

**Sid Rommel**  
**Narrator**

**Amy Rieger**  
**Interviewer**

**August 31, 1993**  
**Rommel's home in Grand Rapids, Minnesota**

**AR:** When and where were you born?

**SR:** In Minneapolis in 1912. I couldn't wait to become a boy scout, already I was interested in the woods, probably from a book in the little branch library in the drug store a couple of blocks away. Books by Ahlschalter (sp), he talked about pioneer days in Ohio and settlement in the Indian country. I'm sure that sparked by interest. And Ernest Seton Thompson or Thompson Seton, whatever, and his little savages off in the woods, and his book of woodcraft, which I just devoured when I was a kid. We were Indians, we camped out at every opportunity and when I got into the boy scouts – at that time the scouts were quite different than they are now, the emphasis was on camping and the outdoors and wild plants and so on. We had a marvelous scout master that took us out every chance he could. Early on I got interested in canoe and had a canoe down on the Minnesota River and explored the river up as far as time would let me go. Then I worked at a boy's camp when I was in high school up at Lake Vermilion. All that led me into forestry.

**AR:** You finished high school and then went to college for a little while?

**SR:** Three and a quarter years, with time out to go on the Chippewa Acquisition Survey in 1933. My first acquaintance with the park was in my freshman year. Three of us hitchhiked up to the park, got a key to the Southwest Cabin from Earl Lange, who was the superintendent then, then we hiked down the park. One of the first things we saw was a dead elk, that we later learned was loaded with strychnine and hauled out to the lake for wolf bait. One of the things I remember besides the strong skunk smell in the southwest cabin was the notes that Andy Madson had made. One of them was "Did not see any elks today." Andy was a towerman at Anchor Hill on the west side of the park, bachelor and Finlander. His winter job was to patrol the park, trapping wolves and checking on the elk that they had planted there. I was there in the summer of 1931 as a student, and dearly loved the course of Dr. Otto Rosendahl, the botanist. Quite a well known botanist. And John Muehl was his assistant there and John and I used to paddle down the Mississippi River. I offered to be John's travel steward when he made his trip to Hudson Bay, which never came off. Muehl and I got along really fine.

**AR:** 1931 was your first connection with the park. You hadn't visited as a child at all?

**SR:** We camped there with my dad and mother when I was a small child, but that would be just overnight or for a day or so. I didn't know much about it before then.

**AR:** What made you and your friend decide to hitchhike up there in 31?

**SR:** Just the adventure of it. While I was in school there we again borrowed the key and hiked down to the southwest cabin and spent a night or so there. At that time we fished in a little lake, I think it was Morrison Lake, we found a canoe ditched in the woods and patched it up and caught some nice bass.

**AR:** Can you describe the southwest cabin?

**SR:** It was a one-room cabin, probably 16 x 24, the size that most cabins were built in those days. The purpose of the cabin was for the wolf trappers engaged by the park to have a place to stay when they were making their rounds because it was too far back in when you had to walk. Incidentally, the Eagle Scout Trail that goes to the cabin was built by Paddy Bail (phonetic) with Eagle Scouts. Paddy Bail was the state ranger at Grand Marais at that time and was known for his good work with kids. Just previous to this, or maybe it was 31, the park was in charge of the state forestry. The division of parks wasn't in existence yet, I believe. The men from the forest service were drawn into the park for many different things. While we were in school there, the division of forestry had an encampment there of state forestry people where they were practicing the various skills that they needed.

**AR:** Was that in the park?

**SR:** Yes, around the headquarters I believe, but I don't know exactly. I know they had a parade in which the students were encouraged to enter. One of my friends, about six foot four had a sign on him "Tobacco stunted my growth." (laughter)

**AR:** The first time you were in Itasca going to the southwest cabin, getting the key from Earl Lang. Had you met him before or did you just go to him...

**SR:** No. We just said we were forestry students and that we'd be up there that summer. I suppose that's what we said. We'd like to get acquainted with the park and could you loan us the key. It was no problem. He gave it to us right away.

