ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

WARREN BIELENBERG ALCOA, TENNESSEE MARCH 13, 2020

INTERVIEWED BY DEBORAH HARVEY

AUDIO FILE #BRVB031320 – WARREN BIELENBERG

# EDITORIAL NOTE

This document is a rendering of the oral history interview as transcribed by the interviewer from the audio recording. Although effort was made to provide a verbatim transcription, for easier reading of the transcript, verbal pauses, repetitions of words, and encouraging words from the interviewer were omitted. The resulting oral history interview transcript was provided to the informant for review and, if necessary, correction. Mr. Bielenberg made minor modifications to the draft transcript. For the original interview, please refer to the audio file.

# ABSTRACT

Mr. Warren Bielenberg discusses hist time as Chief of Interpretation for the Midwest Region and the work that he did for Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. He describes the trajectory of his career with the National Park Service, beginning in 1967. Mr. Bielenberg went to work in the Midwest Regional Office in 1988 and retired from there in 2001. He relates the comments of Midwest Regional Director Don Castleberry upon the establishment of Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. Mr. Bielenberg also describes his first impressions of Topeka and Monroe School when he visited it with a contingent from the Midwest Regional Office after establishment of the park. He offers his opinions on what Cheryl Brown Henderson and the Brown Foundation wanted from the park and how the citizens of Topeka felt about the establishment of the park. Mr. Bielenberg also describes some of the internal reorganizations of the National Park Service in the early and mid-1990s that impacted who was assigned to work on which parks in the Midwest Region, including on Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. He discusses some of the challenges experienced by the Midwest Regional Office in servicing the parks in the Region, including challenges with Regional Office facilities, funding, and personnel. Mr. Bielenberg describes decision-making regarding selection of the cooperating association and location for the educational bookstore at Brown v. Board of Education as well as discussions regarding potential uses of the various rooms in the building.

# PERSONS MENTIONED

Mr. and Mrs. Parger (Apostle Islands NL), Dennis Carter, Don Castleberry, Andy Ketterson, Don Stevens, Bill Harlow, Cheryl Brown [Henderson], Bill Schenk, Deborah Dandridge, Sändra Washington, Tyrone Brandyburg, Robin White, Tom Richter, June McMillan, Ron Cockrell, Ed Carlin, Sherda Williams, Tim Priest.

Warren Bielenberg, 2020

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

**WARREN BIELENBERG**

Interviewer: This oral history interview is for the Administrative History of the Brown v Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas. The interviewer is Deborah Harvey, with Outside The Box, on behalf of the Midwest Regional Office of the National Park Service. Interviewed today is Warren Bielenberg, former Chief of Interpretation for the Midwest Region. The date is three – March 13, 2020. The interview takes place at Alcoa, Tennessee. Warren, as I’m sure you know, the purpose of an Administrative History is to document the development of a unit of the National Park System. Oral histories are one way to get information that might not otherwise be available from documentary evidence. We try to get as much information as we can from as many different perspectives as possible in order to craft a robust narrative of the developmental history of the park. This will be used by future park administrators to inform their decisions as they navigate future developments. However, I should inform you that not all the information we gather will be included in the final Administrative History. That depends on how the information advances our understanding of park development. But I do want you to know that we appreciate that you are giving your time to share your experiences of the development of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site for this project.

So, to start, I need you to say your name and spell your last name for the transcriber.

Bielenberg: Warren Bielenberg. And B-I-E-L-E-N-B-E-R-G.

Interviewer: Okay, thank you. So, we’re going to start with your work, just in general, for the National Park Service and then move to Brown v. Board of Education.

Bielenberg: Okay.

Interviewer: So, when did you start with the Park Service?

Bielenberg: I started on January 5, 1967, a month after graduating from college, as an intake Ranger at the Albright Training Center at Grand Canyon National Park. My first twelve weeks in the Park Service was going to school and –

Interviewer: They gave you Ranger school? You went to Ranger School?

Bielenberg: Yep. It was called Introduction to National Park Operations. It was – there was people with administrative – that would go on – or – within administration and maintenance, but generally the majority were Park Rangers. And then, after graduation, my first assignment was on the Blue Ridge Parkway in Asheville, North Carolina.

Interviewer: And you were trained as a Ranger, to start with? Bielenberg: Correct. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. What - when you got out of college, what was your major?

Bielenberg: Biology and Conservation. It was the only job I ever applied for. I always – I always tell people the way I got my job with the Park Service is that I was – I was hung over on the day of– scheduled to take the – now, how was that? I was hung over, and I missed my ride to go deer hunting on the day of the FSEE – Federal Service Entrance Exam – and so I took the exam instead of going deer hunting. And then I did apply. The only job I ever applied for was the Park Service. I applied as seasonal jobs for two years and never got to be seasonal, so I’m kind of odd. And I never was –

Interviewer: Oh, really? You were just determined to work with the Park Service?

Bielenberg: I would – yeah! Right. But I never was a seasonal, where most people, they’ll start work as a seasonal for many years before getting permanent, and I was permanent right away, so –

Interviewer: Okay, so, after Blue Ridge?

Bielenberg: And then I was – well – I was sort of – in 1967, there was something going on in Southeast Asia, so, you know, young men were of value, and so, while I was – while I was there, I got my notice for my physical, and then I couldn’t do it, and then I was – got it again, and I couldn’t do it because I had moved from Minnesota to Arizona, and then I was going to North Carolina and then – anyway, on December 21st, I got my draft notice (chuckles). So, then I spent two years in the Army and then came back to the Blue Ridge Parkway and started back in March of 1970. The cool thing was that, during that time, I was an intake Ranger as a GS-5, so that –

Interviewer: What’s an intake Ranger? Just greet people?

