in the biggest years. While the public has pleaded that DPOR limit the number of guides, the Alaska constitution and case law has prohibited the agency from implementing a guide limit. The only avenue has been to implement a very restrictive and specific set of guidelines for qualifying as a Kenai River guide. While that may have helped professionalize an industry that has seen little regulation away from the Kenai River, it has not satisfied the disenfranchised anglers who feel like they can no longer compete on the Kenai River due to all of the guide boats.

The KRSMA is the most highly regulated recreational river in Alaska. Power boats have limits on length, width and horsepower and are required to be the newer cleaner burning "4 stroke" type to reduce hydrocarbon pollution in the river. Some areas of the river and some times of the year are designated for non-motorized use only. A number of miles of public land along the river are off limits to bank angling so that the riparian habitat on those areas can be undisturbed as much as possible.

There is no easy or perfect solution that best meets the needs and desires of the recreating public, the local business interests, the rights and interests of river property owners and local, state and federal government agencies, and local politicians. Competing issues such as environmental considerations, economic functions and legal constraints makes a very difficult dance indeed for DPOR. Only time and history will tell us whether our efforts were and are enough to preserve the resources of one of the world's finest salmon rivers so that generations to come can enjoy them as we do today.

MICHAEL GOODWIN: VIEW OF SERVICE IN CONSERVATION

For me, ranger, as the name implies, was the job of being out on the land and waters of some of Alaska's finest special purpose areas. They are, collectively called, the Alaska State Park system. After an early 1970s encounter with an iconic federal ranger in the backcountry of Yellowstone National Park, I knew what my adult career would be. Maybe it was the ornate rifle scabbard lashed to the horse he rode, but more likely it was the stories he told at the fireside while we camped along the Gallatin River. To get a job of such purity I needed to complete four academic years and a degree at Michigan State University, volunteer as a park ranger intern, and study a map of Alaska nailed to my screened shelter at Isle Royale's wilderness park in Lake Superior. Oh, I also can't forget the mental flexibility and luck that came my way. I arrived in Alaska in 1976. There was no better place to serve as a park ranger than Alaska, a dynamically changing place in the 1970s and a bastion of the conservation movement.

It wasn't until early 1981 that I was courted by Alaska State Parks, a system large in scale but a true institutional infant. My decision to join the rangers in Chugach State Park was based largely on the newness of it all; to become part of a rapidly growing system and to work in a self-proclaimed urban wilderness. I reported to work at an ATCO trailer attached to a large garage with a one-room office that served as headquarters. I wasn't elated about the decor but I came to work in the outdoors that was the park. Within my first week the chief ranger issued me my badge, a .357 revolver, a ticket book and the brief case he said I was to carry it all in. Simply stated, his direction was to "get out and protect the park and the people", because "the mudboggers , 4x4s and dirt bikes are tearing the place up." I had no problem with basic guidelines. My office would be a marked dark green Ram Charger with a red, rotating bubble dome on top. It was perplexing that my equipment needed to be carried in a brief case, especially the revolver. I quickly began to see how young this organization was: It was exciting. It was my call to serve in the youthful conservation movement in Alaska.

Through cooperative agreements, Chugach State Park and its rangers were responsible for search and rescue within the park, a task the rangers took on with great resolve and commitment. I hadn't worn the uniform a month when I got the first call that rolled me out of bed and a solid nighttime sleep. A young boy was missing in the Thunderbird Falls Gorge north of Anchorage. A fellow ranger named John Harris, whom we humorously but respectfully called "red dog," was on the radio as we both arrived at the accident scene. By headlamp, I prepared to lower Harris over the edge into the tumbling

Left to right: engineer Judy Chapman and ranger Mike Goodwin, who worked for Alaska State Parks from 1981 to 2002.
Photo courtesy of Bill Evans.

waterfalls of the gorge below. He was no stranger to his job, but we hardly knew one another. On my belay, but before he went over the canyon edge, we exchanged eye contact; there was an unspoken trust. As rangers then, this was the job we did. An hour later he emerged up the wall pocketing the teen's eyeglasses, confirming the site of the fall. A successful-but-tragic outcome ended a three-day recovery operation involving rangers, the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group, fire department and police. This kind of dirt on your boots was a measure of your day's worth, and I was glad to be part of it. I learned to live on less sleep when there were other nighttime calls. There were many more recoveries and some rescue saves throughout my career. Occasionally, it was my job to deliver the message of loss to those who cared. I always appreciated when a chaplin was present.

