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University of California
Berkeley, California

East Bay Regional Park District Oral History Project

Michael Avalos:
East Bay Park District Parkland Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Shanna Farrell
in 2018

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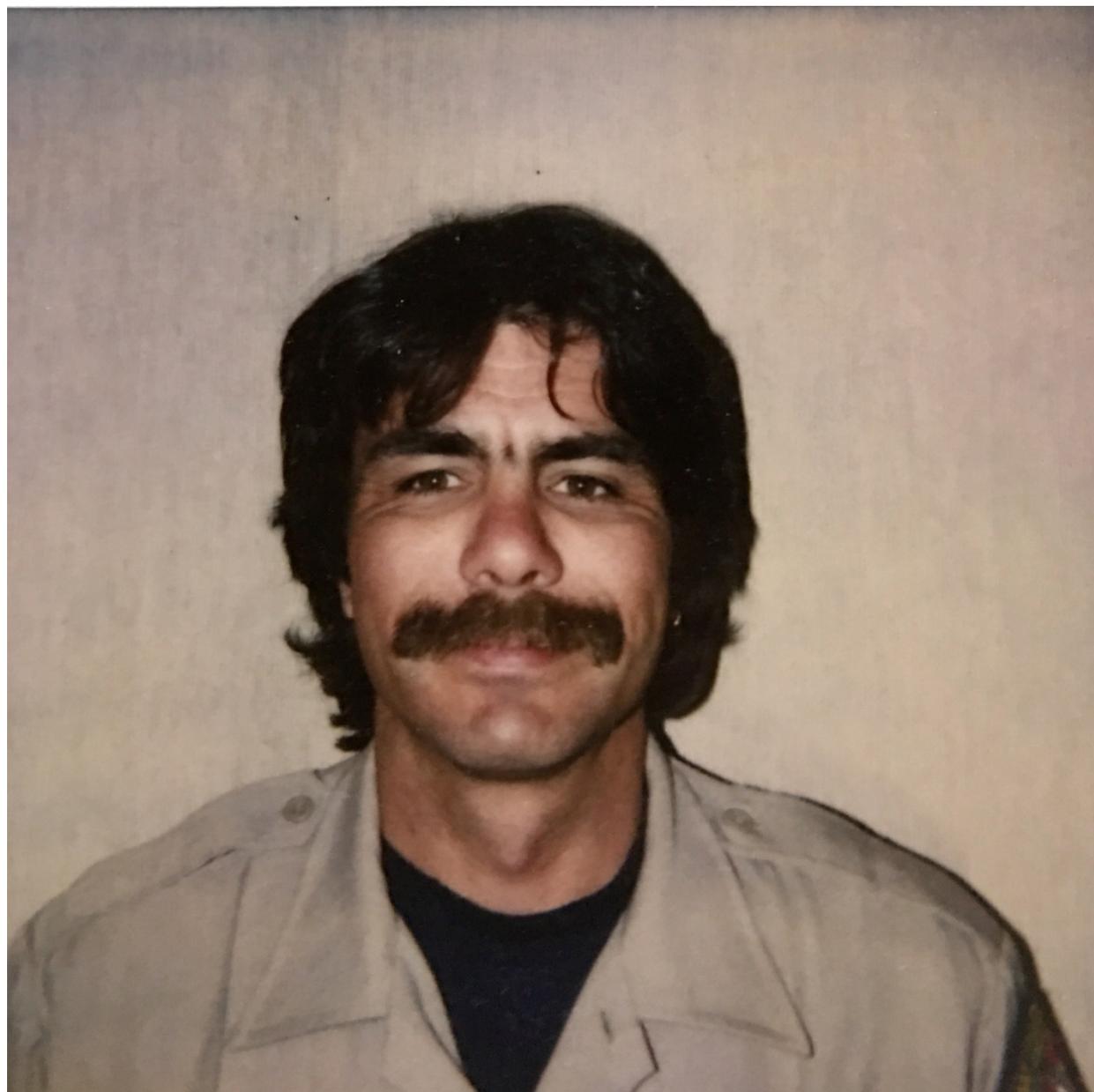
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Michael Avalos, July 1994

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Michael Avalos is a longtime East Bay Regional Park District employee who retired in 2015. He worked in various roles at Redwood Park, Lake Chabot, Tilden Park, Crown Beach, and Quarry Lakes. In this interview, Avalos discusses his early life, moving around with his family, coming to the Bay Area in the 1970s, working at Yosemite National Park and in Washington State, returning to the Bay Area in 1985, starting with the EBRPD as a six-month Ranger, the various sites he worked on in the district, moving up the ranks, working as a firefighter, retiring in 2015, and reflections on his career and role of the district in the Bay Area. Michael is representative of the type of employee that the Park District hired during the 1970's and 80's which was a time when the District was growing and original staff were retiring. Like many others he stepped up and supported that growth and EBRPD's mission.

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The East Bay Regional Park District Oral History Project

The East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) is a special regional district that stretches across both Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. First established in 1934 by Alameda County voters, the EBRPD slowly expanded to Contra Costa in 1964 and has continued to grow and preserve the East Bay's most scenic and historically significant parklands. The EBRPD's core mission is to acquire, develop, and maintain diverse and interconnected parklands in order to provide the public with usable natural spaces and to preserve the region's natural and cultural resources.

This oral history project—The East Bay Regional Park District Oral History Project—records and preserves the voices and experiences of formative, retired EBRPD field staff, individuals associated with land use of EBRPD parklands prior to district acquisition, and individuals who continue to use parklands for agriculture and ranching.

The Oral History Center (OHC) of The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley first engaged in conversations with the EBRPD in the fall of 2016 about the possibility of restarting an oral history project on the parklands. The OHC, previously the Regional Oral History Office, had conducted interviews with EBRPD board members, supervisors and individuals historically associated with the parklands throughout the 1970s and early 2000s. After the completion of a successful pilot project in late 2016, the EBRPD and OHC began a more robust partnership in early 2017 that has resulted in an expansive collection of interviews.

The interviews in this collection reflect the diverse yet interconnected ecology of individuals and places that have helped shape and define the East Bay Regional Park District and East Bay local history.

Interview 1: July 20, 2018

01-00:00:03

Farrell: Okay, this is Shanna Farrell with Michael Avalos on Friday, June [sic] 20, 2018, and this is an interview for the East Bay Regional Park District Parkland Oral History Project. Michael, can you tell me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:23

Avalos: I was born in Waco, Texas, in December of 1955. My father was in the military, so we traveled around quite a bit as a child, and ended up in the Bay Area in 1972, where he retired from the military. I finished high school in San Leandro, and then had a series of different jobs and adventures until I returned to the Bay Area in 1985, and that was when I found out about the park district and went to work for them.

01-00:01:23

Farrell: Did you spend most of your childhood in Waco?

01-00:01:27

Avalos: No, no. We were in Louisiana, a lot in California, but since my father was in the military, we spent time in the Philippines, on Kwajalein, and on Guam, and then San Diego and LA before we landed in the Bay Area.

01-00:01:54

Farrell: Okay. What was your father's role in the military?

01-00:01:57

Avalos: He was a yeoman, which is basically office, clerical, so he was stationed at different places but he was on aircraft carriers, on the *Kitty Hawk* and the *Enterprise*, and on both of those, he was the captain's yeoman, so he handled all of the captains' business. He was also stationed at the NROTC unit at UCLA in the late sixties, '68 to '70, I think, or somewhere in there. That was why we lived in LA, because he was stationed at UCLA.

01-00:02:56

Farrell: Okay. Can you tell me about maybe some of your earliest memories of your parents, or your siblings, if you have any?

01-00:03:04

Avalos: I have one sister, just what they would call, I guess at the time, a nuclear family: Mom, Dad, Buddy, and Sis. [laughter] Did the usual thing: vacations in the summer. When we lived in Louisiana, we drove out to visit my father's family in California, and we would go to visit my mother's family in Texas. I remember, we were on a trip from California to Texas, in 1969, to visit my mother's family, when the moon landing happened. That was very exciting, following the thing on the TV in the motel rooms at night, and I remember being I think in Arizona, at some motel, when the moon landing actually happened.

01-00:04:09

Farrell:

What kind of impression did that leave on you as a child?