Bielenberg: That was just – the people that came in – it was the tail end of Mission 66, when they were hiring people, and – yeah. And, so, anyway, I was a – we were in a 5-7-9 position, supposedly. So, when I got drafted, I was a GS-5, and when I got out of the Army I was a GS-7, Step 2, because I had honorable discharge over that. So, I missed – it – weird thing, anyway. But then, I was on the Parkway for two years, and then, in March of ’72, transferred up to Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in northern Wisconsin. It was a brand-new park. I was the fourth person on staff, and they had just purchased the first piece of property, and it was a house, and Mrs. – Mr. Parger died, and Mrs. Parger sold it to the Park Service, and that became our office, so my –

Interviewer: How is that spelled – Parger? Do you remember? No? Okay. We’ll just make it up.

Bielenberg: P-A-R-G-E-R, I think. Parger. I think so, but it doesn’t really matter. You are doing Brown

v. Board, not Apostle Islands. They haven’t asked me to do one there, but I think they already did their Administrative History. Anyway, so, then I was at Apostle Islands for five and a half years, I believe. Whew! Yeah, ’72, and then we moved in ’77. So, I got there in March and we moved in September of ’77 to Fort McHenry in Baltimore, Maryland. So, while I was at Apostle Islands, I was – I was at – when I went from the Parkway to Apostle Islands, I got a promotion from a 7 to a 9, and then, when I was at

Apostle Islands, three years in, I got a promotion from a 9 to an 11 through accretion of duties.

Interviewer: So, were you still a Ranger at that time?

Bielenberg: Yeah, the whole – my whole experience – my whole thing is a Park Ranger. And then, when I – when I transferred from Apostle Islands, they hired a Chief of Interpretation, a Chief of Resource Management, and a Park Historian, , all three were GS-11s – to do the work that I had been doing (chuckles), you know, but whatever. Well, in a brand-new park –yeah, it was a brand-new park, and it went from zero acres to forty – over forty thousand of the forty-two thousand, so, yeah, it was a – I was in over my head, and – but, then, that’s okay. We made it through. That’s a wonderful park. They’ll do fifty years – their fiftieth anniversary is this year, so I’m planning to go back up there in August – late August or September, when they’re having a get-together. So, anyway. So then, from there, I went to Fort McHenry, and I was the Chief of – well, I was the Chief Ranger – Chief of everything. And I was there – ’77 to ’82. And then I went from – and then, from there, I went to Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, up in the Poconos, of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. I got a promotion to a GS-12.

Interviewer: (Laughs) When you went? Maybe you get a promotion when you got there?

Bielenberg: Oh, I don’t know if I – I don’t remember if I transferred as a 12 or I got promoted as a 12 when I was there. No, I – it was a GS-12. Yeah, because I was – I thought it was kind of unfair at the time because I was a 12, and the Chief Ranger was a 12, and he had, like, thirty people, and I had four, so, anyway, that doesn’t really matter.

Interviewer: What was your position?

Bielenberg: At Delaware Water Gap? The title was Chief of – Chief of Resource Management and Visitor Services. And then the Chief Ranger’s position was called Chief of Resource Protection and Visitor Management (chuckles). Yeah. So, anyway. And then I was – from there – I was there from ’82, or – yeah, ’82 to ’86, and then I swapped jobs with Dennis Carter, who was the Chief Naturalist at Shenandoah. So, we traded jobs. We were both GS-12s. And so, I was in Luray, Virginia. And then, twenty-six, twenty-seven months later, then, I got the job as the Chief of Interpretation in the Midwest Regional Office and got there in November of ’88. And then, in ’95, they were reorganizing, and we went from the Midwest Region to the Midwest Field Office, and –

Interviewer: Okay. You were there. Bielenberg: I was there.

Interviewer: How did it happen that you went from being a Ranger to being – Bielenberg: It’s always – it’s all Ranger. I mean, it’s all –

Interviewer: Right. But, I mean, to being Chief of Interpretation? Bielenberg: That’s still a Ranger.

Interviewer: That’s just how that works?

Bielenberg: It’s still a Ranger position. The Series is a GS-025, which is a Park Ranger. So – I mean, like, a Historian is a different Series. A Biologist – a Natural Resource Specialist is a different Series.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. So, interpretation is under Ranger? Bielenberg: It’s under Park Ranger, yeah.

Interviewer: Alright. And so, you didn’t have any, like, background in interpretation? Bielenberg: Well, I did because I was in interpretation throughout.

Interviewer: Interpreting the park? Bielenberg: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. I guess I needed to clarify what a Chief of Interpretation – Bielenberg: Does?

Interviewer: Does, right. Because to me, interpretation involves a lot of things – Bielenberg: Well, what is interpretation?

Interviewer: Like wayside exhibits and the little brochure things that you pick up at the park, and somebody has to design those, and –

Bielenberg: Right. And usually there are specialists that do that, but, I guess, the result – Interviewer: Oh, okay. So, did you – did you decide what’s going to be interpreted?

Bielenberg: Usually, the parks decided that. In the – in the Regional Office, we were service. We were supporting, initially, the – well, in ’95, we gained North and South Dakota and Arkansas, and a number of parks. I think we went from thirty to –

Interviewer: Had a little reorganization of Regions?

Bielenberg: (Unintelligible – whispers) Big reorganization. But, yeah, we went from, I think – I don’t remember the numbers. I think we had fifty-four units in twelve states after ’95, and it was during the time of a lot of reorganization, and we went from – what? Ten regions to seven regions, I think – or eight regions – seven regions – eight regions. And there were buy-outs in the Regional Offices, and you couldn’t fill those positions. So, in the Midwest Region, we had, like, twenty-seven people that took buy-outs, and then turned around, and we gained twelve parks to manage. And so, a lot of the stuff that used to be done through the Regional Office, then, was foistered out onto the parks, and they broke up in little groups, and it’s (pause) terrible. Yeah. And it’s (pause) – yeah. It’s even worse now.

Interviewer: Okay. So, when did you – so, when did you go to the Midwest Regional Office? Bielenberg: I think November of ’88.

Interviewer: Alright. And how long did you – ?

