United States
Department of the Interior

National Park Service 75th Anniversary

National Park Rangers Generations of Change

WHAT IS A RANGER?

In July of 1932, one week after reporting to Sequoia National Park for his first assignment as a park ranger, Lon Garrison was instructed to lead a rescue. A hiker had collapsed in the rugged Sierra backcountry. Ranger Garrison prepared five horses; organized a team consisting of himself, a doctor, and an animal packer; and started out. Garrison recalled "even though I was a brand-new Sequoia ranger, I was a good mountaineer and rider," and he led his team to the victim.

In Lon Garrison's day, every ranger was "a good mountaineer and rider." In the seventy-five years since the National Park Service was established the demands placed on park rangers have grown dramatically. Today when there are medical emergencies in remote areas, rangers certified as emergency medical technicians or as paramedics are often flown to the scene. But the traditional skills remain important. What if a fierce thunderstorm prevents aircraft from flying? Then rangers must respond the fastest way possible: by foot, by four-wheel drive vehicle, or, perhaps, just as Lon Garrison did, on horseback.

What is a ranger? For most National Park visitors, a ranger is the person wearing the familiar gray and green uniform, gold badge, and distinctive hat. This person may have collected your entrance fee, answered a question at the information desk, presented a campfire program, or perhaps even spoke to you about a violation of park rules. The ranger is the person that you turn to when you have a question, when there is an emergency, or when you have a complaint. The ranger is the friendly, confident, competent person who represents the National Park Service.

RANGERS YESTERDAY

During the early years of our National Parks, their protection was the job of the U.S. Army. Each summer, troops of cavalry fought fires, guided visitors, and built roads and trails. Since a different unit usually patrolled a park each year, civilian "scouts" were hired to show each new troop around. Harry Yount of Yellowstone was such a "scout." In winter, he was Yellowstone's "gamekeeper," protecting the park from poachers, and he is generally recognized as the first park ranger. With the establishment of the National Park Service, civilians replaced soldiers as guardians of the parks. The first rangers carried on some of the cavalry traditions, such as a uniform (including the distinctive hat) and skill with horses and firearms. They were "good mountaineers and riders."

As more people discovered and visited the National Parks, they also discovered the park ranger. Capable, respected, and privileged to live in magnificent surroundings, rangers became "one of the most romantic figures in life," according to Horace Albright, the second Director of the National Park Service. But as numbers of visitors increased, the ranger's job began to change. Protecting parks required more than just good outdoor skills. Rangers became proficient at aiding and protecting park visitors. Search and rescue techniques became more refined. They became adept at conveying knowledge to visitors. Rangers strived not only to share facts, but to impart a feeling of appreciation for the natural world, and to provoke a desire to preserve it.

RANGERS TODAY

Ranger duties continue to evolve with changing social conditions in the nation. Rangers are educators, serving as the link between visitors and the park. Prior to the 1950s, traditional campfire programs, informal "museums," and detailed pamphlets were all most visitors needed. Today, visitors still appreciate traditional programs, but many learn best from more sophisticated media. Rangers must be well versed in modern communication techniques.

Since the 1960s, criminals have discovered how careless park visitors can be while on vacation. Thus, law enforcement methods have evolved as well. In many parks, rangers must combat organized theft, drugs, investigate crimes, and be proficient with firearms.

The 1970s and 1980s have sharpened the need for detailed scientific knowledge of parks. Today, rangers trained as resource managers collect and analyze data, and coordinate the work of scientists.

A career as a ranger has some drawbacks. Most rangers are seasonals, working during the park's busy season, for 3 to 8 months of the year. Permanent positions are cherished and openings are few. Competition for permanent ranger positions is fierce. Most permanent rangers have a college degree, but salaries are, at best, modest. Other issues of contemporary concern include quality of housing, dual career couples, isolated duty, and training requirements.

RANGERS TOMORROW

The challenges that tomorrow's rangers face will reflect the conditions of our evolving society and a changing environment. A vital skill for the future ranger will be the ability to recognize and respond to those changes. Training in social science will become as essential as biology, history, and management. Future visitors will be more ethnically and culturally diverse, and the ranger team must reflect that diversity. With these skills and varied backgrounds, rangers will continue to preserve parks, while welcoming a new generation of visitors.

Rangers over the decades have developed into a proud team, blending the skills of many to preserve parks for all. Park rangers of the future will be heirs to a long tradition. If they share the motivations of past rangers, they will be men and women proud to be perceived by the visiting public as friendly, confident, and competent park rangers. They will be proud to be entrusted with the care of our nation's treasures. They will be proud to be members of the team that carries out the National Park Service mission of maintaining these areas unimpaired for the use and enjoyment of this and future generations.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

1916 - 1991

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The National Park Service is celebrating its 75th anniversary, and we invite you to read more about it. The following books provide information on the colorful history of the service:

Albright, Horace M., *The Birth of the National Park Service,* Howe Brothers, Chicago, 1985.

Robert Shankland, *Stephen Mather of the National Parks,* Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1951.

Swain, Donald, *Wilderness Defender, Horace M. Albright and Conservation,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970.