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# Manager for Corps' Arkansas lakes retires after 42-year career

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Published March 15, 2015 at 12:00 a.m.

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PHOTO BY: William Harvey

Until Brenda Meeks saw what was happening at the parks and recreation department of Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, she planned to become a schoolteacher. That visit to ATU changed her life's path. On Jan. 2, Meeks retired after 42 years with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

When Brenda Meeks went off to college, she intended to become a schoolteacher. However, all it took was one glimpse at the parks and recreation department at Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, and she changed her mind.

"I grew up coming to Lake Ouachita," said the Hot Springs native, who now lives on Lake Hamilton. "I fully intended to become a teacher, but when I saw the parks and recreation department, I said, 'I'm going to register for that.'

"My mother said, 'No,' but someone said, 'Let her get the basics, and she can change her major later.'

"I never changed," Meeks said. "I loved it in the beginning and have loved it ever since."

A 1970 graduate of Lakeside High School in Hot Springs, Meeks, 62, graduated from Arkansas Tech University in 1974 with a degree in park administration.

On Jan. 2, she retired after a 42-year career with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Vicksburg (Mississippi) District.

She was the first woman project manager and the first woman park ranger in the district.

"There are a lot more women in the field than when I started," Meeks said, smiling as she backtracked before turning her

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focus to the present.

"I decided it was time to retire," Meeks said. "I wanted to retire when I still really liked my job. I've loved all the people I've worked with; they were great. I love the Corps.

"I just wanted to retire on a high note. I hope some of the wrinkles from my forehead will soon be gone."

Meeks, the daughter of Ethel Meeks of Rison and the late David Meeks, actually began her career with the Corps of Engineers while she was in college.

"When I was a sophomore, the Corps came looking for students," she said, noting that the Vicksburg District had a cooperative program for students.

"They offered me an internship. I went to school a semester and worked a semester. I worked at Lake Ouachita."

After graduating from Tech in 1974, Meeks continued to work for the Corps, this time as a park ranger at Grenada Lake in Grenada, Mississippi.

"It's a big lake that resulted from a flood-control project in the Mississippi River Valley," she said.

"I stayed there for three years," she said. "I patrolled the campgrounds, worked with agricultural leases, was part of the boat patrol and fought fires. I really did love that job."

From Grenada, Meeks went to the Vicksburg District office in Vicksburg, where she was the outdoor recreation planner.

"I oversaw 10 lakes, helped design camping facilities and developed policy for the campgrounds and fee charges," she said. "I traveled Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana."

She spent the next three years in Vicksburg, returning home to Lake Ouachita as the assistant park manager, a post she would hold for two years.

From there, she went to Lake Greeson in Murfreesboro as the park manager for one year, then back to Lake Ouachita as the park manager, where she stayed for 12 years.

"The Corps then reorganized and established a project office with one person in charge of all three Arkansas lakes – Ouachita, Greeson and DeGray," she said. "That's when I became the project manager."

At the time of her retirement, Meeks was responsible for managing not only the three Arkansas Corps lakes, but also each of their hydropower plants and 114,183 acres of public lands with 49 recreational areas. She managed a combined staff of 188 Corps and contract employees with an average budget of approximately \$19 million.

During her career, Meeks worked on such nationally recognized projects as the Geo-Float Trail and the Lake Ouachita Vista Trail.

Meeks said the Geo-Float Trail was the first water-based nature trail in the country. It is a 16-mile trail on Lake Ouachita.

"You do it by boat," Meeks said. "You look for geological formations on the shoreline that are marked by yellow buoys.

"It's free. You just take your boat and go on the trail."

The project was a finalist in the Corps' Chief of Engineers Awards of Excellence program in 1984. The project is a joint effort of the Corps of Engineers, the Arkansas Geologic Commission and the U.S. Geological Survey. It took five years to do all of the work before opening the Geo-Float Trail in 1984.

The 45-mile Lake Ouachita Vista Trail took 10 years to complete and was dedicated in October 2014.

Meeks said volunteers constructed the Lake Ouachita Vista Trail. It is a wilderness hiking and mountain-biking trail along the southern shore of Lake Ouachita.

"It can be done in easy pieces," Meeks said. She said the International Mountain Bikers Association was instrumental in the design and construction of the trail and has given it special recognition.

Meeks said Lake Ouachita also received a National Take Pride in America Award in 1991.

"Lake Ouachita has been the focus of the community for several years," she said. "The community has worked with us on several projects. And the schools in the area are really interested in the lake and the wildlife it supports. We have eagle counts and surveys of deer and turkey, as well as birdwatchers. A lot of volunteers do a lot of work around our projects."

Lake Ouachita was filled in 1955.

"As a kid, growing up, we camped here, in a tent," she said.

"Today, you can still camp in a tent or in a 40-foot motor home with slide-outs and a satellite dish. It's amazing. Most of our parks have upgraded their campgrounds to accommodate the campers of today."

Meeks has received awards and recognitions over the years, including the Achievement Medal for Civilian Service for her efforts with the Arkadelphia tornado cleanup in 1997, the Vicksburg District's nomination for the Women in Science and Engineering Award for Scientific Achievement, and the Commander's Award for Civilian Service in 2006 for her work with Hurricane Katrina cleanup.

Meeks hopes to travel now that she has retired.

"I want to visit all the national parks," she said.

"Hot Springs National Park is the first one I've checked off my list," she said with a laugh. "I can't wait to see Yosemite and Mount Rushmore."

When asked if she had any advice for someone considering a career in parks and recreation, she replied, "It's such a great public service. It provides an opportunity for millions of people to be outdoors. Being outdoors just makes you feel better. But, just like anything else, you have to love it to do it.

"If you're scared of critters or don't want to be lost in the woods or on the water, this job won't work for you."

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