Park rangers belong to a unique alumnus. Each has his or her own style and focus but all have an opportunity to deliver a message about conservation and the importance of having wild places. Often rangers must freestyle their approach to problem solving, sometimes during dangerous situations, but most often to get something done that could benefit park users. If a field ranger got bored it was self inflicted. I spent many nights, alone on park patrol, discovering what occurs during the dark hours. Not all of it was good. During my early years in Chugach State Park, it was recreational vandalism at its worst. The park suffered natural resource wounds ripped open by 4-wheeled vehicles, ATVs and dirt bikes. Some city dwellers would come to the front country of "the urban wilderness" to shoot guns, gather for parking lot parties and consume large amounts of alcohol. Today less of this activity occurs because of more watchful and concerning public eyes. This is a great thing. In the Chugach foothills during the early 1980s I spent many hours in elevated perches watching for bouncing headlights of vehicles illegally operating within the park's valleys. With luck, I'd intercept the operator. Sometimes there was an arrest, often a citation, and always a message about why the park needed to be conserved. I felt if rangers didn't deliver the message, who would? Rangers work together with their communities to help define the prescription for acceptable public use of a developing park system.

There were many users of the parks that enjoyed so many places as much and often more than myself. It's their park to enjoy; I was just lucky enough to work there. I cherished times in the backcountry. An approach by foot or ski deep into untrampled areas was most often earned. It was a healthful job, at times physically demanding. This suited me. Occasionally, I'd get dropped by helicopter into remote regions of the park. This occurred either during an emergency, in hunting season, or whenever I could simply snag a ride with another department's aircraft.

I always cherished the change of seasons, the intensity of color and the wildlife and human activity that came with it. I observed wolverines, lynx and brown bears trying to inhabit the developed zones of the park. Often park animals would be in conflict with people eating hotdogs at wayside fire pits, running or biking the trails, or photographing in ways that sometimes pushed a mutual comfort zone to capture an image. In such cases I would interface between the natural world and the human world in hopes of avoiding a conflict. Few jobs do this. I found it necessary to kill only one park animal during my career, a young marauding brown bear that challenged a camper and injured him. Others were euthanized after being struck by autos. Being around wild animals helped me understand feeding behaviors, habitat preferences and social tendencies.

I worked around the state as much as most rangers back then. When I was selected to work in a new area I felt it was important to become part of the local community. I considered it important to ease into a new community, witness the diversity, interests and how people used their parks. In Kodiak, I wasn't afforded that luxury. The previous head ranger had been implicated in a big game hunting case. Park rangers accept stewardship of special purpose lands, waters and the creatures that roam within them. This stewardship is not often exclusive but seldom ignored. In Kodiak, I became an investigator, pubic relations specialist and the new steward all on day one. It was a job I found challenging and was passionate about. Becoming a Rotarian, working with local Coast Guard during park rescues, and keeping the state parks clean and accessible seemed to improve local sentiments.

