

An Interview with
Vernon Hennesay

by telephone from his home in
Charlo, Montana

24 March 1998

interviewed by Will Sarvis



Oral History Program
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PREFACE

Vernon Hennesay was born on June 9, 1927. His Park Service career began in 1948, and he worked in California, Colorado, Oregon, and Nebraska before transferring to the Ozark National Scenic Riverways as its first chief ranger, in July 1965. By February 1966, Mr. Hennesay had become the ONSR's second superintendent. His tenure at the ONSR spanned early planning and land acquisition, and before his departure for the Yellowstone National Park (in 1967), he oversaw the ONSR's first tract acquisition. Scenic easements, a fairly novel concept during the 1960s, also comprised an area of great attention for Mr. Hennesay and other early ONSR employees. The ONSR was the first nationally protected river, and faced momentous challenges in its implementation. Unfortunately, a significant degree of controversy characterized its early stages, and in this context Mr. Hennesay remembered his most important accomplishment as probably being the "soothing the feelings of the people toward the Park Service and the Riverways itself."

The interview was recorded on a Sony type I (normal bias) audio cassette, using a Marantz PMD-222 manual recorder (set on automatic recording level) connected directly to a telephone line. Mr. Hennesay spoke from his home in Charlo, Montana, while the interviewer spoke from the office of Western Historical Manuscript Collection in Columbia, Missouri. There is no interfering noise, and the audio quality is generally good for a telephone recording.

The following transcript represents a faithful rendering of the entire oral history interview. Minor stylistic alterations -- none of factual consequence -- have been made as part of a general transcription policy. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Parentheses () are used to indicate laughter or a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation. Quotation marks [" "] indicate speech depicting dialogue, or words highlighted for the usual special purposes (such as indicating irony). Double dashes [--] and ellipses [. . .] are also used as a stylistic method in an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editors, Will Sarvis and N. Renae Farris.

[Tape meter, 000. Begin side one, tape one of one. Begin interview.]

WS: Okay. I thought I'd just get some basic autobiographical information from you, if I could.

Could you please tell me your birth date?

VH: 6/9/27.

WS: Okay. And where were you born, sir?

VH: In Gouldbusk, Texas.

WS: And you were the first superintendent [of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways (OSNR).]

VH: I was the second one. Ted Davenport was the first superintendent. I went down as chief ranger. Then, when he was transferred, I was promoted up to superintendent.

WS: Oh, I see. But you were there in the beginning.

VH: Yes.

WS: Okay. Do you remember the month and the year that you got there?

VH: I was transferred down there in about February of '66.

WS: And then you stayed until when?

VH: Let's see; I was down there about a year and a half. I think I moved out of there in late '67. No, that couldn't be right. I guess I went down in '65. Boy, that's thirty years ago. My memory is pretty good, but awfully short.

(Laughter)

WS: So you were ranger for less than a year, and then became superintendent for a year or more?

VH: Yes. I was chief ranger when I went down, and then Ted Davenport transferred. I hadn't

been down there a year when he transferred. Then I was promoted to superintendent.

WS: I see. Well, maybe you could give me an outline of your Park Service career prior to the [ONSR assignment].

VH: I started my Park Service career out in Sequoia National Park in 1948 as a seasonal maintenance employee. My first job, of course, was cleaning rest rooms in the campgrounds. Then I was promoted to garbage truck driver, and then went up to seasonal ranger. I worked my way up. I didn't get a permanent job immediately. It took seven years before I got a permanent job as a ranger.

From Sequoia National Park I moved to Rocky Mountain National Park. From Rocky Mountain National Park to Colorado National Monument down in western Colorado. From there to Oregon Caves out in southern Oregon. From there to Homestead National Monument in southern Nebraska. From Homestead National Monument I went down to Ozark National Scenic Riverways. I finally worked my way down there.

WS: You were working your way east, kind of.

(Laughter)

VH: Yes, right.

WS: And where did you go after Missouri?

VH: From Ozark National Scenic Riverways I went to Yellowstone National Park, where I was assistant superintendent for ten years. From there I moved to Fort Laramie National Historic Site over in eastern Wyoming. That's where I retired from.