**AR:** Can you describe Earl Lange at all and your experiences with him?

**SR:** He was outgoing. Very pleasant guy. When he left the park he became the chief of police in Bemidji. I know his wife Rose had her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party at our place in the park later on. My first assignment with the Minnesota forestry was at Ash River in 1937. I went to work on April 16. The first week or so I cooked for the timber markers that were there and then, as the season progressed, I went up to Ash River where I was the

towerman that summer. In September I was transferred to Roy Lake, and I was at Roy Lake from 1937 to the fall of 1939, when I was transferred to the park to take the place of Ted Crowfoot, who had been the clerk at the forestry headquarters. Frank Pugh was the ranger. He was a good boss.

**AR:** I've heard a lot of good things about Frank Pugh.

**SR:** He was at the park probably because he was a very good firefighter, and at that time fires were absolutely taboo in the forest. We've changed our attitude since that time. I wanted to tell you...Itasca Park was a game refuge, and for a half mile outside all the way around there was a line cut that was the boundaries of this refuge. The state forestry personnel would be assigned to patrol that boundary and keep out hunters, and if a hunter had wounded a deer, to accompany him into the park to recover that wounded deer. The idea was that the park was a place for the deer to live happy, contented lives, protected against predators, both man and wolves. While I was there, there began a die-back of the deer in the wintertime because of the over-population of deer. They found the condition pretty ideal and hunting season seemed to drive them into the park from many miles around. How far I don't know. CC's in the park at that time conducted deer census where they would surround a section of land with counters, then drivers would drive through and the deer would either cut back through the drivers or go between the people that were posted on the exterior boundaries of this mile. They had deer counts far in excess of what the range would support – about 16 deer to a mile would be about a normal population, and counts were ever so much higher than that, up to 100 or possibly more, I don't remember exactly.

While I was at the park, Dr. Swenson, the game biologist for the University of Minnesota, sent two of his students up one winter trying to get a count on the number of dead deer in the park. That was kind of nonsense to Frank Pugh, so he assigned me to help these fellows out. So I ran compass and we cruised dead deer just like you'd cruise timber. From our work -- we just worked in the north half of the park -- we deduced there'd be 2000 dead deer in the north half of the park alone that winter. At that time I was trying to start a boy scout troop, and we thought that for money we'd chop the tails off of these dead deer and market them as bucktails for fishing lures. We had several bushel baskets full of dead tails that we chopped off the deer. Whatever happened, I don't know, but Walter Nelson and his boys were quite interested in that and they helped, as well as a friend of mine from Bemidji, Hod Ludlow, who was a boy scout executive at the time. I ran the compass and kept the other people. They weren't supposed to stray more than 165 feet on either side of me. So we counted a strip 330 feet wide and three miles long, and we repeated that many times in the north half of the park. The figures escape me now, but our deduction was that there were at least 2000 dead deer on the north half of the park. When we encountered a deer we broke open the leg bones to check the marrow. If the marrow was red or pinkish, it meant they died with starvation as a primary cause. Some of them that didn't have any hindquarters from poachers had white marrow, but we didn't find many poacher-killed deer.

Also, while I was at the park it was the year of the Armistice Day storm (1940). Marge and I had been down to Park Rapids to see a movie and meet friends down there. I don't know if we heard a weather forecast or what but we hurried home at any rate and got home around 8:30, just before the storm struck. There was a highline pole outside our bedroom window about six feet, and at the height of that storm we couldn't see that pole, it was coming that hard and that fast. The following spring was another bad storm. An ice storm that destroyed a lot of jackpine. Normally the dead timber in the park isn't cut, it's allowed to go back to nature. But in this case the jackpine was so dense and would've become such a terrible fire hazard that they got a logger, Norb Barterding from Bagley, who cut it and sawed a lot of into lumber that he could and otherwise made pulp wood and burnt it. But there was at least 80 acres of downed jackpine on the north side of the park. That was about St. Patrick's Day in 1941. I have some pictures there showing us freeing up the telephone line from that and repairing it because all the communication was down. It was a bad storm. It took us three or four days to shovel a road down to Wegmann's from the ranger station, which would be a quarter of a mile, I suppose. We had to hand shovel it. I was at the park until June of 1939, when I was transferred to Link Lake, in north central Itasca county.

**AR:** You transferred out of Itasca. Did you just go back to help with the ice storm?

**SR:** No, I was there until June of '43, when I left to become ranger at Link Lake. From Link Lake I was the timberman from Cook County. This was all during war time. After that was over, I was transferred back to Itasca County to Effie, where I worked five years as a forest management forester, making forest management plans for the George Washington State Forest and the Big Fork State Forest and Nacoochiching State Forest. In the fall of 1957 I went back to Park Rapids where my assignment was, in part, to determine the measures necessary to perpetuate the pine in Itasca Park. That was about half my assignment, the other half was to be forest management forester in the Park Rapids area. To that end I made forest management surveys...about half the old growth pine area is in the park, from which I concluded that forestry should begin to take active part in the management of the park. Hella's idea was to leave nature strictly alone, but nature hadn't been strictly alone because over-population of the deer had destroyed all the reproduction, and that we proved through deer enclosures. One of them that I monitored was on the east side of Mary Lake. At the time I was there, it was very striking. There was roughly an acre I'd guess with a high deer-proof fence, and inside this area the ground was green with pine reproduction, and outside there wasn't any. White pine is like raised doughnuts to a deer. He just loves it. I wrote a report... At that time forestry was pretty well strapped for funds to do the forest management work that was required. However, the legislature just previous to this time had written legislation that would permit part of the proceeds of trust fund lands to go back into "stocking the shelves." To do the measures that were necessary to get regrowth. So my conclusions were that we should use the trust fund lands in the park, of which there were sections 16 and 36, and use those as test tubes. Let forestry go ahead and actively manage these lands to show that foresters could bring back the pine. I don't think there is much pine reproduction in the park still because the heavy growth of brush that followed the heavy browsing of the deer inhibits

the growth of the baby seedlings. I thought it was an excellent plan. I talked to the rotary clubs and junior chambers of commerce in the surrounding towns. I know I was in Staples and Wadena and Bagley...

**AR:** What type of response did you get?

**SR:** People didn't care, but the parks were adamant of no man-made stuff in the park, at least at that time. I believe that was Judge Hella's philosophy.

**AR:** It's an on-going problem. You hear about it even now, talking with some of the naturalists. How do you keep the deer down? There's a large population of deer in the park in spite of hunting. I've seen deer every day that I've worked there. And they talk about controlled fires and things of that nature. And it was a problem even back then!

**SR:** I worked pretty closely with Henry Hanson. Have you talked with him?

**AR:** I talked with him on the phone. He's hopefully coming up to the park sometime this summer or fall so we'll hopefully get together then.

**SR:** One of my assignments when I was at Park Rapids was that the forestry students had made a forest type map of the park, and I counted the acreage of the pine from those maps down at the University. I was assigned down there for several weeks to do that while I was at Park Rapids and worked with Henry Hanson there.

**AR:** Let's go back to your time at the forestry school. Can you describe that experience at all?

**SR:** There were about 40 students, forestry was riding pretty high right then with the advent of the CC program and they thought there was a lot of future in it. There were big classes. We had our own cooperative to feed ourselves and hire a cook and that type of thing. It cost us minimal, and I'm sure the lodging was free but we paid our board. I remember one type a car with several young ladies drove up close to the bunkhouse there and yelled "We want a man!" A couple volunteers went with the ladies back to Park Rapids where they had to hike home.

**AR:** At that time the road went right through the forestry station...

**SR:** Right.

**AR:** Can you describe any of the people who were your instructors?

**SR:** I.M. Brown was the minserationist (?) and I remember some of the guys didn't like Brownie so they took his little boy and taught him how to burp. Dr. Rosenthal was the botany teacher, and he was marvelous. He was already elderly and walked with a

considered limp from some childhood disease, I suppose, but he covered more ground in the park easier than most of us could. Henry Hanson was a classmate, so was John Dobie.