Bielenberg: I retired in September of 2001. So, twelve and a half years.

Interviewer: Okay. Wow! September of 2001. And so, when you were in the Midwest Regional Office, in Omaha, did you go down to Brown v. Board, ever?

Bielenberg: Oh, yes. A number of times.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you remember when the first time you went was?

Bielenberg: I couldn’t tell you the date, but my first – I don’t even know when Brown – I didn’t look it up, and I don’t remember when Brown v. Board legislation was passed. Maybe you can tell me that.

Interviewer: Well, it was the early ‘90s. They had early Superintendents getting things ready in ’93.

Bielenberg: Right. There would have been – there would have been a date that legislation was signed. And I just remember, I was at a meeting with the Regional Director and other people – I can’t remember if it was a Regional staff meeting, a Superintendent’s class – I don’t know. It was some meeting, and Don Castleberry said that the President just signed the bill authorizing Brown v. Board of Education, and that is going to be one of the most important stories in the Park Service. And that was his feelings on Brown v.

Board. So, he always – oh, kind of put an emphasis on that because it was an important story to the country’s history. Not that others aren’t, but he thought that was really kind of a –

Interviewer: It was a watershed moment?

Bielenberg: A watershed moment, yeah, exactly. So, the first time I went down there, it was with – I think, maybe, Andy Ketterson, who was the Regional Chief of Cultural Resources, and Don Stevens – Dr. Don is a historian – and maybe Bill Harlow, who is a landscape architect, and, I think, Don – or, did I say his – Don Stevens yeah! I think he was kind of the lead, initially. And it was – and then I went down for when we had some meetings, and that was the first time I met with – I met Cheryl Brown and other people from the Brown Foundation, and –

Interviewer: So, when you went down there from – probably shortly after it was established, and it was just the school at the time that –

Bielenberg: Well, there wasn’t anything. Yes. There wasn’t anything, because we looked at – we – I remember we drove around Topeka, and I thought it was a really depressing city to be a state capital. But we drove around, and we looked at different sites that had potential to be involved. And the school was the main – the main thing.

Interviewer: So, this was – but this was after the legislation had already been signed?

Bielenberg: I remember – yes. Yeah, and I don’t think we did anything preliminary to the signing of that, where the cases were –

Interviewer: Okay, but there was some discussion about the Sumner School?

Bielenberg: There was.

Interviewer: But it didn’t get in. It wasn’t in good enough condition to be part of the National Historic Site?

Bielenberg: Right. Yeah. I couldn’t remember the name of it, but I know there was – there was some – there might have been – maybe, where the Browns lived, and there might have been something else, but then, one of the – one of – I remember that the Brown v. Board story was not about just Topeka and the Browns. It wasn’t about Cheryl Brown. It wasn’t about the Brown family. They were just part of it, and the only reason that the Brown name is one there was that it is the first in the alphabet of the seven litigants, right? If I – that’s what I remember about it, anyway.

Interviewer: Okay. And so, when you went down there, the school hadn’t been rehabilitated. They didn’t have –?

Bielenberg: It wasn’t even – we couldn’t even go in it the first time we – if I remember correctly, we didn’t even go in it until, like, a second or maybe a third – I don’t know who owned it at the time. Did the Brown Foundation own it at the time? It was –

Interviewer: No, it had belonged – it belonged to someone who had been using it as a warehouse.

Bielenberg: It – wasn’t it going to be – make it into – they planned to make it into apartments or something at one time? It was – it was –

Interviewer: At any rate, there were several plans for it.

Bielenberg: Yeah, it was all boarded up, and then, when we finally got to go into it – Interviewer: What was your first impression?

Bielenberg: On the outside, it’s a cool school. I mean – yeah, it’s – Interviewer: Uh-huh. It’s a nice building.

Bielenberg: Yeah. I remember walking in the front door, and, if I remember, the principal’s office was to the left when you walked in, and there seemed to be another office on the other side of that door, and you walked in, and then there was the hallway. And it was – it reminded me of my grade school. That’s what – it really did.

Interviewer: (Laughs) It was just like your grade school?

Bielenberg: Uh-huh. Very similar. Probably the same age. Very, very similar to that, yeah. So, that was – that was the one thing I remember. And I know there was a second floor, and the stairways were at the end, I remember. So.

Interviewer: Yes! You remember it pretty well, actually! So, when you looked at it the first time, what did – were you at all thinking about interpretation of the site?

Bielenberg: There were discussions about how we would do – what we would do, how we would do it, how we would use it. I mean, it’s always – when you – you’re always looking, you’re

always dealing with park staff, but this is a brand-new park, so there was no staff. So, the – I think the Regional historians and the Cultural Resource folks – they were – I mean, they’re heavily involved in that because there was historic structures and a historic story, so they’re much more involved than I was.

Interviewer: Well, did you look around and say, “Well, we can put the educational bookstore here?

We could talk about –?”

Bielenberg: We didn’t. Actually, we didn’t. That would have been down the road.

Interviewer: You didn’t talk about that? You didn’t have the General Management Plan or any other kind of plan by that time?

Bielenberg: There was not – there was no plan. I don’t – I don’t remember the sequence of how that all went. (Laughter) I mean, I really don’t. And I don’t have any notes. I don’t have any reference to it. I went through whatever – I cleaned out all kinds of crap at my house, and I wish I wouldn’t have thrown out some of it now because I could have used it for a couple of different things, but –

Interviewer: Did you have – did you have any discussions with the members of the – of Brown Foundation about interpreting the site?

Bielenberg: Oh, gosh, yeah! Oh, yeah. They were – we had multiple meetings, I know that. And they had their own way of wanting to do things, and it was really – the focus was on –

Interviewer: From their point of view, the focus was on the Browns?