WS: I see. I guess when you were growing up you must have had some interest in the outdoors to want to choose such a career.

VH: Yes. I was raised on a farm. I worked on a farm all the way through high school. I worked in the cotton fields and the grape vineyards. My senior year in high school I lived with a family who had a dairy farm. This was during World War Two. Their sons had all been drafted into the service and they needed some help. So I went down and lived with them my senior year and worked on the dairy farm.

I was raised on a farm, in the country. My degree was in wildlife management.

WS: I see. I guess you must have been quite aware, when you were going to Missouri, that this Riverways was a pioneering type of National Park Service endeavor.

VH: Yes. That was a new type of an area. It was quite an experience. There was a lot of controversy about the area when it was first proposed. Even when the Park Service first moved down there was still a lot of controversy, locally, about it.

WS: I guess you were there really quite shortly after the legislation got signed into law.

[Tape meter, 050]

VH: Right. Yes.

WS: What were your main endeavors? You and the other people working down there?

VH: When I first went down there were just two of us; Ted Davenport was superintendent, and I was down as chief ranger. We were there, primarily to try to help prepare a master plan. Then, shortly after I arrived, they established the land acquisition office. The Park Service didn't own any property at all. As a matter of fact, our first office was a two

bedroom residence.

We had to acquire all the property. A land office was set up in Eminence. It was up to the superintendent to try to determine which lands would be acquired, what policies would be applied in acquiring land. This was one of the first areas where there were a lot of scenic easements offered along the river.

WS: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

VH: And this was something kind of new in the National Park Service as a Park Service area. But each landowner had an opportunity to give a life tenancy, which meant they would sell the property, but they were allowed to live there the rest of their life, if they wanted to. Then, there was a lot of scenic easement acquired along the river to control any development along the river, once the area was established. So the land acquisition office had a couple of appraisers. They appraised all the property trying to establish the value of the property for the Park Service to pay the owners. Of course, the appraisal was based on comparable sales of comparable properties, and so forth. Then, we had a mapping crew that mapped the area. That was what was going on while I was there. We acquired the first tract of land while I was there. During my tenure there it was strictly land acquisition and trying to explain to the people what the Park Service had in mind once the area was acquired and started developing.

WS: Now as far as hiring those appraisers, was that the responsibility of the superintendent? Or was that higher up in the National Park Service?

VH: We hired appraisers who were qualified. They were certified. A couple of them came

over from the Corps of Engineers, and a couple of them were private appraisers that we hired. They were hired, and they were a Park Service employee, but they were certified appraisers. They had to review each tract of land and try to determine the value by finding other tracts of land in the immediate vicinity that had been sold within a short [recent] period of time, and use those sales as comparable to try to establish the value of the property we were trying to acquire.

WS: So those appraisers actually became government employees, then.

VH: That's correct, yes.

WS: Oh, I thought they had operated like sort of on a contract.

VH: There were a couple of private appraisers that we issued contracts to, but then some of the appraisers were Corps of Engineers, which is a government agency. They were just transferred over from the Corps of Engineers to the National Park Service. So we had some private contractors and some employees.

WS: Yes, I think I've come across some of their names. But in that area you guys were in charge of hiring those appraisers? It didn't come from higher up in the region?

[Tape meter, 100]

VH: What we were supposed to do?

WS: I guess I'm just wondering how much autonomy they gave you. Like if the regional office oversaw some of that, or if they kind of let you loose to do your job.

VH: We had a master plan to follow; guidelines, as far as what areas. The area had been mapped out as to what was going to be included in the National Scenic Riverways. So

we had the master plan to follow as far as land acquisition. But as far as establishing values and contacting the local people to appraise their properties and try to explain to the local people what was happening, that was pretty much our responsibility. Of course, we had to keep the regional office appraised of what was going on all the time.

WS: I'm wondering about the budgeting. Sometimes with these federal projects; of course when they start them, the budget doesn't materialize, and that causes problems for people out in the field trying to acquire land and that sort of thing.

VH: We had land acquisition budget. We knew how much money we had to spend when we went down. Of course, that changes every year. During my tenure there it was strictly land acquisition, developing a master plan, and deciding where we were going to put different developments; campgrounds, and so forth. We never had any problem with knowing that when we bought land if there was going to be money available for it. The budget was there. Now, later on, as they acquired most of the land and started developing and so forth, then they started getting into budget restrictions.

WS: Right. If I recall, during that time in American history, that was pretty common for a lot of the federal agencies.

VH: Right.

WS: The Forest Service ran into that problem too.

VH: We had an established budget when we went down. We knew how much money we had to spend. We knew at the time we went down that the money we had available at that time wasn't going to buy everything that we wanted, but we had enough to do what we

wanted for a couple of years there.

WS: Did any of the condemnation hearings, the eminent domain hearings, start up while you were there?

VH: No. Shortly after I left they started some condemnation. But the first tract that we acquired was through an agreement with the landowners. There were no condemnations while I was there.

WS: And I guess the acquisition of those state parks came later also.

VH: Yes. We were in the process at the time. Of course, negotiation for the state parks was all done through the region and the Washington offices. We were involved, but all the decisions came through the governor's office and through the Washington and regional office. While I was there the state had agree to transfer the parks to the National Park Service, but they hadn't actually done it while I was there.

WS: I see. Was Director Hartzog personally interested in that endeavor?

VH: Oh, very much so. That was his pride and joy. That was kind of his favorite area. He was very much involved in that. He wanted to know everything that went on all the time.

WS: So I guess you got a lot of moral support from him.

VH: Oh yes. We got a lot of static from the locals, too.

(Laughter)

WS: So maybe something of a counterbalance. Well, I wonder if there was any talk of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act while you were down there. Because some people feel like the Ozark Riverways was kind of a precedent.

[Tape meter, 150]

VH: Yes. There was a lot of discussion. What was the name of the area down in Arkansas that eventually came under the result of that?

WS: The Eleven Point River?

VH: Right. The Eleven Point River was in a lot of discussion while we were there. That Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was very hot at the time.

WS: And then, of course, the Eleven Point had been part of the original Park Service [plan] back when it was a Monument proposal, and then had been excluded. And I notice the Riverways stops right at the Carter-Ripley county line. They tell me Ripley was sort of a hotbed of opposition, and that's how that came to be demarcated right there at the county line.

VH: At the time I'm not sure why they stopped it there. I know there was a lot of opposition there. There was also a lot of opposition in the Eminence area, to the Park Service.

WS: Would you say that was kind of like the center of the resistance?

VH: When I was there, Eminence was kind of the center of the opposition. There was an attorney there [Winston Buford] who was very vocal in opposition to it. There was another lady (Mrs. Vaughn, I believe was her name) was very vocal in the opposition to this.

[Tape meter, 168-181; incidental conversation pertaining to attorney's name omitted.]

WS: If Eminence was sort of the center of the opposition, did you have a center of support?

VH: Van Buren was probably the greatest center of support. There was a lot of support from

Eminence, too. But Van Buren was probably the community that gave us the greatest support. Of course, now, there was opposition in all the communities; certain individuals. But Van Buren was probably the strongest support. There was quite a bit of support in Eminence, too.

WS: I guess Ellington was too far away for them to care too much one way or the other.

VH: Well, we'd get some people down from Ellington. But Ellington didn't really seem to have much voice either way, one way or the other. At least while I was there. At one time there was some consideration to make the headquarters at Ellington. I guess the word leaked out on that, and there was a lot of opposition in Van Buren.

WS: Oh, they wanted it in Van Buren.

VH: Yes.

WS: I see. Well, I wonder who made that decision?

VH: I'll tell you a little story about how that leaked out. The master plan team was down there in Van Buren doing some study trying to determine where we'd put campgrounds, and where we would put launch ramps, and where we would put headquarters, et cetera.

[Tape meter, 200]

One of the proposals at the time was maybe we could put the headquarters in Ellington, because it's kind of the center of the area. They scrapped that, but they threw their notes in the waste basket. So when the maid cleaned up the room after the fellows had been using it, she dug the notes out of the waste basket and gave it to some of the people in Van Buren. That's how the word leaked out that we were considering the headquarters in

Ellington. But it changed.

[Tape meter, 208-217; more incidental conversation pertaining to identity of attorney omitted.]

