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“The small community that basically raised me was very proud of the fact that one of their native sons is back in a very key role as a superintendent.”



Former Regional Director Ernie Quintana, an interview with Lu Ann Jones and Lillie Tichinin

Ernest “Ernie” Quintana grew up in Twentynine Palms, California, where Joshua Tree National Park was his “big beautiful backyard.” Only after a flirtation with college and a tour of duty in Vietnam did he become acquainted with the National Park Service. As he explained, the father of a childhood friend who worked at the park “grabbed him by the collar” and put him to work as a maintenance laborer trainee.

As fate would have it, a park technician asked Quintana to switch positions, and his new job set him on the path to a distinguished 41-year career with the Park Service. During stints at Saguaro National Park, Santa Monica Mountains Recreation Area, Joshua Tree National Park and the Midwest Region, Quintana served as a ranger, chief ranger, superintendent and regional director.

During a 2014 interview with historian Lu Ann Jones and folklorist Lilli Tichinin, Quintana described the satisfaction he experienced upon returning to his hometown as park superintendent and resolving competing public use and resource conservation issues.

JONES: What did it mean for you to be a superintendent?

QUINTANA: Oh, it was special in many ways. Being a superintendent of a park is probably one of the best assignments there is in the National Park System. You are the mayor of that piece of ground. The responsibility for what happens there, the responsibility of how that park interacts with the communities, ultimately lands on your shoulders. The welfare of the employees is your responsibility.

The other component of why it was special for me to go to my first superintendent position is I went back to Joshua Tree. I went full circle, went back to the park I started out at, as a superintendent. So I was going back to be the superintendent, not only in the park that gave me my start in my career, but in the community that I grew up in. It was just special pride. It was a thrill when I got selected on the Hall of

‘It was a compromise’

Fame from my high school because of my achievement of becoming superintendent of Joshua Tree National Park. I still cherish that.

TICHININ: Going back to your home park and your home community, were there any particular challenges or particular opportunities that came about because you already had connections with that park and with the community as well?

QUINTANA: It was all very positive and it could have been the total opposite. I’m not quite certain why that occurred. My sense is the small community that basically raised me was very proud of the fact that one of their native sons is back in a very key role as a superintendent. I think it also had to do with the fact that I wanted to make sure that the relations between the park and the gateway communities were always upfront and priority.

At first it was a little bit of a push-and-pull to get the employees to come along [and participate in community events], but every little community has [these celebrations]. We’re up in every parade. We would put these floats together — a flatbed truck with some streamers on it, rangers in uniform. And we made it fun. We had the best time, and the community loved it.

Maybe that’s why we had such a good working relationship. Not only do they know me because I grew up in the town, but they understood in a very sincere way that we wanted to be a part of the community. And it was important for us to listen to the community, especially when they had some ideas. There were some times when I had to back away a little gracefully from some of the ideas, but I was very fortunate that they understood the reason why I had to say no sometimes. I was lucky in many respects, in that the community not only respected the position [I held], but they respected me as well

JONES: Even in that general wonderful experience, there must have been particular

challenges. What were some of the resource issues that you dealt with there or community issues?

QUINTANA: A number of challenges, actually, throughout my career. To me, that is what kept my experience exciting in the parks I worked in. I was having fun, but I was having fun because I was dealing with some very, very key issues. At Joshua Tree National Park we went through a general management plan, a big planning process. How are we going to manage this park for the next 20 years? A lot of community involvement, public input, meetings.

One particular aspect of the general management plan that created a lot of controversy had to do with climbing. Joshua Tree National Park is known as a climbers’ park. It has a boulder field, not a lot of high-pitch multiple climbs, but it has a variety of small-pitch climbs. The controversy was we were going to regulate how the bolting aspect of climbing was permitted in the park. Now, bolting means that there’s a little hole that’s drilled in the rock, there’s a piece of metal, an anchor, that’s put in. Then there’s a bolt that’s then screwed into that metal anchor which is attached to the rock, and then on that is a little piece of metal with basically a hole in it so your carabiner hooks through there. It’s a protection device. If you slip and fall, that’s supposed to catch you.

But we were seeing, wow, for years we’ve been allowing the climbers to just put them up wherever. We got to thinking we wouldn’t let just anybody go out there and chip a hole in our natural resource and stick something permanent on there. I said, “Something’s not right here.” But to change that practice, it was going to take a lot of work and a lot of convincing. The climbing community said, “We’ve been doing it forever. So are you telling us we can’t do it anymore?” They also said, “Well, it’s the safety issues too. If you’re telling us we can’t replace one that’s weak, that’s a safety concern.”

So we had to manage through that. A lot of emotion on the issue from the climbing community. And they had a strong voice; they were well organized.

JONES: How was the issue resolved?

QUINTANA: I use the term, which is not necessarily always a good term to use in the National Park Service, but it’s “compromise.” It was basically an understanding that, “Okay, we’re not going to be able to do away with it, but we can stop any additional bolts being put in.”

[Climbers] said, “Our bolts on these rock faces are, in essence, trails, like that you put on the ground.”

I said, “I can live with that.” I said, “Now, I can also live with the fact that if one of them becomes unsafe and comes loose, that you can replace it without getting permission. But if you start to develop new routes, you need permission from us.” That was the accepted rule. By then I think it was okay with the climbing community because they had pretty much established quite a few of these vertical routes on the wall with using their bolts, but there were still some that said, “I’m not so sure I want to be restricted by that.”

The other part was, “Well, how are you going to regulate that? How do you know, if I’m out there and you can’t see me, I’m putting a new route in?” I said, “Well, I’m not going to be able to catch it all, but if I do, you’ll understand that you’re in the wrong, and we’ll address it at that point in time.” So it was a compromise.

Lu Ann Jones is a staff historian in the Park History Program in Washington, D.C.

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