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Review of: Oral History Interview with Robert G. Stanton

Polly Welts Kaufman

University of Southern Maine, polly.kaufman@maine.edu

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Oral History Interview with Robert G. Stanton. Conducted by JANET A. MCDONNELL. Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2005, http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/director/index.htm

The interview of Robert G. Stanton, the first and only to date African-American director of the National Park Service, by NPS Bureau Historian Janet A. McDonnell is part of the agency's Park History Program. Not only is it an exemplary oral history of a public official, it is also a story of the kind of talent that the Park Service has developed with positive affirmative action programs. It should be of interest to practitioners of public history as well as to historians and citizens concerned with the past, present, and future of the National Park Service.

Stanton's forty-year career with the Park Service began when Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall sent recruiters to historically black colleges to offer male students positions as seasonal rangers. Stanton and William Kincaid became the first African-American rangers at Grand Teton National Park in 1962, two years before the Civil Rights Act. In the interview Stanton explains how he helped Udall understand why some of the men who accepted positions did not arrive at their posts. The Park Service expected each man to pay for his own transportation, uniform, and expenses before it issued his first pay check. Most of the black men who were recruited did not have such resources, including Stanton, who had to co-sign a note with a prominent white farmer in his Texas community. During his whole career, Stanton continually showed Park Service officials what steps they needed to take in order to succeed in recruiting and holding African-American personnel.

The three lengthy interviews are presented as three chapters carefully edited by Stanton. It is a remarkable career beginning with the support of his parents who joined other black parents in Mosier Valley, Texas, to successfully petition the courts for a new school under the "separate but equal" doctrine in 1950. After graduating from college, Stanton found support from his earlier contacts at Grand Teton when he became a permanent employee serving as a personnel assistant in Washington. As a GS-9 in 1966, Stanton believes he was the highest-ranked African American in the NPS Washington headquarters. He notes the irony of having the NPS manage national monuments to black leaders before there were African-American NPS managers. George Washington Carver National Monument was authorized in 1943, Booker T. Washington National Monument in 1956, and Frederick Douglass National Monument in 1962. It took the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, established to help implement the 1964 Civil Rights Act, to open up opportunities for African Americans in the Park Service.

Stanton believes that he witnessed the "maturing" of the Park Service as the agency developed a new historic consciousness able to "recognize some of our mistakes with the hope that we can learn and grow from them" (14). He cites Manzanar National Historic Site and the Selma to Montgomery Na-

tional Historic Trail as examples. During his tenure as director, he was particularly interested in new parks that reflected the struggles of African Americans. He notes that the Little Rock Nine honored in Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site were his contemporaries and that his parents had engaged in similar struggles to those commemorated in Brown vs. Board of Education National Historic Site. He also worked with NPS historians to deal with the issue of slavery then missing from the interpretation of most of the Civil War battlefields.

The core of Stanton's experience was his four tours of duty in the National Capital Region beginning as an assistant director in 1966 and ending as regional director in 1988. It was during those periods that he learned the importance of a bipartisanship approach to members of Congress who he believes all have "a genuine interest in the parks" (27). Stanton was the first NPS director to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

Among the most difficult times in his career was being part of the working group to reorganize NPS staffing as a result of the program to reduce the size of the federal workforce led by Vice President Al Gore. Although the Park Service was required to reduce its staff by 1,100 full-time positions, the working group came up with a plan to reduce the effect on skilled individuals by assigning them to positions in the parks and new support offices.

As director from 1997 to 2001, Stanton put together all his previous experiences as a seasonal ranger at Grand Teton, superintendent at Virgin Islands National Park, and director of National Capital Region. There were plenty of challenges. Publicity about a \$700,000 comfort facility at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area led to a congressional investigation and an outside evaluation of the Park Service's planning, design, and construction program. He convinced Dr. John Hope Franklin to chair the National Park Advisory board and organized Park Service scientists and resource managers to tackle a National Resource Challenge. At the end of his interview Stanton spoke of the necessity for the Park Service to work outside of park boundaries with local communities and agencies to improve the quality of the environment surrounding the parks.

The Stanton interviews can be considered a model for an oral history of a public official. The only caveat is the inconsistent use of captions under the photographs. Several are incomplete, perhaps out of necessity, but the captions should indicate the position of the individuals in each picture. Hopefully the Park History Program will continue its work and also include interviews with Park Service notables in a variety of fields.

POLLY WELTS KAUFMAN

University of Southern Maine, Portland