

‘People wear the uniform every work day’

Bill Halainen

interviewed by
Lu Ann Jones

Bill Halainen is perhaps best known as a writer and editor on behalf of park rangers. He edited *Ranger* magazine from 1982 to 1993, created and edited both the email and web-based versions of the *Morning Report* from 1986 to 2015, and also edited the front page of *InsideNPS* from 2002 to 2015. As a co-founder of the International Ranger Federation, Halainen edited the IRF’s original publications, too. But one of his most satisfying – and challenging – jobs was managing the National Park Service uniform program when he worked in the Ranger Activities Division in Washington from 1985 to 1994. Here’s how Halainen described the demands of the position and reflected upon the importance of the uniform when Lu Ann Jones interviewed him in 2013.



HALAINEN: Depending on the time of year, we had up to about 20-some-odd-thousand people in uniform. I used to say that there were at least 20,000 people who were willing to tell you how to run the program and had no hesitation in calling you up to tell you. It was interesting. It was like walking around with a lightning rod in a thunderstorm most of the time.

JONES: What were they complaining about?

HALAINEN: Everything, everything. I used to think about that, why is this such a hot program? Well, somebody pointed out to me – people wear the uniform every work day. It relates closely to both how they feel about the agency and how they feel about themselves. It’s something that’s there all the time, so it becomes very strongly associated with the NPS. So a lot of times feelings about something else go through that. Plus people just are very personal about clothes.

Ask me about women’s sizes. I never want to have to deal with that again – because sizing a woman is – you know, I was a guy, what do I know? That’s a whole wilderness to get into. So there is a whole array of issues, but people really got worked up about a lot of them.

The solution to some of the specific issues a particular group was concerned about was to enlist some of them to participate in a work group to come up with solutions. That’s what happened with women’s clothes issues, lifeguard issues, several others.

JONES: So what were the variables, type of fabric or cost?

HALAINEN: Yes – both. We had about 160 contract line items in the program, so that’s a lot of components. Somebody’s pointed out, if you have that many, you’re not being uni-formed anymore; you’re being vari-formed. But people wanted them because we have such an array of things that we do. I had a request for a uniform mu-mu for American Samoa. I said, “No, guys, you can work that one out yourself.” So there’s that.

There’s the cost. People thought it was too expensive, but it wasn’t. It was reasonable for what they were getting. There were always quality issues. There was also sizing issues, patterns. There were all things that came like that.

But as I say, it was always an interesting program to run. I was blessed by the fact that my predecessor went over to the contractor; revolving door a little bit, but she was absolutely brilliant, Linda Balatti, and

1918-40s

Due to the lack of official guidance, early Park Service women wore whatever the park superintendent or their own whim dictated.

NPS art: Gilbert B. Cohen, artist



1970s

The 1970 uniform regulations pertaining to women brought forth a plethora of uniforms. Not only did the female rangers now have their own distinctive dress for formal occasions, but for the first time there was a whole range of other clothing for their different functions.

so I had a contact on the other side who knew the program as well as I did.

So we were able to move on a lot of changes, meet expectations, add a lot of things to the program. It was fun. I'll tell you what, though, setting and enforcing uniform standards was really tough.

JONES: Tell me more about that, who ultimately sets that, how they enforce that.

HALAINEN: That really gets down to the decentralized agency, because you can set any kind of standard you want at the national level, but if the superintendent doesn't enforce it at the park level, it's not going to happen, because the regional director is not going to sit on the superintendent, except in rare occasions. It would happen now and then. A lot of superintendents really were indifferent to uniforms, period.

Now, I'll tell you one of the things that's really changed in the organizational culture, for better or worse, but when I came in the service, most of the senior managers were vets and they knew how to wear the uniform. They had worn it in the military. They had come out of World War II or Korea, sometimes Vietnam, and they were very particular about it, and they made sure everybody else was.

That's not the case now, and I think that really is one of the essential reasons why appearance isn't what it used to be. It is now, but selectively.

The Park Service does a really good job, though, in the place where it should do a good job, and that's in the high visitor contact areas. If you go down on

the National Mall, you'd better have rangers that look good. If you're at an event with the Old Guard, the 3rd Infantry, as we do in a lot of special events, you've got to look as good. You're not going to look as good as they are, but you need to try. If you're out there with the President of the United States, by god, you need to look good. You can't have a warped hat brim and stains on your uniform.

I think that the problems with uniform appearance present a very good example of the programs that come with agency decentralization in general. The director can stand up there and say that you will wear the uniform this way, but unless she or he enforces it, it's not going to happen.

JONES: So by standards, would it be how it's cleaned, how it's pressed, in terms of size, if it fits correctly?

HALAINEN: Do you wear a tie with a tie tack? Do you have things polished? Do you have a flat hat that has a warped brim or do you have one that's on straight and looks good. Do you have your collar insignia on and in the right place?

People say, "Well, that doesn't matter." Well, it does. Uniformity is what it's all about. When you have a bunch of rangers together and they all look different and some are dressed poorly, it tells you something about the organization. If they look, in military terms, strack, if you take a look at the Park Service Honor Guard, those guys are strack, and that tells you something about the agency, that the agency really cares.

After Halainen retired in 2007 he became a contract writer and editor for Inside NPS and the Morning Report for another eight years.

Lu Ann Jones is a staff historian for the Park History Program in Washington, DC.



1980s

The 1980s brought the women into the mainstream of the National Park Service by furnishing them all the various uniforms needed to accomplish their mission. Plus a couple of extras not authorized for men. Notably, skirts and maternity clothing.