01-00:04:12

Avalos:

Oh, it was big. I mean, we landed on the moon [laughs]. A man landed on the moon, but the future was ahead. Where else could we go? What else could we do?

01-00:04:32

Farrell:

And what were, or are, your parents' names?

01-00:04:36

Avalos:

My father is Raymond Avalos, and my mother is Jo Ann, maiden name Duckett, but Jo Ann Avalos. My sister's name is Carla. My father still lives in San Leandro, my mother lives in Roseville now, and my sister lives near her in Lincoln.

01-00:05:00

Farrell:

Okay. What's the age difference between you and your sister?

01-00:05:04

Avalos:

Four years.

01-00:05:05

Farrell:

Older or younger?

01-00:05:07

Avalos:

She's younger.

01-00:05:08

Farrell:

Younger, okay. What was it like for you to move around to different places when you were growing up?

01-00:05:14

Avalos:

I didn't appreciate it. [laughter] I wanted to be stable in one place. I think before I got to high school, I had been to twelve different schools, but fortunately, most of those were elementary schools. By the time I got to junior high, I only went to two different junior highs, and two different senior highs, but I wanted to be more stable. But it was actually a great childhood, because I got to see a lot of things, experience a lot of different things. The time on Guam was just fascinating, and I enjoyed it, but didn't appreciate it in the same way that I appreciate it now, and I would love to go back to Guam, to see it the way that it is now.

01-00:06:16

Farrell:

Was there anything that you took from that experience, in the Philippines or any other place that you lived, that you feel like influenced your life, or you pulled from in any particular way?

01-00:06:28

Avalos:

I don't know if it was a conscious thing, but it was an interest in other places. I knew that they were different, and now, I travel quite a bit, and it's just because I want to see other things, and being exposed to other things may have had a subtle underlying influence on that now.

01-00:07:01

Farrell:

What was it like for you to move to San Leandro and the Bay Area in the 1970s? What were your first impressions?

01-00:07:08

Avalos:

It was certainly different than LA, because we came from San Pedro to San Leandro. It was a slower-type atmosphere. It was, I guess, more homey, but I don't think there was any huge, different impression. The most obvious thing for me is, in LA, I had started a junior high school where it was seventh, eighth, and ninth grade, and the high school was ten, eleven, and twelve; when I got to the Bay Area, the high school was nine, ten, eleven, twelve. Those people had been together for longer. It was just little things like that, and it certainly rained a lot more here. [laughter] Didn't rain that much in LA.

01-00:08:25

Farrell:

How about the landscape? Were there any particular impressions that the mountains and the Bay left on you?

01-00:08:34

Avalos:

Not really, but I understand now that the Bay influence makes things much more moderate than it was, because we lived in San Pedro which is just off of the San Pedro Harbor, and it was, I think, warmer in the summer. But no real, major influence that I can think of.

01-00:09:10

Farrell:

Were there any subjects or areas that you were more interested in when you were in school growing up?

01-00:09:17

Avalos:

Not really. I was a better-than-average student, but an unfocused student. I had a B-plus average, but I had no real focus anywhere, and I don't think it was that difficult to have a good grade average then. I have a high school diploma and that's it. I had an aborted part of a semester at Chabot Junior College, and I think I lasted six weeks, [laughter] and quit, because I was unfocused.

01-00:10:05

Farrell:

Did you have any hobbies or any outside interests growing up?

01-00:10:09

Avalos:

I was an athlete, track and cross country, so I was always interested in outdoor-type of activities, bike riding, and like that, and I was a big reader.

01-00:10:36

Farrell: What were some of your favorite books growing up?

01-00:10:38

Avalos: Oh, I've always been a big fan of Steinbeck, but I just can't think of anything off the top of my head right now.

01-00:10:50

Farrell: That's okay. It's kind of out of the blue. [laughs] Did you use any of the parks or trails, growing up?

01-00:10:59

Avalos: We actually did. I didn't realize this at the time, that it was part of the park district, but my cross-country team trained at Lake Chabot. I went to some of the parks, to Coyote Hills, and Lake Chabot, and Anthony Chabot, but, like I said, I didn't know. I just knew it was outside. I didn't know that it was a regional park. I didn't know what it was.

01-00:11:41

Farrell: I think at that time too it was probably still coming together as a regional park, too.

01-00:11:44

Avalos: It was fairly developed. It certainly wasn't as refined as it is now, but a lot of the original trails, they're there, and they were maintained. But, it wasn't as predominate or as well noticeable, I think, as it is now.

01-00:12:19

Farrell: So you graduated from high school in what, 1972?

01-00:12:25

Avalos: '72.

01-00:12:26

Farrell: Okay. What did you do after high school?

01-00:12:29

Avalos: Oh, not '72, I'm sorry, [in] 1974. I had the aborted part of a semester at Chabot, and my father had retired from the military, so he worked at the unemployment, or employment development, or whatever, and Yosemite Park and Curry Company was there recruiting for summer employment. I went to work in Yosemite for the summer in 1975, and worked summers in Yosemite from '75 to '79, and in the winter, pretty much lived out of my car. I would stay at my dad's house sometimes, but bounce around, stay in Yosemite or go, visit friends. In 1979, I worked for the National Park Service for the summer, at Wawona, and then in 1980, I moved to Washington State—or late '79, moved to Washington State until '85, when I came back to the Bay Area.

01-00:14:10

Farrell: When you were working summers in Yosemite, what were you doing? What was your role?

01-00:14:14

Avalos:

I was the stock clerk at the Curry Village Cafeteria, assistant stock clerk. There was a lead guy, and I was his assistant, and he had been working there since the '60s, and that was his thing. He was kind of a mentor, but he was a really good guy to work with, and treated me really nice.

01-00:14:44

Farrell:

What was his name?

01-00:14:45

Avalos:

Leo O'Sullivan.

01-00:14:46

Farrell:

How did he mentor you, in a way?

01-00:14:50

Avalos:

He just had a very strong work ethic, and I was still a bit unfocused and that I realized, that was an impression on me, his work ethic. I was a typical young nineteen year old away from home, and he put up with a lot. [laughter] He was just a really good guy.

01-00:15:37

Farrell:

What drew you to Yosemite in the first place?

01-00:15:40

Avalos:

Well, first was the job—it was something to do and it was away from home—but then, once I was there, you can't get a better backyard, as far as I'm concerned. I would love to find a way to be able to live there again, without having to work. [laughter] But, it's just a great place, and Yosemite Valley is such a small percentage of what the park really is, so there's so much more to it than the main focus area.

01-00:16:20

Farrell:

How about Wawona, what were you doing there?

01-00:16:23

Avalos:

Wawona, I was taking care of the campground, the Wawona Campground. I was basically the janitor, I guess. I took care of the restrooms and the campsites, and just whatever needed to be done at the campground.

01-00:16:49

Farrell:

What were you up to when you were in Washington State?

01-00:16:52

Avalos:

A lot of different things. I worked at a vegetable canning plant that was seasonal, so it was mostly in the late summer. I did close to a year plus with a railroad salvage company that was removing a rail line through our county.

I started out with them out on the line removing the track, and then they had a yard that the track was stored at, and then it was sold to different places. I ran that yard for a while, and we would load the rail into either flat cars, load them

on flat cars, or into the—I don't know what they were called, the—but we would load them and mostly, it was going to Mexico. They were selling the second-hand rail to Mexico. They actually had a yard here in the Bay Area for a while. The company was based out of Utah. It was called A&K Railroad Salvage. That was pretty interesting, actually.

01-00:18:23

Farrell:

Do you have a sense of why they were dismantling the railroad and selling it?

01-00:18:28

Avalos:

I honestly don't remember why it was being dismantled. It eventually, I found out, became part of a trail system through the county, and I believe it went through Snoqualmie Pass over into Seattle. But I don't remember why it was being taken out, just that it was.

01-00:19:02

Farrell:

What brought you back to San Leandro in 1985, or the Bay Area?

01-00:19:06

Avalos:

A relationship was breaking up, and one of my friends that I had been to high school with stayed in the Bay Area, and he had gone to work for the park district. We had been in communication, and he said, "If you come back down, you can apply with these guys and maybe get a job," and that's what I did.

01-00:19:33

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about the job that you first applied for?

