

Bison Trails



From the Oklahoma State Coordinator

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It probably goes without saying that 2020 offered us unique challenges in many areas of our lives. To say that we were unprepared for some of those challenges on a global scale, would be an understatement. Whether we were focused globally, nationally, or locally, the challenges and the response to them were felt by everyone. We were not immune to those challenges in the National Park Service. We witnessed unprecedented response within our agency. Things I never would have thought we would consider implementing, we did. We closed entire parks to the public. We sent most of our employees to work from home, and some are still working from home. We had to rethink what was important as an agency. To say we overcame all our challenges would be shortsighted. We did, however, find ways to manage through them, or “deal” with them as some would say. What we learned along the way is we must develop new leadership skills that may not have been as crucial in the past. We must find a new leadership normal!

I am not a big fan of the term, “new normal”. What is “normal” in an ever-changing world? Given that, how do we define a “new” normal? Certainly, leadership once had a normal progression, but leadership models are changing as we all have experienced on some level or another in recent years.

Although there was always debate on which were the most important tenants of leadership, there was always general agreement on the basics: good judgement, loyalty, integrity, dependability, decisiveness, and courage. But in this everchanging world the basics may not be enough to be a successful leader. We have seen that the old style of leadership tends to flounder under the pressures that exist in society today. Leadership worldwide struggled under the weight of the pandemic and the fear and insecurity it brought with it. Those basic qualities are all still important, but other skills must be developed for leaders to be able to thrive wherever the “new normal” takes us.

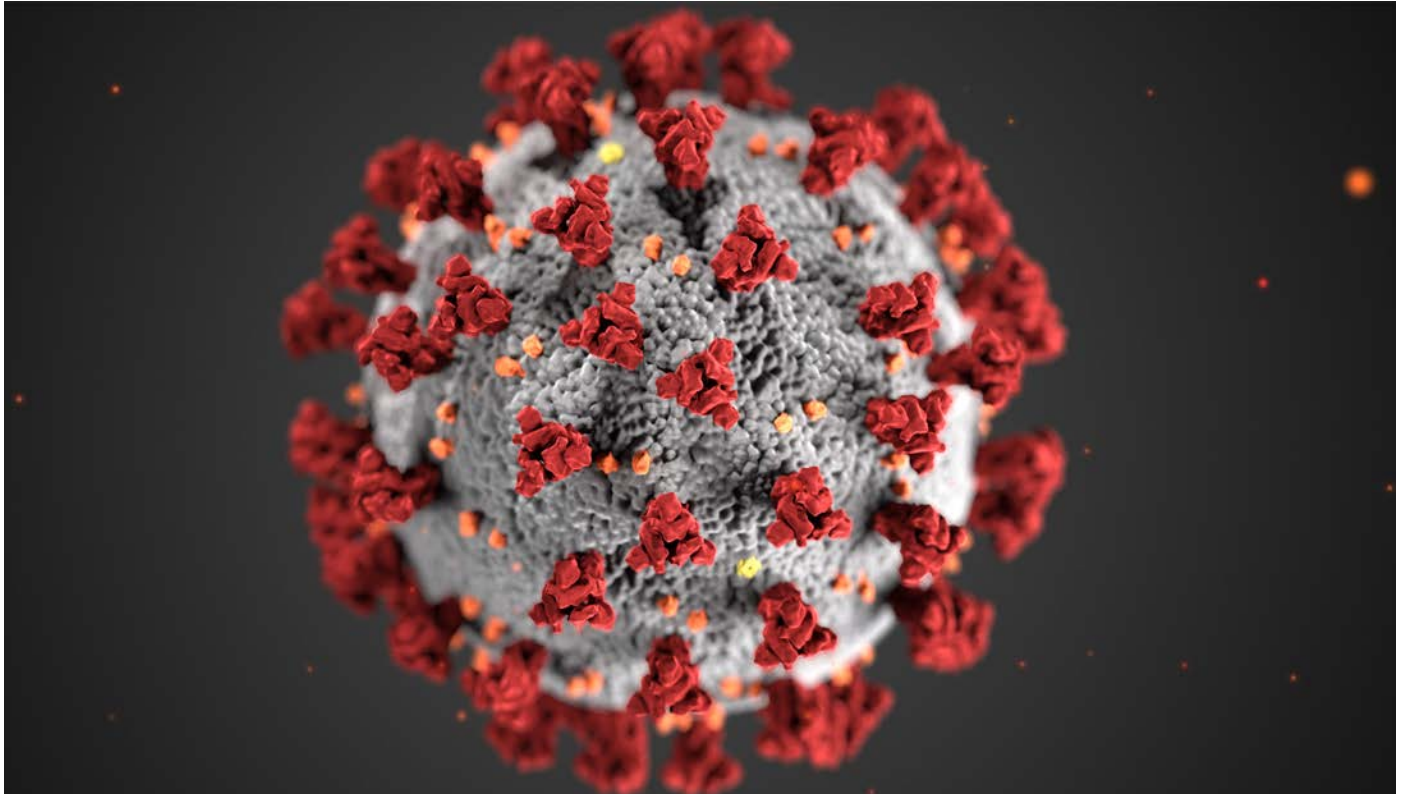
Leaders will now need to be adaptable, flexible, and resilient in the face of constant change and overwhelming workloads. They will have to master a variety of skills and maintain versatility in the workplace. They will need to understand how to manage staff members from diverse cultures and how to manage in a multigenerational workforce. Leaders will have to understand the art of collaboration and be adept at relationship building and reaching out to those with differing agendas. They will need to possess emotional intelligence. They will need to understand what it means to generate a positive social media presence. Generating restraint, professionalism and moderation online have never been more important. They will have to be willing to engage in the hard conversations. Last but not least, today’s leaders must know how to lead virtual teams as we move into an era where it may become a rare event for everyone to be in the same room together.