**AR:** You knew John Dobie. Have you read his book on Itasca? What did you think?

**SR:** He gave me a copy. I thought it was not terribly inspired but factual.

**AR:** I've run across people who haven't agreed with some of the things he said in there, although when I ask them what they didn't agree with, they couldn't tell me specifics.

**SR:** I think John was a pretty careful workman and probably did his homework pretty well.

**AR:** What did a typical day consist of while you were a student there? I imagine you were out in the field quite a bit.

**SR:** You're talking about 60-some years ago! I remember one day where we were asked to run a compass diagonally across a section. I believe we kept track of distance by pacing. Brownie was there to greet us as we came out to tell us how far off we were. I can't remember much. I remember bringing plants to Dr. Rosenthal and him telling me that I had a pretty good eye for this stuff, which encouraged me to later on to take advanced taxonomy from him at the University. I believe that I was one of the first ones to find slippery elm in the park.

**AR:** It was a good experience. Did you have much free time to explore the park on your own?

**SR:** I had a canoe there, and John Muehl and I went down the Mississippi River, I remember.

**AR:** At that time did you happen to meet Theodore Wegmann at all?

**SR:** I knew him as a gruff old man, that's all. One of my memories is that he was pretty short-sighted and didn't like wood ticks. When he found one in his store he laid it on the counter and went after it with a long-bladed knife and he'd miss more often than he'd hit it. Betty Smith used to work for him, she'd have some good stories about he and his wife. August Snyder at Park View Resort and his brother, he'd go down to Wegmann's and buy two beers, they were two for a quarter. He'd drink one and leave the other. Then when he came back his first words were, "I've got one coming." He was noted for that.

**AR:** Did you have much contact at that time with park visitors or other local residents?

**SR:** The people north of the park were easy to get acquainted with. Our two girls went to school up there and we got to know the parents of the other students who went to the school. There were frequent house parties at Butlers and Gallswegs. Those I remember

particularly. We had a garden on Easy Street. The Butlers would move the furniture out of the house and probably sprinkle a little cornmeal on the floor and somebody would play the piano, and people would dance to "Skip to the Lou, my darling" I remember. It was good times. Very companionable people. Butlers were North Dakota farmers that got chased out of North Dakota by the drought and they'd seen some pretty hard times. The Morphews were from Iowa, and we were good friends with them....

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

**AR:** It sounds like you got to know quite a few of the people up there.

**SR:** The Butlers I still remember very well. Billy Butler and I used to go hiking together on Saturdays and Sundays. I remember riding their pony and getting bucked off of it.

**AR:** Did you have much to do with park management at that time?

**SR:** Nothing at all. Nothing at all. The only thing...I mentioned to you about trolling the telephone line through the buffalo pen and getting the run put on me by the buffalo.

**AR:** That was while you were a student?

**SR:** No, while I was working there.

**AR:** At that time you could still go to the southwest cabin. Was the middle west cabin still functioning?

**SR:** I think it was. Nicollet cabin was still there. You mentioned visitors at the park. Marge will tell you that anybody who ever knew us came to visit us because they were going to the park anyway. To quote her, "They came for coffee and stayed three days." Meanwhile, I'd dig the worms, take them fishing, clean the fish, fry the fish and do the dishes. I'd plop down and they'd tell me what a good time they were having.

**AR:** When were you married?

**SR:** 1934.

**AR:** You were only at the university forestry school for the summer of 1931, then you went back to Minneapolis to the U of M campus and were there for three and one quarter years. Then you went into the CCC, but not at Itasca?

**SR:** No, it was in Wisconsin.

**AR:** That interest that had been instilled as you as a kid and at the forestry school didn't leave. When you came back from the CCC you went directly to get a job in forestry.

**SR:** I was in the CCs as a forester. Both in Wisconsin and southern Indiana. Then the program began to break up and I was let go and I came back. I got a job in a boy's camp where I'd worked when I was in high school. I was the canoe guide for taking the boys out on canoe trips. That was 1935. That fall I went to Wisconsin as a forester in the Niccolaine (phonetic) National Forest.

**AR:** How did you get back into the Minnesota system?

**SR:** I took the forest patrolman examination at Orr in the spring of '37. That spring I got on as towerman at the Ash River Tower. That fall we went to Roy Lake, and I was there two years, and then to Itasca Park in the fall of '39.

**AR:** What did the examination consist of?

**SR:** I don't remember now.

**AR:** How did working at Itasca State Park compare to working at Ash River and Roy Lake?

**SR:** Much the same. We weren't anymore forest fire conscious there because that was our primary job wherever we were. Itasca Park under Frank Pugh you jumped on a fire right now with everything you had so that you kept it small.

**AR:** While you were at Itasca did any fires ever get more out of control then you would have liked to have seen it?

**SR:** No. They were mostly confined to less than an acre in Itasca Park while I was there, and not much bigger than that outside the park.

**AR:** Can you comment on the practice of local people setting fires and then getting paid because they hired local people to help put them out?

**SR:** To my knowledge it never happened, but we were always aware that it had happened someplace. It was pretty hard times.

**AR:** Yes. I can understand why someone would do that...

**SR:** The pay wasn't that great, you know. Fifteen cents an hour, with thirty-five cents an hour for the foreman.

**AR:** How much was your salary?

**SR:** I started at Ash River at eighty dollars a month. I went to Roy Lake at \$100 a month, but then they raised the rent to \$21 a month, so actually I was making less at Roy Lake as

a forest patrolman than I did at Ash River as a towerman. I don't remember.... I suppose while I was at the park it may have gotten up to \$150 a month.

**AR:** Where did you live, you and your wife?

**SR:** We lived in the bunkhouse, which was adjacent to the ranger's dwelling and the office. The idea of the bunkhouse was that there would be a place for forestry personnel to stay during schools which were frequently scheduled at the park, a central location. That was before they built up the complex here in Grand Rapids. Marge and I lived in part of the bunkhouse, and part of our job was to feed visiting personnel. I'm sure we fed Swan Carlson, the most inept forestry employee that ever happened.

**AR:** Why do you say that?

**SR:** Because he was! He was Pittinger's backer or something like that. Do you remember Pittinger? He was the US Congressman from Duluth. He probably financed Pittinger's early... and probably was secretary to Pittinger in Washington, D.C. until Pittinger got wise to him. Then he shoved him off on forestry and I guess forestry couldn't think of anyplace else to put him except to send him to Frank Pugh. Frank put him in the Aiton Heights Tower as a towerman, where he misled the public. He was pretty glib. He liked to talk...he was a nice enough person...but he was the most ineligible forestry employee that ever happened. He was quite elderly and not very strong. He couldn't do manual work and he didn't know anything about the woods. He was telling people how they painted the aspen to make them birch or something like that! So politics reared its ugly head in those days, too.

**AR:** Besides that instance, did you notice a lot of politics going on in the park, between forestry and the park...?

**SR:** Well, Andy Peterson was hired as the park superintendent following Earl Lange. He was a very congenial person, out of Bagley. First thing I remember him showing me a watch that was given to him by Harold Stassen, so there must have been some politics there.

**AR:** Any conflict between the division of forestry and parks when that came?

**SR:** I don't think so. Frank was wise enough to know he had to get along. He and Andy turned out to be pretty good drinking partners, I think. I don't think Earl Lange drank. I think he was a Mormon.

**AR:** While you were at Itasca, what were some of the projects you did?

**SR:** Maintained the telephone lines. We maintained the roads through the park, not the main roads but the secondary roads. There were timber sales that I worked on, at that time I didn't do any appraisal work, but I would check the timber sales. I mentioned Al

Witterstein to you. He was the assistant ranger or assistant area forester. He was checking on some pine that was cut illegally in the park and he traced it to a farmer southwest of the park named Thelin. Pretty rough people, they chased him off their land with a rifle and meant it. What the outcome of that was, I don't know. If he went to the sheriff and got them arrested or not... Stealing state timber is a felony.

**AR:** Didn't you say that Al Witterstein was a lumberjack guy himself?

**SR:** Yes. He was on the river drives on the Mississippi.

**AR:** Did he ever have any good stories to tell about that?

**SR:** I'm sure he did but I've forgotten them. Frank Pugh was a good story teller. He'd tell about the homestead days when his family homesteaded south of the border, south of Baudette in the rapid river country. He'd tell how, when you'd go to town you'd get drunker than when you came home from town because you'd meet all the people coming back with a jug. They'd all invite you to have a drink.

**AR:** You mentioned maintaining the telephone lines. What did that consist of?

**SR:** Making sure they weren't down and were working. A tree would go across and short it out and you had to trace the line. We didn't have the sophisticated equipment that is available now that would tell you where it was broken or approximately how far from you it was broken. We had to walk the telephone line through many miles of park and also outside of the park. We kept the line down to where it hooked onto the commercial lines at Harrago (phonetic) and probably at Bagley.

**AR:** That must have been a big job.

**SR:** It was one of the jobs. I remember riding the grader when we were grading the trails. Cutting wood and getting wood for heat. We heated with wood in all three buildings. I was assigned to help with the timber work in other districts, both the Elbow Lake and Royal Lake districts were part of the Itasca Park district. While were there, it was 1938, the tax-forfeited land became the county and the state's responsibility. Prior to that I don't think there was much tools to do anything with it. I remember cruising with Don Caesar, he was the ranger at Elbow Lake. We worked out in Mahnomem County, right up till almost Christmas one year, must have been 1938, making timber appraisals on that land so the timber could be sold, or land and timber could be sold. In wintertime when I was there I was assigned to logging camps up north out of Big Falls. I'd watch the timber operations, make sure the wood was scaled properly and none of the younger timber was cut. I'd mark reserve lines.

**AR:** At the time you were in Itasca did you have much contact with the CCC boys?

**SR:** No, at Itasca it was a Veteran's Camp.

**AR:** Did you have contact with them?

**SR:** Very little. I used to shoot my bow and arrow with one of the veterans. A friendly basis, but they were on park projects, not on forestry projects.

**AR:** Any contact with the transient relief camps that were in Itasca? One at Squaw Lake and one at Elk Lake.

**SR:** No, none at all.

(turned off recorder to look at photographs)

**AR:** Tell me about the trout fishing.

**SR:** LaSalle Springs and LaSalle Creek was great. I've loved to fish trout ever since I was a little kid, especially trout in the brooks. LaSalle Creek seemed to be just loaded with trout. If that was because of special plantings because it was in the park, I don't know. The headwaters of it, right by the springs, was dammed by a beaver dam, and there was maybe four feet of water in there. There was some trout in there like I've seen but never caught. Brookies like that, just tremendous. Frank was a trout fisherman, too. While we never fished together, we compared notes. While I was at Royal Lake, the headquarters at the park, I'd drive over to the park in wintertime and see Sucker Brook, just northwest of the park, just open and steaming from the springs. I thought there must be trout in there, so I put in an application and I carried a pump tank of trout back to that creek and dumped them in the creek in various places. I did that in the spring. Later on in the summer I thought I'd go down and see how they're doing. So I went down there and started catching 8-9 inch fish, which weren't the ones that I'd planted, I knew that. So Frank asked me where I was catching all these nice trout and I told him Sucker Brook. So he went down there, they apparently weren't biting that day, and he didn't get any, so he thought I was lying.

**AR:** We talked a little bit about the pageants and the people you thought would know more about it. What can you tell me about them?

**SR:** I never saw them and don't know anything about them except the stories that I've heard. I heard those stories so long ago I just remember that there were stories.

**AR:** I imagine by '39, '40 they were pretty much over anyway. You said that the division of forestry had schools quite often at Itasca, other than the University. Can you describe what that consisted of at all?

**SR:** No, I can't. I think at one time they had an entomology course, but whether it was offered there... I know it was offered by correspondence and they may have finished up with final exams. The people weren't required to take them but were encouraged to.

Some of the meetings may have been ranger meetings where they'd bring them together and talk personnel problems and so on. I really just have forgotten.

**AR:** About what you had to do after the Armistice Day Storm and the ice storm the following spring. There was a lot of damage, how were you involved with cleaning it up?

**SR:** Just running lines to limit the areas. They could cut the standing timber that was left in while most of it was destroyed. Where there was little destruction, we didn't want them in there at all, so we'd run reserve lines around the timber that was not to be cut. That's probably the only part I had in it.

**AR:** You had to get the telephones back on line and open up the roads and so on.

**SR:** Yes.

**AR:** What were some of the differences of duty between the forestry and the park itself? Did you cooperate to any degree on any projects?

**SR:** Mostly no. They were handling people and we were handling the resource, is what I would say.

**AR:** You don't recall if there were any conflicts or problems?

**SR:** I'm sure not. We'd be asked to talk for the evening programs every once in a while, telling what we did, firefighting and that type of thing.

**AR:** I was noticing in the picture you had your uniform on. Was that provided for you, the hat, the pants and boots?

**SR:** Yes. Although that may have been a holdover from when I was in the US.

**AR:** In terms of park facilities, the buildings and roads that were there, can you describe any of that at the time you lived in the park? Any changes you saw in the park?

**SR:** It's become ever so much more sophisticated since I was around there. I guess the demands on the park are ever so much greater now than in the old days, though it was a popular spot. We'd make what they now call the Park Drive with every visitor that came to visit us. At that time it was two-way traffic.

**AR:** I understand that before it was tarred it was pretty dusty, too.

**SR:** You bet it was.

**AR:** And rough and tumble on the cars. Bert Pfeiffer said it was a great torture test for new cars!

**SR:** Bert didn't mention his brother?

**AR:** No, he didn't.

**SR:** He used to work for Wegmann. That's where I first knew him.

**AR:** We talked about how Bert worked at Wegmann's and soon after he started then Joe worked with them. And then Joe went off to the army and when he came back he lived at Bert's Cabins for a little while. But I didn't realize he was in Deer River.

[Rommel goes to find Joe Pfeiffer's phone number.]

**AR:** When you were at Itasca did you have to spend a lot of time in the tower or were you past that stage and have other people do that?

**SR:** There were other people, but I'd go up. Fire season came on pretty sudden and they'd need somebody in a hurry. Sometimes I'd go down to Aiton Heights Tower and handle that while Swan was on leave or something. That was mostly to contact the public, it wasn't that great of a tower, really. It was the DeSoto Tower further south and Sugarbush to the northwest, and I forget what was over by Lake George.

[Rieger talks about her grandfather's work as a smoke chaser in northern Minnesota.]

**AR:** How would you describe your time in Itasca, looking back on it now?

**SR:** It was all good time.

**AR:** Did you enjoy working at Itasca better than other parks?

**SR:** I've enjoyed my job, no matter where it's been, so I can't say any one place is better than another. My best job was the last one I've had, which was land exchange appraisals. I was seventeen years at that and covered about the whole state. That's the most interesting job I've had.

**AR:** Anything else you'd like to talk about, about being a forester in Itasca or forestry in general?

**SR:** I'm disappointed that forestry isn't wearing the white hats they did when I was active. Now forestry is kind of a swear word to a lot of people. That disturbs me. I thought we were leading the conservation movement instead of being the black sheep because we cut trees.

**AR:** Were you involved at all when they created the National Wilderness Sanctuary at Itasca?

**SR:** It happened between the time I left the park as a ranger and the time I came back as a forester. I don't have a great deal of sympathy for it because I think managed forests are so much better than mismanaged or unmanaged forests. It hurts me to see a big dead white pine. It would make beautiful boards.

**AR:** Have you been to Itasca in the years since you've worked there?

**SR:** Not much. We were back just to drive through it three or four years ago, back when I could drive.

END OF INTERVIEW

Itasca State Park Oral History Project  
Minnesota Historical Society