01-00:19:39

Avalos:

In '85, when I got back, I applied for the ranger position, which is what I wanted to do, is the outside maintenance position, and that's what I was most adept at doing. At that time, there were three different positions: the six-month ranger, nine-month ranger, and twelve-month ranger, and I applied for all of them, just because that seemed to be the smart thing to do, in just wanting to get a job.

01-00:20:20

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about that, about why you felt like applying for the six-, nine-, and twelve-month was the smart thing to do? Had you heard about that?

01-00:20:29

Avalos:

I did not know. I just knew that that's what my friend was doing. He was a ranger, and so I wanted to be a ranger, and when I went to the personnel office, which is what it was called at the time, that was what they told me, that "If we have six-, nine-, and twelve-month positions, which one do you want to apply for?" I said, "Can I apply for all of them?" [laughs] They said, "Yes," and it was basically the same application, but it was considered three different jobs. I filled out one application very thoroughly, and then at the top of the

other two, I inserted the proper classification, either six-month, nine-month, or twelve-month.

01-00:21:22

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about why those classifications, the six-month, the nine-month, and the twelve-month, were thought of as separate jobs?

01-00:21:31

Avalos:

The six-month was considered an entry-level position, and it was what they referred to as seasonal, but you were still a permanent employee, but you were laid off. I believe it was April 1, you started, and then six months later, October, or whatever that was, 31, is when you were laid off. It was basically for what they called the summer focus, to have more—because at that time, I don't believe the visitor ship of the parks was as high volume as it is now, so they felt that they needed more bodies in the summer, and then in the winter, they could get by with less people.

01-00:22:27

Farrell:

So it's a permanent position, but you get laid off. Are you guaranteed to get your job back the following April if you still want it?

01-00:22:37

Avalos:

Yes, but there was a caveat with the six-month position, that you were guaranteed your job back, but you weren't necessarily guaranteed the same work location. More often than not, you went to the same work location, and in fact, I can't remember personally any instances of people not going back to their work location, but I know that was stipulation, and I know that every year, all of the supervisors would get together in the spring, in March, and go over who the returning people were: were they going to come back to the same place; did somebody want to trade somebody for somebody else?

01-00:23:35

Farrell:

So like a drafting meeting, essentially?

01-00:23:36

Avalos:

More or less, more or less. They actually called it the body shop, [laughs] because they were trading bodies. But I always went back to that same location. I was a six-monther at Redwood Park, which is where I started.

01-00:24:01

Farrell:

How did that differ? How did six months differ from nine months? Was it, you were employed at the same park for nine months and then laid off for three months?

01-00:24:08

Avalos:

Yes, it was the same thing except there wasn't a body shop, so to speak, for nine-month. If you were a nine-month ranger, you were pretty much guaranteed to go back to the same place where you had been the previous year.

01-00:24:27

Farrell:

Okay. What did people, or what did you do in the interim period, either the six or nine months when you weren't working?

01-00:24:35

Avalos:

Well, for the most part, when you were laid off, you were available for temporary work. A lot of times, you would be laid off from your permanent position, but go to another park within the district to work as a temporary. The park district liked to keep you working in a temporary capacity, because if you weren't working, it was likely that you were going to collect unemployment, and they didn't want that. There was usually off-season work to be done.

01-00:25:22

Farrell:

Was there a difference in pay scale when you were doing your permanent versus temp work?

01-00:25:29

Avalos:

No, it was always the same pay rate, and that was the other thing. Even though they considered the three different positions different jobs, they were the same pay rate. The six didn't get paid any less than the twelve. It was just the terminology of—because the job description was exactly the same, for all the positions.

01-00:25:58

Farrell:

What are some of the benefits from working in one over another?

01-00:26:03

Avalos:

Well, you don't get laid off, and at the time, it was years of service. If you were a six-monther, it would take you two years to get one complete year of service, because you would have to work two seasons. You didn't get continuous service as a six- and nine-month; it was broken up. In the long run, it makes a difference towards your retirement.

01-00:26:49

Farrell:

Okay. That makes sense. So you're basically contributing to your retirement as a twelve-month?

01-00:26:58

Avalos:

You're contributing to your retirement as in each position, but, as a six-monther, you're only contributing for those six months. But, when you're laid off, and you go back to work as a temporary, you're not considered in permanent status anymore, so you're not contributing to the retirement.

01-00:27:22

Farrell:

Yeah, that makes sense, yeah.

01-00:27:24

Avalos:

At that time, you also didn't get benefits while on temporary status. If you wanted to continue your medical or dental benefits, you had to pay them

yourself. That was the other thing: the more you worked, the more your benefits followed you.

01-00:27:48

Farrell:

How often would these positions come up? So if you were in a six-month permanent position, how often would you be able to apply for a nine- or a twelve-month position?

01-00:27:57

Avalos:

At that time, in the mid-'80s and early '90s, they had a yearly recruitment because they needed people every year. I don't think the recruitment is as standardized as it was then, but it seemed like every year in January, February, or March, that was when the application, the job posting would come out for those positions. It's more random when the job posting is put up now.

01-00:28:45

Farrell:

Okay. You had mentioned before we started recording that there were ways that you could miss out on job opportunities if you weren't tapped into what was coming up when. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

01-00:28:58

Avalos:

I'm not sure; I can't remember why, [laughs] but if you were working, then you were around, and you knew what was happening in other places. You knew when somebody was going to get promoted, or somebody was going to leave, or something. The scuttlebutt was going around on what positions were going to be available at what place, when. It's better to have the continuity.

01-00:29:38

Farrell:

And be tapped in so you can figure out advancement for yourself?

01-00:29:41

Avalos:

Right.

01-00:29:42

Farrell:

That makes sense. Did you, with the seasonal layoffs, did you ever feel any job insecurity, or did you always feel like you had work available to you?

01-00:29:53

Avalos:

No, I never felt insecure. I always knew that I was going to be able to go back to the job that I had, but I also did want to be a year-round person, just because for the continuity of the benefits and everything else. It's better to have a constant income than not.

01-00:30:27

Farrell:

Can you tell me about some of your first impressions of Redwood when you starting working there as a six-month employee?

01-00:30:34

Avalos:

We were still in the old hunting lodge, that had been there from—I don't know when it was built, the '30s or the '40s, but it was an old building, had a

stone fireplace. There was still an old feel to it, and we had a lot of old equipment. There was still a lot of surplus equipment, surplus World War II equipment, so it was just an older feel, from the '60s or the '70s type of thing. It was just different. I can't think of the right word to describe it, but it just felt more homey, I guess.

01-00:31:36

Farrell: Yeah, more comfortable.

01-00:31:38

Avalos: More comfortable.

01-00:31:39

Farrell: What were your roles or responsibilities during that period of time?

01-00:31:44

Avalos: We were responsible for the cleaning and maintaining of the park, maintaining the trails, the lawn maintenance. Just whatever it took to maintain the park, that was what we did. I can't think of any big projects that we did those first few years there. I'm sure there must have been, but I just don't remember them right now.

01-00:32:22

Farrell: What were the uses of Redwood at that point?

01-00:32:26

Avalos: It was mostly hiking and equestrian, though '85 was right around the birth of the mountain bike, so we started to have mountain bikes coming and using the trails, so there was some discrepancy or conflict with the equestrians and the bikes. While I was there, there were restrictions put on the bikes, where they could go. When I started, the bikes could go anywhere, but I can't remember what year it was, '87 or so, they were restricted from the narrow track trail, so they were only allowed to go on the fire roads or multiuse trails, not the single track. It was a transition that was a little rough.

01-00:33:42

Farrell: Did you see that transition play out at all?

01-00:33:49

Avalos: It was a little tough, because I always had a mountain bike myself, so I appreciated what they wanted to do, but being, working in that environment, I also had an appreciation of what the bikes did to that environment, and I saw the aftermath of the bike and equestrian encounters, or the bike and the hiker encounters. I understood that it was probably for the better that there were some restrictions, because we had, at one point, there was a group that would, they would go up to Skyline Gate and drop off a group of six, eight, ten, twelve bikers, and they would just barrel down the stream trail into the Canyon Meadow parking lot, and just they would have a car and they would shuttle them back and forth.

That was what caused the restriction on bikes from Girls' Camp to, I think, Trail's End, because it cut off a middle section of that particular trail. But that was the impetus, was that group of bikers. They would come on the weekends and just ride like crazy down the hill, and it was, I'm certain, fun for them, but it wasn't very conducive to the environment for the hikers and the equestrians.