Bielenberg: It was – the focus was on Topeka and the Browns, yeah. And the story was the whole thing. And that –

Interviewer: Right. Was that a point of tension between the Park Service and the Browns? Bielenberg: I think there was tension – look – yeah, I know – that’s why you need to talk to Don

Castleberry or Bill Schenk. Because I – yes, there was.

Interviewer: Right. Okay. So, you went to all these meetings?

Bielenberg: Yeah, I don’t know how many that “all” is, but I went to a number of meetings, yeah. Interviewer: With the Brown Foundation?

Bielenberg: Yeah, Cheryl was usually there, and then there was another lady, Deborah Dandridge. Interviewer: Deborah Dandridge, from the University of Kansas?

Bielenberg: Yes, she was – okay, I don’t know if she was at the University of Kansas at the time, but she was –

Interviewer: Currently, she’s the archivist –

Bielenberg: Okay. She was – I think – I don’t know if I had this – they were really – they were really tight. It seemed to me like Cheryl was in charge, and Deborah was her right-hand

person, and, maybe the – maybe the hatchet-person for dealing with making decisions or doing something or – now, there was tension, I know that.

Interviewer: From the beginning? Bielenberg: I think so. They wanted –

Interviewer: Or was it just started – do you think it just developed?

Bielenberg: No, I think they thought it was going to be their park. And Cheryl wanted to be the Superintendent. That was the impression I got. And I know –

Interviewer: She wanted to be the Superintendent from the beginning? Bielenberg: Oh, yeah. And I know that (pause) –

Interviewer: Hmm. She became the Superintendent in 2010.

Bielenberg: Well, that was later. Yeah, I don’t know. That was after I left. But, yeah, she wanted to be the Superintendent, and it was either Don Castleberry or Bill Schenk or maybe both of them at a – you know, at separate times, told her that, “Well, Cheryl, if you were the Superintendent, you’d be wearing a uniform. You’d be working for me. You wouldn’t be able to go around the country and the world speaking and making money for –“

Interviewer: (Laughs) “You’d have to join the Park Service to do that?”

Bielenberg: Well, I mean, yeah! I mean, she did – she did make money. She did give – do speeches and travel around and, you know, raise funds. Well, you can’t do that in the Park Service.

Interviewer: Yeah, you can’t do that if you’re the Superintendent of a park.

Bielenberg: Right. So, yeah. But I think she tried – I think maybe she did that after she became Superintendent. It didn’t last very long. I don’t know how long.

Interviewer: Yeah, she was Superintendent for one year [six months].

Bielenberg: One year, yeah. I think there was – well, I wasn’t around, so – I’ve heard stories, yeah.

But that’s why I think, you know, Bill Schenk and Don Castleberry should be on the list of people to chat with, but they’re not. I don’t know, maybe they don’t want that part of the history told.

Interviewer: Okay. They’re not. So, when you were in Topeka, and as you worked on developing this park, did you get any kind of sense of how the public in Topeka perceived the park, other than the Brown Foundation?

Bielenberg: (Long pause) You know, I – there were – there was – I think that – well, my notes said that there was a negative view of Topeka.

Interviewer: From people in Topeka?

Bielenberg: Of focusing this Brown v. Board of Education on the city of Topeka.

Interviewer: Oh. They were afraid it would create a negative view of Topeka?

Bielenberg: Something – yeah, and I don’t – I can’t remember where – I mean, that was – we had semi-public meetings. I don’t know if we ever - I never was – I don’t recall going to, you know, a big, open, public meeting, but we did meet with city officials and, maybe, some people from the City Council, and things like that. That was my impression, anyway, that they were leery of the Park Service, and they were –

Interviewer: They worried that – they were worried about how you were going to tell the story?

Bielenberg: Yeah, and that it – for some reason, I had the feeling that they didn’t want the focus on this negative story on Topeka. I mean, that’s just the impression I got. So, we’re trying to make it – the role of the Park Service is not that. It’s to tell the story, and this is just one location, and the story is not about Topeka. So, I think that was kind of an overriding –

Interviewer: And did the people in Topeka think that was a good thing if you were going to broaden the focus of the story and just – and just locate the story in – you know, the place to look at it in Topeka?

Bielenberg: I don’t – yeah, I really – I don’t have a strong sense about that. I might – yeah. Interviewer: Okay. They just worried that you were going to put Topeka in a bad light?

Bielenberg: I remember – oh, that’s – I’m trying to think. There was something that happened in the neighborhood. One of the neighbors was afraid, if we had that school – if we made that school our Visitor Center, that it would overrun and ruin their neighborhood.

Interviewer: Because there would be so much traffic and people coming and parking?

Bielenberg: There would be traffic, right, and where are people going to park and all like that, so.

And I don’t know what they did.

Interviewer: And where are people going to park. And, at first, the Visitor Center was in the Post Office –

Bielenberg: Did they have a Visitor Center? That’s where their office was. Maybe had a small Visitor Center.

Interviewer: Well, they had a small display. There was an interpretive display there. Bielenberg: Yeah. Okay. That was when (long pause) somebody – who started that? Interviewer: Well, Shirley Washington started that – Sändra Washington did that.

Bielenberg: Sändra Washington. Was she the first Superintendent? Interviewer: Yes. She was the first Site Manager.

Bielenberg: Okay. Site Manager. Right. Sändra was. Yeah, so – yeah, and Sändra was part of the initial teams, also. I forgot about that. But, yeah, that was the gang on the fourth floor, (laughter) Cultural Resource folks. I was on the ground floor.

Interviewer: Yeah, she said she was tricked into being the first Site Manager by Don Castleberry (laughs).

Bielenberg: Tricked? Maybe so. It was probably good. Yeah.

Interviewer: He told her he could – she – he told her she could be the Site Superintendent from Omaha – stay in Omaha (laughs).

Bielenberg: That’s true! Yeah, I remember that. Yeah.

Interviewer: She went down there and decided that wasn’t going to work out (laughs). Bielenberg: Right. Yeah. She needed to be there.

