

Elizabeth Hawke  
Horticulturist, Grey Towers National Historic site  
Milford, Pennsylvania

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Interviewer: Sandra Forney

Sandra Forney (SF): Please give me your full name, your title, your address, and phone number.

Elizabeth Hawke (EH): Elizabeth Ann Hawke. I'm the horticulturist at grey Towers. And my address is 3450 Sunrise Lake, Milford, Pennsylvania, 18337. And my work number where you can reach me Mondays through Friday is 296-9661.

SF: Tell me a little something about your background, profession, and what you're doing here at grey Towers.

EH: Okay. I graduated from high school in 1993, and then went to University of Scranton working towards a U.S. history degree. Decided that that was not the direction I wanted to go, and transferred to Rutgers University at Cook College in environmental planning and design studies, and earned a degree in 1998. And pretty much loved plants because my father made me work outside with them all the time.

SF: So did you do any work after finishing your degree? Or did you come right here?

EH: I actually interned here in 1997-- the summer of 1997—and realized that I really liked Grey Towers. It kind had the feel that I was looking for. Went back and finished my degree that year, and applied and got a 1039 position, but unfortunately they didn't have the funding to offer me a permanent. Then I went into the private sector for two and a half, three years, in charge of greenhouse and landscape design, and then I transferred to a design [built?] firm. And then fortunately the permanent position was advertised three years later, and someone from Grey Towers let me know and I applied, and I got the job.

SF: So is environmental design kind of a landscape architecture...?

EH: It's along landscape architecture. I don't have a degree in landscape architecture. It's more landscape industry, horticulture industry. Kind of a mixed bag. I just realized that I loved the plant aspect more and wanted to go more into that field than I did just doing designs. But I did both in the private sector. Here it's pretty much based on what's here historically and then plant material and taking care of and making sure it remains for all future [words too faint to hear].

SF: So is that what you mainly do here at Grey Towers?

EH: I do a lot of things, but the main thing is to keep the landscape... There's tours seven days a week, so the place has to be maintained well, just to the finest points of to the benches are clean, so there's no bird droppings, making sure there's no cigarette butts in the parking lots-- is what I

pick up every morning when I walk in there's about seven butts in the parking lots-- to going down when there's pests on trees I ID them and make sure they get the proper treatment. And then training interns and our staff on proper pruning techniques and horticulture techniques. I'm also in charge of a large part of Grey Towers horticulture team. I'm the lead on that; we have about twenty senior citizen women volunteers. And then I'm also part of the trail team which our gardener, Rich Gilbert also works hands on with, also a large part are volunteers. Also there's garden club crew work, so I also help a lot with question people have about their plants at the garden club, we sponsor the Apple Valley Triangle so it's my staff and myself that maintain that so Grey Towers looks good as you pull onto Old [Amigo?]. And I also tend to end up being a really big outreach. People call here with questions on their plants or on their pests, and they usually get forwarded to me and I try to help figure out what's wrong, or give them an idea of what they can do or who to contact to get more information.

SF: That's a great public service opportunity there. Why did you choose this career? [Laughs] You mentioned because your dad made you deal with plants?

EH: Well I went to college and majored in American history and then realized that I had to learn Western history and everything else along with that, and I went, No I don't think that's a major, that's a hobby, that's not going to be a living for me. And actually I realized it, my father died that following spring, and that day of his funeral I was sitting there thinking what am I going to do with my life, and it came to me as an epiphany and I went, you know, I wonder if there's anything you could do with gardening. And you know, four high school guidance counselors didn't even tell me there was fields and forestry, or things like, and I just happened to pick up a Rutgers book because a friend was going there to another branch, and there was like all this stuff for plants and landscaping and landscape architecture, and I went, well, I think I know what to go and do now. And it was just that simple moment. Out of some grief came a really good career.

SF: So why did you pick or choose the Forest Service as your employer.

EH: Well, I actually kind of stumbled upon the Forest Service, in the essence of Grey Towers. It's always confused so much with the park Service. I'm a local here, so I grew up in the area. And I had a friend who had been awarded an internship here the year before and had told me, hey, you know, you should probably try for that the following summer, and I did, and I got the position, and that was my first real information on the Forest Service and on the federal government. I didn't receive any real information in high school or college about the chances of employment in a really good field, and it just happened to work out that I got really good information that way. And I had the feeling that I probably wanted to stay in this area. There's a little more freedom than people think there is. And the chance for training and to see different parts of fields, and different parts of forests, is just amazing.

SF: Tell me a little bit about the Mortimer Internship.

