

BY RICHARD WEST SELLARS

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

THE COOK FAMILY AND NPS HOUSING.

On a cold day in November 1958, John Cook and his wife, Dani, sat down to a festive Thanksgiving dinner with turkey and all the trimmings. The Cooks had just moved into a new home in Chaco Canyon NM. John himself had graded the house site, and had helped Dani select some of the interior colors and materials, such as the tile for the kitchen and bath—and he remembers well the *beautiful* three-bedroom Mission 66 house. John and Dani were newlyweds, and it was their first *real* house to share together, as they had begun their marriage living in a small Park Service trailer at Chaco.

This move was just another step in the Cook family's long odyssey with national park housing. Two generations back, in 1924, John's grandfather, John E. Cook, began working for the NPS at Grand Canyon, where he lived in a small cabin with a kitchen and a combined bedroom and sitting room. Near by was a tent cabin for the children, and an outhouse. Gradually moving up in the world, John E. Cook and his family occupied a duplex, and then a single family house, both at Grand Canyon.

His son, John O. Cook, lived with his folks at Grand Canyon, then began his own Park Service career there in 1936, living in a tent with bathroom facilities across the street. Like his father, John O. lived in a variety of housing at Grand Canyon, including a tent cabin, trailers, and wood-frame cabins. He notes, "When you start at the bottom, the next place looks pretty big," and eventually John and Bee Cook did get a big house at Grand Canyon—a two-story, four-bedroom house with hardwood floors.

They fondly remember their next homes at Montezuma, Wupatki, and Saguaro—two of which were built under the direction of Frank "Boss" Pinkley. These houses were small, yet attractive, and John O. says their Wupatki home was "colder than hell, but still a very nice place." But their favorite house was the gracious and handsome two-story superintendent's residence at Chickamauga-Chattanooga, built in 1912 by the U.S. Army. "Talk



John E. Cook where it all began.

about advancement!" John O. says, thinking back to the tent he and Bee first shared at Grand Canyon.

This generation's John Cook grew up in the park housing his parents rented, and he remembers how housing connoted status—not only for NPS employees at Grand Canyon, but also for those who worked with the Harvey Company and the railroad. Just as his father and grandfather had moved up and into better housing, John repeated this process, living in a tent at Saguaro when he began his career in 1953. By 1958 he had advanced to the small trailer in Chaco Canyon. Anticipating today's integrated pest management, John let skunks under the trailer to keep the mice population down—"it was the risk we had to take," he says.

When John and Dani moved into their new Mis-

sion 66 house at Chaco in 1958, they furnished it with hand-me-down pieces—neither Park Service salaries nor the frequent transfers enabled employees to collect fine furniture. None of this was new for Dani, since she, too, had been raised in parks. Her father, Meredith Guillet, served in several NPS areas, mainly in the southwest. Typical of the national park experience, the Guillets first lived in a tent, at Black Canyon of the Gunnison NM. But soon after, at Casa Grande, Dani lived with her parents in the oldest of all park housing—the prehistoric ruins! As with many other NPS employees, however, the Guillets' housing situation improved. At Canyon de Chelly, they occupied a fine adobe home, designed by well known NPS architect, Cecil Doty.

From their Mission 66 house at Chaco, John and Dani moved to Navajo NM—and back into a trailer. Yet they never felt underprivileged living in park housing. In John's words, "We were proud of these places, and always enhanced the appearance of the houses where we lived." For example, they planted flower gardens and greenery around their trailer in Navajo, and later fully landscaped their yard at Hubbell Trading Post. John also recalls that the rent for park housing was low then: "It was not highway robbery." He certainly feels he benefitted from actually living in parks he was managing, thus getting to know them better.

The last park housing John and Dani occupied was at Canyon de Chelly. There they had "absolutely the most perfect park housing"—a beautiful Southwestern-style home with a lovely view toward the cottonwoods and sand dunes across the canyon. What's more, John remembers rolling up their "first rate shag carpet to reveal beautiful hardwood floors—great for dancing!"

Indeed, to each generation of the Cook family, the houses they lived in became "places in the heart"—no matter what they looked like. For the Cooks, they were *homes* where they raised their families, pursued their careers, and enjoyed the great beauty of the parks. So when John went back to Grand Canyon to talk to the Ranger Skills class in 1988, he naturally had to take his daughter, Kayci (a trainee in that class), around the housing area to show her where her great-grandfather, grandfather, and he, too, had lived. He very likely told her stories about growing up in parks—wisely, she may have believed only half of what her daddy told her! After all, Kayci was born when John and Dani were living in the trailer at Navajo, then moved around with her folks to various parks before becoming an NPS employee also—so she has her own experiences to recall.

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