

A ranger's work can be 'very hard on a family'

Ranger Butch Farabee: An interview with historian Lu Ann Jones

In the 1970s, **Charles R. "Butch" Farabee Jr.** epitomized National Park Service rangers ready to respond to any emergency. One striking photograph from that era features Farabee outfitted in diving gear perched on a bale of marijuana retrieved from an icy lake at Yosemite. He exudes bravado. Long before he retired from Glacier the last day of 1999, Farabee served as emergency services coordinator for the Park Service and received the Harry Yount Lifetime Achievement Award.

Yet, Farabee would be the first to admit that the demands and allure of being a ranger can take a toll on families. On any list of accomplishments, he places at the top raising two sons. During an interview conducted in 2012 for the ANPR oral history project, he talked forthrightly when the interview with historian Lu Ann Jones took a personal turn.

Jones: In a number of ranger memoirs I've read people allude to the fact that the Park Service can be hard on families.

Farabee: Oh, Jesus, yes.

Jones: I don't want to pry, but at the same time it is part of the culture that people have to (deal with).

Farabee: No, no. It's a terrible, terrible (strain). It's probably not quite so bad now. The Park Service, maybe society in general, is starting to recognize that it takes two to tango, you know.

In my day, in the summertime in a place like Yosemite, you could easily go to work at noon and not get off until six the next morning. And you wouldn't get paid for the overtime, as a rule — occasionally, but as a rule, no — and that's just what you did. Well, that's very hard on a family.

I remember my oldest son Lincoln, for a number of years, when he was about 3, 4, 5, 6, I guess, he'd hear a jet plane or some thunder and he'd just start screaming and screaming and screaming. I wasn't smart enough to figure it out. But finally my wife did: every time the helicopter came into Yosemite Valley, you've got these walls, (and they would) be reverberating — brmmmm. Nine times out of 10, I'm on that ship going out some place. Before that helicopter would get there, I'd be



home (getting ready). We had a one-car garage. I had my SAR equipment on the wall; it was like a shopping market. I'd get my backpack, my climbing gear. In the meantime Anne, my wife, is rushing around making a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And my 3- or 4-year-old is watching all this. He hears this noise; he sees dad and this chaos, so he connects the two. Again, I wasn't smart enough to know this. Finally, Anne said, "You know, it's the fact that every time that ship comes in" — which it did quite often — "he sees you, running around like your head's cut off." And that was true.

So finally, on those occasions when I wasn't on a ship, we'd take him over and we'd watch the helicopter land, take off. We'd put him in the seat so he would see what was going on. And he finally got over it. But it was several years.

That was the kind of stress that was on the family in general — and the wives in particular, I guess. My wife had a degree from the University of Arizona, and I would say, "So what do you want to do? I'll support this. Do you want to go back to graduate school? Do you want to go to law school? You do something." Well, she could never quite figure out what she wanted to do, so she'd end up being

the secretary up in the law enforcement office or a dispatcher or she was a fee collector in a campground or she ended up working for the magistrate as his secretary. And she was a smart, smart woman — still is — and she was in big demand. Had she chosen to make the Service a career, she'd be a regional director. I mean, she was that good. But she was doing part-time (work) and raising kids. I was never home.

I was like a kid in a candy store. I mean, I was driving big fire trucks. I was jumping out of helicopters on the cliffs. The more you could let me jump out of that ship into something, the better I liked it. I set a world's record rappelling one time, over 2,600 feet, because I was with the boys. Now, the boys — all these single guys, attractive studs — were actually having a good time. I was doing what most men my age would just love to have done. Except for maybe the military, a park ranger in a busy place like Yosemite is about as elite as it could get — at least in those days. And I was right in the middle of all that, and I had a great time.

Part of me takes great pride in that. Part of me is sad because I screwed my marriage up because of that. But I know numerous rangers who have been divorced — for a lot of reasons, I mean, all the reasons that we all know about — but also the fact that we just worked our ass off. Yeah, it was very hard on relationships. 🏠

Butch Farabee is retired and lives in Arizona. 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. Many remember Rick, one of the founders of ANPR and a long-serving president, as a moving force of the organization. With his passing in 2009, ANPR established a memorial fund, which his family and the board agreed to use for the oral history project. The audio recordings and transcriptions will be archived at the Harpers Ferry Center in West Virginia.

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