01-00:35:51

Farrell:

How long did it take for the mountain bikers to get used to the new sort of restrictions or the new areas that they could go use?

01-00:36:01

Avalos:

Years. [laughs]

01-00:36:02

Farrell:

Okay, oh, okay, so it took a little while.

01-00:36:04

Avalos:

It took while. In fact, there was—I can't remember the name—the Bay Area Mountain Bike Council or something, but there were a lot of meetings going on between the bike groups and the management on what they could and couldn't do. I think there's a good relationship now with the bike groups and the park district, but it was a little rough at first.

01-00:36:41

Farrell:

In the off season, you were at the Chabot Campground, is that correct?

01-00:36:46

Avalos:

Yes.

01-00:36:47

Farrell:

Okay, so you were there as a temp?

01-00:36:48

Avalos:

I was there as a temp in the off season for three or four years, so I'd work summers in Redwood, and then most of the winter in Chabot. And then, I think one year, I was laid off for three months, possibly two years—I can't remember—but I would basically spend the summer in Redwood, winter in the Anthony Chabot Campground.

01-00:37:19

Farrell:

Okay. What were your first impressions of Chabot?

01-00:37:24

Avalos:

It was an undeveloped campground. There was a lot of development happening, and when I started there, there was not a service yard at the campground. The Anthony Chabot staff worked out of the Redwood office. They would report to the Redwood office and then drive to the campground to take care of the campground and the campers. I don't believe there was a kiosk at the campground at that time, so, there was what's called a park service attendant who would drive out from Redwood and register the

campers. It was a little disconnected. There wasn't any staff at the campground the whole day. There was only a window of time when staff was there.

01-00:38:31

Farrell: You worked there before the new service yard was built, right? So you would go to Redwood Park in the morning, and then drive to Chabot?

01-00:38:42

Avalos: Yes.

01-00:38:43

Farrell: Okay. How did that kind of instruct the workflow of the day?

01-00:38:50

Avalos: Well, for one thing, all of your tools, and everything that you needed to work, were at Redwood Park, so you had to plan your day accordingly. We would keep some things in the pipe chases of the restrooms, just a little tool closet, emergency things, but for the most part, if you had a big job planned, you had to bring everything out, and if you forgot something, you had to go back, and I think it's a ten-minute drive on Redwood Road from one place to the other.

At that point, there was the self-registration for the campers at site number five, which was a metal pole with envelopes, and you filled out the envelope and put the money in the pole. We tried to keep the envelopes stocked there, but more often—well, not more often, a number of times, I would find myself out there without any envelopes, and have to drive back to Redwood Park, get the envelopes and bring them back so that the campers would be able to register.

01-00:40:14

Farrell: That's like thirty minutes out of your day every time you have to go back.

01-00:40:16

Avalos: Yeah, yeah. You have to plan accordingly, but when Jack Kenny became the supervisor there, he was behind having the service yard built. I think there was an idea for it, and he was the real impetus behind having it built. I remember they had surveyed it, and I worked with a couple of the old-timers there, and we would ride out, and they would look at the survey stakes, and they would think, oh, this is too narrow; this is never going to work. They would move the survey stake wider, [laughter] and I'm sure that they were found out, but eventually the service yard was widened to the dimensions that they said that it needed to be, because when it was first built, it was too narrow.

01-00:41:16

Farrell: Oh, interesting.

01-00:41:17

Avalos: We worked with it as best as we could, but in the following years, it was upgraded and widened. It's a nice service yard now.

01-00:41:33

Farrell: Yeah. Do you remember what year it was finished?

01-00:41:37

Avalos: I honestly don't. It was the late '80s, '87, '88, somewhere in there.

01-00:41:47

Farrell: Okay, so you had already gone by then.

01-00:41:51

Avalos: Yeah, I didn't actually go back there, yeah, for a long time after the service yard was built.

01-00:42:02

Farrell: Okay. You got hired to work at Tilden in 1988. What was that application or interview process like?

01-00:42:18

Avalos: Well, at that time, it was I was already—let's see. Oh, I was a six-month ranger at Redwood, and there was a nine-month position open at Tilden. When you apply, you go through the interview process and they make a list, and then the supervisor has the option of either picking somebody for a transfer, or going off of the list. My name was on the list to be a nine-month ranger, and they had a nine-month opening at Tilden. Rachel McDonald, who was the supervisor at that time at Tilden, knew of me and about me working at Redwood, and she said, "I've got a nine month job at Tilden. Do you want it?" I said, "Yes." She just chose me off of the list, but I had gone through the interview process, and application process, and all of that. She just picked me off of the list.

01-00:43:34

Farrell: What was it like to work for Rachel as your supervisor?

01-00:43:38

Avalos: She was good. She was very fair. I remember, she always had a list of things that she wanted you to do. Tilden is so big and so diverse that there's always something to do. But if you found yourself wanting, you just would go and she would say, "Here's a half-hour job," or whatever. She always had something for people to do.

01-00:44:20

Farrell: What were your impressions of Tilden? I know some see it as sort of the crown jewel of the district, and some don't appreciate it in the same way, but yeah, I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about what Tilden was like when you first started there, so in the late eighties?

01-00:44:36

Avalos: Well, going from Redwood, Redwood was more low key, and I was a bit overwhelmed at Tilden, because it was much busier. A lot more people would come there and it had the attractions: the steam train, the merry-go-round,

Lake Anza, the swim facility, and the Little Farm—which a lot of people confuse as being part of Tilden. Even though it's on, I guess, the western end, northwestern end of it, it's not really Tilden. It's run by a different entity altogether. But the border, so to speak, is Indian Camp, so the Indian Camp parking lot, which is part of Tilden, is the parking lot for people going into the Little Farm. When you walk through the gate at the end of the Indian Camp parking lot, you leave Tilden, and go into the Little Farm, which is actually part of Wildcat Canyon.

01-00:45:59

Farrell: Oh, okay. Okay.

01-00:46:02

Avalos: It's just semantics, really. One's the border; you're right on the border, and you wouldn't really know it unless you work there.

01-00:46:17

Farrell: Yeah, yeah, maybe some faces change depending if you're in Tilden or Wildcat, yeah. And, because Tilden was higher volume and there were more attractions there, did it require more maintenance to upkeep?

01-00:46:34

Avalos: Oh yeah, yeah. Just volume. All of the maintenance is pretty much the same in all of the parks, because a restroom's a restroom; a picnic area is a picnic area. But, there was just more of them in Tilden, and more people using them, and the turnover rate was, I think, bigger. You could go into a picnic area two or three times on a Saturday or Sunday to clean it up, because one group would come in and use it and leave, and then another group would come in. So, just the volume of usage was much bigger.

01-00:47:24

Farrell: Were there any special projects that you worked on while you were in Tilden? I mean, you spent ten, eleven years there.

01-00:47:32

Avalos: More than that. [laughs]

01-00:47:33

Farrell: Oh, well, I guess in your first round there.

01-00:47:37

Avalos: Yeah, I was there from '88 to I think either '98 or 2000, and then was gone for two, two and a half years, and then came back. But the most significant thing, I believe, that I was involved in there was the closing of South Park Drive in the winter for the newts, because when I started, we didn't close South Park, and when it was raining, and wet, it would be a massacre of the newts, because they would cross the road from one side to go into the creek to mate, and then go back to the other side, to the hillside, when they're done, and there would be hundreds of them squished in the road.

There was the drive, so to speak, by Rachel McDonald and Margaret Kelley to close the road during the winter for the migration, and that, I think, came about in '89, '88 or '89. I'm not sure what they had to do, what kind of permissions they had to get from the county, Contra Costa County, to do it. South Park Drive is not a county road. It's owned and maintained by the park district, but it connects county roads. I don't know what permissions they needed to do, but I'm sure that took a while for the bureaucracies to agree. But then when they decided to close it, we had to build gates, and signs that said that the road was closed.

01-00:49:53

Farrell:

Before the road was closed, and there would be these dead newts, was it the responsibility of the district to clean that up?

01-00:50:03

Avalos:

Not necessarily clean it up, but what they did was to document. When I got there, they were in the documenting phase. When we would have a wet spell, somebody from the Little Farm, which was where Margaret Kelley was the supervising naturalist there, they were documenting how many newts were squished during the period. What they did was, they set up a grid on South Park Drive, of x amount of feet between, so they knew which sections of road, and the Tilden staff would help the Little Farm staff when they would come up and scrape these newts off of the road and document it, count them—how many were run over, and in a specific grid—and I believe they even kept them in a freezer [laughs] for a long time.

01-00:51:25

Farrell:

Did you see or experience a diminishing number of newts, or hear anything about that?

01-00:51:32

Avalos:

I never really noticed. I just know that it was definitely carnage after a rain, and we, as the staff, driving down the road, we would do our best to avoid them, and sometimes we would even go around. But, the commuters and regular park users, they didn't know any better, and it was literally carnage on the road at times after rains. They were just everywhere.

01-00:52:15

Farrell:

When there's this agreement to close the road, it made commuters unhappy and there was a bit of a controversy about closing the road. Can you tell me about what you remember around that tension?

01-00:52:27

Avalos:

The criteria for closing the road was very loose when we started. We would end up closing the road sometimes a couple of times during a week, or when it was raining, and if you were closing the road when somebody was commuting home, and the rain was forecast and so you had to close it, commuters, we took some abuse from people who would get there just as you closed the gate,

and they would want to go through, and, “Sorry, I just locked the gate.” They weren’t happy, and usually let you know that they weren’t happy.

But, you had to do your job. I think this went on for at least two or three years, and then when Jeff Wilson became supervisor at Tilden Park, he decided, he realized that it was much better and easier for everyone involved to have a specific time frame of when the road would be closed.

01-00:54:05

Farrell: So it was less arbitrary.

01-00:54:06

Avalos: So it was less arbitrary. I think it was November through April that we closed it. October 31 we would close the road, and then it wouldn’t open up again until March 31. I believe those are the dates. I could be wrong. But, that made things much easier, because then people knew that the time was coming when the road was going to be closed, and when it was going to be opened again. It actually worked out well for us, because it closed off a third of the park that people weren’t using, and we could do projects that we needed to do there without worry about people being around.

01-00:54:59

Farrell: Yeah. When you were locking the gate, before you had the November through April schedule, how did you handle the confrontation from unhappy commuters?

01-00:55:13

Avalos: With a smile. [laughter] Usually what we would do is, you would have to do it with a minimum of two people, though I did it a few times by myself and it wasn’t super difficult; it just wasn’t easy. But you would close the road at the top, and then you would have to go down and make sure that nobody was on the road, and escort them out, to make sure that you didn’t lock anybody in. It was just a process that you went through, and the more we did it, the better we got at it, and you knew specifically the places where people were likely to be when it was time to close the road. We got pretty good at it really, but it was much easier when there was a window of time that it was definitely closed.

01-00:56:14

Farrell: How long were the closures happening before you got the window of time, that November to April?

01-00:56:21

Avalos: I think it was two or three years, because it was, like I said, I think it was ’89 when we first started closing it. I can’t remember when Jeff came there as the supervisor, but I think it was in his second year or so that he decided that we put up with too much—it just didn’t make any sense, really—that the logical thing was to close it specifically for the period of time.

01-00:57:01

Farrell: Did you ever get to see one of the newt migrations?

01-00:57:04

Avalos: Oh yeah!

01-00:57:05

Farrell: Can you tell me what those were like?

01-00:57:07

Avalos: They just went from one side of the road to the other, and they were going to the creek to mate, and then they would get in the creek, and they would—it's a very strange thing, because they would form these balls of a bunch of them, and in small pools on Wildcat Creek. I'm not sure how the mating process happened in these little balls, but they would do their thing, and then when they were finished, they would walk to the other side of the road.

01-00:57:52

Farrell: Would you just constantly see newts going back and forth across the street?

01-00:57:55

Avalos: It depended. It depended with the weather, and then there were certainly different times of the year when they were more active than others. But during the wet weather, there was always the chance that they could be active. Sometimes you'd see dozens, going from one side of the road to the other.

01-00:58:23

Farrell: That's really interesting. You had also mentioned that, during your time, your first period of time in Tilden, you lived in district residences, a district residence from '92 to '98. I haven't actually heard about this before. Can you tell me a little bit about the residence?

01-00:58:42

Avalos: The park district has a number of what they, then, at that time, called security residences. I don't know if they still call them that or not, but some parks had them; some parks didn't. When I started and got there, there wasn't any time limit on somebody living in a residence, so there were a lot of residences where people lived and had lived for twenty-plus years. But, I believe, when David Pesonen was the general manager for a very brief window of time, he put a time limit on the amount of time that somebody could be in a residence.

That happened to come up in 1992, and the person that was living in the security residence, which is a double-wide trailer at the Tilden Corp Yard, he, I can't remember if he retired or if he just moved out. I think he retired. But anyway, I moved into the trailer at the Tilden Corp Yard, and there was a six-year time limit, and I'm not sure if it's still six years. I know there was a move to change it to ten years, because six years actually is not that long of a time, because when somebody moved out, the maintenance people would have to go in and get it ready for the new person to move in, and they had plenty of other things to do besides taking care of a residence. I don't remember how

many residences there are throughout the park district, but I'm pretty sure it's upwards of forty or so.

01-01:01:05

Farrell: Did you have to pay rent?

01-01:01:07

Avalos: Yes, and the rent, when I moved in, was very reasonable, and I'm not sure what they are, how much they are now, but that was the way that I was able to eventually buy a house, was when I was in the residence, I was able to save enough for a down payment for my house when it was time to move out in 1998. I was there almost exactly six years, because I moved in in September of '92, and I moved out in August of '98. I just happened to find a house at that particular time. I was very fortunate. But yeah, there's some very interesting and very nice residences in the park district.

01-01:02:16

Farrell: What was it like living in the residence?

01-01:02:19

Avalos: It was very busy, because it was the Tilden Corp Yard, which, not only does the Tilden staff work out of there, that's where the Fire Station One is, that's where the central warehouse is, that's where the maintenance crew for the north county is, that's where the equipment garage is.

It was, between 7:00 and 5:00, it was very busy, but, after 5:00, when everybody went home, it was about as close to rural living in the Bay Area that you could get, and I loved it, after 5:00. I wasn't that keen on it between 7:00 and 5:00, and the weekends, of course, the bulk of the people weren't there. But it was very nice. I didn't have any neighbors. I had owls, owls and coyotes and foxes. It was very, very rural, though, I was ten minutes from many sections of Berkeley, and North Oakland. I could be sitting under a tree and then in ten minutes, be in a coffeehouse or something. It was very, very spoiling. [laughs]

01-01:03:54

Farrell: Yeah, that sounds pretty cool, and pretty fantastic that it afforded you the ability to buy a house. That's a big deal too.

01-01:04:02

Avalos: Yeah, yeah, it was. I don't know if I would have been able to, if I hadn't been able to save living in the residence.

01-01:04:12

Farrell: Did you buy a house in San Leandro?

01-01:04:14

Avalos: I did, and the funny thing was, I started looking, since I worked at Tilden, I started looking in Berkeley, and was, number one, very surprised at the price and also size of the house in my price range. I really only looked for one or

two days, and at the end of that time, the Realtor that I was with, he had no idea that I had any connection or affiliation with San Leandro, but at the end of the our time together, he told me, “You ought to look in San Leandro. You could probably get more house for your money there.” I just thought, okay, I will.

01-01:05:05

Farrell: Do you still live in that house now?

01-01:05:07

Avalos: I do.

01-01:05:08

Farrell: Cool. You had mentioned the fire station, and I know that you were part of the fire department for a long time. Can you tell me about how you got involved with them?

01-01:05:22

Avalos: Well, the park district is interesting in, its fire department at that time, it's evolved a lot since then. Still, there's a number of positions you have to be employed with the district, but you can be part of the park district fire department as what they called at the time, industrials. I'm not sure what they're calling them now, but there were a lot of different job classifications. There were, of course, a lot of rangers that were firefighters, but there were carpenters, plumbers, mechanics, clericals—a lot of different job classifications.

There was an application and interview process that you had to go through, but if you worked with the district, you could get into the fire department, and then they would train you. You didn't necessarily have to be a Firefighter One, or have your EMT; the park district would train you. At that time, there was a captain and four nine-month firefighters, and a chief, and now, there's a whole different organization and there's at least twelve or more permanent firefighters. But it was much different at that time. So, by, I think, the fall of '88 is when I got into the fire department.

01-01:07:23

Farrell: You worked with them for twenty-seven years, is that right?

01-01:07:26

Avalos: Until I retired, in 2015.

01-01:07:31

Farrell: How much time did it usually take to work with them?

01-01:07:36

Avalos: Basically, you were on call, so you wore a pager, and if things happened while you were on duty—you had an agreement with your supervisor—if it was in your park, you could go. We responded to medicals and fires, but it was also during the summer focus, from May to October, we would staff—there were

different fire stations throughout the district that we would staff on weekends, and high fire-danger days, and of course, July Fourth. There was also one training day a month that you had to go to, and there were week-long training in the spring that you would have to go to, to maintain your certificates and the quality of your training.

01-01:08:39

Farrell:

Did you have to go to fire science school?

01-01:08:42

Avalos:

That was what they trained you as. We were, through the State of California, we were given accredited courses that, over a period of time, we became State of California accredited Firefighter Ones. But that was just our in-house training that we got through, with our department and the park district.

01-01:09:10

Farrell:

Okay. I know that you worked on several big fires including the Tunnel Fire. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience working on that fire?

01-01:09:21

Avalos:

I was in there on Saturday, the first time that it went off, and we were part of the initial attack at the top of Marlborough Terrace, and we helped Oakland put it out, and then of course, it blew up on the Sunday. We had left hose line there on Saturday, and on Sunday, there was a call to go and pick up the hose that we had left. It had been a long season up to that point, and my niece was a week old and I hadn't seen her yet, so I said, "I've put in enough time this year. I'm going to meet my niece."

So, I did, but the group of park district firefighters that went to pick up the hose was there when the fire blew up on Marlborough Terrace, and they were basically caught in that initial blowup, and they ended up saving themselves and saving a house. I can't remember the street that they were on, but they ended up saving a house on that street, and they were very near or with Captain Riley, the Oakland—I think he was a captain. He may have been a chief. But, they were around Captain Riley or Chief Riley, think he was Chief Riley, who was caught and died.

01-01:11:26

Farrell:

Yeah, wow.

01-01:11:31

Avalos:

I realized what was happening, and I got back late Sunday evening and went directly to the fire line, and we spent a good two or three days there. We were at Fish Ranch Road in Grizzly, and we just took care of everything up along Grizzly Peak, from Grizzly Peak up to—I can't remember the name of the street is, that the Oakland Fire Station's on.

01-01:12:11

Farrell:

Was it pretty easy to work with the Oakland Fire Department, especially given that the district knows the park so well?

01-01:12:23

Avalos:

That's a tough one. [laughter] I think it's gotten better in time. It wasn't that easy then, and part of the big thing with what happened at that time was, the fittings that Oakland had on their hydrants were a different size from the standardized fittings that were in the rest of the state. A lot of places, the Mutual Aid people that came in, if they didn't have an adaptor, they couldn't hook up to the hydrants. That was one of the things that came out of the whole process, was that Oakland standardized their hydrants.

But, it depended on who you worked with. Some people you got along with better than others, but for the most part—and the park district's expertise is at the wildland-urban interface, more in line with what CAL FIRE does, which was called CDF at the time, whereas Oakland is a metropolitan-municipal department. They're a full service, so they do address the wildland issues. They've got a huge amount of more things to deal with, and the park district, that's their niche, is the wildland-urban interface.

01-01:14:07

Farrell:

How did that fire affect the park district?

01-01:14:14

Avalos:

Obviously, it affected the people that were in the blowup quite a bit, but I think it was a big unifying thing. It was a life-changing thing. It was what a lot of people would call a career fire, and hopefully, you don't go through something like that more than once in a career. It was bonding, of course. You'd been through life and death circumstances. It was very bonding.

01-01:15:00

Farrell:

You've also traveled around California to different fires, and you said they were all south. You were at the Cedar Fire in 2002, and you fought fires in San Bernardino and Orange Counties. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

01-01:15:14

Avalos:

Yes, and the Angeles National Forest. The State of California has a Mutual Aid system, where when big, what they call campaign fires happen, they put out the word on the OES network, and there's what's called a strike team, and the different counties have their process that they will—what a strike team is, is five, like five apparatus of the same kind, and a leader, a chief or somebody in charge. The park district was loosely involved in the Mutual Aid system before 2002, but more often than not, they would stay back. But in 2002, going to the Cedar Fire, that kind of spurred the impetus over, so now it's much more involved in that system.

We were a part of a Contra Costa County strike team. There were, I think, an engine from Hayward, Rodeo, Hercules, Contra Costa, and somewhere else; I

can't remember. But when we got there, we were a Type 3 strike team with four-wheel drive engines, and there weren't that many Type 3 strike teams there, which is a type of an engine. It signifies that it is four-wheel drive, the amount of water that it carries, the amount of hose, and the number of personnel that it has.

But there weren't that many Type 3 strike teams in there, so when we got there, we went directly on to the line, and were there for I think forty-eight hours, came back in, and since there weren't any other strike teams, we had time to eat and take a shower. Our chief came back and said, "They need us back out on the line, and I'm going to let you guys make the decision. I know you've been working hard for two days. It's up to you. If you don't want to go back"—and we, of course, said, "Yeah, we're going." We went back out on the line for another two days, and it was some very interesting firefighting. I was in some very career situations.

01-01:18:34
Farrell:

Yeah, so you've had more than one career fire then.

01-01:18:36
Avalos:

I've had more than one career fire.

01-01:18:40
Farrell:

Is a Type 3 strike engine a big truck?

01-01:18:43
Avalos:

Not really. The minimum that it should hold is 300 gallons, but ours held 500, and most of the ones that we were withheld 500, and I believe it's a thousand feet of inch-and-a-half hose, 800 feet of two-and-a-half-inch hose, and minimum of three people. There's an assortment of tools that it's supposed to have. I can't remember the number of each one, but those are the bare minimums, and it's supposed to be four-wheel drive, and that's a big thing, is being four-wheel drive, for having access to—

01-01:19:33
Farrell:

You could traverse different terrain?

01-01:19:36
Avalos:

You can go off road, and that's a big deal, being able to go off road.

01-01:19:42
Farrell:

What are you most proud of, from your twenty-seven years of working with the fire department, the district fire department?

01-01:19:49
Avalos:

Being a firefighter. Helping people. I enjoyed my time as a park district employee, ranger, supervisor; I am proud of being a firefighter.

01-01:20:09

Farrell:

Did you ever consider joining the Berkeley or the Oakland, or even the San Francisco Fire Department?

01-01:20:16

Avalos:

I did. There was actually an early time in my career when there were openings in Marin that I could have gotten, but at one point, you get to a point of no return. I had invested so much time with the park district that it didn't make that much logical sense, and a lot of people that we met, a lot of other firefighters, would tell us that, "you have the best of both worlds. You get to do this job and you get to be a firefighter," and I feel that's true. We had the best of both. We got to do both, and there's not many places where you can do that. It's very unique, not only in the Bay Area, but in the West. The East Coast has a lot of volunteer type of fire departments, but it's not so much out West.

It's one of the proudest things that I did with the park district. The park district as a whole is a great thing, but I'm very proud of having been with the park district fire department.

01-01:21:49

Farrell:

Moving back into your time in your park capacity, or your ranger capacity, you went back to Chabot in 1998. Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like, what your role was, and what it was like to return to Chabot after all that time?

01-01:22:09

Avalos:

Well, I changed classifications, which was the primary impetus for doing it. It was a pay increase, of course, but I became what the park district calls a park craft specialist. Of course, Chabot had changed with having the service yard at the campground, and it was much more organized, I guess, and they had set definite limits for—there was the same limit, but it wasn't as strictly enforced in that campers could stay for thirty days in a year. They were allowed to be in for two weeks, they would have to be out for a day, then they could be back in for another two weeks.

The standardization of the two big campgrounds in the park district, Anthony Chabot and Del Valle, they were standardized in the way that they worked, the prices that they charged, and the way that they dealt with the campers, and there had been differences before, but it was felt that since they were two campgrounds, they should be standardized, and so they were. But I believe that we had the kiosk at the campground now, so there was, excuse me, more of an eye kept on the campers. It was easier to document when they came in and when they left, and it was just more efficiently run than it had been.

01-01:24:27

Farrell:

How did the role of Chabot in the greater park district change after the kiosk was built, after the service yard was built, these organizational structural changes? Did the role of Chabot change?

01-01:24:43

Avalos:

Not really. It was still overall the same. It was just more efficiently taken care of, and certainly, much easier to have the staff on site at the campground. Even though the campground is one of the—it's the major focus of Anthony Chabot as a park, but like Yosemite, the valley is only 1 percent of the park. Anthony Chabot is a big park. It's got a huge trail system, and it's got a lot more to it. The staff is responsible for all of that, another 4,000 acres besides the 500 acres that the campground is on. It was much easier to deal with it being at the campground, having the service yard there.

01-01:25:47

Farrell:

What were the functions of your new role as the park craft specialist?

01-01:25:51

Avalos:

I still did the basic roles, helping with the cleanup and maintaining things, but I was more the—the park craft specialist is a buffer position, between the field staff and the maintenance staff, between the carpenters, plumbers, and electricians, and things like that. There were things that we would take care of before calling in for the plumbers, or before calling in for the carpenters to come out, because they took care of the bigger jobs, and we would take care as much of the maintenance that we could, to take the pressure off of, because there's not a large amount of carpenters or plumbers for the sixty parks or seventy-two parks that there are in the district now. If things could be taken care of on site, it took a little bit of the pressure off of the maintenance crew.

01-01:27:23

Farrell:

You did that for about two or three years, until around 2002, is that correct?

01-01:27:29

Avalos:

Yes, roughly that time frame, and then I went back to Tilden as the Tilden park craft specialist, and I was the park craft specialist at Tilden until, I believe, 2006, when I got promoted to supervisor, and went to Crown Beach as a park supervisor.

01-01:27:55

Farrell:

When you went back to Tilden as the park craft specialist, you were gone for a couple of years, but in the grand scheme of your career, it wasn't all that long, because you had been at Tilden for so long. Had anything really changed or was it really kind of the same?

01-01:28:11

Avalos:

It was basically the same. A few of the faces may have changed, but there was always a fixed amount of people that were around, and then, rotating people coming through. But, more or less, it was all the same. I don't think there were

any—can't think of any big changes that had happened in the park in that time.

01-01:28:51

Farrell:

What are some of the things that you're most proud of from your time as a park craft specialist, either in Chabot or Tilden, maybe some of your biggest successes or challenges?

01-01:29:02

Avalos:

I always tried to do something that would benefit the park, and the people that used the park. We built a wooden walkway on the back side of Lake Anza that, in the winter, when people would walk around—there was a marshy type area, and we built a wooden walkway so that people could walk around the lake without getting their feet wet. I re-decked a couple of the bridges that crossed Wildcat Creek, above the Botanic Garden, behind the Botanic Garden. That reminds me of a thing that I did as a ranger with—I worked in affiliation with the Botanic Garden in Tilden. Al Senares, who was the supervising gardener there, I believe, he built these rock—I don't know what they call them—

01-01:30:21

Farrell:

Formation things, right?

01-01:30:22

Avalos:

Yeah, but I assisted him in that I drove the tractor, and moved the rocks around for him, because they were big rocks. But he built formations that would be similar to formations that would be found out in the natural habitat. He had pictures of some place that he had seen somewhere else, and he tried to make these areas similar to them. I would haul, move the dirt for him with the tractor, move the big rocks for him. He did all of the designing and the fine-tuning, the moving, the planting, and I just did the big machine grunt work with it.

I think I did three or four separate things with him in the garden. That's another one of the things that I'm very proud of, working with Al in the garden, because I don't know if you know about the Botanic Garden or not, but it's all California natives, and it's very unique in the world and very highly thought of, and to have been able to do something in that type of atmosphere, it was very, very special.

01-01:32:05

Farrell:

What was it like working for him, and helping him?

01-01:32:07

Avalos:

Al?

01-01:32:08

Farrell:

Yeah.

01-01:32:08

Avalos:

He was an artist, so he was very kind of standoffish, but once you got to know him, he was very—he knew what he wanted, and he was very precise. But I remember moving one rock more than a few times. We would [get it into] position, he would step back, and he'd go, "No, it's not right," and then we'd have to move it around. He would step back, and he'd go, "Oh, it's not right." [laughter] He was an artist. No, he is an artist. I think he is living in Portland doing art now. But it was very special working with him.

01-01:33:03

Farrell:

Was it easy to work with him because he had a vision, so you knew exactly what to expect?

01-01:33:10

Avalos:

Yes and no. [laughter] He knew what he wanted. It's another thing, one of those things that like, as a child, not appreciating living in foreign lands. At the time, there were times when I probably wanted to be doing something else, but I ended up spending more time there than I thought that I was going to, so I didn't appreciate it. But when I went back later on, I looked at it and I went, "Wow, I was part of that; that's incredible." I didn't realize that at the time, but having been back to the garden and seeing those things now years later, it was amazing.

01-01:34:01

Farrell:

Yeah, I've heard a lot about those rock formations, and I've interviewed some people who worked in the Botanic Gardens, and it's cool to hear that you, for the one, doing the groundwork for that.

01-01:34:11

Avalos:

Well, I'm glad that—it was one of those that was probably just going to go *phht*, right over my head, but something spurred him to go. That's right, the garden, the garden! But yeah, that was while I was a ranger, and can't remember; I know there was other things that I did as a craft specialist, [like] replacing the decking on the bridges. We built an equestrian bridge down above the old pony ride.

Oh, that was one of the interesting things very early in my career. When I first started there, there were actually tennis courts at the bottom of Canon Drive across from where the pony ride use to be is. But we took them out, and I was loosely in charge of the removal of those, the tennis courts. They had the fifteen-, twenty-foot high fences that we had to take down, and get rid of, and now, there's nice—I think there's a parking lot where part, one of the old tennis courts is, and one of them is meadows.

The other interesting thing is, well, that I worked there at the merry-go-round with the Perrys, Harry Perry who ran the merry-go-round for years until they retired in the early '90s, and he had been there for, I don't know, thirty years or so.

01-01:36:10

Farrell:

What was it like working with him, or interacting with him?

01-01:36:13

Avalos:

At that point, he only ran the merry-go-round for nine or ten months out of the year and would take a couple of months off, but he was a bit testy at times. But, if he did know that you were going to do what needed to be done, he was good. He was very interesting, very interesting. And then of course, Terri came in, Terri Holleman, and I don't think that she runs it anymore, but she did for a very long time, and she's the one that started having it run all year round. In the winter, I think it runs only on the weekends, but it was a lot different. Harry was more running it as a merry-go-round; Terri ran it more as an entertainment business, but it, of course, is a very interesting thing in itself, being a historic merry-go-round, in the merry-go-round circle.

01-01:37:42

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah it's really fascinating. I don't know much about merry-go-rounds, but they seem interesting. [laughs]

01-01:37:47

Avalos:

Yeah, well this one is. It's a Herschel-Spillman, and it has a sister merry-go-round in Griffith Park, in LA, and I can't remember much more of the history. I knew it a lot better for a while. But yeah, it's very, very interesting. It's one of the things that makes Tilden so interesting, is that, in itself, is a historical thing. The steam train is a historical thing. It actually was at Redwood Park in I guess the '60s, and then it was moved up to Tilden and that's where it's been forever. That's one of the things that makes Tilden so unique, I believe, is the different facets of it.

01-01:38:48

Farrell:

Mm-hmm. Yeah, absolutely. You were promoted to supervisor in 2006, and that took you to Crown Beach. Can you tell me what it was like to step into the role of supervisor, at a new park, too?

01-01:39:05

Avalos:

Yeah, yeah, I never thought I would end up at Crown Beach. I hate to really say this, but, it was a calculated move. I can't think of the right word. Telling people what to do wasn't really what I wanted, but, as far as a calculated move towards retirement, it made a huge, huge amount of sense. It's something that I put off for a very long time, and I had peers that I worked with who, that was their thing. They wanted to be a supervisor, to be a supervisor but also for the end goal, in that that's the highest you can go at the field level without going into management or into some other bureaucratic position.

That was the epitome of the field level that I could go to, and it produced a good means but it wasn't one of my happiest times with the park district. I did well. I did things that I'm proud of at each park that I was supervisor at, but

there were times when I didn't look forward to going to work, [laughs] having to deal with the people level of things.

01-01:41:12

Farrell: Yeah, yeah, it can be tough.

01-01:41:15

Avalos: It's very tough.

01-01:41:17

Farrell: Well, can you tell me a little bit about the role of Crown Beach in the greater park district?

01-01:41:22

Avalos: Crown Beach is very unique in that it's the only white sand beach on the Bay, the inner Bay. Also, it has a big history in Alameda. It's mostly, I believe it is, it's actually owned by the state, but the park district operates it, and there is also part of it is there's affiliations with the federal government on McKay Drive where the Glory of the Sea Building is. It's different in that it's not specifically owned by the park district; it's operated by the park district for another agency. There's a lot of improvements that the park district did there. Before my time, they did the planting of the dunes that kept the sand from drifting on to South Shore Drive, and that's been very successful over the years.

One of the things that I started there that was a contribution, was that there were these wooden walkways from the sidewalk on to the beach that were deteriorating, and I found this product called a Mobi-Mat, which is basically a plastic mat that has a lot of different applications, but it's not inexpensive. But it is more user friendly than these old wooden walkways and it didn't clog up the way that the wooden walkways. I started a program to systematically replace these wooden walkways between the sidewalks on South Shore and going on to the beach, and I drove down South Shore a couple of months ago and was happy to see that not only are the Mobi-Mats that I had put in still there, but they've installed new ones since I left, so that somebody is carrying on that project.

01-01:44:13

Farrell: Yeah, successful catch of the Mobi-Mats.

01-01:44:15

Avalos: Yeah, yeah, it was, I think, a good thing.

01-01:44:19

Farrell: Yeah. You moved to Quarry Lake in 2011, also in a supervisor capacity. What was it like to move to Quarry Lake?

01-01:44:29

Avalos: It was different in that it was a different environment than I was used to because it was a predominately, again—and it's another entity that, the park

district operates it for the Alameda County Water District. The Alameda County Water District owns the water in Quarry Lake. That's drinking water for Fremont and area down there, but it's primarily a recreation area, and its main focus is fishing. It has picnic areas; it has a swim area; but people primarily come there to fish, and it was just different being in charge of a fishing area, because I don't know anything about fishing. [laughter] I learned a lot; I learned a lot about fishing, but I wasn't a fishing person before I went there.

01-01:45:38

Farrell:

I guess the energy of the park was different because people are going there to fish and that's usually a relaxing thing.

01-01:45:50

Avalos:

It was very different in that it didn't get the volume of visitor ship that Tilden did, or Anthony Chabot, or Crown Beach. All of those are high-volume parks, and Quarry Lakes is not. I would just like, smirk and smile when the staff would go, "Oh my gosh, we're so busy today," and I would look around; I go, "No you're not. [laughter] This isn't busy." It was very different to go from working in high-volume areas to working some place that wasn't, though it had its interesting aspects as well, and it was interesting to work with the Alameda County Water District.

01-01:46:52

Farrell:

Yeah. What was the relationship like there? Was it a pretty friendly relationship between the district and the water county board?

01-01:47:00

Avalos:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, we got along very well with them. We were in charge of the recreation; they were in charge of the water. We each knew our roles, and it was very interesting in that the year that I got there was a heavy rain year, so we had as much water as anybody had ever seen there. A year or two later, one of the levees breached, so it had to be repaired, and for it to be repaired, the water district had to let a lot of the water out of the lakes. We went from one extreme to the other so that that, at one point, it was the lowest that anybody could remember the lake being since their inception. That was a very interesting process because they had to rebuild this levee after it had breached. That was an interesting process for over a year that it took them to rebuild. We went from the highest to the lowest. [laughs]

01-01:48:47

Farrell:

Interesting. You ended up retiring in 2015. Can you tell me a little bit about your decision to retire?

01-01:48:57

Avalos:

I'd rather not.

01-01:48:58

Farrell:

Okay. Okay.

01-01:49:00

Avalos:

It was more or less amicable. Actually, I will. I wanted six weeks off, and I wasn't granted six weeks off, so, and I had the time on the books, and I wanted to go to Bhutan, and so I did. My ultimate plan would have been to work for two more years, but I just said, "Well, this is the opportunity now and I'm not going to wait two years to go to Bhutan." It just moved forward my plan a little bit, but, as usual, things worked out for the better, for that happening. Everything, it was just, it wasn't the way I planned it, but it was the way that it probably should have been.

01-01:50:07

Farrell:

Yeah, and you had thirty years with the district at that point.

01-01:50:11

Avalos:

Very close. I did, because I ended up buying some of my temporary time, which you are allowed to do, because there was a program for a while that you could actually buy time. It was called "air time," and I bought five years, so I think I ended up with thirty-six or thirty-seven years towards my retirement, which was pretty good.

01-01:50:46

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. During your career, your entire career with the district, were there any colleagues that you worked with that were particularly important to you or significant?

01-01:51:01

Avalos:

Oh my gosh. I worked with a lot of great people, a lot of great people, and Lee Nunnally at Tilden; and John Sanasteven, Jeff Wilson, Paul Reed, Rachel McDonald. I don't want to go on a naming spree, because I know that I'll forget somebody that is so special, but that was one of the things about working for the park district, is that there was so many great people working there. One of the people that actually told me about this project, I worked with, and she is a great person: Julie Haselden, and she's the president of our retirees' association right now. But the list could go on and on and on. It was a great place to work. A lot of great people came through there; worked with them, yeah.

01-01:52:24

Farrell:

It was the people that was a big part of why you liked working for the district?

01-01:52:27

Avalos:

A lot of it was the people. It was a very unique job in the Bay Area to have, and it was a very unique group of people to work with, and it's like I told a lot of people a lot of times, "I had enough really crappy jobs in my life to know when I finally got a good one," and I did. I can't imagine living in the Bay Area and doing anything that significant and that impactful for the area, but on a low-key level. Our goal was to get in and do the work, make it the most safe and enjoyable atmosphere, and not have anybody notice that we had done that, and that's what we did. We took care of the place, and gave people a very safe

and enjoyable place to recreate, and if they didn't notice that we had done something but they enjoyed it, all the better.

01-01:53:52

Farrell: Yeah. How do you think that the district shapes or influences life in the Bay Area?

01-01:54:02

Avalos: I don't think that the Bay Area would be the same without it. It's very unique in other places. There's so many; I met so many people over the years that came to the parks and just said, "I wish there was something like this where I live." In my travels, I've always looked at other places and other similar type of things, and this park district is definitely unique in their scope, in their attitude, and their mission towards doing the best that they can.

01-01:54:51

Farrell: What has it meant to you to have worked for the district and had such a long career with them?

01-01:54:58

Avalos: It's meant the world. It's made my life because I'm not going to say I enjoyed every single minute of it, because there were certainly some trying times, but it's made my life that I can enjoy it now, and it's made me richer. I was able to help people have a rich experience. It's completely enriching, on so many levels.

01-01:55:42

Farrell: What are your hopes for the district's future?

01-01:55:46

Avalos: That it continues. It's growing. It needs to catch up with the number of people that take care of how it's growing. I don't think the staff rates have grown in proportion to the area, but I understand that's budgets and bureaucracy and all of that, and I think now, people are having to do more with less, and that needs to get into a better proportion, but I think the heart is in the right place. I think everybody wants to do the best that they can, and that's the ultimate goal, but I think in time, if it could catch up, that would be a good thing.

01-01:56:49

Farrell: I think that's all the questions I have for you unless you want to—is there anything else that you'd like to add?

01-01:56:55

Avalos: Mm, well, I know as soon as I walk out the door, there will be a dozen things [laughter].

01-01:57:01

Farrell: You can always add those in after, too; that's no problem.

01-01:57:03

Avalos:

But right now I think that's probably pretty well done.

01-01:57:09

Farrell:

Okay. Well thank you so much for your time. It was a pleasure talking to you.

01-01:57:12

Avalos:

Well thank you, I really appreciate being part of it and I think it's a great thing.

01-01:57:17

Farrell:

Well, thank you.

[End of Interview]