

Long-Time Park Visitors and Campground Hosts

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Narrators**

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Interviewer**

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Itasca State Park, Lake Itasca, Minnesota**

AR: What are your names and how long have you been coming here to the park?

BE: I'm Bev Engel, I live in St. Peter, Minnesota. We've been campground hosts here for eleven years. We've enjoyed every month of our hosting program.

AR: I understand that you're coming back next year so you can say you've made it one year in the park.

BE: Lord willing we'll be here next year, too, if they want us!

AR: How long had you been coming to the park before you were campground hosts?

BE: I think two or three times that we camped here before we were hosts. That's why we decided that this would be our first choice when we made application.

AR: So not a continuous, yearly thing?

BE: No, we didn't have camping facilities for a number of years so we didn't do a lot of camping. We started out camping stringing a rope between two trees and throwing a blanket over it. That was in Waukon [phonetic] on Mille Lacs. That didn't last long. Wasn't very secure or warm and I had visions of a bear walking in on us, because there are bears there, too.

AR: Have you seen the bears that are here?

BE: We have seen our first bear in the park this year. We've seen bear outside the park but never inside until this year. There were always reports of bears, but a lot of times they figured they were raccoons.

AR: I saw two weeks ago up by Peacepipe a mother bear and three babies.

BE: While we saw just one single bear, but we saw a bear!

EE: Right across, between the bicycle trail and the campground entrance.

BE: Campground hosts from a number of years ago were telling us that their neighbors right across the road from where their site was wanted to see a bear so bad, so they went out on the Wilderness Drive and while they were gone a bear got up on their picnic table!

AR: Do you remember when the first time was that you used Itasca, when that was?

BE: We camped in Pine Ridge. The raccoons were just alive after dusk. I was even afraid to go to the bathroom because I wasn't acquainted with 'coons. I think that was the first experience.

AR: What were your impressions of the park the first time you came?

BE: I wanted to come back, I thought it was really nice. Although if I had been in Bearpaw first, that's my favorite of the two, I would have been more impressed if we'd been in Bearpaw and not Pine Ridge.

EE: We've done the passport twice when we've seen all the campgrounds, and this one has them all beat.

AR: Can you describe what makes this campground and this park in particular special?

EE: For one thing, it's full, always. And we've gone into some of them that were supposed to be really good ones and we're orphans.

BE: And they were pretty parks, nice parks. But this one seems to fill up. I suppose the headwaters is a big attraction and there are more things to do.

AR: What types of things did you do before hosting?

BE: All we did was camp and prepare our food and walk around a little bit and look it over. That was prior to bike trails and hiking trails and all those good things. We really didn't go to the nature programs until we were hosts. Actually I don't think we knew about them.

EE: No. Most of the parks don't even have them.

BE: We were in for maybe one night or two and that would be it and we'd be on our way again. After we were hosts we got all the knowledge we could about the naturalist programs and all.

EE: They've got Ben [Thoma] here. That makes the difference.

AR: In comparing Bearpaw to Pine Ridge, what makes you like Bearpaw better?

BE: Because it's by the lake.

EE: And there are nice trees. Pretty good chance of setting out in the sun over there. We got put over there once or twice because we couldn't get in there when we came.

BE: We got here early.

EE: And we were right out in the sun.

BE: We don't like to be out in the sun!

AR: This is a nice campground. How about the facilities in the campground? How have you seen them change? I know the garbage system has changed but then you have the [unclear] kitchen here.

BE: This is the only park I have seen that has that facility. You talk about garbage. When we first came here as hosts there were galvanized garbage cans by each camp site. All night long you could hear garbage cans tipping over, covers flying. The next morning everything was garbage. The 'coons.

EE: The first thing in the morning was go around and tip them up and put the garbage back in the cans.

BE: They finally provided us with rakes and scoops to scoop up the garbage. We were just getting in there and picking up.

EE: They didn't expect us to do it, but it would late in the day before they got here.

