



Whitewater Stories Podcast Transcript

Episode 2: Staff Stories

Podcast audio can be found online at mndnr.gov/whitewater. Episode length: 15:40.

Host: **Sara Holger**, Lead Interpretive Naturalist at Whitewater State Park

Joe Rice, retired park staff

Ken Heaser, retired park staff

Gene McGarry, park ranger

Doug Case, former park staff

Lee Ragan, park ranger

Transcript:

Sara Holger: Timber rattlesnakes, big floods, and women park rangers. What do all of these things have in common? Give up? You can find them all at Whitewater State Park in Minnesota. Like all of our 75 state parks in Minnesota, Whitewater State Park has a very rich history. Stick around for our podcast to learn more about this special place.

[acoustic guitar music]

Hello! I'm Sara Holger, an Interpretive Naturalist at Whitewater State Park. Since 1919, Whitewater State Park has been providing exceptional outdoor experiences for families, youngsters and people of all ages. During the summer of 2017, I, along with a team of volunteers, gathered stories from park visitors and local residents about their memories of this special place. The stories we collected have been woven together to create this podcast series. I invite you to sit back and relax as you listen to this edition of *Whitewater Stories*.

During its 100 years serving the community, Whitewater State Park has employed hundreds of men, women and young adults. Throughout the years, employees have dedicated countless hours caring for the spectacular natural resources and ensuring visitor safety and enjoyment of

the diverse outdoor opportunities offered at the park. In 1979, parks worker Joe Rice was involved in a major undertaking to build the stone path and steps that lead several hundred feet up the bluff to Chimney Rock.

Joe Rice: I think the first couple years we tried different stuff - ramps and wheel barrels. Did that for a while. Then we took a little tractor up, so that worked until the tractor went over the edge. We'd carry rocks and eventually after we got through with the equipment we just went back to Egyptian style...

Sara Holger: Oh my God!

Joe Rice: ...we just carried it by hand. We'd carry rocks the first couple of hours before lunch, then we would mix cement, carry that up. Then after lunch we would lay the rock in and then after the afternoon break we would carry everything down and clean up. 'Cause I know George and I finished that last stretch of steps where it Y's off to Inspiration and that, we did one step a day. Which was actually pretty good because that tall up, talk about great exercise, carrying rocks up Chimney Rock.

Sara Holger: Ken Heaser, who was a seasonal Building and Grounds Worker at the time, worked with Joe and a handful of other seasonal staff on building the Chimney Rock trail.

Ken Heaser: We had this old Ford dump truck that was, I would say, probably early 60s. This truck, and this was in the late 70's, it had the back windows were broke out on it. And half the stuff didn't work, there were holes rusted right through the floor on it. It was an old six-speed split shift thing on it and it just roared. And we'd take it down to the, drive from the park to Biesanz stone quarry, we'd get permission to get stone there – their scrap stone. We'd go down there with mauls and break down the sheets into smaller pieces until the truck was loaded. The three of us, you know, bring it back. It'd take a half a day trip. Dump it and hopefully go back and if we can make two trips a day that was pretty good. Well, one day, the weigh station was open. They were doing a safety check. And we pulled the truck in and the highway patrol man just looked and said, "Just park it over there." Okay, so we pulled it over to the side, he came over and there was 12 or 13 violations on the truck. And he says, "I'll tell you what boys," he says, "I'm gonna let you drive this thing back to Whitewater" he says "I

never want to see it on the road again.” And we did. We got it back to the park and then they came with a flatbed and loaded it and hauled it away. But yeah, that poor old dump truck - the seat, just a flat hard seat, no seat belts, no nothing. Just bouncing along in the thing. You can look down in through the holes in the floor and see the highway go underneath ya. And it’s great to go back there and hike up and see very little of it has been hurt by nature. You know, frost pushing anything out and stuff like that. A few loose stones here and there but otherwise... It’s basically, as sound as when we got done with it 30-some years ago.

Sara Holger: Employees not only built trails in the park. They also maintained facilities including the beach and former golf course. They developed naturalist programs and activities. They provided information to visitors and they interacted with wildlife in the park. Each year, one or two of the 350,000 annual visitors to Whitewater State Park experiences a rare encounter with a timber rattlesnake. Since arriving at the park in 1995, Night Security Ranger, Gene McGarry, has had to assist with occasional rattlesnake encounters along the rugged park trails.

Gene

McGarry: When I first started working here, and it was even before I had the core position, Dave and I transplanted eight rattlesnakes. Barney Oldfield came to check it out, he was amazed that we had that many. And two of them were doing this mating dance, literally bah-bah-bah-bah-bah shaking the whole thing...

Sara Holger: Oh my god!

Gene

McGarry: And Barney Oldfield had told us, he said, “That’s one of the rarest things you just saw because people don’t get to see that...”

Sara Holger: Oh wow!

Gene

McGarry: ...very often, you know, rattlesnakes mating.” Dave and I transplanted them over past Trout Run and that area. And it was really cool, I remember when we let them all out they’re all kind of just looking at us

Sara Holger: Like what do we do?

Gene

McGarry: Yeah. We had marked the rattles. Three times someone had reported them and I had to go get them. That was always a good thing.

Sara Holger: Is that a little scary, when it's a wild one? You don't really know how it's going to react?

Gene

McGarry: The first time I did it, this one was in the bush. When I went to get it, it started going into the brambles so it was really...it was hard to get. I kept pulling him out and he was getting madder and madder. You know? So I was getting a little nervous 'cause he was a pretty good size one. And I finally got him in the bucket, but that was the first time I ever really caught one like that and I was really nervous and excited.

Sara Holger: Doug Case is another former Whitewater employee who, as part of his responsibilities as a lifeguard and seasonal parks worker for a handful of years beginning in 1959, was to go clear snakes from public areas such as the wood pile that was located near the far end of the old golf course.

Doug Case: But if I came in early some mornings, I was to drive through the campground slowly and look for snakes that were sunning themselves on the picnic tables.

Sara Holger: And then you had to move them all? [laughing]

Doug Case: And move them all, yes.

Sara Holger: So what did you use to move them? A big stick?

Doug Case: A big stick, yeah. And hope that they were gone for the rest of the day...

Sara Holger: Funny.

Doug Case: ...before the campers woke up.

Sara Holger: Were they ever rattlesnakes?

Doug Case: I don't think so. I think they were probably bull snakes or...

Sara Holger: Fox snakes.

Doug Case: fox snakes, yeah.

Sara Holger: Do you ever remember seeing any rattlesnakes when you worked here?

Doug Case: We did. In fact, we killed one.

Sara Holger: Did ya?

Doug Case: And we sent it to the history museum in Minnesota.

Sara Holger: The Bell Museum.

Doug Case: I think it's still up there.

Sara Holger: Oh, okay.

Doug Case: It was one of the largest that they had...or longest that they had seen.

Sara Holger: Okay. I'll have to check on that...see if they still have it.

Doug Case: And it was killed with a bow and arrow.

Sara Holger: Oh wow!

Doug Case: One of the lifeguards had a bow and arrow.

Sara Holger: Oh my goodness.

Doug Case: So we shot it and got rid of it.

Sara Holger: Okay. Interesting.

Doug Case: Cleared the beach, I'll tell ya. [laughing]

Sara Holger: I can imagine!

[guitar music]

Historically, parks and natural resource professions have been largely dominated by men. In the 1990s, Affirmative Action policies combined with science education outreach programs targeting girls helped to even the playing field by encouraging more women to pursue conservation careers. Today, many women, like Lee Ragan, hold park management and security ranger positions at parks across Minnesota and throughout the country. Lee describes her role as a night security ranger as

Lee Ragan: ...a customer service specialist.

Sara Holger: One of the biggest challenges for Lee, who has been working to enforce the rules at Whitewater State Park since 2013, is to help visitors understand why the rules exist, why they matter. Lee has developed her own special approach to communicating with park visitors about the rules. She tells visitors,

Lee Ragan: This is your tax money. I mean, if you destroy the resources here you're basically allowing someone to destroy your front lawn. Try to relate to them on a personal level, you know, get them to take better care of their park.

Sara Holger: Ensuring visitors safe and enjoyable experiences is the primary focus of the park staff. But maintaining visitor safety can be quite complex with the park's steep and sometimes icy hiking trails, constant vehicle traffic, and fast moving water. Nothing is potentially as dangerous as the constant threat of flooding. Over the past 100 years, Whitewater State Park has experienced many floods. The most destructive flood in the park's history occurred on August 19th, 2007. Gene McGarry was working that night.

Gene

McGarry: Fortunately, all those other little floods that we've had set me up for, you know, that one in 2007. It was one of the weird experiences because we had WildBlue that connected the satellite to the computer which didn't work when it was raining or cloudy. We had no idea, really, the magnitude of what was coming our way. It was a steady rain and it lasted about 13 hours, I believe. But at that point, when you're in the moment, you don't really think about until, it was probably 6:30/7 o'clock at night when it started going over the low water crossing, which is very common. That happened a lot when we had heavy rains. But that night, we noticed at

one point around 8 o'clock, mud was starting to slide down the bluff you know. And I was like, "This is not good." But we weren't hearing any reports. And at that point, the evacuation thing, I wasn't so much thinking about that. In the back of my mind, you know the group camp, there's only one way out of there. The water was coming up but not of any big concern at that point because things were flowing pretty well still.

