

ELLEN LABOTKA

Salt Lake City, UT

An Interview by

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**THIS IS AN INTERVIEW WITH ELLEN LABOTKA ON FEBRUARY 23, 2014.
THE INTERVIEWER IS BECKY B. LLOYD. THIS IS THE GREAT SALT LAKE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT. TAPE No.u-3248.**

BBL: This is an interview with Ellen Labotka at the Field Garr Ranch on Antelope Island. Today's date is February 23, 2014. This is part of the Great Salt Lake Oral History Project funded through the Utah Humanities Council and the Utah History Association. My name is Becky Lloyd.

Ellen, let's get some background information on you to start. Tell me when and where you were born.

EL: I'm actually from Illinois. I was born in 1962. My birthday is in just a couple of weeks, on March 9th. Grew up in Illinois.

BBL: What was your family doing in Illinois?

EL: Well, my mom and dad, their families were all Midwestern. My mom was a nurse; my dad was a doctor.

BBL: Is that how they got together?

EL: Actually, they did. Let's see if I can remember this right. My dad was a captain in the U.S. Army during World War II. My mom was actually a nurse. They kind of met, I believe it was in Kansas, working on a base in Kansas.

BBL: How interesting. Did your dad have a practice in Illinois?

EL: He did. In Berwyn, Illinois.

BBL: Where was that?

EL: Berwyn.

BBL: How do you spell that?

EL: B-E-R-W-I-N. The town I actually grew up in is called Riverside. It's just a little bit west of the city. When people ask me I just say Chicago, unless they're familiar with the area, then I say, "I'm from Riverside, Illinois." "Oh, okay."

BBL: I see. How many children did your parents have?

EL: Actually ten.

BBL: Ten. Where do you fit in that lineup?

EL: I'm second youngest; youngest of the girls and second youngest in the ranks.

BBL: Is that right. That's where I fit in my family. There are seven kids, but I'm the youngest girl and second to the youngest.

Tell me how you got out to Utah.

EL: Oh, it's kind of a long story, I suppose, but when we were younger, my parents took me and the three youngest kids—I had two brothers—on vacations. We traveled all over the country, visited national parks, state parks, the West coast, East coast, we went down South. That's probably where I learned or found my passion in the outdoors. So at an early age, oh, probably early teens, I decided then I wanted to be a park ranger.

BBL: Really?

EL: Uh-huh. Met some really cool park rangers and I just loved the mountains, the timber, the deserts, and just fell in love with the outdoors. So that was always kind of my goal, to be a park ranger, because I never was successful at being an astronaut. That was my other goal (laughs).

BBL: Is that right, really?

EL: Yeah (laughs).

BBL: Did you pursue that at all, astronaut?

EL: No, no. When I was little I wanted to be the first female astronaut. Unfortunately, somebody beat me to it and that kind of, “Ah, well, fine! (laughs). I’ll find something else to do.”

BBL: That’s been done (laughs).

EL: Yeah (laughs).

BBL: So you attended school and lived your whole childhood and teenage years in Riverside?

EL: Right. Illinois. So I actually came out here knowing that I wanted to be a forest ranger, park ranger. I looked around for schools in forestry and always loved the mountains, so I knew I wanted to be somewhere where there were mountains. I applied to Utah State University and got accepted. I came out and lived in Logan and got my degree.

BBL: Is that degree in, what? Forestry?

EL: It’s a forestry degree, but it’s recreational resource management.

BBL: Oh, really? Wow.

EL: Uh-huh. I know it’s a mouthful (laughs).

BBL: It’s very impressive, it sounds very impressive. But is that in the college of forestry, or the degree heading is forestry?

EL: It’s in the college of forestry, or department of natural resources. So it’s in the forestry department, but it’s its own school.

BBL: Major.

EL: Major, yes.

BBL: I see. So tell me about your time in Logan. Is that a bachelor’s degree?

EL: Uh-huh. It's bachelor's.

Well, I like to say I graduated early, since I was on the ten year plan (laughs).

BBL: (laughs)

EL: Logan was a good experience, it was a learning experience. I thoroughly enjoyed my fellow students in the learning, forestry department.

BBL: Were you joking about the ten year degree?

EL: No, I was probably not quite a lifelong student (laughs). It took me about five, six years to get my bachelor's.

BBL: Sure. Okay. But during that time you were living in Logan, those five, six years?

EL: Yes.

BBL: Did you get an advanced degree beyond your bachelor's?

EL: No. I stopped at my bachelor's. Actually, I had worked in the summers with the Forest Service as a recreational aide. I worked up in Cache Valley, on the Logan Ranger District, and one summer on the Ogden Ranger District. Then from there...

BBL: Wait a second. Before we go from there, tell me more about your training during school. You said you worked summers as an aide, but tell me about some of your schooling. How do they prepare to become a...I've got to write that down.

EL: Recreational resource management. Actually, it's natural resources recreational resource management. It's a long...

BBL: How do you get that all on a business card? It has to go around to the back side.

EL: You do a lot of abbreviation (laughs).

BBL: (laughs) Okay. Recreational resource manager. How did they train you to become that, then? Did you get more on the job experience? Or internships?