Shuyak Island State Park is an island wedge of land that splits the north pacific and forms the Shelikof Straight to the west while the Gulf of Alaska pounds its' eastern flank. To me, it's the prime rib of state parks within the Kodiak Archipelago. I helped conserve it during the Exxon Valdez oil spill response. From this involvement I had an education on many levels that helped me interpret the park's natural and cultural resources. I was busy cribbing the outhouse on the island's Big Bay ranger station when sea kayakers scrambled up the beach during low tide. Clearly agitated and alarmed they reported a witnessed siege upon a flotilla of sea otters across the bay. My investigation revealed that Alaska Natives had harvested a number of the marine mammals. Since the activity was customary, but unusual for the location, albeit completely cultural and legal, I took report on the information. With the kayakers from Oregon, I set about trying to describe why this activity was permissible in the park. The boaters spent no time departing the beach they had parked on as they clamored amongst themselves the interpretive message they left with. A park ranger's communication skill is often tested in real-time situations. I deemed good communication skills invaluable and later helped train

other rangers to enhance theirs with the help of other professionals in that field. Meeting interesting people in my line of work was an opportunity. Some of these people developed me, stretched me and educated me; some even threatened me. They were naturalists, spiritualists, hunters, craftsmen, cops, volunteers, alpinists and athletes; some were even criminals. I always believed I could take away from each encounter something to share again, either on the trail or in the classroom.

The evolution of the park ranger seemed to occur during my career and I with it. Over time recreational trends, equipment and the zeal with which people used the parks changed. An elevated level of competitiveness, perhaps to be the first or best at something, seemed to drive people to use the park in different ways. I needed to keep up with how the park was used and communicate how it affected the park's natural resources. I collaborated with other rangers, park managers, educators, wildlife biologists and law enforcement professionals to influence "The Job." My job became more technical. I was dealing with difficult land management issues, people and public processes; all integral parts of conserving park resources. The environmental, legal, budgetary and political influences effected each and every day. For good reasons, the simple days of carrying my revolver and office in a briefcase had passed, but the opportunity to go to the field hadn't. Being a small part of a great park system was a privilege. The passion, seldom spoken about but often witnessed from fellow rangers, is what made a job in conservation even better.

DONNA QUANTE: WILLOW CREEK RECREATIONAL AREA

I have been a fee attendant for the past three summers. It is a job I love. I am a huge supporter of public parks of any kind. To be one of the people responsible for over looking Willow Creek Campground is a joy. Something fun happens everyday. Yes, sometimes I deal with infractions, but mostly I interact with people coming to fish or camp. I've made friends with out-of-state campground hosts who have been wonderful. Spending time outside is a perk. After 35 years working in a tv studio, I couldn't have wished for a better place to be. The park rangers, the specialists, the trail crews: Everyone is just a pleasure to be around. I am very happy to be a part of Alaska State Parks.

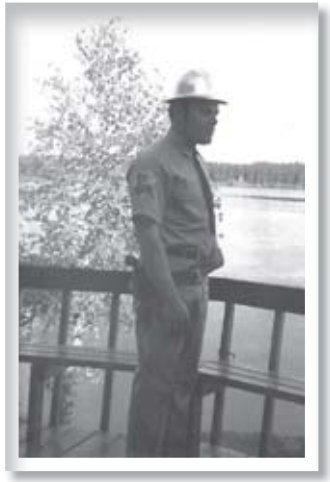
WILLIAM HANABLE: OFFICE OF HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

I started August 7, 1970 as a state park historian, tasked with working on the statewide historic preservation program. Assigned to the planning section, I worked for Bob Scott and later George Hall. I was appointed chief of statewide programs in January 1973; the section evolved into the Office of History and Archaeology. I left Alaska State Parks for the Alaska Historical Commission in June of 1980, but returned in 1986 when the commission was transferred to parks. I retired May of 1987.

I was working for State Parks when Ted Smith called the headquarters staff (Dee Koester, his secretary; Ed Kramer and Kay Torzy, Land and Water Conservation Fund; Bob Scott and Edith Dimmick, park planning; Nat Goodhue, Statewide Outdoor Recreation Plan; Dick Button, engineer; Dick Alman, operations) into his office to announce that the Division of Parks had been established. A modest celebration followed. It was a very exciting time, with master planning starting for the new large parks and major large campgrounds like Byers Lake and Nancy Lake. We started the state Historic Preservation Program, wrote the first state historic preservation plan, submitted our first National Register nominations and had the first meeting of the Historic Preservation Advisory Board. Over the years I worked for successive directors including Ted Smith, Russ Cahill, Bill Sacheck, Terry McWilliams, Chip Dennerlein and Neil Johannsen.

