

Smithsonian Folklife Interview

William J. Rosanelli  
Lead Interpretive Tour Guide  
Grey Towers National Historic Monument  
Milford, Pennsylvania

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Interviewer: Sandra Forney

Sandra Forney (SF): Good morning Bill.

William Rosanelli (WR): Good morning.

SF: If you would, give me your full name, title, address, and phone number.

WR: William J. Rosanelli, 44 Decker Town Turnpike, Montegue, New Jersey. Phone number is 973-293-7267. My title here is lead tour guide.

SF: We're sitting here at Grey Towers Historic Landmark this afternoon. Tell me a little something about your background, your profession, your discipline, and what you're doing here at Grey Towers now.

WR: Okay .Well, going all the way back, as a youngster growing up. I lived in Richmond, Virginia, outside of a... we were the last house in a development, there was a big farm behind us. And I go back to that, it just shaped my love for the outdoors. And we moved when I was about six, up north to Hudson County, New Jersey, right near the Lincoln Tunnel. So coming from a large, huge farm behind me to about an area the size of this room as a back yard, it was quite a shock. We always loved the outdoors. When I was about thirteen we got a place just across the river in Montague, New Jersey, which is where I live now. And my family came up summers. I started hunting and fishing, and got a chance to do whatever we liked doing. Throughout high school, reading various magazines and so forth, I was very much aware of Gifford Pinchot and his work. I finished my undergraduate work and went on to study forestry; got a master's in forestry. Worked for the Forest Service down in Mississippi. I was back in the early '70s for a couple summers. Decided I didn't like being [word inaudible] a lot, so I branched out into something else. Eventually ended up in teaching. I started teaching in 1977, and what I'm presently doing full-time during most of the year. Teach in a Catholic high school in [Sparta], New Jersey. And back in the early '80s I was looking for some summer work, and was applying over here to Grey Towers-- it's closer to my home, five minutes away—and I was applying in the site area, in maintenance. And there was an opening. And one summer, actually in May of '85, I got a phone call from some folks over here that knew my brother who lives in town, knew a little bit about my background, said would I be interested in coming over to do tours; the person we hired isn't going to be able make it. So I was hired before I filled out the application

actually. It was kind of neat. And what I always liked—it was especially true my first summer, in '85—you kind of walk on the same ground that Gifford Pinchot walked. It was quite impressive. It was a great feeling. I started off as a seasonal here, as a GS 3. And actually moved up to a 4, and then was able to get hired on permanently. Took the civil service test and became what I am now, a GS 5. Permanent part-time. Permanent, meaning I can get my benefits; part-time meaning I come in during the summer months and on weekends as they need me; I go on an intermittent. So it's been a great fit for me, being close by, and also with my background and my admiration for Gifford Pinchot. So kind of real quick, that's how I ended up over here.

SF: You mentioned you got a master's in forestry. Did you get a bachelor's in forestry?

WR: No, my bachelor's is in biology.

SF: And where did you attend college.

WR: Undergraduate was Notre Dame, and master's was at Michigan State.

SF: And you're currently teaching forestry at...?

WR: No, I teach theology, which is my first love. That's a long story; not for this tape. But what I did is, after I had worked for the Forest Service for a while, I had a small business for a bit; eventually I decided I'd like to... I thought I'd become a missionary, I decided that's not where I wanted to go, I decided I wanted to share my faith. I went back to school and picked up some more credits in theology at a seminary, and then... I'd worked always in the Catholic school system. I started out teaching science and math; that's where my certification is. But within a year or two I was teaching some theology courses, and that's all I teach now, is straight theology. The curriculum at the moment centers on church history, prayer, and morality; the sections I teach, to the juniors.

SF: And what seminary did you attend?

WR: I went to Immaculate Conception Seminary, which at the time was at Darlington, near Suffern, New York; it's in New Jersey, and since has moved to Seton Hall University. That's where it's located now.

SF: Why did you... Well first of all, why did you choose forestry and biology as a career, and then if you care to share, how you chose theology?

WR: All right. Well I'll start off with... As I mentioned, back when I was a youngster, I liked being outside; I always enjoyed... well, the critters that were running around; I liked to explore and I was attracted to learning more about them, and I just figured it made sense, as I went on, to pursue that. Kind of an idea, I guess early on thinking, well kind of a naturalist type of approach to things. I decided on forestry, believe it or not, I was at Michigan State; I had been accepted into their program, into the graduate school, in the field of natural resources with no specific major. And I went into the office, and they had some videos, and I saw one on forestry. I picked it up, put it in. Fifteen minute video, it showed somebody on the Pacific Northwest cruising

timber in a hard hat, and big trees; I said that looks like a lot of fun, I'd like to do that. Kind of a romantic notion that got me sold. And I really enjoyed the courses that I took. Dendrology right on through; I thoroughly enjoyed those courses. And I was fortunate to get a couple of summer's work down in Mississippi. The only thing I didn't like, in talking to the people that were with the Forest Service for quite a while down there, was that you get moved around a lot. I was a person, and still am, that likes to get my roots down in a spot and stay put. So it didn't seem like I was going to make a career out of this. So I came back, and like I said I had a little business for a while. The way I ended up in theology, there was a friend of my family's I had been dating for a while who was still in school, in college, she came back and she had had a conversion experience, and told me about it. Now I'd gone to Catholic school all my life, I'd had the academic stuff, but the experience of it wasn't there. And in talking to her, and going to prayer meetings and so forth and so on, I came to the realization that what she was talking about made a lot of sense. And I had a conversion experience of my own in August of '75 that convinced me I had to do something else with my life. So I decided to forget about that little business I was trying to start up. And like I said, initially I thought maybe I should go into the missions, maybe I should become a physician, become a medical missionary. I thought of becoming a priest. A lot of little things. And in talking to people, through a lot of prayer I discerned what I was to do. I felt I should go to the seminary. I'd gotten some undergraduate credits in theology at Notre Dame, but obviously needed more to teach. So I had a friend of my parents whose son was a priest that happened to be down at Seton Hall, and knew the rector up at the seminary up at Darlington. So he contacted the rector, and I was a week late registering for the class, but there had been a lot of snow that winter so I didn't miss anything; they were able to get me in. And I was able to take the twelve graduate credits to get me the minimum necessary to teach. And then I did a lot of reading and such on my own. And then I landed a job—let's see, that was the spring of '77 that I took the courses. And then I was hired to teach chemistry and math at Paterson, New Jersey. I guess I got the job that May for the following fall of '77. And that's when I started teaching at Paterson [words inaudible]. And then about three years later I moved back up to where I presently live in Montague. It was too far to commute. So now I'm only half an hour from home. Where I teach is Pope John High School. That's kind of a quick [word inaudible].

SF: You mentioned having had a couple summers' experience with the Forest Service in Mississippi. I can imagine someone coming from an urban area in New Jersey to the coastal lowlands of the very, very deep South. Can you give me some memories, experiences about those times?

WR: Yeah, in fact, I went down, we were at ... The office was in Jackson, Mississippi. Actually the building was the [Milton] Building, [that's where] it's still housed. National Forest had, I'd say the second or third floor. I think we were on the ninth floor. We had a very small office. We were at that time, S and P was still separated out down in Region Eight, so... I was with S and P and I was on the PL 566 project. We would go out and do basic inventory. They were working on a computer printout I guess of the entire watershed, so I would collect data and come back to the office and... So I was on the road probably half the time, which I always liked because you got per diem and made a little extra money. Now in those days, if I remember right, we were allowed up to fifteen dollars a night for a motel. One time I went to New Orleans and got a special voucher to spend nineteen dollars. And we were given, I believe, ten dollars a day for food, if I remember correctly. And so, I had four states that I worked in. I was in Alabama,

Mississippi, Louisiana, and east Texas. So I'd fly into or drive to, depending on where the spot was. I'd have aerial photographs that I'd look at in the office, get a road map, pick the spots I wanted to do. If it was privately owned and there was land all around it I'd go in and introduce myself. Always make sure they understood I was with the Forest Service and not the Internal Revenue Service, 'cause I had plates on the car, and obviously they were motor pool; they weren't Forest Service vehicles. And I also remember, in those days, when you were getting a car from the motor pool you didn't get air conditioning, unless you were transporting an animal. And if you had to fly someplace you never got a meal, because you got the cheaper ticket. And you could always tell, the government employees came on the plane with a little brown bag with their lunch or dinner, whatever it was. My boss was actually from Pennsylvania. Carl Hoover. Very, very nice man. All the guys in the office were; the rest of them were from down South. But he constantly would make it a point that, when he sent me someplace, he would allow me to visit a sawmill. He would allow me to visit somebody so I could learn what was going on. He said, in the long run the agency benefits from people being well exposed. I was always impressed by kind of his vision. It wasn't a narrow, we're going to get this work [words inaudible], and that's all you can do is this work. He was looking at a much bigger picture, which I thought made a lot of sense. And the other gentleman in the office, the one guy, he had a little farm outside of Jackson, and I'd go out and stay with his family sometimes. Help put up a fence, or go fishing with another guy, go camping with one family. That whole idea of family in the Forest Service is something that I really believe in, and I saw it firsthand. When I went down the second summer, I didn't have a place to stay at; they put me up a couple nights until I was able to rent another spot. [Inaudible sentence] I also learned to chew tobacco when I was down there. [SF laughs] Since I've given that up. That was before it was popular up North. [Laughs]

