



## Insider's Look at Grand Canyon

### Webisode #25 – Interview with Ranger Jack Howell at Verkamp's Transcript

**Ranger Patrick Gamman:** This is Ranger Patrick and I am joined today by Ranger Jack Howell. We are sitting in front of the Verkamp's museum and bookstore. Jack, can you tell us a little bit about this facility?

**Ranger Jack Howell:** I'd be happy to Pat. I like to call Verkamp's our **newest** Visitor Center in one of the **oldest** buildings in the historic district of Grand Canyon south rim. Folks who visited Grand Canyon before, might remember this as Verkamp's Curios, a family owned business that lasted over 100 years.

**Patrick:** That's really cool, but Jack how did it all get started?

**Jack:** In 1898, John Verkamp brought a wagon load of Indian blankets and souvenirs to the Grand Canyon village to sell for the Babbitt brothers. Babbitt brothers were well known ranchers in northern Arizona who had also owned a number of trading posts. Verkamp had followed the Babbitts from Ohio where their families were friends. John Verkamp rented a tent from the Bright Angel camp and attempted to sell the curios. However, business was slow especially since the Grand Canyon railroad line wasn't to be completed for a few more years. Disappointed with the lack of business, Verkamp sold out his merchandise to the Bright Angel Camp and left. But, he recognized the potential opportunity here and he returned in 1905. He had this building constructed to house his business which opened early the following year.

**Patrick:** So, Jack did he actually run this business himself?

**Jack:** Initially, he had hired other folks to run the store for him. He made a home for his family in Flagstaff, which was closer to his ranching interests. He had both cattle and sheep ranches. But, during the depression his other interests became unprofitable. One day in 1936 he announced to his family; "*We're going to move out to the canyon, all of us.*" The family (one son and three daughters) took over the operations of the store and everyone helped out. They lived in the small apartment above the store. When John Verkamp passed on in 1944, his son Jack and other family members kept the curio shop open until 2008 at which time family members decided to pursue other interests. The Verkamps were prominent community members over the years. In fact Peggy Verkamp was a driving force behind the establishment of a school and Jack Verkamp organized the effort to build the Shrine of Ages.

**Patrick:** So, what was life like for the family during these years?

**Jack:** When the family moved to the canyon many memories were made of sharing the small apartment with only one small bathroom. As you might expect, running the store, dealing with suppliers and keeping it stocked was a lot of hard work. Being in competition with Fred Harvey, they would not supply the Verkamps with electricity. The old generator they had would rattle and bang. Also being at the far end of the village, visitors were attracted to the store in various ways. The large "Akin" painting, of Grand Canyon, by Louis Akin; the natural stone fireplace which was always inviting; and many visitors still ask about the 500 pound meteorite that was displayed on a pedestal right in the middle of the store.

**Patrick:** So, what did they sell in the store?

**Jack:** Jack: Verkamps sold Navajo blankets, jewelry, and all kinds of Grand Canyon souvenirs. They advertised themselves as the "Independent Store", meaning not affiliated with the Fred Harvey Company. They had their own suppliers and the stock would vary somewhat every year.

**Patrick:** Hey Jack, let's go inside and take a look.

**Jack:** Jack: OK great...Come on in, I will show you around. As you enter, you will see the non-profit book sales on the right side of the room. In the middle, the bullpen has an information desk and is staffed by a ranger who also conducts a ranger program or two from this location during the day. To the left is a museum of the village and the school with displays depicting early pioneering life here right up to the present time. You can walk through time by walking the floor timeline, or you can watch old black & white home movies of Grand Canyon showing continuously on a television.

The Aiken painting, I mentioned, was purchased and still hangs on the wall and the fireplace still has a crackling fire during most of the days during the colder months. The meteorite is no longer here, but is on display at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff.

There is a lot of history in this building that gives one the true flavor of the pioneering days here at Grand Canyon National Park. It represents one family's struggle to make a living, where each one contributed to running their family business. By preserving the Curio Shop, The National Park Service invites visitors to experience one part of the legacy of this park that the Verkamp family contributed.

**Patrick:** Well Jack, thanks a lot for sharing with myself and our listeners this historical tour through the Verkamp's Visitor Center.

**Jack:** It has been my pleasure Pat, thanks for having me.