Normal vs New Normal is not actually new. We have always lived in a world that constantly redefined our normal. We just haven’t had to really look at it that way. Now we do.

- Bill Wright

Reflections During the Time of COVID-19

DJ Labay, Park Guide



The new normal - this seems to be the catch phrase of 2020. The world we were accustomed to has moved on and we are all doing our best to adjust accordingly. Social interactions are down while self-isolation is up. With normal routines being interrupted, the passing of time seems warped these last six months. I started as an Interpreter at the Oklahoma City National Memorial in April, during the first phases of the pandemic. Here we are, months later, and that early day in April seems like a lifetime ago. The world appears to be spinning a bit slower, like we are all stuck in a waiting room watching the big hand of the clock slowly ticking, minute by minute, hour by hour.

The work and life of an Interpreter is based on the wholesome, universal concept of human connection. In these current times, where physical interaction is infrequent, it's hard not to feel a sense of loss, akin to the feeling of having fallen out of favor with an old friend. With that loss comes the anxiety of disconnection and uncertainty. We continue to tell our stories in a way that is unique to who we are, but in the end we are all on this journey together, through this spinning blue dot, seeking that which gives our passions meaning, and helps to close that dark cellar door known as loneliness.

As I live this disconnection every day, I do know change is constant, I know the merry-go-round of what's normal will continue to spin, and I know nothing is definite.

What have I learned in these isolating times? I have been slowly learning to listen more to the world around me. As I stand out by the survivor tree I listen to the birds, I listen to the passing of cars, I listen to the slow ripple of the reflection pool and perhaps, if I listen close enough, I may just be able to hear the passing of time. As a kid I remember loving the thrill of going to the amusement park. I remember the initial excitement of being buckled into that metal car as it slowly creaks and clicks its way up the track. My excitement would grow ever greater as the car reaches the top. While the pandemic lingers, and although I find myself lamenting for the past, I remain optimistic that we are close to reaching the top and the drop is just on the other side.

When this version of normal changes and the next normal begins, I'll be excited to let the caterpillars in my stomach become butterflies. Even now, Winter is upon us, the leaves of the trees have disappeared, and I find myself changing too. I know I will look back on this season of isolation with a sense of kindness and forgiveness for the world, and myself, with many fond reflections.

Chickasaw National Recreation Area

Stewards of a National Icon

Noel Osborn, Chief of Resource Management



Bison and calf at Chickasaw NRA / NPS Photo

The North American plains bison (Bison bison) once numbered about 30 million, with a range that extended from northern Mexico to central Canada. Yet by the end of the 1800s, a combination of commercial hunting, introduced diseases, and habitat destruction had driven plains bison to the brink of extinction. The establishment of a small number of protected, federally managed herds in the early 1900s saved them from extinction in the wild. As a result of those efforts, the Department of the Interior (DOI) is now the primary national conservation steward of North American plains bison.

The department supports about 12,000 bison in 12 states. A total of 19 herds roam 4.6 million acres of National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management lands. The largest DOI herd is at Yellowstone National Park, with

about 4,800 animals. The smallest herd is at Chickasaw National Recreation Area (CNRA), with six to ten animals.