SF: And I'm sure you got quite an introduction to bugs

WR: Chiggers I remember well. I also remember starting my work day well before seven so I could be done by three, three-thirty. I never did get accustomed to the heat. Air conditioning was a godsend. I had it in the apartment where I rented, and I used to lay down in front of that thing after work. When I was in the office, and if I was in the field, the motels were all air conditioned, and had a nice little swimming pool. And I met a lot of interesting people, you know, business people, when you're staying there. And I learned the value of menthol shaving cream; I used to rub that on my legs. Those chigger bites, the menthol would cool the area and take the itch away. So that was a little gimmick.

SF: Why did you pick, choose, or otherwise select the Forest Service as an employer when you got out of college?

WR: In part, reading about Gifford Pinchot, I was always impressed with his ethic; the high standards he held people to. And actually, coming to work here and reading about him, I was even happier that I made that choice. I guess because I chose forestry to study, it seemed an obvious choice to work for the Forest Service. I'd actually say what I read about Gifford Pinchot and learned about him made the biggest impact on me. In many ways I still... I had seen the agency as kind of his offspring, and I figured it continued in the vein he had started. I still believe that's true; I still figure we're the best federal agency.

SF: You're a tour guide here at Grey Towers. What kinds of stories do you enjoy sharing with the public? With your interest in Gifford and his family?

WR: Well, the stories about his fishing. The stories about how he expected people to do the job they were assigned, without having someone look over their shoulder. He gave them the job, sent them off, and he expected them to do it. One of my favorite stories is when he was with President Roosevelt, Teddy Roosevelt, walking around D.C. They would go on these extended walks. Gifford was part of the [word inaudible] cabinet as they called it. And Gifford started carrying a pistol because Roosevelt had a habit of trying to lose the Secret Service, and Gifford felt an obligation to try to protect the president if something happened. Well one time they were walking along, and they had to cross, I don't know if it was the Potomac, I'm pretty sure it was, to get to the other side. And they were all dressed up at that time. And one of the gentlemen with them, they took all their clothes off but he kept on his white gloves when they swam across. Roosevelt said to the gentleman, why'd you leave on those white gloves. He said, well, in case we meet any women I want to be properly attired. I have great stories from the [Finger Bowl] and how they used to have a good time out there. One of the stories about passing the food across. They were entertaining somebody next to Gifford, the gentleman was seated, [name inaudible] was at the other end of the Finger Bowl, and the gentleman had asked for some butter. And [name unclear] took a pad of butter and just kind of flung it. Gifford picked up [claps hand; word inaudible], caught it, set it down in front of him. And you know they had practiced that little routine. So sometimes you look at people with a lot of wealth, and look at nice settings, and say geez, they probably don't have a good time, they're a bunch of stuffed shirts, but that certainly wasn't the case. Also, if you take a look at Gifford's bedroom, which we've partially restored, pretty much anyway, it's very austere. You figure the man has some money. There's a small bed; very simple surroundings really. And you read stories about when Pinchot was out, and he was with Muir or he was with somebody else having to sleep right outdoors. Another story comes to mind. There's a gentleman up here that remembers back, I guess it was the Depression here in Pennsylvania. At any rate, he had driven up to some camp. And a couple of state troopers came right up to him, wouldn't let him go on. It was Gifford. I think he was, I don't know if he was the governor at this point, or some other position. Anyway, Gifford was stretched out on the ground taking a nap at one of these camps. And the guy was told was told, you can't come over here, and they were kind of, keep it at a distance. So you don't find too many people who are in that kind of a position that would do that. Those kind of things.

SF: So, humanistic stories.

WR: Yeah, a real person, you know? I'm sure he had his enemies. Everybody does. But he was a man who told it like it was. If he wanted something done, he told you to do it; if he didn't like what you were doing, he'd tell you. That's not done right, you've got to fix it.

SF: So you've been working at Grey Towers since...

WR: 1985.

SF: 1985.