VH: He [Winston Buford] wrote several letters. As a matter of fact, he threatened to sue me one time because I was “practicing law without a license,” because I was issuing press releases. I’m sure you’ll find some correspondence in the office there from him.

WS: Do you remember Bill Bailey?¹

VH: Oh, yes!

WS: I’m told he became a ranger, but he was native to the area.

VH: Right.

WS: And supposedly friends with Congressman Ichord, I guess. I don’t know. He’s kind of in poor health, but I hope to get down and meet him sometime soon.

VH: If you see him, tell him “hi” for me.

WS: I will.

VH: He was a close friend of Ichord’s, and through their connection he was able to acquire an appointment there. It started out as a seasonal ranger, then it developed into a permanent ranger position for him. But he was hired primarily to guide us. He was a local man. He knew the area like the back of his hand. He was kind of an advisor to us on where to go, who the opposition was, who the support was, and that sort of thing.

WS: Would he have been unique in that regard, or were there other people like that?

VH: I’m sure there were some other people around there that probably would have done the

¹ For an interview with Mr. Bailey, please see C3966 Missouri Environment Oral History Project, a.c. 24, 25.

same thing. Bill had spent a lot of time on the river. He knew the river real well. He knew the countryside along the river. I would have thought he had probably passed away by now. But he's still there, is he?

WS: I called down there, and I guess I spoke to his wife, and he had just gotten out of the hospital. He was feeling quite poorly, but they seemed to think he would recover and be all right. I think he had open heart surgery.

VH: Is he living in Eminence still?

WS: I've got a post office box address for him in Eminence; I guess that's where he is.

VH: Oh, okay. Yes, he lived out in the country out of Eminence, there for a while.

WS: Was it Mr. Dave Thompson that followed you in the superintendent's role?²

[Tape meter, 250]

VH: Yes, he replaced me when I left.

WS: Would you happen to know who came after him? I'm trying to put a chronology together of the superintendents. Was it Mr. Sullivan that came after him?

VH: I'm not sure. I don't know. [Lynn Thompson] was in Washington. He was the regional director at one time. He wasn't in the regional office at the time I was at Ozark National Scenic Riverways. Fred [C.] Fagergren was the regional director when I was at Ozark.

WS: What is the most important thing you think you got done when you were down there?

VH: I think probably -- (laughs) this may sound conceited a little bit -- but probably the most important thing that I felt I accomplished was soothing the feelings of the people toward

2 Mr. Thompson was interviewed in C3966 Missouri Environment Collection, a.c. 49, 40.

the Park Service and the Riverways itself. I tried to make myself available to all of them. There was a lot of misunderstanding on what the Park Service was going to do. The eminent domain thing was really a hot issue, because everybody thought their property was going to be condemned, and they weren't going to get any money for it, and this sort of thing. So I tried to make myself available to everybody and explain what the Park Service was doing, and what we were hoping to accomplish in the long run. I felt, anyway, that I had kind of soothed the feelings of the people there before I left. Even though they may not have agreed with what the Park Service was doing, they had a better understanding of what was going to happen.

WS: Had you ever encountered anything like that in any other place you worked for the Park Service?

VH: No. I think Ozark National Scenic Riverways was probably the hottest political area I ever worked in.

(Laughter)

VH: I found the name of that attorney: Winston Buford.

WS: Winston Buford. That sounds vaguely familiar. I'll try to find more about him. I've gone through the Congressional testimony, and that's where I've located most of these names. It seems like he may have testified, but I'll have to go back and check.

VH: I don't know that he testified in the Congressional hearings or not. I know he surfaced pretty vehemently when we moved in, especially when we moved the land acquisition office into Eminence. That's where it was located. Of course he had contact with the

people there.

[Tape meter, 300]

He was representing the people in opposition to the Riverways and the Park Service.

No, I think the Ozark National Scenic Riverways was one of the hottest political areas of my career.

WS: I guess so. Well, how does that make you feel about it? I mean, was it a good experience? Or challenging?

VH: It was a very challenging experience. It really was. When we first went there, we were kind of writing our own policies as far as land acquisitions. We didn't really have any great established policies to follow, as far as how we would go about acquiring the land, except we knew we didn't want to do any condemnation if we could get around it. We absolutely tried to avoid that. Of course, it wasn't unavoidable. We had to do some. But one of the key issues that Mr. Hartzog said, was, "We don't want to do any condemnation if we can at all get around it." And I'm sure we had to pay some pretty good prices for some of the land to avoid having to do that. But he felt it was worth it to keep the goodwill of the community, and I'm sure it was.

WS: I'm kind of surprised they didn't put a supervisor for at least the first few years just to make it easier. I mean, it seems to me that moving the supervisors around would make it more challenging to come in there.

VH: Yes; of course, with Director Hartzog being personally interested, he made numerous trips down there to keep the continuity going. The first superintendent, Mr. Davenport,

that went in -- sort of rankled some of the locals. He wasn't as personable as he could have been with some of the local people. That turned some of them against the Park Service.

WS: I would imagine that would be a very sensitive position, to be going in there.

VH: *Very* sensitive, you betcha.

WS: Well, is there anything you have done differently if you could go back?

VH: Oh; I don't know if there is or not. I think that one of the things that I would have tried to have done differently if I had a chance, would be to do a better job in the land acquisition, and making more personal contacts with the people that they were trying to acquire the land [from.]

[Tape meter, 350]

Because in many cases the landowners were absentee owners. They lived in St. Louis, Kansas City, or someplace. The appraisers would just have to go on their property to investigate. Now, I think if we'd done a little better job in contacting the landowners before we went in to appraise their property it would have eliminated some of the hard feelings that developed, that we had to overcome.

[Tape meter, 361. End side one, tape one of one.]

[Tape meter, 000. Begin side two, tape one of one.]

WS: I don't know if you would know this, but I've heard rumors that there was a Kansas City lawyer that supposedly went down there right after the legislation [was passed], and some of the attorneys seemed to think he was "chasing" the cases. You know what I mean?

Like he was, I guess, going to try to escalate the land prices, and encouraging the landowners to go into condemnation for that reason.

VH: I think Winston Buford was in that position.

WS: Oh, is that right? He was representing some of the landowners in the condemnation?

VH: Yes. He was representing the landowners. He was encouraging them to not sell, and to make sure that they went into condemnation because they'd get more money, and this sort of thing.

WS: Was there any confusion about this scenic easement option? Because, as you say, I realize it was a relatively new kind of agreement in a less-than-fee sort of situation.

VH: Yes. That was one of the confusing issues, because we didn't really have any guidelines at the time on what would be allowed under the scenic easement, and what would not be allowed under the scenic easement. If people just sold a scenic easement but retained ownership of the land, then when you tried to tell them what they could and could not do, the language was pretty vague; something to the effect that they "could not develop anything that would be detrimental to the scenic value of the land." Wording like that can be interpreted many ways by many different people.

So that was one of the confusing issues that we had at the time. Now, I don't know exactly how much land was actually acquired under scenic easements. When I was there, there wasn't any actually acquired under scenic easements. There was a lot of it offered. But I'm not sure, in the final run, how many acres were actually acquired under scenic easement.

WS: Do you recall if there was an approach to the landowners in terms of fee simple or scenic easement depending on the terrain, or was it just any and all land?

VH: Well, when we first started it, there was some consideration to have just certain areas that would be allowed scenic easements. Initially we were not going to allow any scenic easements on property that had waterfront. We felt that we wanted to acquire that in fee to protect the development on the waterfront itself. But then Director Hartzog said, "No, we don't want to do that. If they want a scenic easement, then we'll offer anybody a scenic easement." But we didn't really have too much in the way of guidelines on what they could or could not do under scenic easement. A lot of people, of course -- any landowner, anywhere in the United States doesn't like to have any restrictions placed on his land. A lot of people would not even consider a scenic easement because they don't want somebody telling them what they can do with their land.

WS: Yes, that's very much an American trait, I think; all over the place.

VH: Right.

WS: Well, did you have any early concessionaires, like in other national parks?

VH: Not at that time, no. We didn't really have any land on which to offer concession operations.

WS: I see. You were talking about some of this opposition. Did any of the local people ever retaliate? Vandalism, or anything like that?

