

Long-Time Park Visitors and Campground Hosts

Joe and Beverly Cunningham
Narrators

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Interviewer

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AR: Let's start out with your name and where you're from.

JC: I'm Joe Cunningham from Minneapolis, Minnesota. I'm a retired railroad man. My first trip to Itasca was in 1934, at which time I was 20 years old and very much involved with Boy Scout work. They had the [unclear] of scouting at Itasca. I came from a non-camping family, so Itasca meant absolutely nothing to me. I'd never even heard of the place before except I knew it was in northern Minnesota. So I rode up with four other men and we stayed at the University Forestry School, and I think that is now the park headquarters because it was on that side of the road and I notice that the Forestry School is now on the other side. A number of things are in Itasca now that were there at that time. Douglas Lodge was there and the observation tower had been built in the thirties and it was there. The cold water was there! I'm telling you, we went in swimming and it was like swimming in ice water, and it hasn't gotten any warmer over the years. We enjoyed it. Preacher's Grove was a couple inches shorter back then, but it's continued to grow.

AR: When you were there the first time was that still the picnic grounds?

JC: [unclear] was up in there and the picnic grounds were there. Actually, physically I don't see too much change. The walks were still there, the headwaters where people have been crossing the river for eons now. Everything is very much like what it was.

BC: Was Preacher's Grove marked like it is now? Did they have pretty much the same signs up there?

JC: I don't think so. They've probably done a lot more identifying now over the years.

AR: That used to be the regular Itasca picnic grounds, then they moved everything out of there when the CCC built the new campground. The picnic ground was moved up to the old campground, which was up by the museum, by the Wegmann store.

JC: That was in about '57 or '58 when we made our first family trip up there and they had mentioned earlier to my wife that where the campground was there was a store up

there, and also four or five cabins that could be rented. I don't know if they're still in existence or not.

AR: Was this at Bearpaw?

JC: Yes, Bearpaw. Of course, we pulled into Bearpaw that night and the place was crowded. There was no registration or anything and also in those days there was no designated place to camp in. You just pulled in and sat down wherever you felt like it.

AR: Did you have to pay a fee at that time to get into the park or to camp?

BC: I'm sure if you wanted to camp you had to buy a sticker.

JC: I remember going to the store and checking in and paying to get in. I think it was about two and a half or something like that.

BC: It wasn't very much. Just a couple of bucks.

JC: Of course, the evening campfires. You smell that smoke and it really got into her blood. She really loved that.

BC: There is something about them.

JC: Eventually we were out driving around the lake and spotted Bert's Cabins and we went in. Bert worked at the Forestry School for many, many years and he and his wife lived in one cabin. Then they built another and kept on building until they had seven cabins all together. His daughter now runs the place, although Bert now, in 1993, was still in good health and has been up there painting. The first time we were at Bert's Cabins was in 1968, so in other words we had been camping in tent and trailer from '58 to '68, so we'd probably been up here five or six times. I know we were up here one year at Camp Many Points. I looked at the map and saw you could get to Camp Many Points from the north or from Park Rapids. So we came from the north. Many Points was the Boy Scout camp there. It was a logging trail and we were driving along. It looked like some of those shows you see on television, down in Africa. Sliding all over the place. I was never happier in my life than to drive into the back end of a Boy Scout camp. We went back on the high road. When we were at Bert's she'd get a little nostalgic for the evening. We'd drive back over through a campground so she could smell the smoke.

BC: Although every year we were there we always take a ride all around the park. One thing we'd always enjoy doing is traditional, and that's to climb that high tower. I can still do it and I'm 76 and I get to the top. One thing that's being done, you have to walk at least a half a mile now to get from the parking area up to the tower. He's started out the walk and gave up and went back to the car.

AR: It's not an easy walk. It's uphill!

BC: A lot of it is uphill. One time we didn't get going until about 8:15, when it gets dark by 9:00. But I've laid down rules now that we go during the day and forget going at night.

JC: I figured mathematically that there must be 132 steps.

BC: It's 100 feet high.

JC: I used to be able to drive within 100 or 200 feet of the tower, to a little parking area similar to what they have now.

BC: I wonder why they changed it. Maybe because they'd have to keep up the road better.

AR: I think that had something to do with it, plus the number of people that were up there and the cars that were near. They didn't think it was working as well as it should be.

JC: It cuts down the number that go there, like me.