EH: It's through our non-profit partner, the Pinchot Institute for Conservation. It was started in 1995. A local family, Duke and Elizabeth Mortimer. They had come to Grey Towers many times, Her husband actually did some film work, and they did a mini-film with grey Towers as the backdrop, and the wife always loved the gardens, and I guess in the '80s had volunteered at

some point. And they decided to give a donation to the Pinchot Institute for that money to be used as Elizabeth Mortimer Garden Internship, to give a college student a chance to get hands-on work. At that point it was a two thousand dollar stipend, now it's a twenty-five thousand dollar stipend. And you get to stay rather than switch would either be at the gatehouse or the farm house. So it's a great thing, and the Pinchot Institute has invested money well, so it's definitely going to be an internship at Grey Towers for a long time.

SF: So what would you say your fondest or most memorable experience has been while working here at Grey Towers?

EH: Well, there's all sorts of different memories, but I would say how we pull together as a team. When we have a lot of big events here, they're not always conferences; we have the Governor Bike Ride where the governor of Pennsylvania was here plus about four hundred people on bikes. Delivery of traffic trailers full of bikes. And of course working in an historic landscape it's really hard to keep bikes and foot traffic and old trees and things like that. They don't mix well. And that was probably about only three hours of intense, maybe four hours of intense labor, and then, boy, by ten o'clock in the afternoon the bikes were gone, in the morning they were gone, and everyone was just wiped. So that was a really fond memory. But as an intern the [word unclear] Ball was one of my better things. We went swimming with other interns. That was probably... It's what they did with the old Forestry School back in 1902, so you really felt a connection. We were trying to find the old [cork?] engravings. You really got a sense what the history was of the Forest Service. As a college student I didn't get that until I went into the [fall?] and was actually probably illegally swimming but I don't think Peter would mind; he'll let me know. But you really got a sense of what existed a hundred years before you.

SF: So tell me a little bit about the kinds of skills that you have, or the tools that you use in your work here?

EH: I guess what I have changed since I've been at Grey Towers for going on three years now, is mechanizing the equipment. When I was here as an intern, on all our walkways we had to sweep by hand, and usually by the time I got that done in three hours by the time I came back it could be done again. It was horrible. [Laughs] So we use leaf blowers, which, within a half hour you've got the walks cleared because everywhere else staffing is low, so you have to do as much as you can safely, and mechanizing works well. We have, you know, new hedge shears that are powered so you're not just using your hand power, getting stiff. But also I've gotten contractors to do tree work. There'd been a lack of tree care for a long time. So I brought in a good firm that has an arborist on staff, and instead of it being as three week project to take care of some trees, it's two days. We try to do stuff, anything major, not out of the public eye because it is interpretive, but we try to do things so that it doesn't interfere with tours but doesn't also make the Forest Service look bad. Because as soon as you remove a tree or see limbs coming down, people instantly think it's bad. So you try to educate them as to why it's important to do these things but it's also good to do it in the early morning before people are here, [Laughs] and the tours have started; and then it just looks better and no one really saw what happened. And so that's probably what I've done here, and the tools that I use the most is just the newer technology in the landscape. But also books and research of all Cornelia's papers and different things. Luckily she had a lot of stuff, so there's lots of seed lists. Unfortunately she wasn't—like we all

are in our gardens—you order stuff and on your order you don't put exactly where it's going. You know. [Laughs] Some of those things are lacking, and Cornelia was very broad. And I kind of take a little bit of liberty in that, in the sense that she was a home owner, so what she planned one year doesn't always mean that what's she's going to be next year. So from research in those places, and looking up some heritage plans and different things, and finding out what still works today. If it's a yellow marigold it's still a yellow marigold today. So I'm not going to waste my government funds buying really expensive annual marigolds. But when it comes to buying better apple trees, or heritage, things like that that are going to make a really big statement, we want to do it historically correct. Kind of like I've done with the apple trees in the parking lot, or with the Park Service with the Olmstead Center, I took cuttings and then they were send up to them in Massachusetts where they do the grafting. And in about three years we'll have the little trees come back and they'll graft it on to the side and we'll be able to start re-instituting the orchard where the parking lot construction is now, back on the original grid but also with the original apple trees. Because we haven't been able to I.D. the original apple trees, because they're so old they're not fruiting so much, so we're hoping once we get some new, if we get some fruit, if we find out it's just a regular old Macintosh, well then we can probably go and buy some more Macintosh. But if it's some vintage, heritage thing, then we have to keep taking cuttings to get the orchard back. But that's probably one of the new technologies that are happening and things that exist. There's that capability in the inter-agency agreement to really help Grey Towers. To be able to take a little bit of information that the Park Service already created for their own use.

