

**Rollis Bishop**  
Narrator

**Ben Thoma**  
Interviewer

**August 2, 2000**  
**Bishop's Department Store, Park Rapids, Minnesota**

**Ben:** This is another recording in the oral history project for the year 2000. Today we have with us Rollis Bishop, who has been a long-time supporter of the park, part of the original advisory board, and currently a member of Friends of Itasca. Today is the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, 2000; and we are going to start out, Rollie, by asking what are some of the early recollections you have regarding Itasca State Park?

**Rollie:** Well, I grew up in Park Rapids as a kid. And back in the twenties and thirties, we used to come up here. My dad was involved in the park, and he liked to bring the family up here. And my first recollections were coming up for the pageants back in the thirties. And also, camping. I earned my camping merit badge by so many days of camping, and most of them were in Itasca Park back in the middle thirties. I was in the Boy Scouts from about 1935-1940 in Park Rapids. At that time there was only Bear Paw campground, I think, right there by the lake. We used to go up there and spend one or two or three days at a time camping, and then we went hiking on all the trails. We also visited some of the CC camps, and it was a real fun place for me to go. As a result, I have a basic knowledge of the trail system in the park. I've been on every trail up there, either on foot or on skis. My dad was involved with the advisory board when they started, and he has always been a big supporter of Itasca Park. He knew the people who managed the park years ago. They were friends of his, so we used to go up there to eat at picnics all the time. So I've been involved with the park for many, many years. After the war, when I came back to this country to live, I still have been involved in the park by going up there a lot and being on the advisory board and the new Friends of Itasca Park, which is what we call it now. And trying to do the volunteer things that the park needs. The park itself, I've not only been on foot in it, but we used to canoe up there a lot. We had a Model T Roadster. We had a canoe rack on the Model T, and we'd go up there and camp, and then we'd take the canoe and go all over the lake. We went down to Elk Lake and up on Lake Itasca. I can remember one major storm up there when we had to lay down in the bottom of the canoe and let it drift, let the wind drift us to shore because we couldn't handle the dang canoe in the heavy wind. It was a dangerous spot to be in -- two kids without life jackets. (Laughs)

**Ben:** Real good. That also explained something that I never really understood. When I came to Itasca in the early 60's, I would attend some of these advisory board meetings. It always struck me that one guy, primarily, knew something about the park and what the park was there for and so on; and that was your dad, Harold. I don't know if you are aware of it or not, but he was the one who managed to get the advisory board to understand why everything couldn't be used for all

purposes and that the trails in the south side of the park should be used primarily for cross-country skiing. This was, at the time, quite controversial. I've pointed out that a lot of things that I've seen that have been very controversial suddenly become ho-hum. Nobody gets excited anymore. But Harold was really the one instrumental in getting the ski trail system, if you will, set up and zoning the trails for use. Do you have any comments on that?

**Rollie:** Yes, I remember that very vividly because there were some very contrary people there, and they called my dad a bunch of names because he wanted to ban snowmobiles from some of the existing trails. When snowmobiles started in existence, they were on every trail in the park. I mean the trails were there, and they weren't zoned or anything. When the cross country skiers wanted to use some of the trails, that's where the problem came in. So what they did as a compromise, they put the snowmobiles on the north part of the park; and all the trails in the south part were cross country ski trails. They were originally hiking trails, and that worked out real good. And then they put in new trails for the snowmobilers to come in from outside into the park. Now the snowmobilers can get into the park and see what's in the park and still see most of the park. And in the future that's what it will be.

**Ben:** I know some of the people took the heat back at that time because snowmobiles were part of the power structure, and cross country skiing wasn't what it is today back then. It turns out that those trails have since been improved for cross country skiing, and many people call them the best cross country ski trails that they have encountered. But that was a very controversial thing that your dad was very instrumental in getting straightened out.

**Rollie:** But they do have accommodations for snowmobiles now, see. They've added a few trails in from the park in the south entrance and so on, which is a nice way to do it.

**Ben:** Right. Big enough area.

**Rollie:** Yeah, it's a big enough area, and there are enough trails for everybody, and everybody gets their chance to use them.

**Ben:** What are some of the changes that you've observed over the years in terms of the typical park visitors, what they expect or what they do?

**Rollie:** Well, you're having a lot more campers up there now. And, of course, the campers are better equipped. Years ago it was all tent campers. Now a lot of them have camping trailers or they have a RV, and even the tents are a lot bigger. They have more size and more screened in porch on the tents. They're a lot better than they used to be. And also the campgrounds have improved. They've got facilities there. They've got showers and so on, which they had before, but now it's better. Everything that I see in the park now is better equipped to take care of people who come in there for camping. Also, Douglas Lodge, for example, has been improved over the years -- the kitchen and the facilities there. They modernized it. It's still an old lodge and very historic. It looks like an old lodge, but it's very modern in the convenience in it. You'll see a lot more people with bikes now. And bicycles are a huge thing in the summer. I mean, you go up there on just any day in the summer, and there' are hundreds of bikes in Itasca Park. And it's a family organization. It isn't just one or two bikers. It's the whole family going on a bicycle trip,

which is much more than it used to be. The bicycles are using the park very, very heavily.

**Ben:** Any comments about your years on the advisory board and your dad's years on the advisory board? What have been some of the changes in management?

**Rollie:** Well, many years ago, the Advisory Board was a little controversial sometimes because they were trying to criticize the park operation or trying to direct them. They felt that certain people around here felt the park should be logged off, that it should be a lot of other things. Now the cooperation between our Friends of Itasca and the park administration is very good. They work together and any criticism that comes from the citizens is well taken by the park. If it's something they think they can do, they'll do it. In other words, it's not a citizen trying to tell the DNR how to run the thing. Citizens are now giving advice and trying to help, and citizens are a conduit for information from the area to the park management, and I think everybody is working together a lot more now than they used to.

**Ben:** The list of items which the Advisory Board has sponsored and the Friends of Itasca are involved in show many things that we wouldn't have today if it weren't for their pushing it.

**Rollie:** Right.

**Ben:** Actually in some cases, funding it.

**Rollie:** Yeah, we funded some things like the wicker furniture and the playground equipment. But they also start things and push things and fund a little bit, but then have the parks fund some of it. But the Advisory Board tries to do things, and they see things to be done and try to start it.

**Ben:** You perhaps alluded to it, but would there be any comments you would want to make regarding the relationship between the Friends of Itasca or the old advisory board and the politicians who ultimately control the purse strings?

**Rollie:** Well, the old advisory board, once in a while, used to have politicians come to their meeting; and the biggest problem with that was the politicians liked to come to the meetings to get exposure and tell what they could do and find out what they could help with too. But, sometimes certain people in the Advisory Board would try to tell the politicians what should be done and try to direct them instead of asking them to do it. And the Friends of Itasca are trying to be friendly with all the politicians and let them know what is going on and work with them because they're the ones who provide the money for the park. I think there's a better harmony now and especially since the Douglas Lodge has that funding, the revolving fund, involving that. And the souvenir shops and the campground are also in a revolving fund. The legislature does not have to allocate money every year for it, and that's been a big plus.

**Ben:** What are some of the changes that you've observed regarding the fish and wildlife in Itasca Park and the experiences people have there? Any comments on that?

**Rollie:** Most of the tourists, if they see a deer, that's a big experience for a lot of the people who don't live in the area. Those of us who live in this area, we are so accustomed to seeing deer that

we're careful of to not be around deer because cars run into them. But for a tourist to see a deer, that is very, very important. And even though there are too many deer in the park, they still like to see them. And any other wild animal. And, of course, the wild animals kind of shy away from where people are except that coons find garbage and that kind of thing. The park with the new way of re-foresting by burning, they're going to rehabilitate the trees. I would imagine they'll be able to cut some of that brush out. Then tourists will be able to see animals a little more. And the animals will be able to move around.

**Ben:** Perhaps this was covered; but what might be some specific item or items that you feel have been a considerable benefit to Itasca State Park, either individuals or projects?

**Rollie:** Well, I think there's a better feeling in this particular area between the business people here and the resorters and Itasca Park now. Many of the resorters in this area used to say they didn't like the park because it was competition, but they've changed that attitude. The biggest draw for tourists in the whole area is Itasca Park, and the maintenance and operation of the park is very important to the area. Some of these business people now have come to realize that. And also having a manager of the Douglas Lodge, Jim, on the Board of Directors of the Park and Chamber of Commerce helped an awful lot. He's in the tourist end of this, and showed that the park is a partner -- not a competitor. A lot of the campgrounds and so on, I imagine it's around other parks too, they feel that the park takes away from some of their business, but it doesn't. The average private campground and resort lives on the overage that can't get into the park. When people come camping, they want to camp in the park; and when the campgrounds are full, they have to go to the private campgrounds nearby. But it's a better atmosphere among the business people, and they realize that the park is the big draw in the area.

**Ben:** I suspect one of the things is to just get them together and talk to one another, and that takes care of a lot of the problems. Many people have always pointed out that there is plenty of tourist business. It's a matter of how it gets directed.

**Rollie:** Yeah, and also the park has been working on information about what's available in the area. They have information there that they pass out that the businesses within the area provide, and it's passed out by the park or in a place where the customer can find it right in the park.

**Ben:** Do you have any comments about some of the more colorful individuals who have been connected with the park. Not necessarily working in the park, but in the park area, had some connection with the park?

**Rollie:** Well, a guy like Burt Pfeifer has been really good for the park over the years because he's outside of the park, but yet his business is involved with the park. He's been very cooperative with the park and, of course, his son-in-law there. They've fixed that resort up so it's an attraction for the park. I know the park eventually wanted to buy it, but I think being privately run is being outside of the park is better than the park running it.

**Ben:** And once they decided to get back in the business, that was fine.

**Rollie:** Yeah.

**Ben:** And at one point, it looked like it was going to close.

**Rollie:** But it's a well run resort.

**Ben:** Yes it is.

**Rollie:** It's good for the park, and anything outside of the park that's run well is good for the park.

**Ben:** You alluded to the early years when you went to the park. Do you have any comments regarding the Civilian Conservation Corps, anything that you observed firsthand in connection with the park?

**Rollie:** Oh yeah, the work the CCC's did in Itasca Park is really what has made that a good park. They cut most of those early trails, and the buildings they've built up there were core for the park. I've been to a lot of other state parks. It's the same situation. Their buildings are still standing, and the park was helped by the CCC's. And also in the thirties it gave a lot of publicity to Itasca Park because people knew about the CC's working up there. They went up to visit the camps. People from this area had relatives who were in the CC's, so they had to go up and visit them. The park got a lot of publicity in the thirties from the CCC's, and a lot of those guys are still living around here. They settled in the area even though they came from other parts of the country. But the work that they did is still there, and it was good construction.

**Ben:** Okay, what might be one or more concerns that you have possibly regarding the future? I know you can't predict the future, but what might take place, let us say, fifty years from now?

**Rollie:** Well, they're starting on a real good rehabilitation on the forest up there with this fire parcel burn. I think they're really on the right track. And regeneration of the pines. Fifty years from now, I would think, they'll have a pretty good regeneration of pines within the high use area. It will not be in the outside in the southeast part of the park or southwest of the park, but in the high use area where they've been doing the burns and the planting. I look for a real regeneration; and some of the existing pines now will be gone by then, the big pines, and some of them will still be there. But that is really what people come for. They drive through there and see the big Norways and the low spruce, and they really enjoy that. That's people that come from a desert area or where there are not many trees. What has made Itasca Park is those trees.

**Ben:** For many years you've been active on the state level in the state park council, or state park trail council. Would you care to make any comments about that in relation to Itasca Park?

**Rollie:** Yeah, I think that's a very, very good organization. I'm still a senior. I'm a senior active.

**Ben:** Ex-officio.

**Rollie:** Ex-officio yeah. In other words, I'm an ex-director who is still living. But it's grown. It used to be about 25 people when my dad was in it, but now it's over 1000 members; and that's

important because it's getting people statewide involved in the state park system. They're looking at new parks; they're looking at funding with present parks, and also the maintenance of the parks. They lobby the legislature because the legislature is a key to it since they provide the funding. The money they get from admissions is only part of the funds. They have to get supplemental funds from the legislature to run parks. And it's an important part. And getting citizens involved from all over the state through this state organization is important. Then also they're organizing groups like our Friends of Itasca around most of the state parks, the bigger state parks. And that's how you get people within an area involved in that park, and then they get involved in the whole park system. The parks throughout the whole country and other states, national parks and state parks, need citizens' help.

**Ben:** Do you have any other comments regarding Itasca Park that you would like to make?

**Rollie:** Well, I think right now they have a manager who really works at the park. I mean, he's been a good manager. I think they've had good managers in the past, but now it seems to be more involvement with the manager and with the park. And I think he's been good for the park. They've had only one manager in the past who was not taking an active part. He was just ready for retirement, and he didn't want to do a lot of things. But, anyway, basically over the years they've had good managers and good workers. And some of the workers there, the permanent workers, are excellent. They've been there for years. They know what they're doing, and they like the park. And that's important.

**Ben:** Well I want to thank you, Rollie, for taking the time. This recording was made at the Bishop's Department Store where Rollie left his post as the manager for this session to make this recording. So thank you very much for taking the time and for your very interesting comments.

**Rollie:** Thank you.