BC: Well, maybe they wanted that to happen. I don't know how old that tower is, but I bet it's been there a long time.

AR: CCC era.

JC: I got to the last hill, and then I got to thinking. "I'm going to get over this hill, and then there's going to be that tower, another 100 foot up. I'm going to turn around and go back, I've had my daily constitutional."

BC: One thing we noticed this year were the mosquitoes. I don't know when they've been so bad. Have you noticed that?

AR: Yes, and it's because there's been so much water up there. I don't know when you were up there, but about two weeks ago they had five inches of rain overnight. It washed out the south entrance road. The headwater rocks were all underwater. It's gone down now finally.

BC: This was the first year I didn't go to the headwaters, but Joe did. I guess I was getting hungry. I climbed that tower and was ready to go. Bob wanted to go but John wanted to stay. You went over there, but I thought that I'd seen it so many times that I could miss it one year. [Bob and John are their children].

AR: I'd like to go back to that first trip in 1934 before we go on a little bit more with Bert's Cabins. You were at the Forestry School. I believe the changes you were talking

about with the road being different may be because the road used to go through the station and now it just goes around it.

JC: That would fool me. That could be, I was going by which side the road was on.

AR: When you were up there in '34, there were several CCC camps in the park. Do you remember seeing any of the boys out working in the forest?

JC: Yes. They were cutting trails. They also had the Eagle Trail. Eagle Scouts would walk to Itasca every year, and they were also trail building. I never went on that particular thing. They went up for about ten days and work in the morning building a trail and in the afternoon they'd have open for recreation. So was the CCC, building a lot of trails and doing a lot of work.

AR: You were up there for a scouting training session.

JC: Yes.

AR: While you were up there did you happen to ever come across or meet the Teddy Wegmann or go to the Wegmann store?

JC: There was a store down at Bearpaw and there was another one up at this end here. Out in front he had a huge wheelbarrow.

BC: You're thinking about the Trading Post.

JC: Oh, that was the Trading Post.

BC: Wegmann's store, Joe, was a little log cabin. It had been a store, but it looked like a log cabin.

AR: That's what he started out with. A log cabin that was a store and post office, but then it turned into quite an operation and it was in operation until, I believe he died in 1941.

JC: I know they had to move out. They couldn't have any private property on the park property. They moved across the road, I believe. The post office has been discontinued.

BC: Have you seen that post office up there?

AR: Which one?

BC: It's behind the store that's the Trading Post. Our son noticed that the Post Office was gone. It was always the Post Office at that store, right outside the park. The Post Office has been there the last twenty years, I guess, and here they did away with that in

October. But then this lady at the store whose lived in that area all her life was telling us that the old Post Office out behind the store, a old log cabin. She mentioned how it was settling, and, boy, it really was settling. But it kind of reminds you of the Wegmann store, too. I didn't even know that that had existed until this time when we were up there and then she told us.

JC: There was a trading post where you come in on the north entrance, and that's the one I'm talking about. They have this huge wheelbarrow out there, and it had a big truck tire as the wheel on the wheelbarrow. The kids would always climb up on that. I think those are the people that moved from there across the road. Was that the Wegmann's?

AR: The Wegmann store was basically very close to where they have the replica now. It was up back a little ways maybe.

BC: It's up near the headwaters, but not too far off the park road that you drive. You have seen it, Joe, two or three times.

AR: I was just curious if you happened to go up there, but if you used the Trading Post then that would take care of your needs.

JC: When we were there we had all our meals at the school and were pretty well occupied we were there. We did take a few side trips, like the tower and the Grove and Douglas Lodge, you know.

[Long discussion about how Itasca is the jewel of the state parks, and of how they have visited other Minnesota state parks and will come back to Itasca.]

JC: It would be cheaper to go elsewhere, Bert charges \$70 a night...

BC: ...for each cottage. It's expensive, but it's worth it. One thing at Bert's is the swimming pool which the kids just love. They live in that pool. And they enjoy the fishing at Lake Itasca, they rented a boat.

AR: Okay. From 1934 until you went back in 1957, had you visited the park at all?

JC: No.

AR: What made you decide to come back to Itasca then?

JC: I had been up there in '34 and knew how beautiful it was. I think Itasca and Gooseberry are the two top parks.

[Continuing discussion about other trips to other state parks and where their children live in relation to the parks.]

BC: Back in our early days of camping they had a lot of things that they don't have now, at all of the state parks. Economically I suppose they had to cut back. But they would have kitchens open with running hot water. Either take your dishes up and do them in the sink at the kitchens or bring the water back down and do them at your table. That was really a nice feature. They had showers at Interstate. Then if it rained, there were picnic tables up in the building so you could take your food up there.

JC: When we started camping, I bought this camping trailer and when we'd go to the campground we were the only one on the entire campground that didn't camp in tents. Everybody else was tent campers. And they'd come up and look at the trailer and, boy. What had happened was I bought that trailer from the fellow who built it himself out of marine plywood and a fifteen gallon water tank. We had it for at least ten years.

BC: We had it for fifteen years, then we had the Bethany trailer for ten years, so we did camping for twenty-five years. Fifteen was with our own children and the last ten years was with grandchildren.

AR: Going back to 1934, you mentioned the first trip to the park [unclear] lodge. Can you describe what it was like then?

JC: I can remember it just as it is now. I think that's one of the nice things about Itasca is that it's changed very little except they've manicured it a bit. But the lodge was there and the bathing beach was there with its cold water.

AR: Talking about the store that was in the campground, am I correct in saying that you'd go there and buy ice, and ring the bell? Do you remember that?

JC: Yes. They had a screened-in enclosure to clean your fish in over there and they had an icehouse as I recall. And they had milk and break and stuff like that. This was as you come into Bearpaw. I think they had five cabins, and we lived in one of them one time with the idea of renting it, but a log cabin like that is so dark. It's like having a house that's paneled with wood that's dark. We passed that up, then we did find Bert's and started going to Bert's. We were down to two kids by that time, Jim and Terry. Tomorrow I'm going to see if I can find any movies from Bert's in 1968, the first year we were up there.

We did a lot of camping. Upstairs I have a log...and the trailer, on one of the panels when you opened it up, I wrote on that and I'd listed every trip. Before I sold it I made a copy of it. It was so fun because we'd get together and say, "Where do you want to go? How about Whitewater, Gooseberry, Taylor's Falls?" We camped 99 nights in Taylor's Falls.

AR: So you liked Bert's Cabins?

JC: Yes.

AR: What is it about the cabins and the whole area that you like so much that you've been going back?

JC: First we like the people, that's one of the main things. At so many of these resorts they've got signs everywhere -- do not do this, do not do that. I know this new resort we're considering, one problem is you can't have more than five people to a cabin. With Bert's, sometimes people would come up there with six or seven kids. They'd have a place for them and there was no extra charge.

BC: The cabin we had had three bedrooms and a hide-a-bed in the living room.

JC: The nice thing about it was the pool. The parents can sit down there and watch them and coach them. We have a thing called "Swimming for Dollars", "Diving for Dollars." I look over and see what they are deficient in. These little kids weren't very deficient in anything, they were great little swimmers. [Talk about how well they're grandchildren can swim and dive.]

BC: We should mention that we took Joe's brother from Chicago, Gene, and his wife up to Bert's Cabins and all around the park. Barb and I waded across the Mississippi up there. This was maybe four, five years ago.

JC: We also took my mother up there. I had a brilliant idea. I had a reel to reel tape recorder. I set it outside on the picnic bench with a microphone -- it was on a timer. At about 4:30 in the morning it came on and it would pick up the beautiful bird noises. But when I woke up and played it back you couldn't hear anything! But it was a good idea. So I kept the tape recorder out there and recorded my mother as she talked, clearing up a few things about family history...

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AR: You've probably gotten to know Bert fairly well being there. What type of person do you think he is?

BC: He's a very nice man. Very polite, kind.

JC: Very laid back. We like his daughter, Pat. The first night we were at Bert's, we were at the house talking to him and the telephone rang. Nobody in the world knows where we are at except ourselves. Bert turns around and says, "It's for you." I went over and it was [our son] Jim. He was at the trading post. He was about sixteen and he'd taken the car. Well, in front of the trading post was one of those logs that if you hit it, you've gone too far. He hit the front end of the radiator and loosened it up and water was pouring out. So we had to go over and take the radiator out. And Mrs. Bert was going in to Park Rapids, and on the way in to Park Rapids there was a sign that said "Radiator Repair." So we left the radiator there, did some shopping, went to dinner, and came back, picked up the radiator, went back and put it back on again.

BC: I should tell you what happened to us this time. It was really a nightmare. I had made an ice cream bucket full of chocolate chip cookies, then I had a Tupperware thing with bars in. You don't have a lot of counter space in cabins, so I decided to store them in the oven. The way we work is we each have a night to get supper for the whole group. The second night was [daughter] Terry's night, and she decided to cook in our cabin since we were in the middle [of the three cabins]. She had spaghetti and French bread which she had to head up. So she turned on the oven, and when she opened up the oven it was all on fire. Flames shooting up, plastic melting all over the oven. Our son remembered seeing a fire extinguisher on the post, so he dashed out and got that and put the flames out. So then we were struggling with this hot plastic which was hardening up. We got everything out we could, and then decided we had to get better tools than we had to get it out of there. So I confessed to Pat what had happened. She gave us putty knives, and I asked for rags. We worked for two or three days getting that plastic out. We finally used a razor blade to get every spic of it out, but everything was working fine when we left.

JC: It seems every time we went up there we ran into disaster, although it had nothing to do with Itasca. One year we were going up with our oldest son, his wife and two little children. He said, "Mom, Dad, you've never ridden in a good car." He had just bought a Mercedes-Benz. We got about ten miles from the south entrance and the car rolled to a stop. We turned into a place and a bunch of young fellows worked on it and got it going and we got up to Bert's. The next day we went into Park Rapids and to put in new plugs and new points. And the guy said, "We've got a problem. There aren't any plugs in town for this type of car." So they cleaned up the old ones and put them back in. When we left we headed back home and got to St. Cloud and the car rolled again to a stop. This time it was the transmission. We were so happy to get back to our house and see our poor old wreck sitting there.

AR: Besides Bert, did you come into contact with any of the other park employees, or was it just basically him?

BC: I don't think so. The only employee we ever meet is at the gate when you give them your money.

JC: We do like the sessions down at Douglas Lodge. The nature films and things like that.

BC: And the restaurant they have down there is kind of nice, too. We did have lunch or supper down there once. That's kind of nice to have. I was kind of sad when the Brower Inn was closed. That was too bad, they must not have had good enough business. With that restaurant up at Douglas Lodge, maybe they only need one restaurant in the park.

JC: But for someone to come in and set up for three months out of the year...

AR: ...It would be hard to make a profit I think.

BC: Bert had two girls helping him this summer. One lived there all the time and one that went back and forth.

AR: You spoke about some of the programs you go to see in the Douglas Lodge area and Forest Inn. Have you seen a big change, or can you describe the development of the naturalist programs, or have they remained pretty steady?

BC: I think they've remained kind of steady. We haven't been now for a few years. We did stuff more like that when we camped, except for the time we did run into the people who were working as taxidermists. At the cabin there we play games at night and entertain ourselves. I know at Whitewater they have nature hikes. I don't know if they have them at Itasca.

AR: Oh, they do. Some of them are during the day.

BC: They did have some cabins once in the campground [at Bearpaw]. We did look at them but they were pretty miserable. It was so dark and there wasn't much to them. That's why we started looking at Bert's Cabins; we didn't like the ones on the campground.

AR: You've been going to Itasca for years and years, can you pinpoint one thing or a couple of things that have really made you want to go back?

JC: When we go down to Sunset Point...

BC: The beauty of the place. There's a lot to see and do. We kind of do the same things each year but still it's kind of fun to go back and do that.

JC: Plus the late evening nature ride. We go around the lake. We've always been able to scare up a couple of deer. But for the kids it's the anticipation. They're just sure they're going to see something, but they've got to be watching.

BC: I guess it's a place you like your grandchildren to see when they're growing up. It's really worth going up there.

JC: We also have a deep appreciation for Schoolcraft and his men. We look at that forest primeval and imagine them cutting their way through that forest. The park was 100 years old [in 1991]. Back in the 1800s there was a lot of romance in finding the source of the Nile and the source of the Mississippi. What amazes us is we go into Bemidji and drive across the Mississippi River and we realize and remember that it flows north out of Itasca.

AR: Is there anything else you'd like to say about Itasca or staying at Bert's cabin all these years. I think it is really an accomplishment and something special that you have been coming there for so long.

BC: I haven't thought about it that way, but it is a place we've always liked and have tried to get our children and grandchildren to see it and other relatives because it is unique to the country.

JC: I guess you can close by saying we'll be back.

Itasca State Park Oral History Project
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