Concerns have been raised about the long-term genetic viability of the DOI herds. Twelve of the herds are kept behind fences, only one herd has more than 1,000 bison, and almost all are culled to maintain low population densities. Compounding these factors, these herds have primarily been managed in isolation from one another. In 2020, DOI initiated the Bison Conservation Initiative to restore effective gene flow and to manage DOI bison herds as a metapopulation (a group of interacting populations instead of separate populations).

A major obstacle to the conservation of bison is that most public and private

herds contain evidence of historic interbreeding with domestic cattle. The introduction of cattle DNA into bison herds began more than 100 years ago, when bison were at the brink of extinction and small herds were maintained on private ranches. Ranchers began experimentally breeding the bison with cattle in an attempt to engineer hardier livestock. The DOI bison herds are a unique resource because they have low levels of cattle introgression and a relatively high degree of genetic diversity. Thus, they are an irreplaceable resource for the long-term conservation of North American plains bison.

To mitigate the loss of genetic diversity in isolated bison populations, such as

Cont. on pg 5

COVID-19 at Chickasaw NRA

Megan Wilkins, Park Ranger

I first heard about the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in early January on the way home from work. The radio was still playing when I parked and turned off my car. For a brief moment as my radio went silent, it felt like the introductory scene from a movie; a movie in which I was soon to become an example or a very unlikely hero. The moment passed and my life has (luckily) not been exciting enough for Hollywood, but it has been a very different year than I could have ever imagined on January 1st.

At Chickasaw NRA, our changes started on March 17th when Western National Parks Association decided to pull their store. Later that same day the NPS closed the Travertine Nature Center. Within a week, campgrounds throughout the park were closed, with some other areas of the park soon to follow. Trails and the main boat launches at Lake of the Arbuckles remained open. Phased reopening began in May with Veterans Lake road reopening to traffic. Over the next five weeks, most campgrounds, swimming access, and the Travertine Nature Center reopened to the public with mitigations in place. As the summer marched on, guidance was released, seasonal staff arrived, and some sense of normal work returned.



Visitor at Travertine Nature Center / NPS Photo

A number of mitigations remain in place. Maintenance staff constructed sneeze guards for the Travertine Nature Center front desk and a mobile sneeze guard that travels outside with rangers giving pop-up programs. Park staff is encouraged to use masks, to practice social distancing between themselves and with the public, and use separate vehicles when travelling in order keep staff as safe as possible. Hopefully, these measures will limit the spread of COVID-19 and keep park operations as normal as possible.

Stewards cont. from pg. 4

in CNRA's herd, researchers have suggested restoring effective gene flow among department herds. Deliberate transfer of bison among the DOI herds would help maintain genetic diversity of bison populations, especially for smaller herds that are managed in isolation.

As part of the DOI bison genetics project, the CNRA herd was sampled in 2016 for DNA analysis. Results indicate the park's herd has the lowest level of introgression of cattle DNA compared with other federal herds. However, due to its small size and isolation, the park's herd also has the lowest genetic diversity. Genetic diversity of the park's herd could be increased by introducing bison selected from another herd with high diversity and a low level of cattle introgression. The CNRA herd may be the smallest DOI herd, but it can still play a role in conserving the species.



Bison calf at Chickasaw NRA / NPS Photo

New Wayside Exhibits

Megan Wilkins, Park Ranger

New interpretive wayside exhibits have arrived at Chickasaw National Recreation Area. Work began several years ago to design and fabricate eighteen new, full color waysides and upright orientation panels. Most of these signs are now in place throughout the park, including new metal bases for the panels to slide into. Many feature custom artwork, while others feature new and historic photographs.

Look for these new signs along the Antelope and Buffalo Springs Trail System, Little Niagara, Vendome Well, Pavilion Springs, Flower Park, Walnut Grove, Inkana Bridge, The Point picnic area, Buckhorn Pavilion, Guy Sandy Boat Launch, Bluestem Prairie, and Veterans Lake.

In addition to the new interpretive signs, new park entrance signs have also been installed throughout the park. The updated entry signs bring uniformity to the entrances, which previously had been a mishmash of several designs.

Repeat visitors to the park will also notice improvements have been made along the Northeast Perimeter Road. Pullouts in the falls area now have designated parking spaces that have been measured and marked with painted stripes. These measures helped address the congestion and parking issues that have been increasingly common in the past few summers.



New wayside exhibit at Chickasaw NRA / NPS Photo

2020 Historic Candlelight Tour

Megan Wilkins, Park Ranger

The Historic Candlelight Tour at Chickasaw National Recreation Area was held on December 4 & 5, 2020. The tour was different from normal to encourage social distancing both for participants and visitors.

Instead of having actors, the scenes had interpretive signs to explain the history being portrayed. Visitors were not clustered into tour groups, but instead were able to walk through the park at their own pace to view the scenes. Park staff and volunteers were present, many in costume, to greet visitors and answer questions.



Historic Candlelight Tour Scene / NPS Photo

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site

A Place to Play In

Richard Zahm, Park Ranger and Kate Roesch, Park Ranger

John Muir said it best, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.” Many people do not realize that the reason why we do natural resource management in parks is so that there is a place to play in, pray in, and contemplate the beauty of the world around us.

In the last few months, COVID-19 quarantine has become routine and people have not been able to explore nature. However, that has not stopped Washita Battlefield from revitalizing the beauty of the park for when visitors return. This past spring, with help from our partner Black Kettle National Grassland, we mowed 113 acres in the flood plain to cut down on exotic Johnson grass, allow for the summer growth of native grasses, and decrease the density of plant life.

In late summer, Washita Battlefield worked with the Exotic Plant Management Team (EPMT), a program within the National Park Service, and the Ancestral Lands, a Native youth corps with the AmeriCorps program, to assemble a hand crew for exotic species management. For eight days, the Ancestral Lands crew sprayed herbicide on Johnson grass and removed Siberian elm sprouts with weed wrenches throughout the park.

Thanks to the hard work of Ancestral Lands and the EPMT, Washita Battlefield will continue to be a place to heal and give strength for those who seek solitude and solace from the natural world.



Pulling a Siberian Elm / NPS Photo

A 25th Anniversary

November 2021 marks the 25th anniversary of the establishment of Washita Battlefield National Historic Site.

Special 25th anniversary events will be posted on our social media pages and website so mark your calendars now!



Tipi on the Prairie / NPS Photo

Camp Owa Chita

Kevin Mohr, Chief of Interpretation

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site's Visitor Center sits somewhat hidden from view, off highway 47, less than a mile on the western edge of the town of Cheyenne. We may not seem far away, but the adage can be true, 'out of sight, out of mind.' Five years ago, we wanted to be of service to our neighboring community and create the next generation of park visitors, supporters, and advocates. We decided to launch Owa Chita, a summer camp. Five years later, it's going strong, filling to capacity usually the day registration begins.

In recognition of the 25th anniversary of the park's establishment in November 2021, we will hold two summer camps in July 2021. Owa Chita is for students entering 1st through 6th grade and runs from 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. daily, Monday through Friday. It is normally held the second week in July.

"It's a win-win program," says Superintendent Kevin Young. "Local children haven an opportunity to learn about Oklahoma history and the National Park Service. And we are supporting the needs of our community."

Summer Camp Volunteer positions are available, and lunch is included. Volunteers must be at least 15 years-old before the start of camp in order to volunteer. Please call the visitor center to learn more at 580-497-2742.



Campers at Owa Chita / NPS Photo

Virtual Programing

Christian Schroll, Park Guide and Kate Roesch, Park Ranger

COVID-19 affected all facets of life, including park operations and community closures. To accommodate young learners and virtual visitors, we developed digital content to share the story of Washita Battlefield National Historic Site.

When school field trips were cancelled, we created a series of 21 virtual kid- friendly puppet tour videos. The virtual tours, led by the puppets Harry the Ranger and Sadie the Horse, took visitors along the park trail to share the history of the attack, as well as explore the natural resources within the park.

We also decided to make Reading Ranger virtual. A was filmed Ranger doing a monthly book read-aloud and a corresponding craft with art supplies typically found around the house. These videos allowed families to continue to learn and be engaged. Based on the success of the virtual Reading Ranger films, we will continue with virtual Reading Ranger programs starting in November and every three months thereafter.



Rangers filming a puppet program / NPS Photo

All videos originally aired on Facebook ([Facebook.com/WashitaBattlefieldNHS](https://www.facebook.com/WashitaBattlefieldNHS)) and are still available. In the future, the education section of the park's website (www.nps.gov/waba) will add these videos as a resource for teachers and virtual visitors.

Not Alone

Kevin Mohr, Chief of Interpretation

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site encompasses 315 acres and has 7 employees. We are mandated to preserve and protect the site of the Battle of the Washita including the natural, cultural, topographic, and scenic resources. Plus promote the public understanding of the attack via educational programming, both face-to-face and digitally - in classrooms or guided tours or using distance learning and social media. We also operate a visitor center with a large gallery, a museum, and a bookstore. We cannot do it alone.

Last spring, we held a Resource Stewardship Strategy (RSS) workshop. An RSS is a long-range plan to achieve desired natural and cultural resource conditions at Washita. Park staff and National Park Service (NPS) regional experts, 16 of them, reviewed Washita's key issues, such as exotic plant management, removal of post-battle landscape features, tribal involvement, future climate change impacts, energy development that impacts soundscapes and night sky conditions, among others. With the help of other NPS staff, Washita managers have identified goals and actions to maintain the public's resources in perpetuity. The RSS motto is "Bridging science and management for today and tomorrow."

Our bookstore is managed by Western National Parks Association (WNPA), a non-profit activity operated by our official educational partner. WNPA has a wide range of educational books, activities, and resources available for retail sale. The products and resources they provide support and compliment the interpretive and educational theme you will experience when visiting the park. Some new items are shirts. One is made from RePreve – plastic bottles recycled into yarn! This shirt follows the conservation and preservation philosophy of the NPS and promotes sound environmental principles by reducing waste and promoting sustainability. Another item is a token – a park specific collectible found at most other NPS sites. Washita's token features our two prominent leaders: Chief Black Kettle, widely known for his pursuit of peaceful coexistence with whites; and Lt. Col. George Custer, who acquired a reputation as an aggressive Indian fighter after the Washita. And WNPA has European style stickers which will connect visitors to the park every time they see it!

A Museum is not a museum without objects. We recently received a half dozen historic documents that



Items at WNPA Bookstore / NPS Photo

share the broader story of the white captive Clara Blinn who, as a result of the Washita, was killed in the Arapaho camp down river. The documents include a military note from Fort Hays, dated November 27, 1868. It details that the woman at Fort Hays does not match the description of Clara Blinn and that "Mr. Blain (sic) was here a few days since." Mr. Blinn is Clara's husband who searched for her for months. Another item is a carte-de-visite styled photo of Clara Blinn.

Galleries are meant to display art. Southwestern Oklahoma State University has graciously loaned us 13 contemporary ledger art drawings that depict the Washita. Ledger Art refers to the paper from ledger books used by Plains Indians to paint and draw their stories. Artist George Levi explains, "Cheyenne art isn't art. It is history in motion. Everything is alive and has a story." Come see these magnificent pieces before the loan ends next year.

Become a partner with Washita Battlefield National Historic Site today. Volunteer on natural resource projects, share your artwork and artifacts, or bring a friend or family member and connect with your park. Don't forget to take an educational souvenir home with you!

Oklahoma City National Memorial

A Busy Fire Season

Matt Whitney, Community Outreach Park Ranger



CNRA Engine 82 on the Middle Fork Fire in Colorado/ NPS Photo

Late this past summer, many of us may have noticed an unusual haze hanging in the Oklahoma sky. This was smoke from wildfires in the western part of the United States. Millions of acres were burning from wildfires that were sparked by natural and human causes.

National Park Service Rangers from Chickasaw National Recreation Area, Washita Battlefield National Historic Site and the Oklahoma City National Memorial have accepted the collateral duty of a wildland firefighter. Wildland firefighters aid in the suppression and use of fire, both in a wildfire situation, and prescribed burns.

In the summer of 2020, firefighters from the Oklahoma units of the National Park Service accepted two-week details to aid in the suppression and logistical support of large wildfires. During these details, firefighters can work up to 16-hour days. The 2020 fire season was long and one of the largest on record. In addition to facing the challenges of a record-breaking season, firefighters had to take extra precautions to minimize exposure to COVID-19, including daily screenings and wearing face coverings.

Some of the incidents included the Superstition, Bighorn, and Hidden Fires in Arizona, the Red Salmon Complex and August Complex in California, The Middle Fork and Cameron Peak Fires in Colorado, and COVID-19 Support.

In addition, rangers also provided support for assistance with the Sulphur (OK) Fire Department, Texas Initial Attack, and the Black Kettle National Grasslands.

The Southern Plains Fire Group based in Fritch, TX, collaborates with the individual units to plan and conduct prescribed burns to aid in park management. These units include Chickasaw NRA, Washita Battlefield NHS, Bent's Old Fort NHS (CO), Sand Creek Massacre NHS (CO), Capulin Volcano NM (NM), and Lake Meredith NRA (TX).

Fire is a natural process that many species depend on for survival. With the onset of urban sprawl, people building in fire prone areas, complete fire suppression, and climate change, wildland fires have been burning bigger, hotter, and longer into the fire season.

Better Conversations

Natasha Moore, Supervisory Park Ranger

When I speak with visitors at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, I tend to ask the question, “Timothy McVeigh didn’t like what he thought was happening in the Federal Government, so he bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Is that how you should act when you don’t like something?” Even the younger visitors all say “NO!” I usually follow that up with, “What should you do instead?”

A great answer lies in Better Conversations, a new program started by the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum in partnership with Bank of America and On Being’s Civil Conversations Project. Better Conversations was developed in response to the “Looking Back – Thinking Forward” vision created to honor the 25th Anniversary of the Oklahoma City Bombing. While the events of April 19, 1995 include stories of the horrific aftermath, there are also stories of hope and resilience. Family members, survivors, first responders, and community members from all walks of life put aside their differences and came together, working for the best possible outcome: healing.

Remembering that spirit, Better Conversations encourages participants to take part in an hour-long, facilitated



conversation centered around a universal question such as, “What does it mean to belong?” or, “How can we use stereotypes in a beneficial way?” Once the session ends, participants are urged to become facilitators. This is done by attending a training built to teach them how to engage in peaceful dialogue helping heal division and conflict in their local communities.

Would you like to join in and have Better Conversations? If interested, visit <https://memorialmuseum.com/betterconversations/> to learn more about the program join a session or training and learn how to facilitate a Better Conversation.

Taking Care of Each Other

Hailey Franks, Park Guide

There are things that happen in life, shared experiences, shared traumas, that bring people together in a way they couldn’t have anticipated. 2020 has been a year full of those kinds of events, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic that has swept across the world. It’s unique in that it has affected almost every single person across the planet in one way or another. My life was no exception to this. As a Park Guide at the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum my job was immediately affected. Along with so many other industries, we stepped away from the grounds and teleworked from home for a few months. Our primary duty is to interact with the public, mostly travelers, and it was suddenly too dangerous for us to do our primary job.

While teleworking from home I noticed through my friends, coworkers, and strangers across the internet that we were all experiencing the same kind of trauma from the pandemic. Our lives were in upheaval, different from they had ever been before. As a team we would touch base once a week, and individually more often than that. We were sharing this experience and it brought us together through periodically making sure everyone else was okay. As we were experiencing this together, it made me reflect on the collective trauma experienced by those who were in/around the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building on April 19th, 1995. The people, whose stories we share daily, lived through something tragic that affected all of their lives. Through their shared trauma, they came together and leaned on one another for support. The connections they made after losing so much were lifelong connections.

We were the lucky ones who were able to stay home and keep our jobs. My pandemic experience was stressful, but I constantly remind myself how much worse it could have been. It made me realize that when it came down to it, my coworkers care for one another. We were able to come together and support each other in ways that we never had before and may never have to again. I am thankful for the support system I have when it truly matters.



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#FindYourPark

BisonTrails

Volume 4, Number 2

Fall 2020

BisonTrails is the official newsletter of the units of the national park system located in the State of Oklahoma.

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Cover Photo

A masked ranger talking to visitors at the Oklahoma City National Memorial / NPS Photo

Comments? Write to:

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Support Your Parks

Friends of Chickasaw NRA

The purpose of the Friends of Chickasaw National Recreation Area is to promote public appreciation of and support for Chickasaw National Recreation Area. This support includes conducting interpretive programs, increasing public awareness regarding the park and its mission, fundraising, and other volunteer activities. The IRS has certified this group as a private non-profit organization (501c3) and membership fees for joining are tax deductible. Anyone interested in receiving a membership application can send an email to: chic_superintendent@nps.gov, or call 580-622-7220.

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Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum

The Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum is a private non-profit organization, and does not receive any annual operating funds from the federal, state or local government. Museum admissions, store sales, the Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon, earnings from an endowment and private fundraising allow the Memorial and Museum to be self-sustaining.

Valuable gifts of time, talent and treasure to the Memorial help change lives each and every day. Make your donation to the Memorial and volunteer your time. If you would like to help, write to PO Box 323, Oklahoma City, OK, 73101, or call toll-free at 1-888-542-HOPE.