VH: No. There was a comical incident one time. There were not actual acts of vandalism or retaliation of any kind, except at one time after some land had been acquired. There were

some old cabins. There were a lot of old, run-down cabins along the river. Some of the hippies just moved in and squatted in some of those cabins. We had a crew go out one time. There were a bunch of old, run-down, dilapidated cabins on some land that we acquired. We asked them to go out and burn them down and clean the place up. Well, they did. They went out there and there were two sets of cabins. One set of cabins were in pretty fair shape, and one set was just run-down and dilapidated.

Well, they figured the run-down ones were the ones to be burned. So they stuck a match to them.

[Tape meter, 050]

As it turned out, they were on the wrong piece of property. The better looking cabins were the ones they were supposed to have burned. When Winston Buford, the attorney, got a hold of that, then he filed charges against the superintendent, Dave Thompson, for destruction of property. They were going to take him to court. The superintendent was not in the area at the time the sheriff went to serve the warrant, so they didn't get to serve the warrant, and they eventually got it resolved. But I don't know the details of how it was resolved.

WS: That must have happened after you left, I guess.

VH: Yes. It was about, probably, three or four months after I left, it happened.

WS: I think since then -- when I was down there, they were telling me some ranger had had his house burned down twice. I don't know what the details are. But it made me wonder about that very [thing.]

VH: I hadn't heard about that. One of the land officers got a threatening phone call one time. He lived in Eminence. He got a call that said they were going to come up and get him. So he called the sheriff and advised the sheriff, and told the sheriff that if he came up to be sure to identify himself because he was going to be sitting there with his shotgun. Nothing ever came of it.

WS: I just wonder if those mapping crews or anything ever encountered anybody with a handgun or a rifle in the woods?

VH: No. Not while I was there, anyway. There was one incident with the mapping crew that created some embarrassment for us. They went on a fellow's piece of property. They had put big white crosses at certain places for aerial photography, so they could photograph the area. The mapping crew went into a fellow's place. There was nobody there. The landowner lived in St. Louis, I believe; or maybe Kansas City. Anyway, they put a big cross up on top of the roof of his house. When he came down he saw this big white cross. I was in the office one day. The fellow came storming in the office -- right by the secretary; didn't even say "hi" to her -- and dumped this big white cross on my desk. He was very irate! And I don't blame him. I would have been too. He told me where he found it.

I called the mapping crew, and they said yes, they had put it up there. So I called them over to the office and we had quite a conversation about it. I told them that, henceforth, if they couldn't get permission from a landowner they weren't to put any crosses -- and by any means -- were not to put any crosses on any structures. I think we

got that one squared away.

(Laughter)

But he was very unhappy. He left the office, though, in a little better mood. I apologized to him, because he was right. We had no business doing it. But, those are the things that happen.

WS: Did you ever have any problem with timber poachers or woods arsonists?

VH: Not while I was there. Of course, see, we didn't have enough land that had timber that we actually owned, to create any problem for us. Later on they may have. I don't know.

WS: Do you ever remember meeting Mr. Leo Drey?

VH: Oh, yes.

WS: I guess he was a prominent landowner down there.

VH: Yes.

WS: I guess he had thirty-five miles of river frontage at one time.

VH: He seemed to be pretty amiable. We didn't have any difficulty with him while I was there. He was a very hard worker. When you saw him walking down the street you wouldn't think he was any kind of landowner at all. He would wear a pair of old run-down boots, and holey jeans, and a t-shirt.

(Laughter)

But he was a very nice guy; easy man to talk to. I didn't have any problems. I enjoyed visiting with him.

WS: Did you ever have much interaction with the Forest Service people there? I guess that

would have still been called the Clark National Forest back then. Later they changed it to the Mark Twain.

VH: Yes. We attended meetings. We had regular Rotary meetings and so forth with them. I can't remember the forester's name at the time. But there again, we weren't really in the process of trying to get any state land or Forest Service land at the time I was there.

[Tape meter, 100]

I'm sure that they had more interaction after I left, later on in the land acquisition program.

WS: Well, Mr. Hennesay, that's all my questions for you.

[Tape meter, 103-126; incidental conversation omitted, remainder of recording. End side two, tape one of one. End of interview.]