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Donald B. Alexander
April 13, 1971

Interview conducted by S. Herbert Evison
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DONALD B. ALEXANDER

An interview conducted by
S. Herbert Evison April 13, 1971
for the
Oral History Project National Park Service
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DONALD B. ALEXANDER – 1898

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[Side 2--Tape #48]

D.B. Alexander

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EVISON INTERVIEW WITH DONALD B. ALEXANDER

Clearwater, Florida

April 13, 1971

START OF TAPE

Herbert Evison: This is Tuesday, April 13, 1971. I'm Herb Evison and this morning I'm in Clearwater, Florida, and with me is Donald B. Alexander, with whom I was associated from the earliest days of the C.C.C., but who had already, when I first knew him, quite a park career. Don, let's start this off by getting on the record, when and where you were born, what your father did, your education, and so on.

Donald Alexander: Okay, Herb I was born in Boston, November 3rd, 1898, and went through the local schools, entering the United States Army in 1917 and spending two years overseas in World War I before returning to what was then Massachusetts Agricultural College at Amherst. The Massachusetts Agricultural College later became, through several stages, Massachusetts State College and then the University of Massachusetts. I majored in landscape architecture under Professor Frank Waugh and Professor Arthur K. Harrison and received the degree of B.S.C. in landscape architecture in 1925, although I entered with the class of 1923. I then went out to Ohio and worked for landscape architect Louis Brandt in Cleveland for a time until he went broke and then went down to Akron and became employed by the City of Akron City Planning Commission for a short time, before entering the employment of the Akron Metropolitan Park District, of which Harold Wagner was the Director-Secretary.

Herbert Evison: Don, you mentioned as one of your professors a man who trained an awful lot of people who had Park Service careers, and that was Frank Waugh; and I would like to get a few words from you here about Professor Waugh. He seems to have influenced not only a lot of people, but the practice of landscape architecture itself a good deal.

Donald Alexander: Yes, that's right, Herb. Everywhere I go these days and the subject of landscape architecture and training comes up, everyone says that Professor Waugh was perhaps the finest teacher of this subject that is known today. He brought to the course his long experience with the United States Forest Service and the Park Service and his own tremendous character as an individual; and he was an outstanding person and everyone whoever heard of him says: "Oh, you're one of Professor Waugh's boys."

Herbert Evison: You mentioned another man there under whom you've studied. I hadn't heard of him before, but you did mention Professor Harrison by name.

Donald Alexander: Yes.

Herbert Evison: How about him? Was he a younger man?

Donald Alexander: He was slightly younger than Professor Waugh, but he came to the college with the background of having been a top figure in Olmsted's firm. He was

the one who gave the training in field work and the engineering phases of the profession, the surveying and the mapping and the topography; and also he was an expert on plantings and colors and all that sort of thing. He was an outstanding teacher as well. Well, Harrison, besides being completely competent and very well versed in all of the phases – was a precise individual and demanded perfection in all of the things that the students did which was an essential part of the training as well.

Donald Alexander: In Akron, in 1926, I married and have one son. My son is now employed with the Kaman Aircraft Corporation and is presently stationed in Tehran in Iran. He has been there three years and is going on four. He is the company's representative with the Iranian Government which has many of the helicopters which the company makes.

Herbert Evison: You mentioned the fact that you married, but you didn't say who you married, or just when you were married and you didn't give the name of your son.

Donald Alexander: Oh, very well, you can see I'm not used to this, so I skip over some of what I think may be details, but perhaps belong in the record. I was married on January the 2nd, 1926, to Annette Cardarelli. Our son Donald was born in 1928 on the 11th of January.

Herbert Evison: Don, you mentioned that you ended up after brief employment in other jobs than that with the Akron Metropolitan Park District headed by Harold Wagner; and since I think that ten years that you had there must have been a tremendous experience from the standpoint of training, I would like to get some dope on that period, and particularly I would on Wagner himself.

Donald Alexander: Well, I don't know what I can say about Wagner personally except that I worked for him a good many years and always found him to be way out front as far as knowing what was going on and concerned about what had to be done to make things right. He was, at the time I started working for him, in charge of the city parks of Akron. This did not last long as he moved ahead into the Metropolitan Park System. Wagner had come to Akron about ten years prior to this time in the employ of Warren H. Manning, the landscape architect from Boston, to work as his representative on the F. A. Seiberling Developments including the Fairlawn Country Club and the real-estate subdivision surrounding it.

Donald Alexander: I worked also for him part-time in this area, doing much of the surveying and engineering work of sewers and streets and water systems, and then, following that, landscaping individual properties. This was a rather broad and rewarding experience as many of these things I was learning to do while doing them.

