

Lunch and Learn... *about the NPS*

By Richard West Sellars

It's not easy being green and gray — especially when you are early in a career with the National Park Service and want a better understanding of why your work matters and how it fits into the big picture.

I have been there and found it really frustrating. In time I found a solution that was effective, a genuine pleasure and a boost to my career. Just as important, it was bargain-basement cheap. Especially today, the Park Service's severe budget woes make this worth considering. I have in mind no more than noontime brown-bag discussions held once a week.

Probably unlike most other Park Service employees, I was 27 before I even learned that the agency existed. Trained as a geologist, then involved with oil prospecting around the country, I had been to a number of parks but paid no attention to who was managing them. And in 1973, when I joined the NPS as a historian, I had never heard of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Cultural

resource management had not yet sparked much interest within the academic world from which I had just emerged to begin a second career.

Clearly I needed training and so has everyone else who has worked for the Park Service. Little long-distance learning was available then. Most employees depended on either on-the-job guidance usually related to one's own specialty, or, for the big picture, the hard-to-come-by chance to attend a course at Mather or Albright training centers.

I got into a three-week course — a broad introduction to the NPS — at Albright in 1976. It helped a lot, yet it did not include much analysis of cultural resource management, a topic seldom covered extensively at the time. Given the array of NPS historic preservation responsibilities, there was much I needed to learn, but no systematic “in place” learning programs were available to me.

After becoming Southwest Region's historian in the mid-1970s, I set up an informal brown-bag learning program in my office. It

was a group-mentoring effort that, because it could be taken in small doses and better absorbed over a span of time, brought more beneficial results for me than the formal training I had taken.

In the spring of 1976, I hired Dwight Pitcaithley who was finishing his doctorate in history at Texas Tech University. Not long after he arrived, Jane Scott, who had studied history at Yale and had recent experience as a seasonal interpretive ranger at Mesa Verde, began working in the Santa Fe office, first with the archeologists, then with my office.

Together, the three of us started the brown-bag discussions on topics related to the National Park Service and System. Soon we were joined by perhaps four or five co-workers, mostly archeologists. It was a completely volunteer, self-selected group; and it required individual effort. Some left while others joined us. And several stayed for the long haul. I came to realize that while one person is comfortable with learning through group discussions, another may not be.

We began by reading the NPS official Management Policies, one chapter per week, and discussing them over lunch. The policies were bureaucratic by their nature, and in no way did we become experts; but our readings and discussions on the policies revealed aspects of the Service's operations that were valuable to us.

Once we finished the policies, we turned to articles and book chapters on national parks and related topics. Now and then we discussed broad environmental issues and natural resource management, but mainly the group focused on historic preservation policy and practice in the National Park System. We also examined historic preservation activities elsewhere around the country, including the National Register programs.

Occasionally our discussions ran over the time allotted for lunch, but not a lot. Besides, we were learning more about our work and the Park Service itself. To me, this was time well spent.

Compare the extra minutes when we ran overtime with the costs of attending formal training courses: the travel and per diem, the time away from the duty station and more. Brown-bagging is a lot cheaper, and it can often benefit from expert commentary by experienced co-workers within a park or office, perhaps even the superintendent.

These brown-bag sessions brought important long-range personal benefits, helping me gain a better grasp of the ins and outs of Park Service historic preservation policies and

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the laws behind them. Without a doubt, the sessions deepened my commitment to the goals of the NPS. They helped me feel that I belonged. And they helped build morale and teamwork within the office.

Adding greatly to the satisfactions my career would bring me, the brown-bag discussions, along with my other historic preservation efforts, eventually led to a number of teaching assignments at Albright and Mather training centers. This culminated in the 1980s and '90s with about a dozen, two-week courses in cultural resource management for mid-level managers. Held at Mather Training Center, they provided a broad overview of perspectives, experiences and policies that helped sharpen the understanding of cultural resource management. I remain firmly committed to learning both at home and away. In tandem, they are especially effective.

Even today, Jane, Dwight and I are part of a small book group of friends, each of whom has had Park Service experience. Since about 2005 we have met several times per year via telephone conference calls to discuss books that relate in some way to the National Park System, providing perspectives on historical matters and the natural environment. Diverse titles have included Edward O. Wilson's *The*

Future of Life, Chris Hedges' *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* and William Faulkner's *The Bear* (the only work of fiction).

Below is a sampling from our book group. If the list seems fairly wide ranging, keep in mind that the National Park System involves both human and natural history — it cuts a giant swath.

Think about starting a brown bag at your

park or office. It might prove stimulating. If I were doing it again, I would still start with the official Management Policies, selectively perhaps, given their size. Follow that with any readings the group thinks are appropriate for its needs. Lunch, learn and enjoy! 🍎

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Sample Titles from Book Group

James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, New Press, 2006.

Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*, Pantheon, 1998.

Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*, Oxford, 1999.

Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, University of New Mexico, 1996.

E.O. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, Knopf, 2002.

Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the*

Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West, Random House, 1992.

Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, W.W. Norton, 1987.

Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Anchor, 2003.

Douglas Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*, Random House, 2006.

David Quammen, *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of his Theory of Evolution*, Atlas, 2007.

Full book list: www.anpr.org/brownbag.htm