EL: I think there probably were some internships, but I just worked. I didn't work during the school year; I devoted most of my time just to studying and everything. The classes were a lot of scientific type classes with timber and wildlife and rangelands. There's a lot of math and chemistry and soils and all that kind of stuff in there. But they also had, for the recreational part, they also incorporated all your scientific classes with your social aspects. So a lot of, I don't want to say psychology classes, but a lot of classes dealing on the importance of people getting out in the outdoors and the recreational, the leisure activities, basically, and tie how that all works into managing forests or other recreational areas that you have to balance management of the land, protect the resource, and also accommodate, allow recreational activities. So it just wasn't...if I had gone and gotten a forestry degree, it probably would have been more straight and narrow, just down your scientific management classes, whereas the recreational one incorporates the human side.

BBL: The users as well.

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: Okay. With just a forestry degree, can you become a ranger? Or do you need that management type of education, too?

EL: Boy, there are so many...

BBL: So many ways in?

EL: Right. There are so many ways in. There are so many, I've just been kind of looking for another career, possibly, because I can retire right now. So I've been looking to see what's out there, and there are so many types of jobs with forestry or national parks. It's amazing. I think there's always...to get your foot in the door they always

encourage and really prefer that you start out working as a seasonal, which is what I did, and it kind of gives you a little bit of experience, not only doing the job, but also into the culture, I'd say.

BBL: Sure.

EL: So they look for a lot of either volunteer time or actual seasonal work time, and, of course, they want a degree. For a national park or national forest job, because there's so much competition, they really want those higher degrees now—master's. So I think today it would be a lot tougher to get in than it was when I was actually starting my career.

BBL: So during the summers, then, while you were at Utah State, you worked in the Cache National Forest and in Ogden, too?

EL: Yes.

BBL: Then you graduated.

EL: Uh-huh. I graduated. I worked another summer for the Forest Service and my supervisor at the time, his good friend was a park manager down at Dead Horse Point State, the state park in Moab, and which I was a total Moabite (laughs), back in the day. And I was like, oh, I'd love to work down there. Anyway, the following summer I worked down there as a seasonal and I worked there about nine months, then I volunteered during the winter. So I was there about a year. At that point, they had a job opening, which I interviewed for, and was accepted as a park ranger.

BBL: At Dead Horse Point?

EL: Not at Dead Horse Point. State Parks has what they call a roster and they have this roster and depending on where there's a position that needs to be filled, they would place

you in a certain position. Unfortunately, at Dead Horse Point they didn't have a full-time position.

BBL: Let's see if I get this right. Let's say that there is an opening at Dead Horse Point, that creates an opening somewhere. Then do other people bid for that? Somebody's whose already in the system might want that one instead?

EL: Yeah. What they do is will actually open, if there's a position or positions that open in the system, they will announce it internally, so the people that are already hired, they get, if they want the position they can put in for it. If there's a couple of people they actually have to interview for that position. But, typically, what happens is in the system people move around, get promoted, or they move on, so you have openings and sometimes nobody will move into those positions, so they will put out a public announcement and recruit from all over and then go through the whole interviewing and hiring process.

BBL: All right. So where was your first job as ranger?

EL: Starvation State Park in Duchesne. I was a boating ranger down there. So that was a shock (laughs) coming from...Logan was a shock for me coming from Chicago to Logan, but Duchesne was a totally whole new...

BBL: Another new shock.

EL: Yes (laughs). Very small, very rural area.

BBL: How long were you there?

EL: Just about two years.

BBL: Did you like it?

EL: I liked the park. The park was, it was kind of sagebrush country, upland game, it's a reservoir. It's cold in the winter. It had a lot of...when I first started there, we had our developed areas, our campgrounds, our marina, but we have in the park, all kinds of undeveloped land, which, in rural Utah you have roads everywhere. So you had all this undeveloped land and, because people don't want to pay the fees, they go use undeveloped areas. There's access to a lake. It was pretty rough in those areas. So I got a lot of experience with law enforcement and dealing with the public.

BBL: Is there more than one ranger at Starvation?

EL: When I was there, there was a full-time staff of three. So there were two rangers and a park manager. So park manager usually did the administration side of things and the rangers would be out patrolling. So you worked alone a lot because you had to get the most coverage with that amount of people seven days a week.

BBL: Was the law enforcement part something that you thought about when you first thought about going into this as a career? Or did you realize that was part of it too?

EL: Not...no. I had taken all those surveys they give you when you go into college, or before you go into college, what kind of a career you would do well at and law enforcement had come up, which was kind of funny to me because I was always kind of the rebel in the family (laughs).

BBL: Is that right?

EL: Be the one to stand up to the authority, basically. I actually started out wanting to be in wildlife. At the time, they said primarily, my counselor was like, "Right now they're only hiring the C.O.s. There's law enforcement." I'm like well, "That's not what I want to do; I want to be more with people, help educate people. Be in the outdoors,

enjoying the outdoors, not just being worried about law enforcement.” So I switched to the recreational side. So it’s kind of ironic that I ended up (laughs) as a park ranger, it’s kind of like full circle. So it was something I never, I mean it was not like...people that typically go into law enforcement, I know it’s always a passion of theirs from when they’re little. So I had to grow into it.

BBL: Did you get training specifically in law enforcement?

EL: Oh, yeah. You go to the police academy; you have forty hours of training a year. So, yeah.

BBL: Okay. Was that part of your degree or was that after?

EL: That was after. That was when I got hired on full-time.

BBL: You get hired on full time, then you get the police training, law enforcement training.

EL: Yeah.

BBL: Did they provide any of that in college? Obviously not for your degree, or then. Maybe they’ve changed it.

EL: Weber State has a program. I believe they work with the state Utah Peace Officers Standards and Training. They have a program. Maybe Salt Lake Community College has a program. But Utah State doesn’t. They just have the more management. Never even had a class in it. They were more, like I say, resource management university. That was over twenty years ago, so I’m sure the programs have changed. I wouldn’t be up to date on what they have to offer now.

BBL: That’s interesting because probably in some parks, that becomes the main feature of the job, really, doesn’t it?

EL: It is. When I first started out, everybody was law enforcement, your managers, your assistant managers, your region manager, were all law enforcement. It's changed quite a bit. Park rangers were all law enforcement. Now we have law enforcement rangers, which currently that's what I am now, then they have specific maintenance personnel, they have accountants, they have...gosh, I can't even think what other positions, but in the main office there are a number of them.

BBL: They all considered rangers, but they have different specialties?

EL: Well, no. Now the titles have changed to fit the position, so you have a maintenance supervisor, maintenance tech. Before, park rangers did everything. We used to say we wear many hats, a gun in one hand and our toilet brush in another (laughs). Now it's really changed. Law enforcement is law enforcement, more emphasis with what your primary duty is. And you have your maintenance people who do more of the upkeep of the facilities. Then you have non-law enforcement rangers, or naturalists, if you will, do educational programs.

BBL: I see.

EL: But before, in the day, we would do everything.

BBL: Everybody did it all.

EL: Yeah.

BBL: That's interesting.

So from Starvation, where did you go?

EL: I went to Rockport State Park, which is near Park City, kind of near Jordanelle, Peoa. Then from there I came here as a ranger. Then I actually went up to Willard Bay and was the assistant manager there for a few years and came back and was a ranger here

until about, well, two years ago, three years ago. The legislators did an audit on the state and really didn't like having so many law enforcement personnel. The politics. So they demanded or suggested that they cut back on some. So my position, being on Antelope Island, they didn't think there was such a need for law enforcement. It's more of a scenic, it's not a recreational park like Willard Bay. I mean you're dealing with all kinds of stuff, crazy stuff up there. Here's more mellow. So they declassified my position, so now I'm more of a park generalist, which, going from law enforcement back to doing everything but law enforcement.

BBL: Oh, really. And you say that happened just a few years ago?

EL: Yes.

BBL: That's interesting.

So how long have you worked for the Park Service?

EL: I just reached my twenty-third year.

BBL: Twenty-three. That's great. That's a long time, isn't it?

EL: Yeah. It is. It's amazing. I'm like, wow! (laughs).

BBL: When did you first become acquainted with the Great Salt Lake?

EL: Well, like I said, when I was little, we traveled and one of the states we came to was Utah. We actually had quite the adventure in Utah. I think it was around Salt Lake City, we stayed in a hotel and this phenomenon—I've never heard of it since—but the whole town was run over by insects. I mean, it was like you walked out...like in Illinois we have locusts, seventeen year locusts that come out and cover the ground. Well, this is what happened in Salt Lake City, which I can just kind of remember bits and pieces of it, because I was kind of young when we were here. So I remember the bugs. I remember

we were on I-80 and my mom got pulled over (laughs), because back then you're like flat and open and the only car on the road and she got pulled over. At one point, we were trying to leave the hotel where all the bugs were, she locked the keys in the vehicle. So anyway, somewhere amongst that, we ended up at Saltair. I'd have to say my first experience with the Great Salt Lake wasn't that great because I'm a water person, love to swim. I remember going, we went out to the Great Salt Lake and I dove in head first (laughs). I came up and screaming, "My eyes! My eyes!" So one of the guys that worked there came and got me and I was showering and I'm screaming and Mom's like, "Quit screaming." And I'm like, "It burns!" (laughs). So that was my first experience with the Great Salt Lake. So it's kind of ironic that I would actually come back and work on an island on the Great Salt Lake.

BBL: How old were you, about, do you think, when you came?

EL: Oh, I might have been ten.

BBL: Really?

EL: Yeah, nine, ten; maybe eleven. That was my first experience.

BBL: So that's all you remember about the lake the first time.

EL: At that time.

When I was at Utah State, I pretty much stayed in Logan. I never really came to look at it. I know driving back and forth to the airport I would see it and think, oh that's kind of cool. I used to watch, you know when they have the bison roundup, it would be on the news and they'd show them hauling the horses and cowboys across by boat and listening to the park manager talk. I thought, it can't be that hard (laughs). I could do that. You know, just my typical... (laughs). Then I got hired on by the state and as I just

transferred from park to park, there was an opening here and I came and talked with the park manager and I applied and I beat out a number of people to come get that position and started my experience on this island and learning about the Great Salt Lake. Left for a while and here I am, back again; it seems to be my home.

BBL: Was that decision to come here driven more by the fact that there was an opening than opposed to I really want to come work at Great Salt Lake or Antelope Island?

EL: It was probably a little bit of both. The opening kind of opened that door. Then I was always looking for new experiences and to learn. It seemed to be more, somewhat of a natural park. I enjoyed the law enforcement part, but I wasn't a diehard park law enforcement ranger. I wanted to do the other things, too. So there were a lot of experiences here and a lot of challenges, as well. So it is kind of like you said, the door opened up and potential possibilities out here.

BBL: Sure, you felt like it was a good move.

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: That's interesting.

So tell me, do you remember the year you started here the first time?

EL: It was 1995, four or five. End of the year '94, I believe.

BBL: Okay. What are some of your memories of the early days here, when you were first starting? Was it much different than it is now?

EL: It is. When I was here, they had the northern end of the park, 2,000 acres, that was open on a daily basis. Then everything south of the chain link fence—I don't know if you noticed when you drove through kind of a restricted area?

BBL: Right.

EL: So that was not open. It was only open like once a month, and that was just the road to come down here. So there was no real public access to the majority of the island back then. So it was actually a great way to commune with nature. You had the beautiful island and you had to come patrol and you'd be the only one here. It's just amazing, the wildness and the wildlife and everything else.

BBL: Very appealing.

About how many people were working at the time when you first started, do you recall? Roughly?

EL: Oh, gosh, there were probably...there's quite a few more than there are now.

BBL: There were more then than there are now?

EL: Uh-huh. Yes.

BBL: Because of the cut-backs?

EL: Yes.

BBL: So you have to rely more now on volunteers? Is that right?

EL: We actually have fewer volunteers than we did.

BBL: Then, even?

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: Really? That's interesting.

EL: So the full-time staffers just have to do more and cover more. So you basically do more with less. Do more with less personnel philosophy. So you just feel like you can, and hope it works (laughs).

BBL: About how many visitors do you have here every year roughly?

EL: Gosh, over here, I believe it's over 300,000 on average.

BBL: Wow. Do you have more visitors now than you did in '94, '95 when you first started?

EL: Oh, I imagine so. I don't recall what the visitation was back then, but definitely we have.

BBL: But your sense is you have a lot more people come than you used to.

EL: Yes.

BBL: So tell me some of your responsibilities here.

EL: Right now or back when I first started, because they've changed so much.

BBL: Let's go back to when you started, what did you do? What was your job?

EL: Well, when I came here the first time, I was primarily responsible for search and rescue on the island, as well as search and rescue on the Great Salt Lake.

BBL: Then you had a boat here, I guess.

EL: Yes. We had two large search and rescue boats. So I had to be proficient in operating those and be really familiar with the Great Salt Lake itself.

BBL: How did you do that? How did you become familiar with the lake?

EL: Just going out, taking the boat out and exploring, basically. We had some training, official training, but mostly it was just going out and exploring and learning and working with other people that were experienced with it.

BBL: Well that must have been fun.

EL: Oh, it is. I love going out there. I worked at two other boating parks, and totally different. You're dealing with jet skiers and water skiers and motor boats and fishermen. Come out to the Great Salt Lake and you're like the only boat there. It's so peaceful and quiet.

BBL: What are some of your favorite spots on the Great Salt Lake?

EL: On the Great Salt Lake, it would probably be up north, around Gunnison Island.

Now that's remote; wilderness at the best. Just going out along the west side of the island.

BBL: The west side of Antelope Island?

EL: Yes. Sometimes just being in the middle of the lake and just kind of bobbing around and just relaxing and taking it easy.

BBL: That sounds so nice. Did you ever get caught in a storm or have a time when it got pretty scary for you?

EL: I have been out on a number of rescues. Of course, those don't happen in the best of conditions. Nothing that was ever scary at those times, because you just had a job to do. You had something you had to get accomplished. You were usually looking for somebody. So you had a job to do and get it done and it was just part of it. You'd get in some pretty big waves and some dark. Actually, if I would say this was scary was one time I had a new ranger and a wildlife officer who decided to go out and it was rough out, which was fine, but the wind was blowing and it was really cold out. I took the older boat out and the water crashed over the bow, freezing on the windshield and we couldn't see. So we went out, made a half mile turnaround and came back in (laughs). So we didn't go out very far, but, yeah, it was probably the most stressful.

BBL: Far enough.

EL: Yeah. "Okay. Let's go in." But it gets pretty rough out there because the water's so dense; when you're in those big waves, you really feel it. So a lot of your focus is not only operating the boat or help look for the person, just make sure you're not getting bounced around to kingdom come with the water.

BBL: Interesting.

Were you doing search and rescue for a certain part of the lake or the whole lake?

EL: The whole lake. Usually. If we had a report of a missing boat, or we'd get as much information, if they're not too far away, we'd go out and find them. If you didn't know where they were, then it would be more of an interagency, coordination, activity. The sheriff would get involved. You'd get search and rescue, Davis County, or Box Elder County Search and Rescue, so you'd work closely with those teams as well.

BBL: Did you like that kind of work?

EL: I did.

BBL: What other responsibilities did you have? Search and rescue...

EL: Search and rescue was pretty much it. I was in charge of the backcountry trails, so I obtained grant money to develop trails, maintain the trails. We have, our trail patrol was in charge of that group, as well as kind of managed special events that would take place out here. I had quite a diversity of duties back then.

BBL: So you say those responsibilities continued up until you left for a short time.

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: Remind me again where you went.

EL: Willard Bay, which is just north, up in Willard City.

BBL: You were up there for about how long?

EL: About seven years.

BBL: Oh, that's a long time, too, really. How did you like that duty?

EL: Oh, I actually loved Willard (laughs).

BBL: So different from here?

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: So is it really true you don't have a lot of law enforcement issues here?

EL: It's different. When you have a boating park, it's just always happening because you've got boaters, you've got skiers, jet skiers, and you have to enforce the laws and you have people drinking, or you have accidents, just in the parking lot, and you have fights. So those kinds of parks tend to attract more of a rowdy group of people (laughs), so you're always dealing with law enforcement. Here, your primary visitor is here to sightsee, to recreate. They're not driving a four-wheeler or driving a boat that goes fast. More the laid-back type of recreation. We still have some law enforcement issues that deal more with the resource or people drinking and driving, that kind of thing. Typically you don't have like the fights or the accidents that you would have at Willard Bay or Jordanelle State Park. So there is a need for law enforcement here, it's just not constant. You're not just putting out one fire and going to another. It's a different type.

BBL: Is there a typical, most frequent violation out here that you have to address?

EL: Oh, well, pretty much people hiking off trails, dogs off leash, people getting lost. Maybe medicals: people getting bucked off their horses or getting dehydrated. Speeding is a big issue out here and oftentimes that leads into other, the driver has other things going on.

BBL: Okay. But not as hopping over at Willard Bay, where you're constantly...

EL: No (laughs). Definitely not.

BBL: So at Willard Bay, was that your main function, then, was law enforcement?

EL: Yes. Right.

BBL: Do you remember any particular stories you want to tell us from there, at Willard Bay?

EL: Well (laughs), there would be quite a few (laughs). Sometimes when people are at their worst, you've just got to...some of the things you see you just got to shake your head at or laugh at because they're on drugs or they're totally wasted, we do stupid things (laughs). If you can stop before somebody actually gets hurt, that's great. Unfortunately, you see some pretty bad stuff, too.

There was one time, this is really strange. I was actually off and at the time we had our slip runners, and it was in a locked gate. We had a call that somebody had walked around the gate, a couple of guys, and there was a really fat guy and a really skinny guy who were swimming off of the slip by the boats. People don't want people crawling around their sailboats or motorboats. So I went with two other officers and I was just pretty much in the background; I wasn't the lead officer on it or anything, I was just there to assist if needed. The one guy kind of, he can really cause things to escalate really quick.

BBL: The one officer?

EL: Yeah (laughs). So these guys, he was like, "Get out of the water." The skinny guy popped right out. This other guy, he's like over 300 pounds, couldn't get out. The one officer lost his temper. They're both wasted, the two guys. That made the fat guy mad. He wouldn't get out of the water and he ends up swimming into the middle of the marina and he's like, "I'm going to kill myself." Well, it was just like Cops, the show. Have you ever watched it (laughs)? So, we had backup come, we jump in the boat and it was the total [unclear] of this guy, "I'm going to kill myself if you come near me. I'm going to

kill myself.” Finally, we’re trying to talk to him—I was driving the boat—we were trying to close to talk to him. Finally somehow he gets on shore. He gets on shore and he books it. So we beached the boat, we all jump off, so there’s all these cops chasing this guy. Finally he gets taken down and I don’t know if you know about the mosquitoes up in Willard Bay are really bad, and he’s just in his swim trunks, no shoes, and he’s getting eaten alive by the mosquitoes and he’s freaking out (laughs). So we finally, we had an ambulance. Someone cuffed him to the gurney and he ended up busting it. They got him into the hospital and [unclear]. Of course, when I get there, all the doctors are mad at me for bringing this guy in (laughs). They had to put him out. They gave him something because he was fighting and it took, they said it took like triple the dose to knock this guy out. Then he ended up waking up and...it was just funny. It was just Cops: you don’t believe the stuff (laughs). We’re chasing this guy. So that’s funny (laughs). A little bit of drama.

BBL: At Willard Bay, were you mostly on a water craft of some sort patrolling?

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: Or were you on land and got called to go out?

EL: Both. We had, actually scheduled boating patrols during the busy time, on the weekends. So you have your campgrounds, your duty is to be covered, and then you had someone out in the boat. So you just took turns doing it.

BBL: You had your own beat you had to go to.

EL: Right.

BBL: I see. Interesting. You stayed there for seven years, you say?

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: Then you started looking for a change?

EL: Yeah. Something new. Different. Kind of just do something different. There were personnel changes, too, so I was trying to go back and move on, basically. I was never one to just kind of sit around and stay in one place too long. I felt I'd been there for a while.

Then Antelope, they actually had an opening and they said if I wanted it I could have it. I came back and have been back ever since.

BBL: So when you came back it was the same sort of position that you had before: the law enforcement, plus everything.

EL: Right. Correct.

BBL: About when was that when you came back?

EL: It was like 2005, 2006. So last fall was my seventh year here.

BBL: On your return the second time.

Then you say that just a few years ago, two or three years ago, your duties changed.

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: So tell me about what you do now.

EL: So now, actually, when my duties changed, it was kind of, "Well, what do we do with you now, because now you're out of what we thought your role was. Now we have to create a position for you here." So they created a volunteer coordinator for the park. So we have about ninety volunteers throughout the park in a variety of positions. In that program, prior to me being in that position, had kind of, the program had kind of downgraded, degraded. It needed to be revamped and help the volunteers have a better

experience and make sure that they're doing what we need them to do. So now I coordinate that. I'm not sure how to explain it. We have our volunteers, we have a group of volunteers that work here at the ranch. We've got volunteers that work at the visitor's center, and then our trail patrol volunteers. So we're kind of a diverse group. So each of those areas has, if you will, a direct supervisor. So my role is pretty much to coordinate...I recruit and hire and train and make sure they have their equipment, tools and their schedule. Then I just work with the supervisors on making sure they're getting the appropriate people for their area, kind of handle any personnel issues. So just work to make sure that they're happy, basically.

BBL: Are the supervisors, is that a paid position or are those volunteers?

EL: No, those are paid. Those are full-time employees here. So Clay Shelley is the ranch curator here, so this is primarily his spot, so he would be the supervisor for the ranch volunteers. Now the visitor's center is a little bit kind of a mix, because we have our gift shop, we have our information desk. So we have Trish, who's our gift shop manager, then myself, and then our naturalist. We kind of co-manage those volunteers, because they fill a couple of different positions. And the trail patrol, one of the rangers is in charge of that. Trail patrol, they go out in backcountry and they probably do more, I don't want to say enforcement, but education of the laws and the rules out there.

BBL: I see, "Get back on the trail."

EL: Uh-huh. "Put the dog on a leash." Help out with medicals and that kind of thing, instead of just provide information.

BBL: Are you still considered now a ranger?

EL: Uh-huh. Just a non L.E. ranger. So the division has law enforcement rangers and non-L.E. rangers. Typically, what a national park would call an interpreter or a naturalist is what a non-L.E. ranger is. I'm kind of...since we already have a park naturalist, I'm more of what you call a generalist park ranger. So I do basically everything, except law enforcement. I help with the maintenance, I do interpretation, I run the gift shop. Wherever the need is they basically throw me in there to take care of something.

BBL: So you said you spend about one day a week here at the ranch.

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: Then the rest of the days—do you work five days a week?

EL: Four days a week. Right now four days, four tens.

BBL: So the other three days are at the visitor's center.

EL: No. So four days, forty hours a week, so I work four ten hour shifts. Then I have three days off. So I have one day here and then three days at the visitor's center. That's what you were saying.

BBL: Yeah, that's right.

EL: Yeah, so three days at the visitor's center.

BBL: Does your schedule change all the time?

EL: It's been pretty consistent. It used to change quite a bit. Now during the summer I'll probably be a day here, maybe two days at the visitor's center, or maybe a half day here and there, and then be out in the park the rest of the time.

BBL: Do you still work four tens during the summer?

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: So that's year-round you do ten hour shifts.

EL: Yeah, depending on how much seasonal help we get. So it varies.

BBL: I think I read in the paper that you run educational programs, is that right, where you take people on hikes to certain places. Is that correct?

EL: Yeah, those are more like a guided hike type thing. I do naturalist...like last summer I had a couple of hikes going where I talked about kind of the management of the park and the resource protection. So those are more...you know, when you say education, I think of doing our school groups.

BBL: You do that too?

EL: Yeah. We have a number of programs down at the ranch, which probably should be starting up pretty soon here as it gets closer to school getting out. But we have several activities down here that relate to pioneer activities, pioneer way of life. So I help organize those and get those going. And, yeah, I help our naturalist with some of her programs on the beach or hikes. Tried to get a couple of my own going, as well. So I'll be doing a program on the natural history of bison this summer.

BBL: Okay. What form will that take? Is that going to be classes?

EL: It will be probably inside. I was thinking probably do just like a PowerPoint and talk about history of the bison in North America, starting with the prehistoric and educate people about the bison. Other than, when people come out here you tell them the buffalo, the bison, they were brought out here in the 1800s and we have 500 head of bison. So this is going to be more of the history, natural history.

BBL: Do you sort of have free rein to just come up with whatever education programs you'd like to do?

EL: Pretty much. I try to, because Wendy is so good at it, she's been doing it her whole career, so she's the expert pretty much and I'll bounce ideas off of her. They need to fit in with Antelope Island. Like I couldn't do something like basketball, but possibly I could do a softball team or something (laughs).

BBL: Where did you come up with the idea for the history of the bison?

EL: She had asked me if I wanted to do some programs. I said let me think, see if we can come up with some, because I didn't want to do...she has a broad range of programs, I didn't want to do more of the same of what she's doing or duplicate something she's already doing. So I was just trying to think what is it that we have that we don't have a program in. So that's, like right in front of your face, but we don't have it (laughs).

BBL: An appropriate topic, for sure.

EL: It will likely be, you know, maybe like a half hour program. Just that basic. There won't be a test at the end of it (laughs). Yeah, put out a couple of skulls and hides and let people feel them.

BBL: That's cool. That's interesting. You say you do the school groups. You must have a lot of those coming through.

EL: Yeah, they'll start pretty soon, probably March, April, May. Busy time for that.

BBL: And they come out here to the ranch mostly.

EL: Uh-huh.

BBL: And you have activities for them.

EL: Yes.

BBL: Are you able to, in your position, able to explore the island more than I would be?

EL: Yes. And one of the reasons is search and rescue; I'm still involved in that.

BBL: Are you still involved in search and rescue just on the island, or on the greater lake as well?

EL: My role on the lake would probably change because I'm not in that law enforcement position. I'd be more of a crew member, whereas not being the chief, basically, person in charge.

BBL: I see. But you still do some search and rescue on the lake from Antelope Island?

EL: Yes. I just wouldn't be the primary person they would call anymore, but if something happened, I would go out and assess with them. So the role's kind of changed a little bit. So we have hikers. Like if I'm down here and someone's reported missing and they were hiking this trail, I would start to head out and go to areas they possibly could be.

BBL: Go on horseback or vehicle?

EL: It would be vehicle. I could do foot, too. We do have park horses, so if they were down here I'd be able to use them as well.

But the other thing I was going to tell you is in the fall we have our round-up. So, heavily involved in that, coordinating our posse groups and go out and ride there. So you need to really know the terrain to be able to push the bison because a lot of times they just go along and they take a good path where we want them to go, but some years they want to do something different and you need to be prepared (laughs).

BBL: So you said earlier you saw that on TV and thought, that's easy.

EL: Yeah. I thought, I could do that.

BBL: So it turned out to be harder; they made it look easy on TV?

EL: Yeah (laughs). Because they were on TV.

BBL: Do you like the round-up?

EL: Oh, I do.

BBL: That's got to be a massive project.

EL: A lot of people. And it is a lot of work to get it to go off.

BBL: It is harder to manage the people or the bison?

EL: People (laughs). Definitely the people (laughs).

BBL: You get so many, or that's not the problem.

EL: Well, no, we actually sometimes have almost as many people as we do bison. So, typically about 400 riders. A number of years ago they had over 500. So we do try...we haven't had a limit in a couple of years, but that's always a possibility. So people want to come out and they want to push bison, and they're not cattle. There are people that do herd cattle and there's people that want to herd cattle, they don't know what they're doing anyway, but they're different animals, so you can't herd them like cattle. Some people just want to do their own thing and just keep pushing the animals and it's hard on the animals and people get hurt. But most of the people are pretty good. But you still have that group of people that are going to do their own thing regardless. And you realize you're a group of 500...

BBL: And you can't shoot them (laughs).

EL: Can't shoot them (laughs). There's only a few of you and a lot of them.

BBL: That's interesting.

Do you have some favorite spots on this island?

EL: Oh, boy. If you ever get a chance to go to the west side, it's so...you get great views of the Great Salt Lake and it's a lot more rugged over there and it's just beautiful.

Anywhere on the west side where I'm up high. There are a couple of areas that are just kind of, I don't want to say an oasis, but are hidden away a little bit off the beaten path. I don't get there too often myself, but when I get a chance to go on a ride or something, it's kind of nice to be out there.

BBL: Tell me some of your favorite stories from out here at Antelope Island.

EL: Oh, well. Favorite stories. Probably...I don't want to name names, but when we're working around the animals, some of the toughest animals to get through the round-up are the babies, the calves. Sometimes they get separated from their mammas or we don't want to put them through the chutes, and you see these macho guys go out, big old guys and they're going to go rustle this calf (laughs). Typically the calf gets away and they all get covered in mud (laughs). That's kind of fun. I don't have the law enforcement stories, so just probably meeting the people from all over the world and just, I don't know, you kind of learn so much about other cultures. Countries are so far away and you have people come from Finland, the other side of the world. And you realize they're people just like us. Just to get to meet people and work with the volunteers has been really great.

BBL: Really?

EL: Oh, yeah.

One of our volunteers—of course, everybody can be challenging, the staff can be challenging, we all have our moments.

Probably my best, favorite time is years ago when they didn't have all this open. The road wasn't paved to come down to the ranch. I had my horse out here and I could take her out and ride and just be out here by myself. Me and her and no other people. Had

some close encounters with bison and deer (laughs). I had one time, Barb, who was the wife of the park manager at the time, we were walking down the road, so we weren't very far past that chain link fence, just walking. She was pushing her son in the baby carriage. We were walking and we could see a group of bison and we're like, "We'll walk and they're move, they'll move." Well, we're getting closer and closer and they didn't move. Finally decided, "Well, maybe we should turn around." We turned around and started to go up and I just happened to look over my shoulder and they were coming after us (laughs). So I said, "Barb!" So she grabbed the kid and ran down the hill and it just kind of went steep and we followed the curve of the hill and came back up on the road and went back. She left the baby carriage and they're standing at the baby carriage, kind of like checking it out (laughs).

BBL: Really?

EL: Yeah. It was funny (laughs). Like, wow. It just seemed like how animals have dumb moments too like that (laughs).

I had a...this was actually up by the visitor's center and it was in the winter and I was walking, got out of my vehicle and was walking down the path and there's a group of chukars running across the path. They all made it except this one, the last one. It was so funny. He was running and his little foot slipped out from underneath him and he went, *phhhttt*, (laughs), right over on his furry back.

BBL: Flipped over and back. That's funny (laughs).

EL: *Phuut*. No, nobody saw that (laughs).

