

Floyd (Swede) Smith
Narrator

Ben Thoma
Interviewer

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Ben: This is Ben Thoma, Itasca State Park Naturalist, on the 31st of August, 2000. This is another in the series of oral history recordings. Today we have with us Swede Smith, a longtime resident north of Itasca Park. He also spent a number of years working in the park and is quite knowledgeable regarding the area. To start out with, Swede, could you just go through some of your earliest recollections of Itasca Park? What you saw when you first came here and what your reaction was to the whole thing?

Swede: Well, me and my first wife came up here on our honeymoon. And that's when Wegmann had his store down on the lakeshore down there; and we enjoyed it very, very much while we were here. Oh gosh, the park has really, really changed compared to what it was in them days.

Ben: Were you camping at that time? Did you camp in the park?

Swede: We had that cottage over where Rory Geller lives.

Ben: Okay.

Swede: We had a cottage over there. Then they didn't walk into his store barefooted. That Wegmann. He was so fussy, they had to be dressed up decent.

Ben: Yeah, there are quite a few stories about that. He wouldn't be too happy seeing the garb that people wear today.

Swede: Really. They wouldn't have gotten into the store.

Ben: What year was that, would you say?

Swede: Oh, that was in 1938.

Ben: And then when did you folks move up here?

Swede: We moved up here in 1948. We bought a farm up here.

Ben: And that's what you did until you retired, you might say?

Swede: I farmed until I retired; and then after I retired, well, then I went and got some summer jobs down in the park. And then I took and worked for 19 years.

Ben: Your work at the park was mainly in the campgrounds, is that right?

Swede: I worked two years at the shop, and then after that I went in the campground. And then I put the other 17 years in on the campground.

Ben: What were some of the projects that you were involved with at Itasca?

Swede: Squaw Lake Camp. I was over there and helped with that, put in all the sewer lines. We made all them manholes. We put cement in there, and it was harder than hell. We had to carry a lot of cement. You couldn't make it with the pickup down through the woods there.

Ben: Some of those things are still being used today, though.

Swede: Yeah.

Ben: And what was your job in the campground?

Swede: I was custodian, you might as well say.

Ben: And so this was primarily upkeep of the buildings?

Swede: We did upkeep on the buildings and did all the mowing. In them days, we even had to haul the garbage. We hauled it out to that old gravel pit. And then we had to fix cabins. We had to keep them clean, and I tell you we did a lot of work down in there. It was hard work.

Ben: That would have been the housekeeping cabins then?

Swede: Yeah.

Ben: When you worked there, there was just Bear Paw Campground or was Pine Ridge open?

Swede: Well, at the Bear Paw; and then when they got the road built in between, they had the two campgrounds, and they joined together. After that then we took care of both campgrounds.

Ben: Okay, do you recall the people that you worked with down there?

Swede: Well, there were a lot of different ones. There was Art Dillon and Rose Geller, Anita Chase. I'll tell you there was just so many different ones, I can't recall all of them. But we never had a crew like they have now. Well, I don't know how many they got now, but to start with we just had two of us to clean. We only cleaned the buildings once a day, and we had to haul all the wood up to where they had the registration station. We had two little buildings there we had to keep filled wood. We had to clean the fireplaces, the garbage, do the cabins; and they just worked the heck right out of us.

Ben: That was a big operation with the size of the crew back then.

Swede: There was only two cleaners then, you know. The fireplaces -- we had to clean them and haul them ashes out. I tell you sometimes I wonder how we did it.

Ben: One thing that you have always been interested in and, I might add, been good at is fishing. What are some of the changes that you have observed as far as fish and wildlife or various aspects of fishing in the park?

Swede: Well, for one thing you don't see the wild game, like deer and that, in the park like you used to. We used to enjoy them; but they are getting them pretty well cleaned out, I think. And fishing for walleye and northern and that, they got good fishing in that lake. But for bluegills and crappies, that ain't near like it used to be. There was about three years when you could hardly catch a bluegill down there; but now when you catch them, you get bluegills from 1/2 to 3/4 of a pound and up to a pound. And lots of them if you're out when they are biting. But a lot of the old timers they get so they say, "Where did all them deer go? We don't hardly see one down there anymore."

Ben: That's true. There used to be a herd; but primarily because of the feeling they were detrimental to pine, they reduced the number.

Swede: They figure the reason was they ate all the young seedlings?

Ben: Well, primarily just the pine trees.

Swede: But you tell me, Ben, how it is. Look at all these plantations right around the park. Look at the stands of trees they get. Why ain't the deer eating them out?

Ben: There are some plantations in the park. One over at Squaw Lake is completely surrounded by the park. One winter the whitetail deer, according to one of the research workers in the school of forestry, took 98 percent of the tops. They went right down the rows and ate everything that was above the snow.

Swede: But ain't it funny how these plantations outside the park thrive. Look at the stand they've got.

Ben: Yes, but they hunt intensively up there. They've even got deer hunting towers built out there.

Swede: Yeah.

Ben: And so the deer are harvested in the fall.

Swede: Yeah.

Ben: They're not there browsing in the wintertime to do. That's when they do the damage.

Swede: In the summertime, they got plenty.

Ben: If you get the deer herd number down, they supposedly would like to think this would be beneficial as far as pine regeneration is concerned.

Swede: Yeah, I hope it is.

Ben: What are some of the specific items in Itasca Park, programs or projects, that you'd consider to be of benefit to the operation of the park today, in terms of people visiting the park?

Swede: Well, that's something I ain't gonna say.

Ben: Oh.

Swede: Just explain that a little bit more.

Ben: Well, some type of project. I think that most everyone will agree that the projects that the Civilian Conservation Corp, for example, did in Itasca are beneficial because we are still using them today.

Swede: Oh yeah.

Ben: So what I would be interested in is what you think are some of the more beneficial projects -- things that have taken place down in the park in the last 20, 30 years -- that benefit the park and the people who visit the park.

Swede: Well, I'll tell you the way they fixed on the buildings, toilets and stuff, compared to when I first started to work there -- I'll tell you that it's a hundred percent better.

Ben: Yes, that's the type of thing that many studies have pointed out is one of the first concerns that people have visiting a public facility.

Swede: Yeah, that is wonderful, and then something else real good is when they got a garbage truck and come through and clean that garbage out instead of having the coons scatter it all over the country. And big cans -- that was a great help right there.

Ben: Some of those things have undergone just fantastic changes that are hard to believe, you know, if you go back 30, 40 years.

Swede: When we would come to work, we'd have to spend an hour or so cleaning up after the coons. You know, you couldn't keep them covers on. They'd push them right off; and then after they got them big canisters and got the truck in there, you'd be surprised how much that helped us out on keeping the campground going.

Ben: Yes, and today they have even bigger containers and a much bigger truck that comes in.

Swede: I think it's wonderful.

Ben: Yes, it's totally different than what it was when you and I started down there. I mean, it's been a long haul, but they made some very good changes.

Swede: I'll tell you it made the things look a lot cleaner.

Ben: Did you ever, were you ever involved with the ice operation down there, harvesting of ice? Ice to sell to campers?

Swede: Oh yes, yes, yeah. Used to ring the bell.

Ben: Okay.

Swede: Ring the bell. I forget what time that was, you know. There's a time set there. Ring the bell and anybody who wanted ice would come and get the hunk of ice the size they wanted. But that was just once a day when they could do that.

Ben: Were you ever involved with the harvesting of the ice, the cutting it out in the lake?

Swede: Just one year. Eddie Halberg had the outfit that would cut ice.

Ben: I've seen pictures of it, but I don't know what happened to it.

Swede: Yeah, yeah. Eddie Halbert -- he used to cut the ice. I helped when he used to go down and get his ice from Itasca there for his ice house too.

Ben: There were quite a few local citizens who used the ice, didn't they? I mean from the area around the park.

Swede: Oh yeah.

Ben: Didn't they have a ramp to load it or an elevator to get it up on the truck right at the cutting area?

Swede: Yup.

Ben: What are some of the changes that you've observed during your years that you worked in the campground as far as the public coming there? What they could do and what they couldn't do?

Swede: I don't know really if there's too much that the public couldn't do.

Ben: Well, take for example the size of the camping rigs that they have today.

Swede: Well, they had the campers, but not so much the bigger rigs. So they have had to change a lot of their campsites to make it so that they could use some longer rigs. Otherwise the campsites were too short, and they couldn't camp.

Ben: Oh I'm sure when it was originally laid out, it was aimed at tents.

Swede: Yeah.

Ben: During the time that you worked there, firewood was always sold? Was there a time that firewood was just available for the campers, or was it always sold?

Swede: yeah, we used to haul the firewood up to store it at the registration station there, and they sold it out of there. We had the old ice house that we used to have all filled up, and then we'd take and haul the pickup loads up from there. Now they let that out on a contract for someone to bundle it and haul it in. I guess that firewood is really high down there now.

Ben: Yes, it's all on contract. What year did you start working in the park?

Swede: I believe it was 67 -- 66 or 67.

Ben: Oh, okay, because just before that, they had free firewood from the big woodshed. They didn't sell it, but that lasted until sometime in the early 60's.

Swede: They used to sell it, when I first started working there, for 50 cents a bundle.

Ben: Okay.

Swede: Then it wasn't long and it come up in numbers, and now I figure it's around \$3.

Ben: It's going up all the time, that's for sure. What other comments might you have regarding Itasca Park, things that people might be interested in years from now?

Swede: Well, I tell you I just hope it gets better all the time. They've got a nice park there. You have to give them credit there, and they're keeping it up in good shape. Just hope that they keep it. But there's one thing I do hope. We had so many of the old timers complain about this walk-in business. They said, like our picnic area, we used to drive up there. Now we can't. We're old. We can't take and carry all of our stuff and walk in and have our picnic anymore. They said that they're just so against that, and they're afraid there's going to become more of it. They said where they used to go down and have picnics, they can't do it anymore because they just can't carry all the grub and that in.

Ben: That part has changed, although there are sites where you have pretty close auto access.

Swede: Yeah.

Ben: Not all of them, but some are close to the parking areas. It was not exactly good either with the highway going right through the picnic grounds. They realigned a lot of that, but there are still sites close by.

Swede: You know that there John Herhusky, he was awful good. You know that lakeshore down on camp, Bear Paw campground?

Ben: Yeah.

Swede: It used to be all tall grass and weeds years ago, and a lot of the old people were wondering why that was, why they didn't mow that down. They said, "We can go out there and we can take our blankets and we can sit and we can watch the boats." So I asked John one time. I said, "John," I said, "Do you care," I said, "if I tried cleaning that there up down there?" I said, "Some of the campers said they'd just like to go down there and lay down there and watch the boats and stuff like that." And John said, "If you got time, you clean it up."

Ben: Good comment.

Swede: So I told Art that if we get the time, we're going to go trim those old balsams up, and we are going to mow that grass. Now I've seen they've let her go back to long grass again.

Ben: They had to close up all the campsites along the lake.

Swede: Did they?

Ben: Yes, erosion. Just eroding terrible down along the lakeshore.

Swede: Yeah.

Ben: Too much use.

Swede: Too much huh?

Ben: And this is possibly one of the problems that many parks are going to have in the not too distant future. They really weren't set up to have that high a utilization rate. And that's certainly a problem with Bear Paw; even when they plant trees, it is hard to keep the trees there for a few years to give them a chance before they get trampled and broken off. But they have attempted to minimize the erosion problem by trying to keep people out of an area; and, of course, that's what caused the erosion -- people.

Swede: Oh yeah, but now you have those long grasses there. When they started to walk out by the lake, when they first got a trail there, well then they just walked that trail. They wouldn't scatter around when they walked. They would just walk down on the trail.

Ben: Right. But some of the trails were so heavily used. Well, you take the whole trail from the campgrounds through Douglas Lodge. It has been so heavily used that it's not even a safe trail to walk on anymore. Once you get a worn path and then it starts to erode, then you have a real problem.

Swede: Yeah.

Ben: It's going to be an expensive project to get that fixed up. That's why some of the paths, the bike trail would be an example, were designed to minimize any kind of erosion, but that's rather

expensive.

Swede: Oh yeah.

Ben: It gets a lot of use.

Swede: Then some of them wanted docks, you know -- a dock down there in the campground for their boat.

Ben: Yes.

Swede: So then, by golly, they had an old dock. So we got that down and put that in. But now they outlawed that.

Ben: I believe the docks have to meet certain specifications, because the state is liable for any dock they put in.

Swede: Uh huh.

Ben: For an example, the old ice drive out there where they used to haul the ice out of the lake. Well to many people, that is a boat landing.

Swede: They used that years ago for ice.

Ben: But now people come and they're very unhappy. They think it's a poor boat landing. Well, I still explain that it's not a boat landing. People are just mistakenly using it for that. It doesn't meet any of the specifications for being a boat dock or a boat landing.

Swede: That's just doesn't work down there.

Ben: Well, as I said, you will be getting a copy of this written out; and we'd surely appreciate it if you'd take the time to put any corrections in it. Even more important, add things that you may not have recalled just now for the tape because the printed copy you get will be corrected, and that will be the final record.

Swede: Uh huh.

Ben: The tape itself will probably end up with the Minnesota Historical Society, but the written document probably will be used by anyone trying to work on the early history of the park. So I'd like to thank you, Swede, for taking the time to give us some of your thoughts about your early work in the park.

Swede: Well, it's nice to get to visit with you again.

Ben: Yeah, it was great. Stop down and see us sometime.

Swede: Yeah.

Ben: So that concludes our session.

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