Interviewer: So, they had – so they had the (interrupted by a phone message notification) – Bielenberg: What was that? Your stomach? Your stomach growling?

Interviewer: No, that was my phone telling me I’ve got emails. I don’t want that to happen again! She was the one who opened up – found the space in the Post Office and got that started.

The first offices and –

Bielenberg: For the first – okay. Is that when Tyrone was there? Brandyburg? Tyrone Brandyberg? Interviewer: I know Tyrone – I don’t know exactly when Tyrone was there. I’m – he might have been.

Robin White was there for a minute, and – Bielenberg: Yeah, he might have been the first one. Robin White? Interviewer: Yeah, she was there early on.

Bielenberg: She was – oh, from Indiana Dunes before she went to Grand Canyon. Oh, yeah, I forgot about that.

Interviewer: And I’m going to talk to Tyrone on Monday, so I’ll ask him. Bielenberg: Okay. Yeah. Where is he now? Harpers Ferry?

Interviewer: He is in Harpers Ferry. Bielenberg: Superintendent at the park? Nice.

Interviewer: Yeah. Right. So, when they – when they started talking about interpreting that site, what was your role in that besides going to meetings and – did you make any plans about interpreting –?

Bielenberg: Oh, you know, (long pause) again, I don’t remember where we were. If we were already – if we started working with the design company, if – to help with that.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, there was a Thematic Workshop, where they gathered together various people to talk about that –

Bielenberg: Right. And that would – that would have been one of the initial stages. And, again, I can’t remember. You know, I really didn’t have a role in it. I’m sorry, I really don’t – I –

Interviewer: Okay, let me ask you this. Don Castleberry was – Bielenberg: He was the Regional Director.

Interviewer: The Regional Director at the time?

Bielenberg: And I don’t know what year Don retired. Don was the Regional Director. Bill Schenk was the Deputy. And then, when Don retired, Bill Schenk became the Regional Director.

Yeah. And, on my staff, Tom Richter was very involved with the interpretive planning. He’s an interpretive planner.

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm. I’ve met him.

Bielenberg: Okay. Yeah. And he was probably more involved with the overall interpretive planning than I was. I –

Interviewer: Okay. You were the manager of the interpretive planners, right?

Bielenberg: Well, I can’t – I – we had different roles at different times. I mean, Tom worked for me. I hired Tom. He worked for me. And then – in ’95, then, the Region went away, and we became Great Plains Support Office and Great Lakes Support Office. The same people, but Tom – then, he was the interpretive planner for the Great Plains. So, he didn’t work for me. So, I was the interpretive – well, I was the Chief of Visitor Services. So, at that time, I supervised – ’95, I got a temporary promotion to a 14, and I supervised interpretation, concessions, ranger activities, law enforcement, safety, maintenance, and fire. And then, the next year, they re-organized again, and they did away with – they did away with the Great Lakes and the Great Plains Support Office, and then we became the Midwest Support Office. And then I had to apply for the job again, and I think – I don’t remember if that was a permanent or a temporary promotion. I don’t remember how that went. But, anyway, I know I had to apply for the same job that I – had to apply for the job –

Interviewer: Again? (Laughs)

Bielenberg: Yeah. I had to apply for it because it changed. And, at that time, they took – Interviewer: Yeah. What was the purpose of all this re-organization?

Bielenberg: Talk to your Congressman. And – government efficiency, of course! And then – the following year, then, Maintenance became its own Division, which it should have been – or its own group. And then, Tom – we burned bridges during that first time, and then he went and was working in the planning. He wasn’t in interpretation. He was in planning. So, he was – he was much more involved with that. And then, Great – and then the Brown v. Board would have been in the Great Plains, not the Great Lakes, and they got – they would be real touchy if I was involved with something on the Great Lakes – Great Plains, because I was a Great Lakes guy! Even though people from the Great Plains would call me for help! It was real –

Interviewer: (Laughs) You had a little bit of fiefdom building?

Bielenberg: Yeah. It helped speed up retirement, let me tell you. Yeah. So, I’m sorry, I can’t – I, really, I’m – I questioned, when I got initial contact about being involved with it, because I really don’t think I had major involvement with this, so.

Interviewer: Okay. But you did have major involvement with the various reorganizations of the National Park Service?

Bielenberg: Well, I was! There was –

Interviewer: And that may have some impact on what the park was able to do at certain times because, I would say, considerable confusion about who was in charge of what –

Bielenberg: Correct. There was. There was that. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. So you were – you were Great Lakes instead of Great Plains after ‘95? Bielenberg: After ’95, I was Great – I was –

Interviewer: And how long did –?

Bielenberg: Well, that was one year. And then, the next year, they folded back together in the Midwest Field Office, but, by that time, there were separations that had occurred between Great Lakes and Great Plains that – those, sort of, bonded. Tom was one. Tom and I had differences of opinion on things, and then he was Great Plains, and he was interpretive planner, and he wanted to stay in planning, so he worked in the planning as interpretive planning in the planning office of the – of the office. I was – I was the Chief of Visitor Services after that time, and I –

Interviewer: So, did you find that, because you had been in Great Plains – Great Lakes – the Great Lakes group, for a week – a year – that you had difficulty integrating back with the Great Plains people? Or, they had –?

Bielenberg: A year, yeah. No. More of the – more of the – it was more of a personnel thing between Tom and myself, and my –

Interviewer: Oh, I see. That was just an interpersonal clash? Okay.

Bielenberg: Yeah. Right. Yeah. And maybe with some other people. But, no, I thought I got along very well with those other – I mean, just – we were very – when I got to the Regional Office, Don Castleberry told me – I’m not going to tell you what he told me, but –

Interviewer: (Laughs) I can’t print that, right?

Bielenberg: (Laughs) Well, one of the things – one of the – one of the things he told me was, “This office is too dull. We need you here to liven things up.” (Laughter) And the person that had been the Regional Chief of Interpretation was an ass-hole, from what a lot of people told me and had no dealings with anybody else in the – others in the office. And so I was mending bridges between interpretation and the Ranger activities and the – and the folks on the fourth floor, the resource – Cultural Resource people. And then – yeah. So, I mean, it was – it was an interesting time. That was an interesting experience.

Interviewer: (Laughs) What would you say – what would you say was the biggest challenge? Bielenberg: Of?

Interviewer: To your position? Bielenberg: When?

Interviewer: After ’93. Bielenberg: Lack of money.

Interviewer: Lack of money? The budgets?

Bielenberg: Yeah. I mean, we are – the Midwest Regional Office, you know, they were there to support your parks and provide assistance, and –

Interviewer: And they had that little, old warehouse thing in Omaha? Bielenberg: Little warehouse thing?

Interviewer: Well, the – whatever – I guess it was a newspaper office?

Bielenberg: Yeah. I was there. We were in a newspaper office. And I was on the ground floor. And we had a little office in there, and I had a – I had a secretary and – I had a secretary and, like, a clerk, and then it was Tom and me. And then, for a little while, we had an intern, June McMillan, that then went on to become an interpretive writer in the planning office. But, prior to ’90 – when was the Oklahoma bombing? Was that in ’93?

Interviewer: I don’t remember.

Bielenberg: Well, prior to that, you were in – were you in that old building at all? Interviewer: No. Ron Cockrell has described it to me.

Bielenberg: Okay. So it was the old *Omaha Bee* newspaper *–* right? Yeah. Alright. So, it was this building, and across – there was our building and a parking lot, and then, across the street was the bus station, and behind us was the county jail. And across the road, here (illustrates positions on the table), one of them was the county vehicle inspection, and another one was, like, family services or something, and so here we were in this big building – had a big arrowhead on it, and we’d get all kinds of people – coming off the bus, going to visit people in jail, wanting to know where they can get their vehicle inspected – coming into our building. And our office was right there. So, each of our desks had a red button underneath it. If there was trouble, we could push that, and the LE Rangers would run down to save us. Well, after – the day after – and we tried to get security, we tried to get a lock on the door, and they would never listen to anything.

Interviewer: Oh, the Park Service would welcome everybody?

Bielenberg: So, the Park Service – no. In the office, the Park Service – the – basically, the Chief of Administration, Ed Carlin was a real butt-head – oh, I get opinions, but, anyway, after – the day after Oklahoma City bombing, our door was locked, and we had a GSA guard

that would check things, and then, shortly after that, we had a lock system on the door, and you had to have a password to get in. Yeah, so that made our life a whole lot easier because we didn’t get all these walk-in weird people that were coming in to do all kinds of stuff.

Interviewer: Ask all kind of questions that you didn’t know the answer to?

Bielenberg: Yeah. But – well, we knew the answers because they were almost the same question all the time. But it was just a real interesting group of – you can imagine the people that were coming in.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, now they have a lovely building by the river. It’s wonderful! (Laughs) Bielenberg: They do. They do. Yep, they do.

Interviewer: Did you retire before that was built?

Bielenberg: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Indeed. So, the biggest – you asked the biggest challenge or problem – was the lack of money. So, when I would start the fiscal year, I had a budget, and I would already be overspent, just through my permanent –

Interviewer: So, on October 1, you were overspent?

Bielenberg: Right. For the year. I would start the budget, like, five percent in the hole. So, a park would call up and say, “Well, hey, Warren, we need help with interpretive planning for the exhibits for our Visitor Center, for the wayside exhibits for here. Can you come and help? Or can Tom come and help?” I’d say, “Well, we’d be happy to. Do you have any money for travel?” That’s no way to run a service organization. So, that was always a challenge.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, having money for travel was a big issue?

Bielenberg: Having money to do anything, in my realm, was a big issue. Of course, interpretation always was the low end. You know, that was the first – the first thing you cut at a park was interpretation because it was not necessary. You had to – yeah. Right. At one time – at one time, we had five new Visitor Centers in the Midwest Region that were sitting there with no exhibits in them, not being used.

Interviewer: Do you remember which ones those were? This is after ‘93?

Bielenberg: Oh, let’s see. No, I – this was – I can’t remember what year that would have been. There was one at St. Croix River; there was one at Voyageurs; might have been one at Cuyahoga Valley, and, for a while, we had one at Agate Fossil Beds, and I don’t remember where the other one was.

Interviewer: Well, we could probably figure out the approximate year by knowing which ones those were.

Bielenberg: Yeah. I mean – but they were – I mean, you know, Congress likes – they like to give money to the Park Service to build things. They don’t like to give money to operate them. Yeah. I think there might have been two at Voyageurs that were vacant. Or that

were open – that were empty buildings that were built that had no exhibits in them. They’d have a – you know, they’d open the door, and some – a Ranger would be sitting there. That would be it, or they would tack together, you know, some homemade exhibits, temporarily, but –

Interviewer: Quick get some brochures printed up? Bielenberg: Yeah.

Interviewer: Because you had a standard. You have a brochure standard. It’s pretty easy to do a –?

Bielenberg: Yeah, we can’t do it, and it’s all done – well, there is a standard for doing site bulletins.

Yeah, but it’s all done at – yeah, Harpers Ferry – that Unigrid format, which is pretty cool. And a lot of other agencies and countries have adapted, basically, that format for their signage and brochures and things. So, yeah, that was – that’s a really good thing with the Park Service – the Park Service has done a lot of good things.

Interviewer: The Park Service has a lot of procedures in place that you can adapt to whatever your situation is, like the Unigrid system for the – for the brochures.

Bielenberg: But then, they also have some pretty strict, high standards for exhibits and AV [Audio visual] and things like that. And sometimes that becomes an issue and a problem because you have to pay them forty percent or whatever it is, off your project, to have them involved with – yeah.

Interviewer: And then the other thing in a new park – the first thing that happens with a new park is, like, five years of studies, basically: General Management Plans, Cultural Resource Plans, Interpretive Plans, all of those things. Sometimes the public, because they don’t know that this comes first, expects more sooner, you know. And then they find that –

Bielenberg: Expects more. Yeah. And it all costs money, and Congress doesn’t give much money. Interviewer: So, were you – do you remember being involved in the General Management Plan for

Brown v. Board?

Bielenberg: Not really. I mean – not really. I definitely wasn’t the leader of it, like you accuse me of – (laughter).

Interviewer: (Laughs) I’m trying not to accuse you of things.

Bielenberg: You know, some of that early – some of that early – that early meeting stuff would have been, maybe, legwork for the GMP, so – and I don’t know the time frame. Again, I can’t tell you when the legislation was passed. I can’t tell you when –

Interviewer: Well, I think, about ’93 was when they start – they got the building. So, then –

Bielenberg: Okay. Well, the building would have – that would have been coming – that was – that was later on, then. That wouldn’t have been an initial – getting the building, I don’t think. The legislation would have been first, and then there would have been so many initial groundwork and studies and, I don’t know – did the Park Service – must have bought that building or – it wasn’t donated?

Interviewer: Well, Shirley – I’m sorry, Sändra Washington told me that she was told to go down there and pick up the keys, and I think that was in ’93. I could be remembering that date wrong. And that was when she suddenly discovered that it wasn’t going to work to be the Site Manager from Omaha.

Bielenberg: Couldn’t really do that. Interviewer: Yeah, couldn’t really do that, so –

Bielenberg: Okay. Yeah, I’m – I am just – I really can’t – I don’t – (laughs) there are some other parks that I wish that people – I could do Administrative Histories on –

Interviewer: So, have you been to the park since – okay, well, tell me which ones those are. I’ll tell Ron Cockrell (laughs).

Bielenberg: Well, I don’t know if they’ve already done them, but Apostle Islands. I was there for the first five and a half years, and, if they have an Administrative History, they never asked me anything about it.

Interviewer: Well, you know, the number of people, a lot of times, has to do with how much money – you know, what’s the budget to do this. So, this Administrative History has twenty people, which is the most we’ve done – ever done for an Administrative History.

Bielenberg: Oh, yeah. Who selected the names? Who did the names? Who –?

Interviewer: Ron Cockrell, in the Midwest Regional Office, and Sherda Williams, the Superintendent, and possibly somebody else. I’m not sure. I think –

Bielenberg: Don Stevens, maybe?

Interviewer: I have no idea. Those are the two people I know of who compiled the names.

Bielenberg: Right. It’s just interesting. I don’t know who all the names were, but it just – I found it curious that neither Don or Bill – Don Castleberry or Bill –

Interviewer: Have you been to the park since it –? Bielenberg: No. No, I haven’t.

Interviewer: No? Okay. Alright. So, I’m down to the last two questions. Bielenberg: Oh, wow! Okay.

Interviewer: So, the work that you’ve done, that you can recall, for Brown v. Board, what do you – what would you say you’re most proud of doing?

Bielenberg: The work that I did?

Interviewer: For Brown v. Board. I think you just managed people? Bielenberg: I – yeah, I mean – (long pause)

Interviewer: Okay. So, is there anything you can think of that you think was particularly effective for that park, that you can recall?

Bielenberg: Well, at some point, I know that – one of my jobs in the Regional Office – I was the Cooperating Association Coordinator, you know – you know, the bookstores. And so, there was discussion about Brown v. Board. And so I was – I worked – I worked with Southwest Parks and Monument Association because they had – they had the parks at Fort Scott and Fort Larned, so it was – we had discussions about having that or Eastern National or maybe even Jefferson National Expansion from St. Louis have the – have the bookstore there. But I believe that Southwest Parks and Monuments has the bookstore. I – again, I think that’s what the case is. But I know that is one that I was involved with, but – because I think Tim Priest was the Executive Director, and I think Tim actually came, and we went into the – yeah, we went into the school, and we looked at the bookstore. We had talked about having the bookstore towards the – I don’t know if it was down the hall. There was a room, like, maybe, the library or something that was down to the – hall to the right of when you walked in the main entrance. I don’t think it was right at the office of the – Principal’s Office.

Interviewer: Well, currently, it is opposite the Office of the Principal. Bielenberg: Directly? You walk right through?

Interviewer: Yes. Walk in. Principal’s Office is on the left.

Bielenberg: Oh, so it was that little - how big is the – how big is the room? Interviewer: It’s not very big.

Bielenberg: Not as big as this [where the interview is taking place]? Because that little – that little office was sort of like a smaller – yeah, like maybe from here to that chair?

Interviewer: Yeah. It’s a small room. Yeah.

Bielenberg: Yeah, okay, so it was – yeah. So that’s right. So, that’s where – I mean, it made sense that that’s where you’d want to have your bookstore, close to the entrance and exit.

Interviewer: Yeah, well, basically as close to the exit as possible because you want people to, after they’ve seen everything –

Bielenberg: Well, they don’t have to go through it. Well, and some people – some – yeah.

Sometimes they kind of direct you to do a certain way. It – and I – Interviewer: (Laughs) But it has two doors, so there’s no way to –

Bielenberg: Now, in – there’s a big center room. Was that the gymnasium or – was it multi-purpose gymnasium, lunch room or something? Cafeteria –?

Interviewer: Yeah, that’s the gymnasium – auditorium. Yeah, it was the auditorium. I don’t –

Bielenberg: And I know we talked about having exhibits in there. And there was talk about a theater – building a theater at the other end. But then there was – we – oh, man. I remember,

there was a kitchen or something, and they talked about taking the kitchen out and using that as an auditorium and – but then, I can’t remember if that was the building they talked about gutting the whole thing and – oh, I know one of the big things was having – reconstructing or having the kindergarten room.

Interviewer: Yes. They have done that.

Bielenberg: Okay. So, that was one of the things that was – we identified that early on as something that we wanted to do. And then, I know that the Cultural Resource folks – since that’s a historic structure, you can’t – there’s certain things you can’t do, and, oftentimes, the exhibit planners, they want to rip out everything and start with a sterile rectangle. And so, the challenge, usually, is working around maintaining historic integrity and also having exhibits. Yeah. So, I don’t know what they finally ended up doing in that – in that space, but I think that’s their main – that was planned to be the main exhibit space. And then the – I can’t remember. Was the – was the kindergarten room, when you walked in, to the right or to the left? It was at the end of the hall, if I remember right.

Interviewer: I think it’s to the left, but, yeah, at the end of the hall. It’s the one with the fireplace.

Bielenberg: I don’t remember a fireplace. No. Well, you’re bringing back memories, but I can’t – I really apologize.

Interviewer: That’s okay. No, no, no! That’s fine. You would be surprised what we can glean. Bielenberg: You can glean or you can tear out of that, okay? And tie into something else?

Interviewer: Right, because this is an Administrative History, and it’s the history of how the park developed, but how the parked developed is dependent on how the Park Service was functioning at the time.

Bielenberg: Okay. It was a dysfunctional time.

Interviewer: And so your memories of that inform how we approach the development of the park because we can explain some things that happened in the park because of what was happening in the Region or the Park Service in general. So, that’s very useful, okay?

Bielenberg: Oh, yeah! Alright.

Interviewer: Okay. So, is there anything I haven’t asked you about that you would like to say, or talk about, that you hoped I would ask you about?

Bielenberg: No.

Interviewer: No? Okay (Laughter). Alright. Well, I appreciate that you spent your time and came down here in this not-very-great weather to talk to me about it, and I’m going to turn off the recording device here.

Bielenberg: Okay.

(RECORDING DEVICE TURNED OFF; THEN, AFTER SOME DISCUSSION, TURNED BACK ON)

Bielenberg: I know – more than one meeting, I know, that I was in with Cheryl Brown and Deborah – and there is another lady, too, and I can’t remember her name, but they have an agenda. They had an agenda which wasn’t really what we wanted, and so there was tension, I know that. So.

Interviewer: Okay. You couldn’t agree – you had trouble agreeing on how the park was going to be interpreted, basically? Whether or not it was going to –

Bielenberg: Oh, yeah. Or managed. And what it should be.

Interviewer: Or managed. And whether or not it was going to focus on the Browns and Topeka or talk about the entire story?

Bielenberg: Or how to do that. How best to do that.

Interviewer: How to do that. Did – they didn’t – they didn’t have objections to talking about the entire story, I assume?

Bielenberg: I think – no. I don’t – no, because I think that they were – that’s their whole – no. Huh- uh.

Interviewer: Okay. They just wanted the greater focus to be on the entire story through the lens of Brown – of the Browns and the city of Topeka?

Bielenberg: I think, at one time, if I remember right – I don’t remember. Let’s see, how did – Cheryl lived over here – the Browns lived over here (illustrating locations on the table). And was it – Sumner School was the white school?

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm.

Bielenberg: That was close. She had to walk past that to get to the bus to take the bus to go to Monroe. And there was some discussion that they wanted to have a walking path to show how she had to get to school. And, you know, they wanted to have some signage along the route. And I don’t know if that was –

Interviewer: But you didn’t own any property along there, so –?

Bielenberg: Right. It would have been a city street. It had to have been through the city as a – and I don’t know if they ever did anything like that or not.

Interviewer: The city would have to do that?

Bielenberg: Correct. Yeah, but they would have worked – I mean, usually, with a strong partnership with the city, you would hope – (laughs) a strong partnership with the city (pause), and was there a playground for the school?

Interviewer: It was across the street.

Bielenberg: Across the street. Yeah. And there was some – they wanted to develop some kind of a city park, or maybe we were going to use that for parking. I don’t know. I can’t remember all the –

Interviewer: Well, right now, on the other side of that playground is where the parking is. Bielenberg: So, the playground is still there?

Interviewer: (Illustrating locations with hands on the table) The playground is there, and the backstop for the baseball diamond is still there.

Bielenberg: I remember, yeah. I just remember, across the street, there was, like, this big area.

Interviewer: That was the playspace for, I guess, the older grades. The younger grades stayed on the school side.

Bielenberg: Behind the school. Behind the school, or something? Was there a little play area behind there? I don’t know.

Interviewer: I don’t know. It isn’t – it isn’t clear to me where that was, but I was more focused on the building – the inside of the building. But, because I had to park on the other side of that playspace – I couldn’t walk across it, I was – I noticed it. (Laughs) You have to walk around it. You’re not allowed to walk across it.

Bielenberg: Oh, okay. That was another discussion – yeah, that was a discussion on how people would get there, because there’s not – I don’t think there’s city bus transportation now, and they were thinking about having buses – try to get buses from the center part of town to come out to some – yeah, I – those are all things that came up in, you know, discussions, at meetings – and ideas and things like that. And that’s what you do in the meetings: you just sort of brainstorm and work out things and listen to people, and –

Interviewer: And then, after the meeting, somebody provides you with meeting minutes so that you’ll know what the decisions were?

Bielenberg: Yeah. That was usually Sändra’s job. Yeah. Ask her if that was really her job. I – that’s how I remember – was she would – she would –

Interviewer: She took care of the meeting minutes? Bielenberg: Yeah. Now, is she still working or is she retired? Interviewer: She’s retired. Yeah. I interviewed her in February.

Bielenberg: Where does she live? In Omaha, or did she move – or Ohio? Interviewer: She’s in Lawrence – not Lawrence, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Bielenberg: Lincoln. Oh, Nebraska. Okay, so she stayed in the area, then? Okay. Interviewer: Yeah. Okay, I’m going to turn this off again.

Bielenberg: Oh, my gosh!

END OF INTERVIEW