‘I had to earn my way’
Ranger Jan Kirwan: An interview with folklorist Lilli Tichinin

Jan Kirwan’s career with the National Park Service spanned 27 years, five parks and experience in interpretation, wildland and structural fire, resource management, EMS and law enforcement. All along she pushed herself to learn new skills. During an interview at Ranger Rendezvous in 2014, Jan shared a snippet from her career at Everglades — beginning as a seasonal in the early 1980s and then as a permanent employee from 1987 to 1998 — and the prejudice and misconceptions that she encountered as a pioneering female ranger in the world of land management law enforcement.

Kirwan: While working as a dispatcher in Everglades and trying to move forward in my career after attending seasonal law enforcement academy, the then chief ranger came into the dispatch center after learning that I planned on applying for a LE ranger job at the Tamiami Ranger Station. After a short discussion, the chief told me that he would not hire a female ranger because “things happen in those hunting camps that no woman should be exposed to.” I reminded the chief that I grew up with folks who had hunting camps and occasionally they would take kids from the neighborhood with them while they prepared for the upcoming hunting season. The chief remained adamant that he would not hire a female ranger.

Several years later I returned to my “home” park, having been hired by a forward-thinking supervisory ranger, who transferred shortly after I arrived at the Tamiami Ranger Station. The position I was offered was split interpretation/law enforcement that was soon converted to full-time LE. Now, first and foremost I had to learn the skills most critical to my job — how to operate an airboat, our primary patrol vehicle under all conditions and in all circumstances. My problem was my acting supervisor and co-worker was unwilling to train me the captain of team one. My most vocal challenger from the previous days of class was made the captain of team two. After receiving our mission briefing from the DEA agent in charge, I took my team aside and shared some simple swamp survival skills: which plant indicates deep water, which plant shallow water and lots of laughing and mud, we pulled and uncovered suspect plantings we prepared for the next day’s field operations. Some of my classmates offered to let me work with them if I was scared during the field exercises.

The first day of field exercises, I dressed in my best “go to work in the swamp” clothing and gear. I received some surprised looks. The course coordinator then split the participants into two teams and much to my surprise, made me the captain of team one. My most vocal challenger from the previous days of class was made the captain of team two. After receiving our mission briefing from the DEA agent in charge, I took my team aside and shared some simple swamp survival skills: which plant indicates deep water, which plant shallow water and just what to expect from a cottonmouth should they run across one. I explained to my team what my job consisted of on a daily basis. My team members just laughed and said, “Cool, you know this stuff.” By the end of the field exercises that included sweat, some swearing and lots of laughing and mud, we pulled and hauled out a couple of hundred plants back to the road and met up with the other team.

We learned that most of the other team never left the road, too afraid to walk into the swamp to go after their targets. The other team leader remained very quiet, clearly embarrassed by his assumption of the “girl’s” skills and abilities. When the other team learned of my background as a “swamp ranger,” most had a good laugh while others seemed to remain stoic in their beliefs of my limitations as a “girl ranger.” Maybe I was just a bit evil by not toting around the fire at the game check station, out of uniform and off duty.

The rest of the first day and the second day of the course continued with similar comments directed to me. During a lunch break, the DEA course coordinator asked me if everything was okay. I told him that I was fine, that I had heard similar comments before. He then asked me what it was I did for a living. I replied, “I’m a park ranger.” He then asked specifically what it is I do, which is when I told him, “I run an airboat in the Big Cypress and Everglades pretty much exclusively conducting hunting patrols and resource management work in the swamp.” Laughing, the agent asked me if I had told anyone what I did. I said, “No!” He laughed again, and then said, “This is going to be fun!” After reviewing aerial reconnaissance and uncovering suspect plantings we prepared for the next day’s field operations. Some of my classmates offered to let me work with them if I was scared during the field exercises.

Retired from the Park Service, Jan Kirwan is superintendent of Mesa Valley Boise State Park in New Mexico. Lilli Tichinin, an intern with the Park History Program in Washington D.C., received a Supernaugh Scholarship to attend the Rendezvous in 2014.