- Donald Alexander: In 1925 the State of Ohio passed enabling legislation to create metropolitan park districts of which there were originally five, one of which being Akron. This did not include the whole of Summit County because of legal problems, but it included all of the county except one township, Twinsburg. We started out with property surveys before taking the land. We made boundary surveys; we made topographical surveys of approximately three thousand acres which were divided into, I believe, six separate park areas situated around the environs of Akron, to create what has become known as one of the best metropolitan park systems in the country by virtue, not only of the type of land taken, but the mode of development and the management by Harold Wagner and his staff.
- Donald Alexander: In 1929, when everybody went broke including the county, which had no more money to pay salaries with, some of us including myself were put on short rations and shifted for ourselves for a while before 1933. Then the C.C.C. Program came along and I was fortunate enough to be included in that from the very start. First I was sent to Indiana to work as an inspector out of the Indianapolis Regional Office. In June of 1933 and from then until August I traveled the States of Indiana and Kentucky and assisted in the location and placement of C.C.C. camps in park areas.
- Donald Alexander: In August 1933 I was called to Washington to help organize the National State Parks C.C.C. Program. By this time, although I had been employed as a professional in the landscape architecture field, I was beginning to become an administrator, since I had problems with budgets and other related matters and was known as assistant supervisor for the time being. After working in that capacity there for a little over a year I was transferred to Springfield, Massachusetts, to establish the New England Regional Office of the State Parks C.C.C. I recall getting off the train in Springfield with a suitcase and nothing else and renting space, buying furniture, hiring people, and establishing an office.
- Herbert Evison: I think it would be interesting to get on the tape at this time something of the picture of state parks in New England as you remember it at that time.
- Donald Alexander: Well, at that time means beginning with 1935, when we opened the Regional Office at Springfield. At that point there were state park C.C.C. camps in each of the New England states except Connecticut, Connecticut having declined the offer to have state parks in their area. They, however, did have several forestry camps. I immediately went to work on the State of Connecticut to get camps in and was fortunate enough after several meetings with the Park and Forest Commission to have them reluctantly accept one.

Donald Alexander: We spent quite a bit of time traveling about through the New England states and had very friendly relationships with the state park officials and of course at that point there were very few state parks. There was more activity in the field of state forests; and they had been in business for so many years prior that their thinking was geared to forestry rather than parks and part of the problem was to educate the officials to the need and the importance of creating state parks.

Donald Alexander: Some small land acquisitions resulted, however nothing to compare with what happened in many of the other parts of the country. It was a hard road, but we felt we did make some progress and before the year was up we had done some good. However, at the end of a year the C.C.C. program was again reorganized and I had the dubious pleasure of standing under the office Christmas tree and announcing to the office force that the office was closing forthwith and some people were being transferred and some were being released and the business was being transferred to Bronxville and the New England region was being abandoned as such.

Donald Alexander: At this point we were transferred to Omaha which was then, I believe, Region Seven. This included seven states and I took over the office from George Gibbs, who was the previous regional officer, who moved on to California at his own request. The states in the Midwestern Region at that time had many camps and many other park projects, such as W.P.A. et cetera. Again, it was a matter of organization and education and management and I became further and further away from being a professional landscape architect and was gradually becoming a manager of sorts.

Donald Alexander: During this period there was a landscape architect Civil Service examination announced for all who wished to qualify for Federal rating as landscape architects. I took the examination and was told that I didn't have enough experience. I therefore took another examination for administrative officer and was told that I hadn't enough experience in that, so at that point I was neither one nor the other, although performing both.

Donald Alexander: In February 1936 was when I first went to Omaha. In late 1936 the C.C.C. organization was reshuffled again and the Indianapolis Regional Office was closed and the staff moved en masse to Omaha and superimposed on the existing Regional Office staff of almost the same number of people. After a shakedown period, we got back to business and now the region included fourteen states which, well I won't name them here.

Donald Alexander: This was getting to the point where the regular National Park Service personnel were coming more and more into the picture and in 1937 the regions of the State Parks C.C.C. became official National Park Service

Regions headed by men who had been superintendents of national parks. And in 1937 Thomas J. Allen, Superintendent of Rocky Mountain National Park became Regional Director of Region Two. The C.C.C. was nearing its end in 1939, when Robert Fechner, the head of the C.C.C., died. The next two years the C.C.C. was under the direction of McEntee. At that point the C.C.C. began liquidating and my job was to liquidate the regional business, transferring equipment and all of the processes which are involved in liquidation.

Donald Alexander: At that point the State of Connecticut was seeking an Administrative Director for the State Park and Forest Commission and I was invited to compete with several others and ended up with the job. We moved to Hartford in 1943, January, at 25 below zero, beginning work in the State Park and Forest Commission of Connecticut as Administrative Director.

Donald Alexander: I had been employed to reorganize the department and, as is well known, such reorganization causes problems and some of my "friends" ultimately had a bill introduced in the state legislature to fire me by name. Fortunately the bill never did pass, but, seeing the handwriting on the wall, I decided to take steps which resulted in my return to Federal Government employment in Richmond, Virginia, with the Veterans Administration Branch Office, as budget officer, in 1946. Ultimately these branch offices were disbanded and I was transferred to Atlanta to the new branch office there in the same capacity. Then because of problems with the special services organizations serving the Veterans Hospitals I was made Special Services Director of that area and was told that I had been sent to Atlanta to straighten the matter out.

Donald Alexander: Therefore, one year later, with some apparent success, I was then invited by the general who had headed the Richmond Branch Office and was now in charge of the Army Reserve and R.O.T.C. program in the Pentagon to come to Washington to be his budget officer, which I did arriving, there June 19th, 1950, the day the Korean War started. I spent a year or so in this particular office with the Army and then later moved to other elements of the Defense Department where I worked until March 1962. Having reached the point of voluntary retirement, I was ready to do so and said, "Thank you very much," and left government service.

Donald Alexander: The American Planning and Civic Association and National Conference on State Parks were looking for someone to take charge of their office affairs and act as Executive Secretary, and I was fortunate enough to be employed for this purpose, entering on duty only about a month after having retired from the Federal Government. This was a very rewarding experience, not only because of the people with whom I was associated in

the Washington Office, but also people from all over the United States who were leaders in these fields.

Donald Alexander: One thing led to another, and in 1963 and '64 the National Recreation and Park Association came into being; and I was fortunate in having some part in helping bring this about, many meetings, trips to New York, conferences, et cetera; finally, the thing blossomed into the tremendous organization that it is today. By this time I began to feel that I had worked about long enough and therefore in June 1966 I retired for the second time.

Herbert Evison: Don, we've brought you to 1966 and you've twice retired and what I'm anxious to get on here now is some dope on how a retired person keeps himself busy – a retired person of your training and abilities and capacities.

Donald Alexander: Well, let me say that we came to Florida; I came to Florida primarily to play golf, and upon arrival we joined the Dunedin Country Club and I started out playing two or three times a week, and then all of a sudden I discovered I was getting involved in civic affairs in Clearwater with the Chamber of Commerce, and the Senior Citizen Organization and ultimately the City of Clearwater itself; so that from a hoped-for two-or-three-times-a-week golf, now I am very lucky if I play once in two weeks, what with committee meetings and conferences and luncheon gatherings, et cetera.

Donald Alexander: I'm presently chairman of the Beautification Committee of the City of Clearwater, appointed by the mayor and commission. I'm also chairman of the Sign Committee, appointed by the City Manager. I'm also a member of the Community Development Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, which is a coordinating committee of that body. This should give you some idea of how I keep busy, and I enjoy it very much. The only regret is – I don't get to play golf a little oftener – although I'm working on it.

Herbert Evison: Don, I'm particularly interested in knowing just what you have to work with and how hard your job is on this – what did you call it? – the beautification committee?

Donald Alexander: Yes.

Herbert Evison: Because that is now one of the kinds of things that has developed in a lot of cities over the last ten or fifteen years. Is it reasonably well supported?

Donald Alexander: Yes. The city commission and mayor passed a resolution in October 1969 to create the City Beautification Committee and I was appointed its Chairman. We drew membership to the committee from representatives of all of the local service organizations such as Garden Club, Womens Club, Kiwanis, Rotary, et cetera. The committee consists of ten members. We

meet on call of the chairman and, hopefully, once a month if there is any business to conduct.

Donald Alexander: We're engaged in helping, in cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Association Incorporated, in face-lifting the downtown area out of the doldrums into which it had fallen. We also called in the University of Florida School of Landscape Architecture, who made a "visual survey" of the downtown area and produced a recommended model for its improvement. The city has employed under this context landscape architect, Lane Marshall of Sarasota as a consultant to prepare a beautification program for the City of Clearwater of a long range character, one which can be augmented by federal funds some of which has already been accomplished.

Donald Alexander: The city has included in its budget a substantial sum of money for this program as well as, in a recently passed bond issue, general purpose bonds, for the acquisition and development of park areas. These things all contribute to the whole program and we feel that it's moving forward very well.

Herbert Evison: Don, I'm curious to know – you've mentioned that this bond issue money was to be used, some of it for the beautification program, some of it for the acquisition of park lands – now those are two very closely related things and I'm interested in knowing how your beautification committee and its activities mesh with the park activities and the activities of the park management organization of the city?

Donald Alexander: Okay. This is a good question. The fact of the matter is that as chairman of this beautification committee I am in constant touch with the official city staff members such as the planning director, the park and recreation director, the city engineer, the building department director, all of whom work under the supervision of the city manager. Now, before the city manager will present any recommendations or proposals to the commission for official action and adoption, he looks to the beautification committee for recommendations and will not present matters not recommended by the beautification committee.

Herbert Evison: I'm beginning to think you're the mayor. Don, while we had this turned off you said that that covered the waterfront so to speak. I'm delighted with what we got in our walk along the waterfront and thank you a lot for coming down here this morning to make this tape with me. It's been a joy not only to listen to an old associate, but just to be with him.

Donald Alexander: Well, it's been a pleasure, Herb. I've enjoyed remembering some of these things of which I had not thought for some years, just hope this will keep on this way.

(P.S. – It has.) (D.B.A.)

END OF TAPE