As we got around 9, 10 o'clock we had to figure out that something was going to happen because it was raising up. NOAA called us at La Crosse and said that there's a flood warning. When we get a flood warning, that usually means we have to at least let people know that they're going to have to evacuate at a moment's notice. So we went back there to the group camp, because that was the biggest concern. And they all were partying and having a good time. Went by the bridge to look to see how high the water was, it was about three feet of clearance. So I wasn't too worried yet. And then I told them, I said they're going to have to probably evacuate and we'd be back probably in a half hour to see where they're at and make the official call. And they were like, "oh, ya, oh"...they didn't care.

So we went back again, we were like, "Yes, you're going to have to evacuate so if you can...just pack up some stuff and let's get going." The last time, which was right around 10 o'clock, we were like, "You guys, you gotta, seriously, get out of here." And as I went over the stream, it had come up quite a bit. Five minutes later when I came back, it had gone up two feet. I mean it just was really fast. Oh my god. I just turned right around, I used some expletives, I said, "Get out of here!" We were pushing people out and everything. And they did, they responded and they got out, but they left a lot of stuff.

It was at that point, you just didn't know. It got high. So we got out of there and sure enough, it was about 15 minutes, it hit the Lazy D, it put campers up in the trees and stuff and we were out. I knocked on somebody's truck, because they were sitting there. I said, "You gotta go", we wanted everyone to leave at that point. The person just staring up in space saying, "No, I'm going to stay." And I was knee deep in water. By the time I got into Rochester, I looked over to the left where 14 is, over near the university, and they had that all blocked off and it was all underwater.

What happened during that flood, it was like a bunch of scars. I look at it, it's part of the history. It's still here. The fishing was great after that. I mean it didn't really ruin much.

Sara Holger: Whitewater's history is intertwined with more than just Minnesota's past. As part of the nation's recovery from the Great Depression, Whitewater played a role in housing work camps for both the Civilian Conservation Corps and later the Works Progress Administration, better known as the CCC and the WPA. The same camp was later used as a Prisoner of War camp during the Second World War, where more than 350 German soldiers spent time during the summers of 1944 and 1945. Joe Rice recalls meeting a former German Prisoner of War who spent time at Whitewater.

Joe Rice: I think it was in 2000, when I was working behind the counter I had a POW come...

Sara Holger: Oh really?

Joe Rice: ...and talk to me. The one that had been here and that was pretty cool. It's probably not going to happen anymore.

Sara Holger: No, yeah.

Joe Rice: He had a great story. It was so cool. He was a young boy in Germany and it was toward the end of the war and they were grabbing everybody to fight. And they took him and made him fight and he got captured. They put him on a ship, a POW ship, he said they fed him bread and water. And they sent him over here, put him in the camp with all these other Germans, who had been here...some of them had been here a couple of years. They asked him how the war was going and he said that they were losing, they immediately got mad at him and shunned him and figured he was lying. And, you know, this poor kid, what an experience.

Sara Holger: Since the park's beginning, Whitewater employees have been extremely proud of their work. A popular story shared at the park tells of two former CCC boys, Fred Johnson and James Bishop, who returned to the park in the 1990s to assist with special programming to recognize the important role the CCC played in building the park. The men were emotionally moved and became teary eyed as they observed modern families

picnicking and bonding together in facilities they helped build so long ago when they were very young men. It's no surprise why Whitewater State Park employees today and yesterday take great pride in their park. Again, Gene McGarry.

Gene

McGarry: To me, the things that happened in my life that happened here are character builders. You know, I think this place is better than it ever was. And I feel like I'm better than I ever was just in some ways. They say once you go through hell you keep going. It's that type of thing. What a great place. This is an amazing place. You got to think about all the spirits and history that have been here. That's still here, there's that essence here.

In my own life, I'm proud to be here for 20 years because I know that I'm sharing in part of this history here. I have to be here, which is kind of a neat feeling. It's not just a job, it's a part of your life. There's a reason you got the job and the reason you stay. I'd say in the last five years, this has been one of the most wonderful places for me. I've enjoyed it. They do burns, we don't have hardly any buckthorn compared to a lot of places. Just the whole management of this park, I'm proud of it.

Sara Holger: Thank you for joining me for this edition of Whitewater Stories. From all of the staff at Whitewater State Park, we hope to see you in the park!