SF: You mentioned the Garden Club. You know historically in the Forest Service there has been a connection between conservation education, interpretation, the story of re-foresting forests. Tell me a little bit about the relationship of the Garden Club, historically as well as today.

EH: Okay. The Milford Garden Club I think has been around sixty to seventy years. They do claim that Cornelia was a member; we haven't had a lot of proof that she was a member, but there are quotes from Cornelia saying that there was nothing that annoyed Gifford more than Garden Clubbers asking [mildew on their posters?]. So I think they were established in some way, maybe not in the twenties, but probably in the late thirties or forties, because they did sponsor a tour. I have a poster up in my office, where, with the permission of Cornelia and the Garden Club, they did have a tour of the landscape when the Pinchots were still here. So that was a connection in that sense. In Forest Service history, so to say, since we took it over in '63, their main thing has always been decorating Grey Towers. Probably for about twenty years. In the '80s when we started getting the place back into shape and opening it for tours; it used to be just the museum levels, those three floors, and everything was done with fresh greens, take cuttings from Grey Towers, from their evergreens. So we've broadened that since the restoration was done; we've been using artificial [phrase unclear]. It's a pretty big undertaking; I'm in charge of it as a member of the Milford Garden Club and also as a Grey Towers staff member. So Grey Towers has a little bit of control of what happens. In the past you have thirty volunteers show up for one day, and kind of run amok decorating. So with me being a full-time staff and a Garden Club member, we can kind of control that a little bit. Let them have their freedom, but also make sure we're protecting the resource and making sure people are safe. Anything on ladders is usually done by me and other staff, because =y the time they come in, most of these women are retired, and we don't want them on an eight foot ladder and falling. Which was what they did the first year, was swing from ladders. So we've got that under control. And Milford Garden Club

does a lot for the community. What they do for Grey Towers right now is Christmas is their big thing. And some of my volunteers are Garden Club members. You don't have to be one to be the other.

SF: Last formalized question. What potential ideas do you have for exhibit, display, demonstration, illustration, that you would recommend to the Folklife Festival folks regarding horticulture and work here at Grey Towers on the Mall for next year?

EH: Gee, there's a couple different things you could probably do. I think you could really play up how the past meets the present. You know, what was historically here in the sense of perennials and herbaceous things, and how we're doing it today, through research and maybe newer resistant things, but also following what Cornelia did with her containers and all sorts of different things. But we look at the past, but we also consider the present, and what's available now in plants, and what's going to make our labor work good, make the Forest Service and Grey Towers look nice, and still be historically accurate. That's probably one of the main things that we get to do. Have that little bit of play in there.

SF: Well, are there very many horticulturists in the Forest Service?

EH: it's a smaller field. And most of them, I would say, would maybe be more in the greenhouse. So I'm probably one of the few horticulturists—I mean, there's not a lot of historical sites in the Forest Service anyway—so I'm one of the very lucky people that has this great job.

SF: Is there anything else you'd like to share with me regarding your career, your profession, your time with the Forest Service, your thoughts and visions for the future here at Grey Towers?

EH: I've worked hard to get back in here, so once you're in, like people say, I'm very thrilled with my job. I'm told every day by everyone that walks by, you've got the best job, and I definitely agree with them. The Forest Service in the future—the only thing I would say, being a college student that didn't know the Forest Service existed, is to, and I know there's attempts, but, really to get itself out there, even on the high school level and different things; and to go to the colleges that are landscape architecture and environmental science, and let them know there's a whole field, because when I was here on the Mortimer, when I went back to college we were trying to get a new Mortimer to come on, and I went to my classmates and got one on, because of that. because they didn't even know the Forest Service existed. So that would probably be what the Forest Service needs, to get young people in, because I know we're going to be losing a lot of the staff to the baby boomers who have put in their time and get to retire, which is a wonderful thing. But we need to get so many young people that don't even know we exist.

SF: And how might we lure these people? How might we... What are the characteristics, qualities?

EH: I would say, beyond there's some stability there, than there was when I was in the private sector. It was so economically minded, where you're doing a design, but in a recession the first thing they're going to cut is the guy who mows their lawn or put in those extra shrubs. You're

going to worry about the roof on your house before you worry about those extra shrubs. So there's a security within the field, but there's also such a chance for education and travel and training, that don't exist in the private sector. I've gone to some really great places, received some really great training, and know that there's other branches that I want to travel and train in, that might not be exactly horticultural but may be historic related, maybe paraprofessional training, things like that that I never would have had a chance to do.

SF: very good. Thank you so much.

EH: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW