

ANPR has ‘given me my career’

Ranger Wendy S. Lauritzen: An interview with historian Lu Ann Jones

Careful planning and serendipity account for Wendy S. Lauritzen’s National Park Service career. After her introduction to the Service in 1975 when she worked on a Student Conservation Association summer trail crew in Rocky Mountain National Park, she went on to become an interpreter, park ranger, chief of education and visitor services, and management assistant at sites as disparate as Independence National Historical Park and the Northwest Alaska Areas. In 2003 she was named superintendent at Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, and five years later she was tapped to lead Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. Along the way she detoured to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management. She has been a delegate to International Ranger Federation congresses.

How did Lauritzen build a successful career from one position to the next? That was among the first questions I asked during an interview conducted in 2013 for the ANPR Oral History Project. Lauritzen gave ANPR much of the credit, and recalled attending her first Ranger Rendezvous in 1982 while a seasonal ranger at Great Smoky Mountains National Park. She’s been a regular ever since.

Lauritzen: I got involved with ANPR because we’d been doing a lot of overtime but the park couldn’t pay overtime. So even though you worked lots of overtime cases, you just didn’t get paid for it.

And one day my boss said, “Hey, there’s a whole bunch of rangers getting together. Fill out a leave slip and I’ll sign it. Make it for the whole week, because it’s a weeklong thing. If we get back and nothing happens, I’ll tear it up. (laughs) But if we get hurt, you’re covered.”

So 22 of us left the Smokies and went to a Ranger Rendezvous near Shenandoah. There were all these people in Park Service, and different grade levels. But at the time, most of us were lower graded. There were seasonals; there were people who were permanent. And it was just a really good time.

At a Rendezvous somewhere along the line, I heard Mike Finley — he had become superintendent at Yellowstone — talking about, “Well, if I’d known all the stuff that the superintendent needs to know, I would have learned more about this (field of expertise).” And he said, “You need to know about human resources, and you need to know about



maintenance because that’s where the money is and that’s where the problems are. So know administration, know budget and know maintenance. But the truth is, you need to know all the divisions’ work.” He wasn’t even directing that conversation to me; I just overheard it. (So I started) digging into all that stuff. I got into everybody’s business at points along my career.

ANPR is what’s given me my career because of what I’ve learned to read between the lines, because of the conversations you have at events like this (Ranger Rendezvous). If I were to look at the training the Park Service has provided for me, that would not have done it. It’s only because I knew what to pursue because I’d been coming to these events (Ranger Rendezvous). And if somebody in the Park Service told me “no,” then I’d find a way to do it with or without them. ANPR has taught me you can do it inside or outside of the boundaries. But don’t let “no” stop you. Keep going.

Too many times now I see people who get stuck because, “Well, Park Service didn’t give

me this training.” And since they didn’t give it to me, I’m letting them stop my entire career? No. (laughs) So I would say ANPR has been extremely important to me.

Jones: So could you talk some about just that role of mentoring in your career? Or do you see yourself as a mentor to other people?

Lauritzen: To me, ANPR as an organization has done more in mentoring than specific individuals. Sometimes I have sought out specific people because I want to learn a particular skill. But for me it’s been more serendipitous than it has been “this is my mentor.” Sometimes you hang onto your mentors too long. There have been times that I also realize that they were a good mentor for maybe a couple of years for these particular reasons, and there’s a time to let go. So it’s realizing when those breaks are.

Jones: If younger rangers talk to you now about trying to build a career in the Park Service, what kind of advice do you give them these days?

Lauritzen: First of all, I ask them what it is that they’re wanting. One of the gals who’s here, she had somebody who advised her to call me. And I was trying to ask her what it was that she was wanting. And at the same time, I was trying to look at the picture of how hard is it to get into the agency, what’s happening with downsizing and all that. So my role was to ask enough questions that she knew that she was assessing risks. And while I advised her one way, she took another. I take no offense in that because she was assessing it for her needs. But I feel like she had an informed decision. So I do get into career advice. But I don’t expect people to take the same path I did. 🏠

Wendy Lauritzen serves on the board of ANPR. Lu Ann Jones is a staff historian with the NPS Park History Program in Washington, D.C.

The oral history project is financed by the Rick Gale Memorial Fund. You can continue Rick’s legacy with a tax-deductible donation. Please visit www.anpr.org/donate.htm.