

‘I had to earn my way’

Ranger Jan Kirwan: An interview with folklorist Lilli Tichinin

Jan Kirwan's career with the National Park Service spanned 27 years, five parks and experience in interpretation, wildland and structural fire, resource management, EMS and law enforcement. All along she pushed herself to learn new skills. During an interview at Ranger Rendezvous in 2014, Jan shared a snippet from her career at Everglades — beginning as a seasonal in the early 1980s and then as a permanent employee from 1987 to 1998 — and the prejudice and misconceptions that she encountered as a pioneering female ranger in the world of land management law enforcement.

Kirwan: While working as a dispatcher in Everglades and trying to move forward in my career after attending seasonal law enforcement academy, the then chief ranger came into the dispatch center after learning that I planned on applying for a LE ranger job at the Tamiami Ranger Station. After a short discussion, the chief told me that he would not hire a female ranger because “things happen in those hunting camps that no woman should be exposed to.” I reminded the chief that I grew up with folks who had hunting camps and occasionally they would take kids from the neighborhood with them while they prepared for the upcoming hunting season. The chief remained adamant that he would not hire a female ranger.

Several years later I returned to my “home” park, having been hired by a forward-thinking supervisory ranger, who transferred shortly after I arrived at the Tamiami Ranger Station. The position I was offered was split interpretation/law enforcement that was soon converted to full-time LE. Now, first and foremost I had to learn the skills most critical to my job — how to operate an airboat, our primary patrol vehicle under all conditions and in all circumstances. My problem was my acting supervisor and co-worker was unwilling to train the “girl” ranger beyond the bare minimum of skills. The local hunting community stepped up and taught me how to run an airboat like a hunter, a skill that was invaluable to working the backcountry. I learned how to work hunting by sitting around the fire at the game check station, out of uniform and off duty. I learned the ins and outs of legal take but also many of schemes outlaw hunters would use to try to trick rangers and game wardens. Throughout my career I learned that I had to earn my way, overcome perceptions that came along with being a female ranger, to get folks to understand that I was capable, I can do it!



Jan Kirwan

Tichinin: I saw that you’ve done a lot of additional trainings outside the NPS. What made you do that?

Kirwan: I always wanted to make sure that I had the best skills possible. I didn’t want anyone to say that something happened because I couldn’t do what I was supposed to do and make it harder for the next female ranger to come along after me. It was always a challenge and a battle to prove myself not just as a ranger, but as a female ranger.

This is sort of funny! While at Tamiami I was sent to a DEA marijuana detection and eradication course on the west coast of Florida. The course announcement stated that business attire was required for the classroom sessions, two days. I showed up in a nice skirt and was almost immediately met with comments from my male classmates, comprised of state, county and local officers from the surrounding communities, regarding my attire. I quickly overheard comments about there being a “girl” in the course, and during the first break received questions like, “You know you’re going to have to get dirty don’t you?” and “I can take you to Kmart so you can get some clothes to go outside in.” I quickly figured out that staying quiet would be my best course of action. Let my skills speak for themselves later in the course.

The rest of the first day and the second day of the course continued with similar comments directed to me. During a lunch break, the DEA course coordinator asked me if everything was okay. I told him that I was fine, that I had heard

similar comments before. He then asked me what it was I did for a living. I replied, “I’m a park ranger.” He then asked specifically what it is I did, which is when I told him, “I run an airboat in the Big Cypress and Everglades pretty much exclusively conducting hunting patrols and resource management work in the swamp.” Laughing, the agent asked me if I had told anyone what I did. I said, “No!” He laughed again, and then said, “This is going to be fun!” After reviewing aerial reconnaissance and uncovering suspect plantings we prepared for the next day’s field operations. Some of my classmates offered to let me work with them if I was scared during the field exercises.

The first day of field exercises, I dressed in my best “go to work in the swamp” clothing and gear. I received some surprised looks. The course coordinator then split the participants into two teams and much to my surprise, made me the captain of team one. My most vocal challenger from the previous days of class was made the captain of team two. After receiving our mission briefing from the DEA agent in charge, I took my team aside and shared some simple swamp survival skills: which plant indicates deep water, which plant shallow water and just what to expect from a cottonmouth should they run across one. I explained to my team what my job consisted of on a daily basis. My team members just laughed and said, “Cool, you know this stuff.” By the end of the field exercises that included sweat, some swearing and lots of laughing and mud, we pulled and hauled out a couple of hundred plants back to the road and met up with the other team.

We learned that most of the other team never left the road, too afraid to walk into the swamp to go after their targets. The other team leader remained very quiet, clearly embarrassed by his assumption of the “girl’s” skills and abilities. When the other team learned of my background as a “swamp ranger,” most had a good laugh while others seemed to remain stoic in their beliefs of my limitations as a “girl ranger.” Maybe I was just a bit evil by not toting my skills the very first thing, but sometimes it’s just best to stay quiet, be a ranger and do what you do best. 🛶

Retired from the Park Service, Jan Kirwan is superintendent of Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park in New Mexico. Lilli Tichinin, an intern with the Park History Program in Washington D. C., received a Supernaugh Scholarship to attend the Rendezvous in 2014.