There was one time I was driving down the road and I saw this coyote and he was eating something. He was munching on it. Well, this crow or raven comes flying and he

dive bombed this coyote right in the butt. So the coyote's eating, this raven comes in, *boittt*, and flies off. The coyote's looking around like, What? What? (laughs). The raven just goes on. So those are probably...those keep you laughing when you see those rare moments. When there's a lot of people around, you don't get to see the animals are living their lives, too. Like I say, they have their moments. They're not all grace (laughs). Kind of fun. So I guess just the wildlife, being out here and being able to experience that on any given day, really. It's where I work. I don't have to take time out and time off and go up in the mountains and look for it; it's just all around.

BBL: Every day for you. So where do you vacation? Do you go back to Chicago, a big city?

EL: (laughs) Oh, I usually do. I go home for Christmas.

BBL: Your folks are still there?

EL: My brothers and sisters are. Both my parents are gone, but the rest of my family's still there. I try to go home for Christmas, because that's when everybody's together. I have a sister in Vegas; I go down to Vegas. We've gone on a couple of trips. Been to China and went on a cruise to the Mexican Rivera. So I hope to do some more traveling whenever that comes up. I go down to Moab and I hike, too.

[brief interruption]

BBL: Okay, different places.

EL: Yeah, so I go to Moab. I had my horse and a lot of times I'd just be riding out here. You get that horse and you don't have time to camp or hike or anything.

BBL: Do you still have the horse here?

EL: I don't. I lost her last year.

BBL: Oh, that's too bad.

EL: I'm horseless, yeah.

BBL: What is the question you hate most that the visitors ask? Or is my question that I just asked you the one you hate the most? Maybe not the word hate. What's the most annoying question?

EL: Well, where the bathrooms are, that's the most common asked. "Well, you just walked right by them" (laughs). "Where are the buffalo? Where are the bison?" Those are probably the most common. I shouldn't say hate them, but especially at the visitor's center when it's over and over, you've got to really make sure you maintain, not composure, but to answer it in a friendly way even though you've answered it a thousand times before.

Probably the ones I really, I don't know if I want to say dislike, but irritate me are the people that think they should be able to go wherever they want and do whatever they want. They think they're special. I'm not sure how to phrase it. Kind of like self-entitled. Most of those people are here because they want to pick up sheds. The majority of them, that's what they're here to do. If they want to go off trail, especially...they're not here to enjoy the place, they're here for something.

BBL: They want to take something.

EL: Uh-huh. "Why can't I go there? Why don't you have a road around the island? Why do I have to stay on the trail?" Some of those are genuine: "Why can't I go off trail?" But then there's some, just, "Huh, why can't I?" And are going to go off trail anyway. Or the people that can't keep their dogs on a leash. I have a dog. I love dogs. But you come to these places and it's a privilege to bring your dog out here because you

could easily say no dogs allowed at all. They'll put them on a leash for a little bit, then when they're out of sight, take them off. Amazing how mad people get when you tell them that their dog has to be on a leash, so you write them a ticket for it. But their dog's running around and, "Well, my dog's friendly." And I'm like, "Well, not everybody enjoys your dog running up to them." Or, you know, anything can happen. So just those little "keep your dog on a leash," "stay on the trail"

...something was coming to mind; I kind of lost it.

Those would probably be the most, kind of, irritating, if you will. It's not like your general visitor; it's like I said, they don't care about what this place is for, they don't care about the other person, it's what they want. It kind of comes through with some of those questions they ask. The ones the visitors ask, "Where's the restroom?" or "Where are the buffalo?" that's just part of it. That's okay. The one that's probably really annoying is, "What's that stink?" (laughs). "Why does it smell that way?" I'm like, "It doesn't smell now, does it?" (laughs).

I wish I could remember what I asked, but I was on vacation. I was actually at Capitol Reef. I was waiting in line to find out about a hiking trail and I asked a really dumb question. I can't remember what it was. I was like, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I can't believe I asked that" (laughs).

BBL: I think we all do that at some point, ask a question that you're like, Oh, gosh.

Where do you live, roughly? It is Syracuse? Ogden? You don't live on the island?

EL: No. I live in Clinton.

BBL: In Clinton. That's a drive.

EL: It's about a half hour.

BBL: Then out here's another...

EL: Yeah, twenty minutes, half hour. But, I don't have to drive my own vehicle down here, so that makes a big difference.

BBL: Right. You check in and then you come on out.

Is there anything else you'd want to say about the lake or the island here?

EL: Boy, being an island in the Great Salt Lake is unique enough. It's like, wow, there's an island out there in the Great Salt Lake, but it has so much to offer. If people would just get beyond the smell and the bugs and everything, there's so much more to come out and enjoy and explore, even if you do have to stay on a trail. We do have days where we open up the areas and you can hike wherever you want. People just need to open up their eyes and enjoy it and take it for what it's worth because there's a lot out here and you can learn a lot and if you happen to come out on a day when there's not many people, it makes it even more special. It's such a wild place and you get to enjoy it and treasure it and hopefully take care of it so it's here fifty years from now, whenever, and we don't have a freeway running through it so people can commute from Davis County to Salt Lake. So I hope people can appreciate it and want to keep it how it is and not have to be able to access every area out of convenience. But it's a cool place.

BBL: Well, I'll go ahead and stop this unless there's something else you want to add.

EL: No, that's all.

BBL: Thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW