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Interview with Lewis Cutliff Regarding Mammoth Cave (FA 81)

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TRANSCRIPT

RECORDING NO.: Lewis Cutliff Kelly Lally 9-87

INTERVIEWER: Kelly Lally

INTERVIEWEE: Lewis Cutliff

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 9/8/1987

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Mammoth Cave, KY

OTHER PEOPLE PRESENT:

EQUIPMENT USED:

AMOUNT OF RECORDING (TAPE/MINIDISK) USED: 31:29

DESCRIPTION OF CONTENTS:

TRANSCRIBED BY: Christie Burns **DATE:** January, 2008

Transcribed with the support of a Transcription Grant from the Oral History Commission of the Kentucky Historical Society.

KEY: K=Kelly Lally
L=Lewis Cutliff

Italics= emphasis

// = overlapping or interrupted speech

[] [not part of recording]

Lapsed time represented in left column by minutes and seconds (i.e. 5:50)

? or * = transcript needs to be checked

0:00 K: This is Kelly Lally and I'm here at Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, with Mr. Lewis Cutliff [sp?]. Today is September the 8th, 1987. When were you born, Mr. Cutliff?

L: December the 3rd, 1931.

K: And where did you grow up?

L: I was born here at Mammoth Cave, just across the parking lot there. We lived here until uh, they started making it a national park. We moved in 1935, late in the winter of '35, to Park City. Lived there until I was about fifteen, and then we moved three miles out of Park City, near Highway 255. So I've spent all my life here and around here. I've been around Mammoth Cave, well, when I was growing up, my mother and dad worked here. And uh, I was over here more than I was at home when we moved away. So you might say all my life's been here.

1:11 K: What did your parents do here at the park?

L: My dad guided, and my mother worked for my grandfather. He had the photo concession that made pictures of people entering the cave. And she worked as a photo processor for him. I worked for him starting about the time I was fourteen, twelve or fourteen. Started just helping in the darkroom when I was about twelve. Then by the time I was fourteen, I was actually making

the pictures. I did that up until—during summers—until I went to the service. My mother worked for him until he died, and then she worked for concessions ‘til about four years ago.

K: Did she work for Ray Scott?

L: Yes. I worked for Ray, and she worked for Ray after—After my grandfather died, concessions started operating the photo shop, and Ray was in charge of it. So both of us worked for Ray Scott.

K: I talked to him a few weeks, or about a month ago, right before he died.

L: Yeah, you’re fortunate there.

K: Yeah, I think so.

2:39 K: Let’s see. So what are your earliest memories of the park, or of Mammoth Cave in general? What do you remember as a child around here?

L: As a child, I remember the houses that were still around here. The old hotel. Not the one that burned in 1916, but the one, the later one. I remember the houses where people lived. I remember the old pond that was out there, and remember our house and the barn. I remember some things about visiting some of those people. Then of course, that, I was about four and a half, I guess, when we moved from here. And then of course, when I was a little older, I’d say seven or eight, I can remember being over here while they were working. Associating with a lot of the old guides. Hanging around the guide house. Sometimes they’d give me nickels and money. And uh, I remember the CCCs, know them, working, some of the equipment they’d use. I remember after we moved to Park City—‘course by that time, everybody was moving out of the park. And uh, I remember especially some of the colored CCCs that lived at Park City, and I’d see them. They were married. I’d see them walking, you know, in the evenings going home and this type of thing.

4:36 K: Were these people who lived in the CCC that were just sorta like local enrollees that came to work and went home everyday? Or did they come from other areas?

L: They had camps. They had four camps here. I suppose you’ve already covered the location of those. But um, there’s one black camp, and it was over on Flint Ridge. There was some locals in the camps. You had a lot of locals in the camps. But then there was people, in fact, that came from other places too, like west Kentucky and some of those areas. Around Forest Branch and Beaver Dam, those areas.

5:16 K: Well how did the local residents feel about the presence of the black camps in the area? Do you remember?

L: I don’t um, I don’t recall. You know, it was all, it was accepted, the way of life at the time. Um, and here, I’d say you’d find less attention paid to it then you would in a lot of other places, because for years, a lot, a large part of the employees at Mammoth Cave, or the Mammoth Cave Estate, were black. And they worked along with the whites, and they lived close by. I remember my mother and daddy both talking about playing with them when they were small, growing up, and they grew up together. Even on into adulthood, they were friends. They were always glad

to see each other. Even me, you know, in later years, in fact, one of them, every time he comes back, and he's the last of the old old time guides, that guided here with my daddy, and he still comes in and sees me when we comes back. He acts like he's really glad to see me. I'm always glad to see him. I don't think you had that much animosity.

K: I've heard some differences between the way people in say, Cave City, or parts of—people in Brownsville felt. Didn't know if you'd been able to pick that up or not, or if it was just somebody else's opinion.

L: Yeah, there was differences. Uh, I think maybe you'd find pockets now that would be more that way. But um, you know, without going into detail or saying anything against anybody, you know, I could *tell* you some of the incidents or some attitudes or feelings probably, but probably it's best left unsaid.

K: Okay.

L: But I'd say it's like anywhere else. You'd find different prejudice today among different ethnic groups. In one region it's somebody, and another it's somebody else.

K: That's true.

8:06 K: Well, just for repetition's sake, can you tell me where the different CCC camps were situated here at Mammoth Cave?

L: Number One was on Flint Ridge at the site of what used to be the Bluegrass Country Club. There was a country club over there, it's operated by the Floss Cave Company. There was a clubhouse and greens. It was a nice golf course. And that was the site of Camp Number One. And then later, in 1965, it became the site of the Job Corps center. And the last building that was associated with the Bluegrass Country Club was an old log building that served as their clubhouse. It burned. It was used as a supply room for the Job Corps, and it caught fire and burned after it became Job Corps. Number Two was up by Frozen Niagara and the New Entrance. We're just a short distance from where the New Entrance Hotel sat. And still some foundations that you can see there, that camp. Number Three was over on Highway 70, over near Joppa Church. And Number Four was over at the cave, just down the road from the Maple Springs ranger station.

9:40 K: So, was there any particular camp that, when you were younger, that you might've seen more of?

L: I guess I'd've been more familiar with Number Two, probably.

K: I suppose you wouldn't remember as a child, but now, working for the park service—Do you know what particular work projects they did here at Mammoth Cave?

L: Yeah, they did road work, they built roads, um, the new ferry road—We call it the “new,” but the site of the ferry now—That road was built entirely by then. We have pictures of all of that road cutting in our files. Uh, they did um, you see a lot of these rock [unintelligible] or walls around culverts. They built those. They built the, all of those buildings in the circle there, the old residences. Superintendent's house, the Three Springs pump house, the warehouse, uh, the

garage, fire hall. Uh, they built two—They constructed this picnic area. It was a campground then. And they had two rock buildings that they built there. One's been torn down about twelve years ago. The other one's still there that we use now as our environmental education center. They did reforestation, uh, soil and erosion control. Um, they had carpenters, the stone masons, the whole gamut of trades. Blacksmiths, bulldozer operators, grader operators, truck drivers.

11:41 K: Was it, how does it look different than it did when you were little? I know that they have more stations.

L: It's a lot more vegetated cover. It's, you know, there were farms around here. And it became a park in the open fields. It was easy to see old home sites. Now it's not so easy. You have to almost know where they were to recognize it as such. Exceptional, occasionally you might see a yucca plant growing or something that's around the old house site. If you get out and look, you know, you might find where a foundation was, or refuse dump or something like that. But it's a lot more forested now.

12:31 K: How did the local residents feel about the development of the park?

L: Some didn't like it. Some [coughs]—Excuse me—Some pushed it. People who lived in the area that was being taken, I would say for the most part, didn't like being moved out of their homes. I know my mother has never gotten over “this is her home.” And she's never been able to adjust to that fact that well. But they had to move out. And there's been other people the same way. It's always hard when you uproot, you know, that many people. Some of them have to go away, break up families. A lot of them when to Kewanee, Illinois, uh, Galesburg, Illinois, and those places out there. Worked on farms and in factories. It was—I would say it was traumatic.

13:41 K: There were some people out here that were a little bit more militant about it, and there were some instances of vandalism. Do you remember any of these? Or do you //

L: Just hearsay. I—‘Course, being a child, I wouldn't've paid much attention to it anyway at the time. I probably have heard it talked about, and have heard it talked about some. But it definitely was some. The records show that there's some. We have incidents where people were arrested for, you know, maybe taking off some tin or lumber from a barn or something previously owned by then, and in fact it was the federal government's then. The records show that. So there's some.

14:37 K: Did you ever hear, either as a child or later on, about the two rangers who went around to people who tried to stay on the land and tried to force them off? Did you ever hear about that?

L: I've heard some about it. Again, I think it's probably reported in some of the early uh, daily or weekly reports of the chief rangers. And we've got some of those. And, yes, there was some of that.

15:22 K: How did the local residents feel about the CCC being in the area? Did that have anything to do with their feelings about the development of the park?

L: Well, I don't think it was—It probably wasn't so much the CCCs. I think probably, I'm guessing now that many of them thought it was a good thing, because it provided work for a lot

of people, work that was not available otherwise. 'Cause you know, it was right in the throes of the Depression, at the end of it. It furnished a means of livelihood for people. A lot of the CCCs married local girls and just stayed on in this area. Some of them moved away. They became, you know, assimilated into the local culture here, and just became a part of it. Raised families here. Some of them like Joe Poliza [sp?] stayed on, and later became superintendent of the park.

16:42 K: How would you say that the local economy changed because of the park being developed? Aside from, well obviously the farming to some other type of //

L: Tourism.

K: Mm-hmm.

L: Well, it would've added to it. You know, gradually more people started coming, and it definitely added more into the local economy, the state economy. The towns that surrounded here, especially the ones on 31W. So, it benefited them, as well as furnishing a lot of local people jobs.

K: Uh, around that time in the '30s and early '40s, uh, did a lot of hotels spring up?

L: Not really. The hotel grove didn't start until the '50s, as a result, I suppose, of the increase of visitation in the area. So that's when your, you know I can remember the time there wasn't none but one, maybe two motels in Cave City. None in Park City. 'Course they had hotels, Cave City had two hotels. That was, um, seemed to be the popular thing back in, before the '50s, was hotels. So there was two in Cave City. There was one in Park City that predated those. I mean, it goes back to the time in the 18—Late 1800s, when the little train was running. And that was the main point for people to disembark from the L&N trains, and got the little "gummy" we called it, that ran to the park. Or to Mammoth Cave at the time. And uh, it's called the Fishback Hotel, Bence Hotel. Horse Cave had a hotel. So it changed from hotels and little bitty motels to the bigger ones. Those came in the '50s.

19:18 K: When did some of those—You see a lot of other cave attractions in the area that have nothing to do, really, with this cave, or they might be related. But they use the Mammoth word a lot to get people to come. When did those start opening up?

L: That was, back in during the cave wars, they called it, you know, when a lot of those caves started opening up in the '20s, they were trying to capitalize on the growing attraction of Mammoth Cave. And they all started looking for a cave to open up. And they did try to get that name in there. There was even a lawsuit over it one time. That was in the '20s.

20:21 K: As far as you know, either from, you know, personal experience, or later on, do you know if there was much interaction among the different camps of the CCC? Did they share work or recreation?

L: I think perhaps they did some. I'm not sure. I don't know that much about it. I know some camps might've had more, like into the resource management to reforestation. This type of thing. Some more maybe into construction. But I don't know which ones. Some of them worked in the cave, and the blacks from Camp Number One did a lot of work in the cave, and cave trails and this type of thing. Helping to remove the rock from the mummy that was found in

1935. So they did a lot of trail work in the cave. I'm not sure what the other camps were involved in. You know, at one time there was a rock quarry here, they ran that. I'm not sure which camps were involved in what.

21:39 K: How successful do you feel like the CCC was in relieving the effects of the Depression? That might just be what you've heard too.

L: I've never heard, but my personal opinion, I would say it made it bearable for several thousand people and their families, at least. You know, they would send money home. So I would say it helped some of them over the hump, probably.

K: If you could name one or a couple of things that you would consider to be great contributions of the CCC at Mammoth Cave, what would you say they were?

L: Well, improving the facilities, and then helping to start this into a viable reforestation program, I would say. Stopping a lot of erosion. You know, a lot of those farms had been farmed for hundreds of years by families. Lot of gullies and erosion areas. And they stopped. Improved roads and transportation [unintelligible]. All those things contributed to the same.

22:55 K: Were there any problems that you could see in retrospect, even, or that you heard about with the CCC being here?

L: No. I don't really recall anything. 'Course the people I was around, they had no animosity toward them. Back, you know, I think probably it touched a lot of families in the area. A lot of their people, brothers, sons, uncles, cousins, or whatever, were involved in it. I had an uncle that was in it. No, I think they probably—You know, I don't know of any animosity. Recreation-wise, like I said, you know, they dated a lot of the local girls. They had a recreation house down at the foot of the hill right over here. You probably've heard of the Hoopee House. That was kind of a recreation meeting place. As to the, to its reputation, I don't know.

24:15 K: Looking back now that you work here in the park, how would evaluate the quality of the work they did, as people working in the park, and developing the park?

L: High quality. Look at some of the work in those buildings. You won't find masons today, not many, that can do as well. Blacksmiths, [unintelligible] hinges on some of the doors that are made as quality work. Photography like Ray Scott did, and recording a lot of this stuff. It's high quality work. A lot of artisans in that organization, who couldn't get work anywhere else, so they used their talents in that.

25:12 K: Has the park been added to or changed since the time of the CCC was here? New roads? I know that they've added some roads, or if there's any more land acquired.

L: Since the CCC?

K: Uh-huh.

L: Yes. A few thousand more acres. I don't know exactly how many. I could get it from the records. But it's a number of acres more than it was.

K: And some of the recreation areas have been changed?

L: In what way now?

K: Um, simply moved campsites from one place to another?

L: Yeah, like I said, this is over by the visitors center here, across the parking lot, where the picnic ground is now. That was a campground. They could camp down at the foot of the hill down by the river here. They had some picnic tables over behind the hotel. Some picnic tables down under the hill by the river. On in the late '50s and early '60s, I guess it was early, around sixty—maybe one or two, somewhere along in there—they moved the, from this campground over here, and made it a picnic area. And then built the one up here by the filling station. Then closed this one off at the foot of the hill, at the site of the old fairyland. Quit letting them camp or picnic down there.

27:09 K: In general, how do local residents feel now about the park?

L: Well generally, I think they're proud of it. I think they recognize its importance. It's the drawing card for especially this section of the state. So, all the people that I know, you know, they're proud of the park. They bring all their visitors over here to see it. It's—So I would say it's looked upon favorably. Be crazy not to, as much money as it puts in the economy, you know?

K: Yeah. Let me turn this over, and I'll finish my last question.

28:08 K: This is the second side of the tape of my interview with Mr. Lewis Cutliff. So you say you started working in the park and in the cave when you were a young teenager. Um //

L: In the park. I didn't start in the cave until '56, 'til I got back from the Air Force.

K: Well tell me about your association, um, with the park and the cave.

L: Before?

K: 'Til here. 'Til here and now.

L: Well like I, you know, I told you on the other side of the tape that I started working for my grandfather when I was around twelve. Part time in the summertime. But when I was fourteen, I was working regularly for him in the summertime. Did that until I was nineteen, and I went to the service, stayed in there four years. Came out, came back. By that time he was dead. And uh, Concessions was operating the photo shop, and I worked for them, and that—in the spring of '56. Summer of '56 I started working in the park service as a seasonal guide. And I worked for them then for eight seasons while I went to Western, and after I got out of Western. I would travel for a school picture firm for three, two or three years, while I was, when I got out of Western. And I could still work here in the summer, because they weren't busy in the summer. And I did that until, well, I taught school during the year. And in '63 I got permanent employment. I've been here ever since.

K: So what's your position now?

L: Assistant Chief Interpreter. You're in charge of the guides and all the activities, visitor services. Evening programs, cave trips, the environmental education programs, installations. Most the things.

K: So you still live in the area?

L: I live in Park City.

K: Well let's see, is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the development of the park or the CCC or anything?

L: Well, like what?

K: If there's nothing that comes to mind—

L: I suppose, you know, we covered it pretty well, thumbnail sketch. You can't put several generations of what you've heard on tape in a short time. And it's probably better that you get it from the people who lived at that time, uh, before me. I've heard a lot from my parents and grandparents. Some things you put on tape, some you don't. So, I guess that's about it.

K: I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me.

[CONCLUSION OF INTERVIEW]