MIKE LEE: STATE PARK MEMOIRS

April 13, 1970 was my first day in a new and exciting career with Alaska State Parks. I prepared for park rangering in the first part of my college education, but half way through had all but given up the dream because I just couldn't get a C or better in the heavy science and math classes required in the sixties for a forestry major. I switched to study education because I liked children and loved to teach; I figured my ranger career could continue as a summer endeavor. I came to Alaska in 1967 on a contract to teach at a small country school in Willow. Imagine my delight when I discovered that 11-year-old Alaska was organizing a new park system and the ranger education requirement was one I could fulfill: Any college degree! There was to be a ranger position right in Willow. Since I had two and a half years in Forestry college and 22 months summer-rangering experience, my score on the state register was fairly high. I landed the position as the Willow-Big Lake Area ranger. A sled-dog-fight-inflicted broken hand and flu-like symptoms did little to dampen my spirits as I sat in the first ranger orientation class at the Pioneer School House in Anchorage.



Ranger Mike Lee.
Photo courtesy of Mike Lee.

Maintenance and Operations chief R.K. (Dick) Alman had put together a week's park orientation followed by a week's law enforcement training. After the training we were to strap on a gun and badge, pickup a shovel and plastic bags, and head into the woods. Alman was delighted to finally have a staff, as the contracting he had been doing for park maintenance just didn't work: Contractors had no interest in protecting the resources. Still, some of the dozen or so new rangers didn't want to do law enforcement and some said, "I didn't hire on to clean outhouses!" They walked off the job almost immediately.

What scares me today is that I attended two days of law enforcement training, was issued a gun, and essentially given the right to "execute" people on a split-second decision. That definitely wasn't "due process!" But that was during the early days of statehood. Fortunately, the graduates weren't "gun happy." Most put our issued guns in our glove boxes or left them at home. When I told Alaska State Trooper Jim Shook about our college degree requirement, arms and uniform requirements, and then showed him my brand new garbage truck, he quipped, "You guys are the best dressed, best educated, most heavily armed garbage collectors in the state!" He was right. But for those of us that stuck it out, we had maintenance staff and pickup trucks within a couple years. Garbage collecting became only an administrated task for us.

My earlier experience included a summer in the National Park Service so I figured Alaska State

Parks might be similar with regimented supervision. I was surprised when I called Dick Alman one day to get permission to cut down some trees that were getting hit by campers. Since I'd once been reprimanded in the Forest Service for cutting trees without permission, I was surprised by his answer: "You're the ranger out there, you decide what trees need to come out, and don't bother me". Our bosses only saw us once or twice a summer. There were no policy and procedure manuals except one park maintenance directions book that Dick Alman had pieced together, probably from another park system. I was sometimes frustrated by the lack of direction but gradually realized that this was a blessing-in-disguise and much like the first national park rangers experienced back near the beginning of the century. We were "pioneers." We did have one bit of direction from director Ted Smith: "We are not trying to create a miniature national park system here." Most state park systems concentrate on roadside parks with a small land base. In those days most of our efforts went into the 66 or so roadside parks we'd inherited from the Federal Bureau of Land Management, but the Legislature was rapidly cutting us larger land masses like the 22,000-acre Nancy Lake Recreational Area and the 500,000-acre Chugach State Park. It was hard to realize then, but with strong opposition to the federal movement to put a third of Alaska in federal resource units, it was important for us distance ourselves from them.

My first days at work coincidentally coincided with the first Earth Day. I was teaching at nearby Willow School, so I grabbed a group of kids from school, put them in the back of my pickup and headed to Willow Creek Wayside to do a spring clean up. The first garbage can was full of garbage and water. It weighed conservatively 200 pounds! By my second year I was using neighborhood Youth Corps kids to do park maintenance. Little did I realize that my love affair with parks and kids would eventually lead to my becoming chief of the Alaska Conservation Corps. I soon used that program to lay in the first canoe trails in Nancy Lake Recreational Area. Helping establish the YCC/ACC programs at the newly built Twin Bears Camp in the Fairbanks area was another joy of the job. One amazing youth corps event happened to a crew working on the Resurrection Trail. Leaders allowed the kids to be in a trail cabin unsupervised. The kids ignited gasoline to start a fire in the cabin and had to jump out the back window, shoeless. Despite their best efforts to put the fire out, it burned the cabin to the ground. All had to walk the seven miles out without shoes, and when they reached the trailhead their borrowed National Guard jeep had been stolen! Eventually, I served as parks' representative to the Alaska Youth Hostel Association when oil money flowed like water in Alaska, and everyone was getting state grants.

As a boy I had been greatly influenced by the exciting arctic adventures of Sgt. Preston of the Yukon, a fictitious member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and by the spell-binding stories of author Jack London. It became my fantasy (perhaps goal) to enforce the law, mush dogs and be a bush pilot in Alaska. I saw all three of those fantasies fulfilled working for Alaska State Parks.

Shortly after my arrival in Wasilla, I acquired by accident a team of six dogs and a sled. My Irish Setter, Kelly, became the team's lead, and I used the dogs for park patrols, especially in the days before park-owned snowmobiles. With my bright red setter in the lead I would head into Nancy Lake Recreational Area with the temperatures sometimes less than thirty below zero.

In 1973, I took a full-time park ranger position. I decided it was time to learn to fly. I crawled into a Cessna 150 on Merrill Field and in fifty hours I had my license. On my first unofficial park patrol flight I was still a student pilot and had trouble concentrating on anything but my flying. Yet I flew out over the Nancy Lake Recreational Area and began scouting routes for the canoe trail system. My dream of being a flying ranger was realized. Director Russ Cahill once warned me that most flying rangers who were killed were flying their own planes without park service sanction when their accidents occurred. With my license in my pocket and fifty-one hours of flying time I crawled in a Cessna with Chugach Park superintendent Roland Maw and headed out over the Chugach Mountains on a perfect day. I was scared to death, but I really wanted to be a flying ranger so I climbed to a safe 8000 feet and gave Roland some nice photo opportunities. Then I decided to pull the carb heat control and immediately the engine began running rough. Looking down at the rugged winter mountain scene below us, we were both petrified. But the engine smoothed out and we continued on our way. When I set up for approach to Merrill Field, I was flying ten-to-twenty miles-per-hour more than the recommended approach speed. Since I was assigned the shorter, non-active runway, I soon realized I wasn't going to get stopped by the end of the runway. I followed instructor advice and added power to go around and try again. The trouble was an FAA examiner was landing on the active runway ninety degrees to us. We missed a mid-air collision by one second! Maw never saw the other plane or realized how close we came. I never told him! After that I took Russ Cahill's warning very, very seriously! Eventually I owned a Champ and a Cessna and did many flights over parks. However, the million-dollar liability policy and commercial pilot license requirements for official state flights were never met so my flying had to be done on the "q.t."

In my dreams of being a ranger, I never had a particular desire to get into administration. Yet

five years into my career I was asked to come to Anchorage as Chugach State Park chief ranger. I reluctantly accepted, figuring Chugach was a wonderful place and still being a ranger would allow for a great deal of outdoor work. Then one week later acting superintendent Bill Wright, who was also chief of the Youth Corps, went back to his real job, leaving me the jobs of acting superintendent of both Chugach and the Kenai-Kodiak Districts. It caused me some anxiety but what amazing areas to manage. In those days, administrative duties were not too complex. Superintendents managed to get to the field: I still emptied a garbage can or two and cleaned an occasional outhouse. Photo trips were frequent as well.

The US Army Alaska was still doing maneuvers in the Eklutna Lake Valley, and it became my job to manage that relationship. One perfect summer day, the army offered to take me along with the major in charge of the program and fly me to the upper end of the lake to inspect their camp. I was chagrined to see the impacts on the area when they sent several hundred troops into the camp at once. The litter and solid waste issues were overwhelming and the army had painted numerous rocks white to line trails to tents. It was reported that soldiers were feeding bears and actually posing for pictures with them as they ate. The buses used to bring troops up were occasionally going off the road, causing extensive resource damage. The army was quick to right all their "errors," but it became evident that as civilian visitation to the park grew, a new glacier training area would be better for the army. When the inspection was complete, one of the two army helicopter pilots said, "Mr. Lee, we have two hours fuel on board. Where would you like to go?" I was able to fly at low altitudes over much of the 500,000-acre park! Most of our aircraft work was piggy backed on other agencies. We did several flights with the Soil Conservation Service, helping them check out "snow courses" in the park units.

In 1972, while I was working in Willow, I became aware that a new park had been designated by the legislature just north of my location. It was the 325,000 acre Denali State Park, adjoining the then Mt. McKinley National Park. I decided since there was no staff at the park yet, I would ask to become involved. My first "patrol" was to get on the train at Talkeetna, just south of the park, and ride the train along its eastern boundary on the Susitna River. I wore my uniform and talked to passengers about the new park. Throughout my early career it was always the same; people were amazed to learn that we had a state park system. They were not always happy to find it affected their favorite air/boat hunting area. The Parks Highway was not completed yet, but we wanted to get our park boundary signs up along the road. Dick Alman sent me up with two Neighborhood Youth Corps boys, one being willow resident Jay Bennett. We were well treated by the highway construction foreman Al

Youhoss; he invited us to stay and eat at their camp at mile 160, Parks Highway. As far as I know, the log entry signs placed on the side of the road (without Department of Transportation blessing) were the first park facilities placed on the ground there. Later, I flew with our park engineers and landed on the Parks Highway to inspect some gravel pits. We wanted to see if we could use them for park facilities before DOT destroyed their well-built access roads. We visited Hurricane Bridge, just north of the park. It still had no road deck and people were walking across it on temporary boards—not for me with my fear of heights.

On one fishing trip into the park, I walked around a bush and was face-to-face with a brown bear that was feeding on salmon. Lucky for both of us, we both spun on our heals and walked off in opposite directions. My .357 sidearm never seemed so puny. Later, people camping in the same area baited a female black bear into their tents for photo opportunities. When the mother bear with two cubs tried it the next time, the gentleman was armed and shot the bear for "protection of life and property." As far as I know the cubs starved. Parks had no authority or mission to work with the wildlife in the park units. Apparently the Department of Fish and Game didn't feel the incident warranted attention.

My career moved forward in an orderly fashion, though I felt in Alaska people were very young for the positions they held. I was 32 when promoted from ranger to superintendent. After working as the acting Kenai-Kodiak superintendent for several months, I was promoted to that full position and moved to Soldotna. I was never totally comfortable in the roll. We moved into State Forestry's facility in Soldotna, and for five years I worked the Kenai. One of my main jobs was to try to convince the Anchorage park staff that we really had the number of people we told them we had in the counts. So it became a challenge to take pictures on the big weekends and send them to town. I was in the middle of my flying career at the time, so I used the plane to access the parks and take aerial shots on busy holidays. While on the river I met state Sen. Clem Tillion, who lived in Kachemak Bay State Park. He had been instrumental in designating the park, but did not want it developed or staffed in his life time. He was helpful in loaning me his cabin and canoe at a park lake and once told me, in private, that he would help me increase my budget for the Peninsula if I would give him a budget requests directly but discreetly. But he would not support budget items for the two Kachemak Bay Units. Mike and McBride of Kachemak Bay Wilderness Lodge were also very helpful.

After spending five years on the Kenai, I was assigned to the state office in Anchorage as chief of the Alaska Youth Conservation Corps and later as the associate regional manager of the Southcentral

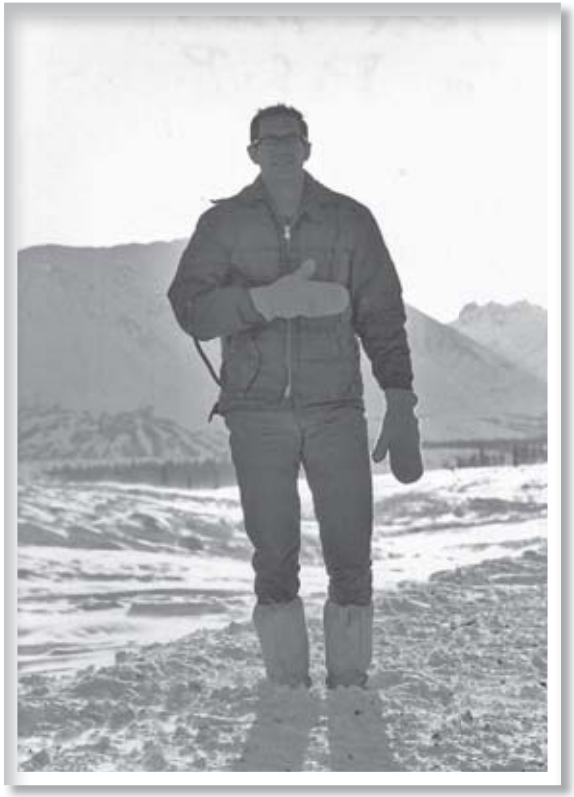
Region. Both of these jobs allowed ample travel through the park system and thus many chances to build the parks' photo files. Then director Neil Johannsen gave the order, "I'm tired of seeing pictures of 35-year-old white males using our parks. Get me some pictures showing our true visitor diversity!" Keeping this in mind, I was soon faced by an older, white-haired Canadian woman, immaculately dressed, holding a gorgeous Dolly Varden that she had just caught in the Chilkoot River near Haines. It was a great shot and we soon blew it up to poster size and hung it on Neil's office door. The front office staff gave the picture the title: "Neil's Mother!" I presume it was a comic reference to a famous art work, "Whistler's Mother!"

Taking pictures of the park system was one of my favorite parts of the job. I bought a very expensive 35mm camera. Within a year after buying the camera I was filming the Captain Cook Recreational Area and I fell onto my face into Cook Inlet mud with the camera on my chest. The camera "died" few months later. Another expensive camera fell out of my truck onto pavement and was ruined. The job was not without personal expense!

PETE MARTIN: GENESIS OF CHUGACH STATE PARK

In November of 1969 Ted Smith, the then-head of Parks, chaired a meeting at his office on a Saturday. A proposed legal description had been drawn up and plotted on a large composite map. I attended; I remember 6-8 of us there. We started on the northern boundary at Pioneer Peak and worked our way around to Eklutna Valley, Peters Creek, Eagle River Valley (both forks) and Arctic Valley. This took several hours. When we came to the Hillside region, I stressed keeping the timbered sections in the park. This included upper O'Malley area, Glen Alps, Rabbit Valley and Potter Creek Valley. Ted Smith agreed with me to attempt to retain as much of the lower end of Rabbit Valley and Potter Creek Valley as possible for the proposed park. The revised legal description reflected that, in spite of the possible necessity of acquiring private inholdings in the future. I felt this was desirable to make the new park as accessible and useable as possible to Anchorage residents. This arguably was my best contribution to the effort.

In the fall or winter of 1967, the State conducted the North Slope oil lease sale and netted nearly a billion dollars in the effort. The state felt (was) rich! This helped create a benevolent atmosphere for the state to set aside some land in a vast mountain state park right in the backyard of half the state's population.



Planner Pete Martin in Denali State Park, -30º winter 1971.

Photo courtesy of Neil Johannsen.