BE: It was terrible. It really looked cruddy, all the garbage lying around.

EE: And the campers were crowded in then.

BE: There were many more sites.

EE: If there is a difference now in the people then in what there was when they were crowded, when they were crowded they were more friendly than they are now. You could walk into any camp site with information or whatever you wanted and be greeted warmly. Now you go in and you have the feeling that they'd wish you'd drop dead. So you just kind of pick them. You can tell right quick

AR: That's too bad, maybe understandable, but too bad.

EE: I used to go out each night and carry a bag of information and pass it out. Quit that.

BE: Too much of it you found in the fireplace. So now if they want information they can come.

AR: Let's talk a little bit about how and why you decided to become campground hosts. You've set that you liked this park, so that's why you chose it. I don't know how the system works, if you just contact a park or is there advertising? How does it work?

BE: Well, at that time it was the DNR. The way we found out about it, was there was a little filler at the end of a newspaper column saying that the DNR was looking for volunteer hosts. So I showed it to Erv and he said, "Maybe we ought to try that." So I wrote in for an application and consequently got selected.

AR: By this time you were both retired? What did you do before?

EE: Manager for a retail lumber yard. 38 years.

AR: So you had a little bit of time on your hands...

BE: We just thought it would be an adventure and we had the time. The kids were all grown and we were free to do what we wanted to do.

AR: So you got your application, sent it back in and they contacted you at that point...

BE: Eventually. It took a long time. I just figured that we'd lost that one. I was quite surprised when we got a notice to come for an interview. You give three choices for parks, and we chose Itasca first. Fortunately we got it.

AR: Were you hosts that first summer then?

BE: Yeah. It was high school graduation time, so it was the next summer that we started. We didn't start that same summer.

AR: Did you have to go through any orientation or did they just plop you down here?

BE: Jack took us around and showed us where everything was.

EE: Actually we both learned. They only had one before, and that was a retired park manager. His son is the assistant manager now. He was here one year before we started.

BE: We got in on the second year of the program.

EE: I think the campground manager and us were both knew.

AR: So it was just a learn as you go?

EE: Last fall we went to Father Hennepin for two weeks...

BE: Over Labor Day, as hosts.

EE: They had one before but didn't know what to do and they didn't know the park.

BE: Well, they hadn't had the program other than the prior host. Steve, the manager, told me afterwards, "Boy, when you two came in and started telling us what you needed and wanted to do your job, I wondered what we had a hold of." I didn't know we came in like that. But he wants us back, so I guess we were all right. We were there over Memorial Day this year then.

AR: How did that experience, with it being a new program for them, how did that work compared to your first couple of years at Itasca?

EE: It was easy there. We knew what we had to do.

BE: We just did the same thing that we do here. Took care of the toilets and the grounds and the people. Visited with them as we went along and stuff. It was easy. Of course, it's a smaller campground, too, although there are two campgrounds there. We went to both of them and did the same thing.

AR: What are some of the other activities or jobs you do as campground hosts?

BE: Basically, the biggest thing that we do is take care of the toilets and the shower rooms and such between cleaning crews. Seeing that there is paper, that the toilets are all working. Mopping when necessary and this year there's been a lot of that because of the rainy weather. We just go in with a mop and go over it. Pick up around the campground when it's necessary. Talk to the people, which is not a hard job. You just say "hi" and if they want to visit with you, fine, you go ahead and visit. Otherwise you just leave them alone because some don't want to. It's not hard to tell which ones are going to want to converse and which ones aren't. Many of them ask about the hosting program. They keep saying, "When we retire, we're going to look into that."

AR: That will keep the program going, hopefully. In the eleven years you've been hosts, you've probably seen many changes. Can you describe them, both good and bad?

BE: When we first came the manager, the security patrol they all stopped to talk to us each time they would go through to see if we had any problems or if we needed anything. Now, we don't even know them. They don't stop and see us at all. We were on really good terms with a lot of the cleaning crew, too, and now we hardly ever see them. That change has come about for some reason.