WR: Just summers, so it's not the kind of, year-round. But yes, since '85.

SF: But you've seen a lot of change?

WR: Yes, I have. In fact, when we were, right now, we were talking about this [very point] in the director's office. Everywhere in the building had smoking sections to it. Our offices in Interpretive Services were up here. In fact all the offices were up in this main part of the house at one time, and then since everything's moved pretty much to the surface. Different directors here, different directions we're going in. And obviously in the last few years we've done a lot of renovations. For example, the sitting room's been restored. The other two rooms downstairs, the main rooms, have been put back as they would have been about 1927. And so these were things that, you heard that, eventually we're going to try to do these things. And year after year you just figure that it's never going to happen. And so it's nice to see those changes come about. We've had different personalities as director come through. I remember Dean Hickey well because he's the one who said, geez, why don't we get you on permanently instead of having to reapply every year as a seasonal? I said that makes a lot of sense to me. How do I do it? He was just in here as acting director for a while, but I remember him, because he helped to get me in here permanently. I remember when Chuck came on board, he brought that flavor of the national forest here. Because, it's probably still true today, most of our employees here, this is their Forest Service. They haven't come from national forest background where Chuck had. I think that influenced... It certainly had an influence on the work schedule. When I first started as a seasonal, we wouldn't necessarily have two days off in a row. Depending on what was going on they could change your schedule around week to week to fit what they needed. Chuck said, no, we can't do that. You have your days off; we'll pay you overtime if we need you to come in extra. So I always appreciated that.

SF: What would you say was one of your fondest, most memorable experiences that you had here? Or more.

WR Well, just being in the building. The first summer was probably the most memorable, because in a sense you're coming onto hallowed ground. It was somewhat... I was fortunate enough to be able to travel to the Vatican during the Jubilee Year. And I remember the first time I walked into Saint Peter's Basilica, the feeling I had, you know, the cardinals and popes that walked here. I remember walking through the house and on the grounds, and you know, Gifford had walked in this, he sat here, he did this here. That really to me was my [fondest memory]. I've met a number of chiefs. This is a good site for that, because in my position I get to chauffeur them sometimes down to the airport or down to the train station, and then got a chance to talk informally to some of them. But actually being here on the same spot that Gifford was, I think for me was the biggest thing. And there's some times, even so many years after, that I'll be walking up over towards his bedroom, and I'll feel geez, this is the spot where the guy spent a lot of time. You're outside, and here's where he wrote *Breaking New Ground*, and just knowing you're on that same spot I think to me would have been the biggest thing.

SF: What are some unique, crazy, wild questions that visitors ask when they come here?

WR: Oh. Is the place haunted? What color was something previously? Don't ask. I had somebody, years ago, actually wrote a letter, it's probably stored in the file someplace. Wrote back and said—this woman was into some kind of occult thing—anyway she said she had some kind of a meeting with Cornelia; she was talking about how Cornelia's dead and she's had a meeting with her in the spiritual world, and how much Cornelia likes me; and actually the color of something else; it was originally yellow, she had said. In the interim when we did our renovation I did the paint analysis, and it never was. That's probably the craziest story. But people will ask, are there secret passages? That type of thing. But probably that woman was the wildest thing that I encountered. Especially when the letter came back. Talking to her I knew she wasn't all there, but when the letter was actually sent to the director, and my name was in it, how much Cornelia liked me, I said, whoa. [Laughter]

SF: Gifford was also the governor of Pennsylvania. Do you get a sense that most visitors come here to visit the governor's mansion, or to visit the Forest Service's founding father's mansion?

WR: No. I'd say most of the people come because they know Gifford as governor. A lot of people from Pennsylvania, obviously as schoolchildren they're going to study Pennsylvania history about Gifford. And part of our mission, a good deal of it in my mind, is to make sure people understand... Well first of all, that the Forest Service and Park Service are two separate agencies and two different departments. And a lot of people, here in the East especially, do not understand that. And the Park Service is just down the Pike here in the national recreation area, the Watergap. In fact a lot of people will walk downtown and start saying something about what I'm doing down below, thinking I'm with the Park Service when I'm not. So one of the things I think to explain first of all is that we're a separate agency; but also that our objectives, our mission, are different than the Forest Service. Having an historic home here is a bit of an anomaly for the Forest Service, but it's a great vehicle to explain the difference between conservation and preservation. You have a lot of people who don't understand that difference. They have a problem with cutting trees. They have a problem with hunting. They think everything should just be left as it is. And trying to educate people, about problems we have to deal with, [crowding] here for example. That has to be taken care of, or we're going to have a real problem with our forests. So bringing that into the story. And that the Forest Service is concerned with more than just, the trees obviously, but the people that will go into those forests, what those resources will provide people with. I think that's all part of what we intend to do. So they come wanting to know about the governor, and I hope they leave with a lot more information about our agency and about natural resources and conservation.

