

Waino Kontola
Narrator

Amy Rieger
Interviewer

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Itasca State Park

AR: When were you born?

WK: June 1, 1909 in Chisholm, Minnesota.

AR: Did you grow up in that area then?

WK: I grew up there, went to school there, graduated from high school there. I left the iron range because there didn't seem to be any work there. So I went down to Michigan and found employment there at the Muskegan Country Club taking care of the grounds. So I learned something about turf culture, etc. I was there for four, five years. I worked as a paper maker for a short time too, until I decided I didn't want to become a paper maker.

AR: I've never heard of that job before, but I guess it makes sense.

WK: There's a big place down in Grand Rapids. Go through it some time and you'll see it. But that's another story. From there I went back to the Iron Range during the Depression in 1935. Jobs were as scarce then as hen's teeth. I noticed that they were building a park in Chisholm and I asked one of the city employees who was in charge of the work of building these parks with baseball fields and football fields, an athletic park. They said some guy from Hibbing. To make a long story short I wound up as superintendent of WPA then. They built the park. And in this park they put in some concrete tennis courts and a football field, baseball park.

AR: You became superintendent right away?

WK: I was hired as the city first as a greenkeeper because I had my greenkeeper's credentials. This project pulled it up. Then the WPA program. It was some alphabetical program, not WPA. The whole project was shut down. So the city hired me as a watchman just to watch the tool sheds and whatever there was to watch there until the WPA got started up. Some fellow was ahead of me for a while. But then when summer rolled around and we got busy on this building and finished the job, then I was hired by the WPA to be superintendent of that work. I just carried that on until I wound up... No, I worked for one year just before the war for the Oliver Mining Company (US Steel),

driving truck. They were moving me up to the foreman job, so I was doing everything. Working with the blasters, dropping cars, driving cars. After that, I wound up in the army for almost two years.

AR: Do you ever consider before going into the army the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)?

WK: No, I didn't. But after I was in the service I thought, "I don't want to go back to that job in the mine." The job was waiting for me. "I think I would rather work in a park, a state park." As a matter of fact, up until that point I had never seen a state park. But I applied for the job. And that was from Lathrop, he was our first director. He was all enthused about it and I thought I was practically hired. April rolled around and I called him up and he said, "Well, all these guys came back for their old jobs," and I thought "so much for that." Then one guy quit, the guy that was working at Lake Carlos, so he was wondering who to put in that job. So his secretary says "How about that soldier that was in here a while back?" "Oh, yeah!" So he called me up and that was the beginning. I accepted the job. I wasn't too excited about the park. It was a new park that had been built during the WPA. The water supply was lousy, there wasn't a decent well in the place. Anyway we survived after eight years. A month or so after we had a good pump and water supply in the residence there, then I transferred over to Whitewater. Then from Whitewater it's a different story.

AR: Let's just talk briefly about Harold Lathrop...

WK: He was a good administrator. He finally got a job with the National Park Service on all parks west of the Mississippi, I think. After I got the job I hadn't been there a year yet and he accepted this job with the federal government. He was pretty strict about the operations in the state parks because we were jumping from a depression era to an after-the-war era and he had to see that every nickel went where it was supposed to go. For instance, there was a special form you had to fill out at that time when you nailed a letter and put a postage stamp on it. Who got the postage, who did the letter go to? This was on this form! If we had to buy a pound of nails, we had to send in a requisition for those nails to the central office. They'd fill it out then you'd take the requisition to the hardware store. It was a long, tedious process just to buy a few pounds of nails, which is all ancient history now.

AR: How did Harold Lathrop compare to his successor?

WK: Lathrop was a park man, he understood parks. He was a good park man. When he left we got Colonel Turvill (?). He was an army man. He understood the army from one man to another, and as much as told me that was his career, the army. He wasn't too familiar with parks. When I had a park problem I'd ask him whenever I had a chance to talk to him, whenever he came to the park. "What'll we do about this?" He didn't always know what to do.

AR: Who did you go to if he didn't know? Just figure it out yourself?

WK: That's about it. After him came U.W. Hella, who was one of the best park directors in the country. In fact, he got national recognition as a park director. He had been a park supervisor at the time that (unclear) got into some industry, and after that this vacancy turned up in parks. And he was hired. We had one of these mosquito problems over at Lake Carlos, and I told him about it. It was probably a problem I had discussed with Turvill. "Oh, take out some of those trees and let a breeze through there to blow the mosquitoes out," which we did. Hella could see the need for the additional parks in the future. When I joined the parks in 1946, there were 32 or 35 state parks. Now I don't know how many there are. 75 maybe. And there doesn't seem to be too many now, either. He was able to recognize if you are going to have a park system, you have to get these lands now where they're available. That was part of his program, getting these lands into possession of the state, whether they get developed or not. You have to give UW Hella the credit for that.

Turvill, he was an army man. We'd have these conferences and he ran the conference the same as he'd run an army. He'd have an officer of the day, and you'd have to report to him how things went during the day or evening. He told me that when the officer of the day changed shifts, he brought the new guy. I said, "Look, colonel, I was only a buck sergeant in the army!" [laughter]

AR: Basically your training for parks after high school came from on-the-job experience in city parks...

WK: When I hired kids – I hired all kinds of people for the parks – but the best workers I could find are usually kids that worked on farms. If you gave them a job mowing, and if the mower was not (unclear), somehow they'd get that thing going. A lot of the other kids would come up and say, the mower doesn't run. I'm supposed to fix it, and I had 101 things to do besides fix mowers.

AR: So you were at Lake Carlos for 8 years, then Whitewater for 12 years. Then you moved to Itasca.

WK: I was here 10 years, 1965-75.

AR: Had you been to Itasca before you became park manager?

WK: I'd been through the park, yes. In fact, I visited quite a few parks at different conferences we had or just take vacation time and visit some of the parks. Not too many, but we got to see some of them. Gooseberry Falls and ...

AR: When you were just going through the park, what were your impressions at that time?

WK: I thought it was beautiful. The first time I saw it, I thought, “This is what a park is supposed to look like.” This is what I had in mind of what a state park is supposed to be like. Up until the time that I was hired as a park manager at Lake Carlos, the state owned parcels of land that were donated by people and didn’t belong in the classification of a state park. But the politicians at the time were able to get the state to (unclear) the parcel of land. One in particular was actually a little city park, right on the edge of town, but it was a state park. The state had to do the mowing and the upkeep. It was a clever political move. They’ve culled some of those parks out.

Down at Whitewater, there was never enough money to hire enough help. Somehow, the activities and the attendance in the park seemed to snowball. It got bigger every year. I remember the first year of the camping fees – I kept all the records of how much we took in. I went over them, and I was surprised at how little it was! So, when the money was appropriated they’d figure out how much money was spent in the last biennium and how much more will there be this coming biennium. It’s always short. We didn’t have enough horses to do the work, you know. I found myself working from daylight to dark, way after dark. Seven days a week! There were no assistant managers, you were the manager. Eventually what happened is I wound up in the hospital. I was shaving and it felt like somebody grabbed me between the shoulder blades with a pair of pliers. I thought, “What the heck is this?” So, I quickly shaved and got to the living room and sat down. My wife was in the kitchen. I knew something was going to happen, so I said, “Call George, get him over here.” George was my assistant, he was just a laborer. The next thing I know there’s a doctor there and an ambulance there and they’re fussing over me. It all wound up that I was in the hospital for quite a while. They didn’t release me, they figured it was my heart. But there was nothing wrong with my heart. They took one cardiogram after another, I couldn’t seem to pull myself together to get going again. In the meantime, the supervisor had taken over my job. He had his wife there, and he had the cook (?) over there and he had an engineer over there, doing what I had to do myself. Anyway, I finally went to the Rochester clinic which happens to be right near there, and they told me that I’d have to slow down. I said, “You mean, that’s my problem?” “Yeah, you’re old enough now there’s nobody to tell you to slow down.” I made up my mind right then and there that either I’d kill myself or something was going to happen. But I had the idea that no one could do anything right except me. If I could get someone else to do it, they’d goof it up somehow. I found out that my delegating this work, I lessened my load a little bit. There might have been a few snafus, but it went.

When I got to Itasca, I was still in that in frame of mind where I had to tell them exactly how we’re going to do it, what we were going to do. I’d set it down to the last detail. I soon found out it wasn’t necessary. I had a really good crew. I’d tell them what I’d want done, and they did it. Sometime I was surprised that it came out as good as it did, or better than I expected.

AR: Who were some of the people that you worked with (at Itasca), that really stick out in your mind?

WK: There was Clarence Norby, he was a mechanic. Dale Moberg. An auto mechanic, I can't remember what his name was anymore. Carl Johnson is another one, he was a carpenter foreman. He was a carpenter foreman when we didn't have any carpenters. I can't remember any...but any of the old guys back then. It seemed like no matter who... That guy that all he did was mow. I can't remember his name anymore. I never had to check up on him or nothing. He did a perfect job. I never gave it a second thought. He called himself "the park beautician." You might asked some of these other old-timers around here who might remember what his name was.

AR: They worked well together and they worked well with you?

WK: Yeah. I set up a project that we had to do, what the job was supposed to look like. And that was exactly the way it was when it was done. I didn't have to supervise it, they took care of that.

AR: Do you remember what project this was?

WK: It was just a small project. We put in the sewer system up here. We wanted the water from this spring up here to flow into the project so there'd be a continual flow of water. I start telling Norby how this was supposed to be done. "Yeah, I know," he said. "Well, go ahead and do it." When it was done I went up and looked at it, a beautiful job. After that, I didn't worry too much. (unclear) I told them what I wanted done here, and he did it. I didn't have to come and help him measure it and make sure he got it done right. That really made my job easy. And I had a very efficient assistant manager, Mel Bergquist. In fact, I turned over to him operational parts, scheduling hours of different people for whatever purpose, hauling garbage. One night he was over here and he said, "How are we going to work this now? What do you want me to do? You gonna manage there or you gonna keep me as a spare or what?" I said, "No, you can do what you've been doing. The only thing is that when these reports go in, I'll sign them. I'll check them off. I'll make sure that this is the way that I want them to go in. We never had any kind of snafus. Everything went like clockwork right from the start.

AR: Can you compare Itasca to the other two parks, Carlos and Whitewater in terms of facilities, overall location, people that you worked with?

WK: I had some pretty good personnel at Whitewater, but there were problems with personnel, too. Nothing very serious. I had to be right on top of everything. They put in a group camp up there with a mess hall, dining hall. At that time we didn't put that out on contract and let a contractor build it. I hired the personnel, ordered the lumber, I ordered everything so we could build it. You had to always be right there. Sometimes they'd go off on a tangent. This guy that acted as a foreman up there -- we were putting in some footings on a building, these forms for concrete. I told him, "that form isn't 48 inches high. I measured it and it's only 42." "What's the difference?" "Eight inches." Because of the material it would have been better if it'd been 42', but it called for 48", so it better be

48". I said, "You tear them apart and build them up to 48". Those kind of things would happen there. But not with that crew here. You say 48" and it's 48".

I don't know how you can compare Itasca with Whitewater. It seems like here there's always been enough personnel to do the job. But when you're working at a park like Whitewater with these people coming in. In the campgrounds for instance. At one time, we didn't have these campsites numbered. They was just a big meadow where they could camp wherever they could put a car in. It was crazy. People were tying their tents to one another's tent stakes because there wasn't much room. I'd be out registering campers and they'd keep coming in and I'd lose track of them. It was a madhouse. Some of these campers got smart and could see that my problem was I wasn't getting all these people, so if they just kept out of my way, they wouldn't have to register. He'll miss you. I wish I could live those days over again.

AR: Things were better in Itasca, the organization....

WK: It all goes back to the staff we had here. Very efficient.

AR: What did managing Itasca entail? Can you describe a typical day or some of the other things that you did as a park manager here?

WK: There as always something going on. Resurfacing the roads or putting in a sewer system from the headwaters. Connecting the headwaters area to the sediment pond up here. Besides that, you had the regular work of taking care of the campgrounds, the picnic area. The concession stands were under the jurisdiction of the park, Mel Huschen, who was the lodge manager. I was very grateful to him because I don't know how he managed it. Most of his employees were women...

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

AR: How did your days usually run? From what time in the morning til...

WK: I've been up since 8:00. Sometimes earlier, it depends on what is going on. If there was a reason for me to be up earlier, I'd be up. The rest of the crew, the mechanics, they had their work at the shop and they know what to do. If they had any problems they'd come in here and we'd take care of it one way or the other. As for the regular operation of the park, it was just a regular schedule that you followed. There wasn't much to do, things kind of took care of themselves. People that worked in the perfections (?) and concession stands, they had their own set up you might say. This woman I met was in charge of supplies and one of them the souvenirs. I didn't have much to do with that. A lot of stuff I just shoved on Mel Bergquist, and he never complained. Mel was a wonderful man.

AR: And you got along with Mel Luschen as well, the manager of Douglas Lodge?

WK: Got along fine with Mel. Sometimes I thought he was running on nervous energy. He smoked too much, and I think those cigarettes finally got him. But they got my wife, though. I got along swell with Mel. He seemed to get along with all those women he had working up there. I don't know how he did it, but he did. (laughs)

AR: You're pretty picky?

WK: It seems like women they start making issues out of something that I don't see any reason for. Getting excited about something, but they do, they did. Luschen somehow would fix it up, and things went along from day to day, year in and year out.

AR: And you lived right here, in this very building.

WK: Lived right here, so I didn't have very far to go to work. Anybody needed me, I wasn't very far to go either to find me. One thing, it's why I approve of living out of the park, I could be eating lunch or supper here and there'd be a rap on the door, and some guy would come up with something. I'm thinking of this one guy in particular, he was bitching about something, somebody making a lot of noise in the campground and he couldn't sleep very well, and he was very emphatic about the fact that if he didn't like something in the park he'd write to the director. I said, "If you want to write to the director, I can give you his address so you don't have to look around for that." Anyway, couldn't find some other time except mealtime. In that particular case, it was the minister from his own home town in Arkansas or some place that was camping and making all the days up there. I finally found that out.

AR: In the other parks that you worked at, did you live right in the park?

WK: Every park I worked at, I lived right in the park. When you live in the park, you have people coming in, making their problems your problems. They forget a frying pan, "Have you got a frying pan we could use? A coffee pot? We forgot a coffee pot?" One woman was even in need of an enema so she wanted to know if we had any equipment for that. It's endless.

AR: I suppose you're on call all the time if people know you're right here.

WK: In some cases you have to help them out. Sometimes it got to be a little much. Bringing frying pans back all dirty and sooted up.

AR: Were you supervised to any extent by the director in St. Paul, or were you basically left to your own devices?

WK: I was left to my own devices. Whatever decisions I made.

AR: Was there ever any instance when you and the park had a clash or conflict with St. Paul?

WK: (laughs). No, although a funny thing happened. One of the conferences I attended was at St. Croix Park. We had a party up there one night. The guys got some refreshments. Whoever it was that Lathrop had, he said he wanted this certain kind of whiskey. If you get that... They found out it was pretty good whiskey, so the guys kept that and gave him another one. (laughs). I'll never forget that, he got kind of hostile about that.

Otherwise not any real clashes. I remember one time, at Lake Carlos, we were putting a foundation onto the house. It was just stuck on posts. We were digging that hole, and specs called for using a team of horses to pull a scraper. In those days a few farmers still had horses. So I got these horses up there and this farmer and we used a slush scraper. A scraper is a big scoop with two wooden handles on it. We were working on that and I thought somebody was going to get killed, because you were underneath the house and didn't have much room to work. Then the scraper would tip over and could very easily cut a guy's head off. So this farmer said "I've got a tractor. Why don't we just use a tractor, that'll pull steady and a horse will lunge forward." I said, "That's a good idea, let's do that." There was some hassle about that when I got to the office. I had requested a team and here I was using a tractor. Nothing ever became of it. I guess it was a budgetary matter or something. At that time pennies were hard to come by. But other than that, I don't think I ever locked horns with them. That isn't to say that sometimes I didn't disagree with our director about some things. Some of those things I'm sure he didn't know what the conditions out in the field were because he was always in the office in St. Paul. But being out in the field, that's another thing. I remember one time we were driving together to a conference in Michigan and he said, "The manager, he could do that." And I said, "He can't do that! He hasn't the time." He was a little startled, but that's the way it was. There just wasn't time. A minor detail, otherwise there were no big hassles. Sometimes he accepted some of the criticism. For example, I was very critical about these campsites that weren't numbered (at Whitewater). That was utter madness. They finally numbered all these parks; I don't think you can find a campground without a numbered campsite.

AR: In the ten years that you were here at Itasca, can you comment on any of the major developments that you were a part of?

WK: One of the major projects was the sewer system. It was already started when I took over. Then they extended it up to the headwaters and we got that in and that's functional. There hasn't been any trouble with that. That one fortunately went out on contract so we didn't have to do that on top of... I did go up now and then to make sure that the pipe wasn't going so the water had to run uphill. We had to put a [unclear] at Peace Pipe Vista. The drawing they got was of a couple big stumps. [The words are unclear, but he relates a story about installing something at the Vista that would last forever.] The park planner was Milt Corona.

AR: Did you witness any changes in the campground development?

WK: I don't think there was much of a campground at Pine Ridge. I think we put the whole campground in. New toilet buildings, washrooms. Numbered the sites. The [unclear] station at the campgrounds, that was put in at my time. The road going up into the campgrounds. That's one thing that I'd suggest to any manager: If you're going to build a building in a park to serve a certain purpose, that you discuss that with the architect. We did that. The park supervisor and I went to St. Paul and we talked to the architect about what it was we wanted in this station. You have to put these camping tickets in a rack and then back to a window. If a guy has to walk twenty steps to get that and then come back and go back and forth, by the end of the day, he's walked 100 miles! I want so that he can reach over, fill it out, put it back, and not have to move. And I want so that he can see down the road a ways. He finally drew up these plans. All I could think of was a rectangular building, but he came up with an octagon, and I think that serves real well.

AR: The Itasca Wilderness Area was established as a national landmark in 1965. Were you here at that time, or was that before?

WK: It was about the same time. Along with that came problems. That was a state wilderness trail, so the state paid the county to run a grader over it (maintain it.) It got to the point where the equipment got so big that they couldn't get around some of these trees to grade the road. So the county engineer wanted some of the trees removed. I asked how many and he said he didn't know. So I said, "Why don't you mark those trees that you think should be out of there so we can get that road through." He tried rigging something, and when I saw all the limbs he had tied, I was horrified. So I took down the more obvious ones that you couldn't get around, and the rest I just left. I told him that I can't just take all those trees out. He came back and said "Let's try and see." We got those trees out and the lumber was sawed into signs and tables and stuff.

AR: What do you think of it now that it's paved?

WK: It's nice driving on a paved road, but it loses something of the primitive when you blacktop it. [He digresses about a park in Florida that blacktop an area, "the most beautiful road in Florida."] There was one time they were talking about putting two roads in there, so you wouldn't be passing on the same road. But then that would have been like building a four lane highway through there. It's such a short road anyway, leave it like it is. And if I'd have had my way about it, I would have left it as it was (a dirt road). There's something about a plain old dirt road when you're going through a primitive area. You want to make it look primitive. The same thing about leaving trees that blow down in storms and lay at the side of the road. The people see that those trees do go down sometimes. The foresters would say that if you leave it lie there too long you get the bugs under the bark.

There was a movie made here, too. "The Immigrants," a Swedish movie. Victor brought the movie director down here, he wanted to see if there were some locations he could use.

And there were some here. I took him up into the wilderness area of the big pines and asked how that would do. "This is just fine, just what we're looking for." And they needed an oak grove, so Mel Bergquist showed them where one was. So they did shoot that movie here partly.

AR: Did that cause any problems?

WK: No, no. I just mention that as kind of a highlight. I don't know how many more movies. And there's been lots of weddings here, too, at Preacher's Grove. Sometimes some of these activities create momentary problems. How about traffic? You think of a wedding, how big a wedding? You have hundreds of cars parked at Preacher's Grove, how are you going to get through? But we lived through all of that.

AR: Can you describe any management differences between your style of management and the managers before and after you? Andy Peterson, John Herhusky.

WK: My son Calvin is park manager at Afton, and we talk parks once in a while. If he's having personnel problems, I say, "Why the hell not fire him?" And he says "You can't do that anymore!" I never had major trouble with that. If you didn't cut the mustard, you were just through, period. Other than that, technology has crept up into the parks. They've got computers, we never had computers. All we had was a telephone and a typewriter. Communication is one thing. When I came here we didn't have anyway of communicating, and we had a pretty big area here, 32,000 acres. We got Citizen's Band first, walkie-talkies. If you weren't very far they worked all right, but if you were way back somewhere and there was an emergency you couldn't get through. We had a [unclear] one time, but we didn't have adequate communications here. We finally got a phone [unclear] at the south entrance, that didn't work right either. It didn't come through when we needed it. That was finally resolved. Then we finally got a regular broadcasting band like the police are on, and that helped. Then you could call anyplace. One time I think I was slated for a hold-up when I was the only one left with the deposit. A guy followed me to the east entrance and I drove about 80 miles an hour whenever I had the chance. I got to Bemidji and he was right behind me. At Bemidji, the radio I had was a citizen's band, and I thought, "I'll tell by which way he turns." I went past the bank and circled around and I came up to the light and stopped. I turned back and tried to get his license number and I was making off like I was talking into the citizen's band. He shot by like a bullet. That's the last I saw of that guy!

AR: You had to take the deposit in yourself? Was that every day or once a week?

WK: Yes. It was once a week. That time I was carrying \$40,000.

AR: What type of equipment did you have when you first got here, and did it change any in terms of park vehicles, maintenance vehicles?

WK: Going way back to Lake Carlos, I had an old Model A Ford when took the job. I had that car from before the war. They weren't making that many cars, you couldn't hardly get one. The state had a two wheel utility trailer you pulled behind the car, and that's what I hauled my garbage in. Any hauling I had to do in the park, I used that trailer. I remember one type I got a paint sprayer and I had to bring it up to Scenic. On the way back, a bearing burnt out on one of the axles on that trailer. I was able to get another axle for it. Then we started getting hand-me-down trucks from the forestry department, which was better than nothing at all. Finally we started getting new trucks and other equipment. In those early years we didn't have all those mowers and stuff that are available today. I don't think they made all those mowers as good as they make them today. Somehow we managed.

AR: The equipment you had once you got to Itasca was fairly adequate, or did you have to start building up?

WK: We had enough here to get by on. We even had an army surplus truck from the University. They couldn't use it, it was too big for them. We used it for opening up the park drive. It was a massive truck, but you could get the plow on it and plow one side and then the other side. We filled the tank, and I forget how much that tank held, but it was an astronomical figure.

AR: Speaking of the University of Minnesota Forestry and Biological Station, did you have fairly good relations with them?

WK: Very good. There's one fellow there that was deputy sheriff or a law enforcement officer, and when some of these students got out of line he was always there to help out.

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WK: ...He'd have a talk with the student. I didn't want that kind of thing continuing in the park. It's dangerous. Otherwise, the manager of that area...was it Dr. Marshall, I think... he invited me over there if I had something to say to the students, if I wanted to give them a little lecture. I was happy to. I'd tell them that they were here as guests and they have to behave like guests. But I would say that our relationship was good.

AR: How about your relationship with forestry?

WK: Wow, that was another extremely good one. He was my hunting partner.

AR: Who was this?

WK: Vern Miller. He retired before I did. Anything to do with forests... Down at the rookery, if there's report that the Blue Herons are causing any extensive damage at the rookery, because they mess up those trees and the trees die, he'd come down and take a

look at it. He always said the trees in Itasca Park are the responsibility of the forestry service. We had excellent relations. We had a lot of fun! Duck hunting.

AR: How about the relationship between the park and the local community? I know for a time there was some resentment towards the park earlier because they wouldn't hire the locals. Can you comment on that at all?

WK: I don't know if there was too much resentment from the local people, because we hired local people because they lived close by and could live at home. At one time I counted the people that were actually working here, whether they were green thumbers or some other outside help we might have got. We had 126 people working here. You couldn't house all of them, so naturally you'd hire those that lived right around here. What happens there is that these people that first got a job here knew that they got the job by taking the civil service exam to qualify. When we hired, we had to hire from this list. The civil service had that. They'd sent the names of those eligible candidates, and we'd have to pick one of them. Our hands were pretty much tied there. There might have been some people that felt they were passed over, maybe they were.

AR: Were there any other conflict between the park and local residents?

WK: I didn't have too much of a conflict there. My wife joined the women's group that they had there. She once said, "I'm not going to go to any more of those meetings that they have!" "What's the matter, what's wrong?" "They brought up this matter of the cemetery here. Is anything being done about that? Why don't they talk to the park manager! I'm not the park manager!"

AR: What was their complaint about the cemetery?

WK: I don't remember. It was just one of those things to talk about for half an hour.

AR: And you wife didn't want to deal with the flak. What was her name?

WK: Linda. She worked here, too, at Brower Inn, where they used to sell souvenirs. Some of the boys thought she was getting special favors because she was the manager's wife. She wasn't. Sometimes orders would come down from the higher echelons and we just had to follow through. If it felt like someone was getting short changed, it was no fault of ours. It was beyond our control.

AR: Did you ever have any problems, in terms of park personnel, discipline problems or times when you had to fire some people? Anything that sticks out in your mind other than routine....?

WK: Yeah. I had a young fellow working here as a manager of one of the campgrounds. He'd like to be a policeman. He was enforcing the law, no matter if it was a mild infraction of the law, he was right there. One time he was going to take one of the park

employees up to a judge. And I said, "What the hell for?" He told me and I said, "You'll do no such thing. You're not taking him to see no judge. It'll get in the papers that park employees are arresting one another up there, you know." Finally he made application to get into the highway patrol and someone came to see me to find out what I knew about him. I said, "He'll make one dandy cop." I gave him the highest recommendation . He got the job. I don't know if he stayed with the highway patrol or not, but I got him out of here. There may be other incidents like that, but I don't recall. I didn't have any other trouble. If someone had to be terminated, there was probably just reason for it to just let them go.

AR: Speaking of management issues...through your career as a park manager, how did you deal with the changing nature of visitor expectations? Did you witness any?

WK: It never changed enough, at least in the years we were down at Whitewater. As I said before, park attendance increased so rapidly and we didn't have the personnel to take care of this crowd. After the budgets were made, that was how much you had to operate on and you had to stay within there. How did you do that when there were always people coming. Sometimes I'd arrange a program in such a way that you'd be doubling up this work. Instead of having one guy do the work, they'd have help. I heard rumblings about guys wanting to quit because of too much work, so I couldn't do that either, because how would I replace them? When I first went to Whitewater I had a heck of a time hiring anybody! I went looking for guys that didn't have jobs, and they'd ask how much I'm paying. At that time, the salary wasn't too good. You pay kids to run a tractor and plow fields more money than that. We were always in kind of a bind. Never enough. That was the toughest part of the time we spent at Whitewater. I can't say that that's the same at Itasca. With the qualified help I had here, and enough help, it was a one-place wonder.

AR: Did you run into any problems or concerns with trying to preserve a balance between the wilderness experience on one hand and modern vacation expectations on the other hand?

WK: That is a problem. It still is a problem. Some of these parks, national parks, especially, are wearing out from too many people. It's a hard question to answer. You can put signs up, "Don't pick wild flowers" "Dogs must be on a leash" but how do you tell these people...the sign is right there and people go right by. Nobody sees the sign. The next thing you know here comes a kid with a whole bouquet of flowers or broken up branches off a tree with some blossoms on it. How do you get this information to them before they even get in the park? Every year it seems like the same thing. Some people already know this, but there is a certain segment of our society that thinks the thing to do is to go camping up there and throw a beer party and keep everybody awake all night. They soon find out they can't do that. [Digresses to tell about a park in southeastern Minnesota where people didn't understand why all branches were not cleared from a path.] (At Itasca) there's a picnic site along the lake, with a steep bank to the lake. Kids, and adults too, start following that path, and the next thing you know you have an erosion problem. And I thought I have to stop that, but how do I stop that? I found a big old tree

limb with lots of prickly branches on it, and you couldn't get through there again. I don't know what the answer is to your question.

They're going to keep coming to the park and they're going to DEMAND that they be allowed to do this or do that. It's a public park, belongs to all the people. One time there was a guy who came up to me and said he saw a guy throw a whiskey bottle into Mary Lake. He said, "Something should be done about that." "Do you want to file a complaint?" "Can't you?" "I didn't see him throw it in, you saw him throw it in. You file the complaint." So he did. Most people would shrug their shoulders. But he didn't. I don't know how they resolved it, I never heard anything more about it. I think more people are becoming more appreciative of nature because there's more of it on TV, in magazines. There seems to be an awareness to me that if we don't take these precautions we won't have any clean water or virgin forests. I think schools are emphasizing this, too. We can't go on wasting stuff because eventually they'll be an end to it. I remember one time I saw a guy hustling in the woods with his saw and axe and a partner. I said, "Where are you guys going?" "We're trimming those trees up there." "By whose authority are you trimming those trees?" "Those branches are too low." "That's the way nature made them and you just leave them as they are. If those trees need to be trimmed, we'll get somebody to trim them." That happened so many times.

One time out here a Canadian cut some green bark up here, to make half a dozen poles up at the campground. They were green, not dry. I said, "Where'd you get those from?" "Out there in the woods." "Who gave you permission to cut them?" "Nobody." So he paid plenty for those trees. Once in the office a woman came in and said, "When you've got a bill, who do you present it to?" "What bill, for what?" They had some meat that they left on the table overnight, and some animal took it. I said, "So what?" "Whose going to pay for that meat?" "It was the raccoons that probably took it, because they are active at night at the campgrounds. Bill it to the 'coons. They ate it." I thought she was kidding but she got kind of hostile. I said, "You people are from Canada and know what wild animals are. Don't come around here about paying for something a raccoon did. They thought you put that out there on purpose for them."

AR: Can you comment at all on the evolution and continuing development of the naturalist part of the park? The interpretive program.

WK: That's a real important job. I think Ben Thoma is a really good example of that. Ben Thoma is Itasca State Park - he's been here longer than any of us. He knows it inside and out. Some of these naturalists wanted to get their heads together and create, like the division of parks, the division of education. I don't see that. This isn't an educational institution. It's all right for a casual visitor to learn something about nature, but that's enough. If they want to an education, go to college and pick up zoology. Just the way it's been going... Don Lewis, he was one of the early naturalists here. It's guys like that that put their heart and soul into their work. Everything they've got goes into their work and they make sure you understand what they are talking about. Don was one of the best.

AR: In recent years there's been a growing interest in historical preservation in parks. Last year they restored cabin 6. This year they restore the ice and wood house that the CCC built. What is your opinion of historic preservation, restoring an old building rather than building a new one, as a park manager?

WK: I think they should be restored as much as they are able to be restored, before they get to the point where they are no longer able to be restored. Wegmann's Cabin, that place is shot. They shouldn't have let it go that long. I was very much for leaving that old shop building where it was and just try to keep it up so it doesn't fall apart. That's a part of the history of Itasca Park. Now it's all gone. Part of it is in this wing north here. They call it Maggie's room. The shop itself wouldn't compare with the shop we have up here now, but it's an historical building, like Douglas Lodge. They could have left that there. Some of the stuff I supposed should be torn down, but not all of it.

AR: Were you park manager when they moved Aiton Heights cabin down to the boat landing?

WK: That was moved shortly after I retired. We had decided it would be moved, but they left it til the wintertime. I was just involved in the early stages of it, but the actual moving was done after I left. That was a must because the old building was I don't know how old. It wasn't going to last much longer, and something had to be done.

AR: Do you think it was a worthwhile venture?

WK: I think so. I don't know about that boat lagoon, if that was the best move or not. Judge Hella was opposed to that, too. He said, "I don't know about those lagoons." When you have boats you have oil scum, oil floating on top, old newspapers, cigarette wrappers floating around. That's not really attractive. But it seems to have worked out okay. Bicycling is a new thing now. It wasn't here when I was here, it's brand new.

AR: Do you have any opinions about that?

WK: I think it's all right. Unless there's been some problems with it. Has there?

AR: A few. Bikes going too fast and having to post more and more signs.

WK: Signs are another thing. When do you have enough signs? And what kind of signs?

AR: Part of the problem is it's used so much, that if you get a lot of people on there, some are going fast and some slow and there are walkers, too. There are bound to be some accidents.

Did you have to deal with on a management level any archeological digs that took place at the park, or concerns about disturbing an ancient village site with Native Americans?

WK: Yes and no. There's this Indian burial ground, and no one really knows what to do with that. The kids climb on top of that, and they'll be a path over a mound. I had a sign made and stuck that up, to respect that old Indian ground so that paths don't weave all over the area. I think all those mounds have been disturbed anyway in past years by whoever dug around to see what they could find. Other than that, I don't think it's ruined. One thing I would have like to have known is when we were putting in the sewer system at the headwaters, we dug down 21 feet to get this pump at that level. At that level we uncovered beaver chewings of sticks that hadn't rotted. They won't rot when they are continually wet. That's 21 feet down from the surface...that's a long way down. That stick must have been there for hundreds of years. How old was that stick, that's what I want to know. I took it out to the University and said, "What can you tell me about this stick that this beaver chewed," but I never heard anymore about it.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 1

WK:There was always talk about the fish, they've got PCBs, mercury. So I took a big pickle jar (of dirt) down to the University in Minneapolis to the head biologist and I said, "Maybe you can find some student whose working on this, and find out what if anything is in this dirt. There's about a half-inch of mud at the bottom of this jar, that could be dangerous." I never heard anymore about that, either. Some insecticide that the farmer's use, it could blow way over here. Maybe we're getting some of these poisons from over there.

AR: Can you comment about the development of the headwaters area? That area has changed so much.

WK: That's changed. There used to be a log cabin much closer to the headwaters stump. It was kind of wet and soggy around there, and it served as a refreshment and souvenir stand. When I was here we built a new parking area and museum building and concession stand up there.

AR: Were the changes fairly well received?

WK: There wasn't static about that. We needed more parking space than the area provided. I bet the guy that drilled the well, the well that was drilled for water supply, that was drilled before I got here. I said, "How's the water in that well?" "I don't know, we haven't used it yet." "We better start using it, or it won't function after a while if you let it set too long." It's been working satisfactorily. The (unclear) building is still there and the doors are open.

AR: Can you reflect on your experience at Itasca, the ten years you were here, and comment on your life here?

WK: They were the best years of my life!! I'm serious. Some people say, "You're the manager of the park?" "Yes, I'm the manager of the park." "You live here?" "Yes, I live

here.” “And you get paid for living here?” “Yep!” That kind of sums it up. There isn’t a prettier place in the world than right here in Itasca. When I think about the color in the fall, I don’t think there is any more colorful area than right through the Wilderness Drive. You have your maples and oaks, it’s really beautiful. Anytime of the year.

AR: Do you think the statement that Itasca is the flagship of Minnesota State Parks is true?

WK: Definitely. It would be the flagship of any state park in the country. I’ve seen quite a few parks. There’s one thing about the lake. There’s no water-skiing, there’s no racing. There’s a quiet serenity here that you don’t find hardly anyplace else anymore. I come to Itasca once or twice a summer, not to fish, but just to be out there.

AR: Do you think Itasca will continue to be the flagship? Do you see any problems coming in the future?

WK: Just so they don’t build any condominiums in here! Any big structures. If they can keep it like it is. No more big roads. Some day the day is going to come, with the population explosion, that they’ll limit the number of people who can visit any particular park on any one day. That’s happening up in the Wilderness Area now [BWCA]. [Digresses about an experience in the BWCA and how crowded it was getting the last time he was there.] So when they say they have to limit that, I know what they’re talking about. Absolutely you have to limit it, and I think that’s going to happen at Itasca.

AR: If you want to keep things the way they are...

WK: I’d keep it the way it is. The only danger is now that they took the forester out of here, is fire. They must have plans that I hope will work for fire prevention, but there’s nothing better than having a trained crew right by the scene when it happens. The sooner you get that fire out, the less damage. But if you have to go from here to Bemidji and wait for someone from Bemidji to come here, by that time with a good wind, that fire has a pretty good start. That was always by concern here was a fire, especially if it was a dry season. Let’s just hope Itasca stays like it is for another hundred years.

AR: Anything else you’d like to share?

WK: I think we covered the bases pretty well.