EE: The old manager, when he retired about four years ago, [John Herhofsky (phonetic)] he'd walk through the campground himself. At least once a day, sometimes twice, and visit with people and so on and see that things were the way they ought to be. Now we've never seen the manager except once, he walked through the office when we were there.

BE: I wouldn't know him if I met him at all. That's too bad.

EE: They need to get out and see the people, too. We hear a lot from the campers, the old-timers, that they're not satisfied like they used to be. Of course, now they don't mow.

BE: We get a lot of comments about that.

EE: Everybody in the campground knows that we've got [unclear] lawn mowers. They don't like that.

AR: What are your feelings on that?

BE: It would look a lot nicer if it was mowed.

EE: John [Herhofsky] was here the other day, he lives in Lake George. After he went through here and saw it he went home sick and couldn't sleep. That's what his wife says, it was that bad. [Unclear] closed, Brower Inn closed. That's the gripe now.

BE: Yes, Brower Inn, that's a really bad one. So many people had gone there. You stop down for a sandwich or ice cream.

EE: Not having lifeguards or anything [unclear].

AR: Did there used to be lifeguards here?

BE: Years ago there was a lifeguard at the beach down there. But the people we've talked to don't complain about the lack of a lifeguard .

EE: I haven't heard anybody complain about not having lifeguards.

AR: That's pretty common at beaches now. But the closure of Brower Inn...

BE: That's a big subject now.

AR: Did that used to be a big hangout for people?

BE: Yeah, you'd stop by and have pie and coffee or ice cream or a sandwich or something, and now that facility just isn't there. And it's a lovely building looking out over the lake and all. It's a fun place to just visit.

EE: And it sure made money because it was busy.

BE: If you got guests and you wanted to take them for coffee, it was a really nice place to go. Now, where do you go? It is much more scenic than Douglas Lodge, for instance. You can't see the lake too well from there. It's always fun to sit and watch the water.

EE: They even had hummingbird feeders around the place.

BE: They used to have feeders at registration and Douglas Lodge and Brower Inn. Now there are no feeders and consequently no hummingbirds. Last time we had the hummingbird feeder up we took it down the day before we were to leave, and we were amazed at the number of little birds that came and there was no feeder. It was really sad because we didn't realize there were that many of them that were using it. We hosted in Maroon Dells in Colorado, ten miles west of Aspen, and 1600 feet up from Aspen and the hummingbirds were just wild there.

AR: Was that a state park there?

BE: It was a national forest.

AR: How did the national forest in Colorado compare with Itasca, if you can compare a state park to a national park?

BE: There's no way to compare. The altitude was high, there were three levels of the campgrounds, which you were always climbing up or going down.

EE: There were 14 toilets to clean. And that was our job. We were out there last year and I walked, and know they have a little golf cart with all the equipment on it. You walk those three campgrounds to get to the toilets carrying the supplies...

BE: Our duties were many more there, too. We had to make the rounds in the campgrounds twice a day. We had to do compliance with the ranger, we didn't handle any money, like we don't here, and we didn't assign sites, but we had to compare our findings from walking to the envelope that was thrown into the tube. So the responsibilities were much more. Not so much that you couldn't handle it, but the responsibilities were more.

AR: Have you visited any other state parks in other states?

BE: The one down there at Mission, that's about all.

EE: Rio Grande, too.

BE: Actually all we did was go through it, we didn't stay there. We don't know anything about their state system at all.

AR: Are there any other changes within the park that you haven't mentioned? How about the bike trail that went in the last couple of years?

BE : That was a good deal. They were riding on the roads.

EE: It's just too bad that they don't all use it.

BE: It was more dangerous on the road, in traffic. So now they have a place to ride their bikes. There are still accidents if people getting carried away with their speed. We don't bike them, though, so we don't know a whole lot about them. I've hike a few of them, but not too many.

AR: How about the naturalist programs? When you became hosts you made yourself really familiar with them. How have they gone and how have they changed, if they have?

BE: We haven't gone to any programs at all this year because there just didn't seem to be anything there. They used to be really interesting programs.

EE: At Forest Inn.

BE: Very enlightening, educational. It was very interesting. I felt bad that they had abolished that because I'm sure a lot of people enjoyed them. The Forest Inn was always filled with people when the program was on. It was nice.

AR: You just haven't noticed them this year?

BE: There haven't been any like that. I don't think Forest Inn has had very much going on there.

AR: It was supposed to, I know, but there were some scheduling problems so they moved a lot of them up to Brower Inn.

BE: A lot of people don't want to sit out in mosquitoes and the cool and the rain. The weather hasn't been too good.

EE: I think having it in that building down there meant a lot.

BE: Forest Inn. He was in CCC in the thirties...

AR: So he can appreciate it!

EE: We saw a CC camp the other day that's still standing. 707. It's over by Cass Lake.

AR: You mentioned that the park personnel don't come through as much. Are there still some of the old-timers that you see at all? I know Anita has been at campground registration for a long time.

BE: Anita has been there a long time. Linda's been there quite a while. Mary Ann has been there quite a while.

AR: But that aspect of the park has changed, too?

BE: It has changed, but it doesn't effect us in the park directly. When Rose left, that was a big blow. She had everybody going.

EE: Rose and Swede and the girl that died, Lois. They were fine people.

BE: And my friend, Loretta. She was on the cleaning crew. Now she's on registration or at the entrances. I've only seen her once now. Couldn't find her for about three weeks. I just didn't know where to look for her. Then one day we saw her; it was so nice.

AR: Have you had much contact with any other local residents in the area?

BE: We haven't met anyone.

EE: Jonesy and...

BE: While, they were former residents at the park. Two couples from Illinois bought acreage north of the park and they reside there in the summer. Well, Jonesy lives there in the summer and Sorbos come and go. They just left yesterday. So we see them each time we're up here, and there are several campers who have been here every year that we have, and long before. So we're meeting old friends when they come, that's always pleasant.

AR: I imagine it would be. That was my next question, about making lasting friendships here in the park. But you say it has changed.

BE: There were four, including us. The three had been here many, many years prior to the time that we came, so we just got adopted into their little group. It was nice.

AR: We've talked about how people aren't as friendly now, and other people have said that. It used to be the kids would get together and go biking and play or sit around the campfire...

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BE: After you're retired the kids are gone and it makes a lot of difference.

AR: Besides the fact that the sites are a little bit bigger but there isn't much interaction between them, do you like the campsites now the way that they've changed them, or did you like them when they were smaller and more of them?

BE: I liked it better when they were smaller.

EE: I liked it better when they were smaller and more of them. I liked it the way it was.

BE: There's no way to go back, though. You don't go back.

EE: You'd have to take out this road up here...

BE: There used to be a road up going up the hill, where the walk out sites are. They could drive up to their sites, then. Now you have to truck it. I don't know how happy they are about that. I don't think we've ever talked to any of them about it.

EE: The ones that are up there now don't know any different.

BE: That's true, but maybe they are old-timers.

EE: You don't see any old-timers up there. They're young people.

BE: That's true. Most of them are young people so they probably don't know it was once driveable.

EE: Those young people in a few years will be driving motor homes. Now they are camping, like we used the tarp or blanket ...

AR: Well, you pay your dues in the beginning, rough it, and get to the point where you deserve to have it more comfortable.

Is there any particular part in the park that you always want to go see? Like headwaters or Preacher's Grove, or do you have to see everything?

BE: I think it would be the headwaters. Our next door neighbors came last Sunday and we had to take them down to show them where the rocks weren't [because of the high water]. I didn't try walking the rocks, I waded it.

AR: Are there any park events that really stick out in your brain for the eleven years you've been coming? You mentioned the wagon train coming through for the centennial.

BE: The wagon train was a really big attraction. It was really exciting to see these wagon trains come in, people dressed in old costumes. It was really fun. We drove up from St. Peter to see it that day. Stood beside the road waving and they passed. It was really fun.

EE: At Peace Pipe Vista, saw them go by there.

AR: Are there any other things you'd like to add about how the park has changed, or your experiences as campground hosts?

BE: Well, we've had only one really unpleasant experience, otherwise we've had pleasant experiences. It was the first year we came and we didn't know exactly how to handle it and we learned a lot that one night.

AR: Can you describe that at all?

BE: Well, a motor home came in and parked right across the road from us. You'd never imagine the number of people that got out of that vehicle. And before long, there were motorcycles coming and they were all right there. There was an older man in the group who was intoxicated, and he started giving the little kids rides around the campground, crossing the sites, not staying on the road, which was dangerous. About nine o'clock at night they started. They had their booze out on their table, which is a no-no in a state park. In fact, you're not supposed to have any. We went over and told them they'd have to put it away, it wasn't legal, and that ten o'clock was sleepy time. It just got noisier and noisier and we couldn't do a thing about it.

EE: It got to the point where you didn't dare go out and telephone.

BE: They were violent. They tore up our host sign and threw that in the slough over there. Erv found it the next day.

EE: One of the campers said he saw him take it.

BE: We didn't know for sure if they had done it or not, but we were sitting out here the next morning. Erv went to the headquarters the next morning and they [unclear]. He brought the post and put it back. And a couple of guys were walking down the road from that group and said, "Well, look there. The post is back!" Then when they pulled out with their camper, we were sitting out there on the terrace. They had a PA system in their camper and they thanked us for being such wonderful hosts. I was really upset. Then I thought, well look who said it. Consider the source. It was a bad experience, but we've not had an experience like that again.

EE: The guard came over and said you be out of here by eleven o'clock, or you aren't going to get out. The sheriff would be here at eleven o'clock.

AR: But you came back the next year!

BE: Yes, we did. We learned what we should have done. We should have called the patrol right away, and we didn't. We just thought they'd settle down and gave them the benefit of the doubt. But you don't do that. They don't listen to you, you call the patrol.

EE: I called after 10:00 that night. I left the telephone and turned around and there he sat. He was just coming in when he got the radio call from the telephone call. He said, "Where is it?"

BE: I think that was probably the time that some campers came here and said that some people were using foul language and they had children that they didn't want to hear that kind of language. There have been times when we've had to go tell people that it's 10:00 and they have to be quiet, and they've complied. So it hasn't been a problem. We've still had fun.

AR: Where do you see the park going in the future? You've been here and seen it progressing...

BE: I'm sure if they don't get too high priced, if they don't keep raising their prices, there will be people camping because it's family-oriented, it's necessary and I hope that it continues that way.

AR: I've heard a couple times that the prices are getting too high.

BE: If you've got a big family you can't afford to go, so I think they do need to hold their prices. I realize that they have to have money to operate, too, but they should try to keep it down so people can come.

EE: I think they're going to have to start closing some of it, though, that doesn't pay for itself.

BE: That would be a shame, too.

EE: The ones that are making out need to support the ones that aren't.

AR: That's the general fund thing.

EE: Like Brower Inn. You need to allot money from St. Paul to run it.

BE: It seems like places that are making money should not be denied the funds to continue. Of course, I'm not running it! It may look different in the office.

AR: Can you reflect on your overall impressions or feelings on the park and its facilities and employees and location? Has it been a good eleven years?

BE: It's been a wonderful eleven years. Very good. We hope it's twelve.

AR: If you had to do it all over again would you?

BE and EE: Oh yes.

EE: We'd like to do it as long as we can. We'd like to get another year.

AR: Anything else you'd like to add?

BE: I don't think so.

AR: Well, thank you then.

Itasca State Park Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society