SF: Very good. So tell me, what kinds of skills do you have, or tools that you use in your work?

WR: Communication, I'd say probably is the most important. And generally I tend to like people. And doing interpretive work and visiting with people, is more than just taking people on a tour. You interact with them when you cover for the gift shop, you're selling to the tour, you might be wandering around outside and someone asks you a question. There's many, many times on my way out in the evening, you'll encounter someone walking on the grounds, and they'll stop you to ask some questions. And they'll say, I know you want to get home, it's the end of the day. I say, go ahead, no problem; I love the place. And you chat with them for ten, fifteen minutes. So interacting with people probably, I would say is the [word inaudible].

SF: you mention the gift shop. What kinds of items relevant to Gifford or Grey Towers are offered there for sale?

WR: Various books. His autobiography is in print, *Breaking New Ground*. His book on fishing, *Just Fishing Talk* we have down there. There's a number of books related to forestry, conservation. Figures in forestry and conservation; kind of biographical books about various individuals. And then the things, you know, Smokey Bear items, post cards. So it's educational and... We don't have the typical touristy items for sale here. And it's a fairly small area. We do a good job I think of maximizing the stock given the space that we have. And we also sell the tickets for the tours there. We'll start the [fee demo] program here Memorial Day. So we're having to sell tickets now, which is a new twist for us. This was always a freebie for the folks.

SF: Do you also get involved in other activities? Special events?

WR: I'll come in. I've done everything here from parking cars to like I said, chauffeuring someone around. We used to go pick people up for these conferences, I don't think we do that any more. At least I haven't. I'd go down in the Forest Service, before 911, and sit there, 'cause you have the uniform and the official vehicle, and wait for people, and then have the cell phone and go from terminal to terminal and pick up and bring them back up. I'd help with, before we had the staff that actually serves food for conferences, I've actually gotten involved lugging dishes up and down before we had an elevator. Whatever they ask you to do. You know, working a Catholic school system, you learn if something has to be done you never say "That's not my job." You just go and do it. And I never had a problem with that. Like I said, I think it's like a family and people pitch in. So if you're having a problem in one area, if someone had to come and help us sell—and Chuck has been great about getting other people up to snuff on running that register-- so if we're shorthanded, there's other people here that aren't on the interpretive staff who can run down and run that register. We have people who aren't technically interpretive staff, that can sell tickets for the tour. So we kind of help one another out.

SF: Good. Last formal question. What potential ideas for exhibit, display, demonstration, you know, sharing what the Forest Service is all about, would you recommend for the Folklife Festival next summer.

WR: Well, I have an idea for a theme. How you'd implement it I'm not quite sure. But I think one of the big, big needs we have in the United States—this is especially true east of the Mississippi—is explaining to people that some of our resources are renewable. That we need to use them; can [emphasis] use them. And we're not going to destroy the resource by using it. Clearly with forests, if that's the case, to explain what scientific forestry is all about. I think there are quite a few people—and I know this from my teaching; I teach eleventh grade age group—a lot of students have difficulty with the concept of hunting. They have difficulty with cutting trees; they think you're destroying them. So something that would explain that these are good things to do. And the fact that if we're going to survive as human beings we need to modify the environment, because clearly if we don't modify the environment we never could survive at this latitude. We'd have to be down at the tropics or sub-tropics. So explaining how we use these things, and in the Forest Service there are regulations that prevent their destruction. So when



we're talking about logging we're not talking about clearing everything off. We're talking about clearing areas; the trees are going to come back. We're going to stay in business. And other people that have... The timber companies are going to stay in business as well. So I think explaining that aspect. To me it's probably one of the more important things if we're not going to go down the tubes with our resources.

SF: Yeah. The balancing act.

WR: Yeah. I mean, we need areas set aside. We have national parks; we need those areas set aside. We have other areas set aside that we can use. I think we are getting very timid about stating the truth. We're afraid of being politically incorrect. Afraid of what people are going to think. The truth is the truth, and people need to be educated. And I don't think we're doing a good job of it.

SF: Is there anything else you'd like to share with me this afternoon?

WR: No, I think that's about it.

SF: Thank you so much.

WR: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW