Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription

Project name: Ranger Lore (LOCRP)
Field ID and name: #0004; Johnny Merideth interview
Interviewee: Johnny Merideth
Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman
Date: 12/3/2013
Location: Mammoth Cave National Park, KY
Others Present: n/a
Equipment used: Tascam DR-60D
Microphone: Audio-Technica AT803B, lavalier mic
Recording Format: .wav
Recorded Tracks in Session: 1 audio track
Duration: [00:48:24]
Corresponding Materials:
Forms: KFP2013LOCRP_0004_BBms0001 - KFP2013LOCRP_0004_BBms0003; Audio recording: KFP2013LOCRP_0004_BBsr0001
Video files: KFP2013LOCRP_0004_BBmv0001 - KFP2013LOCRP_0004_BBmv0009
Context:
Technical Considerations:
Transcription prepared by: Rebecca W. Smith

Transcribing Conventions:
Use of square brackets [ ] indicates a note from the transcriber.
Use of parentheses ( ) indicates a conversational aside.
Use of em dash — indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.
Use of ellipses … indicates a discontinued thought.
Use of quotations “ “ indicates dialogue within conversation.
Use of italics indicates emphasis.
Use of underline indicates movie, magazine, newspaper, or book titles.
Names of interviewee and interviewer are abbreviated by first and last initial letters.
Time is recorded in time elapsed by the convention [hours:minutes:seconds].

Note: This partial transcription is as accurate and complete as possible. In any question of interpretation, the researcher is referred to the recording itself as the primary document representing this event.

[time elapsed in hours:minutes:seconds]

Transcription
Brent Bjorkman: OK, Today is December 3rd 2013. This is Brent Bjorkman, the director of the Kentucky Folklife Program based at Western Kentucky University, and I'm lucky enough to be working on a project through the Library of Congress and the American Folklife Center. [I] was given an Archie Green Fellowship and we're going to be talking about occupational folk culture with a group of folks here in Kentucky- the federal park rangers that work at Mammoth Cave Park. Today I'm going to be talking with a couple people, and today we're going to start with Johnny Meredith, who has worked his way through this park system and, of course, we're getting the intimate details of life and what work has been like for them over their careers. We're doing a wide range of folks who are soon to be retired, and also people that are currently working within the park system here at MC. So, Johnny, could you maybe just start- why don't we just talk about how you started in with the park. I know that some people have started seasonally and worked their way in, but maybe... what's the first thing that grabbed you about this park, or you thoughts about 'hmm, I'd like to work at a park'...

Johnny Meredith: I think that would stem from childhood, for me. I came over to Mammoth Cave a lot as a child, and I guess one things that really sticks in my mind, is cemented in there, is a field trip I took in the third grade, and i may have come with my parents before and some after, but whatever the reasons, that trip I came in, that field trip in third grade, I came in and I remember seeing the rotunda and I was blown away, that this was basically in my own back yard. That I'm standing in a room nearly one acre in size and a ceiling 40 feet tall, and here I am, playing on the surface as a third grade kid, and at that time I had no idea this was going on underneath of me, and that this was here. I was just really amazed by it and I was taken by it. And I saw the guys and the gals here, and those park rangers in their grey shirts and their flat hats and their green pants, and to me they really, you know, epitomized professionalism in guiding visitors through the cave. There was just something about the entire experience in childhood in seeing that, I guess from that moment on, was like, “Well I would like to be a park ranger someday.” And you kind of toy with ideas as you get older and you get in to college, but I really couldn't get that out of my mind. I went to Western and started my undergraduate, and after couple years of general ed courses my advisor said, "Well, Mr. Meredith, you pretty much need to declare a major" [laughs]. And I was like "Well, ok. What do you got?" and so she gives me this big list of stuff and it's like [sighs] none of that said much to me. I thought "Well, what might work to be a park ranger, if I want to do this?" and I thought to have a geology degree would be good. I was going to Western Kentucky and they were close to each other and I thought, “Well, I will major in geology' and my entire intent was to get into geology and go for this, and that's really what I did. When I have been on tours in the past, or even visitors today, they say "Well did you go to college?" I say "yeah" "What's you degree in? Oh, well you work at the perfect place". And they don't understand that I don't work here because I was so into geology, but I majored in geology because I was so into wanting to work here. So that's how I started. My first day was June 10th 1996... and that was the second time I applied here. The first time I applied, I did not realize that this was not like working at, you know, a retail outlet or even a fast food store, that the application was the formality before you get hired. That apparently I was not the only one who wanted to be a park ranger, it was very clear, there were dozens and dozens, and even hundreds of people who apply for 15, 20 jobs over the course of the summer. The first year I applied I didn't get hired. So I said, what do I need to do here to boost my resume? That's when I said, well I'll take an oral communications class, speaking in front of a public-that will help me. I even worked in another local cave here: Kentucky Caverns, which has now revered back to its original name, Mammoth Onyx Cave. So by the time the next year rolled around, man, I had the geology, the oral communications course AND I had the year experience in taking people through a cave, and so I was able to, I guess, cut the muster that year and I was hired, and just pretty much dug in and held on for the most part of that and that's how it started,
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[0:05:15]
BB: Did you get hired in interpretation?

JM: Yeah, I got hired as cave guide, as a park guide here and I was, at that time I think hired as a GS4 cave guide. And to me, it was just the best job ever. Once I got into doing and being a park ranger, I realized that, wow, why would you really want to work anywhere else?

BB: And this was a seasonal job at that time?

JM: Absolutely, yes, this was a seasonal job. From 1996, I stayed seasonal for close to 8 years. And when I had graduated from Western in 1999, I'd been working here about three summers, and there were just no permanent jobs to be had. So here I am, a single guy, and it's like, well [sighs] what can I do here? I know! I'll go to grad school! Because that way I can still stay in school, I can still work at the park, you never know what's going to happen. And that way I didn't have to get a, I guess, quote en quote, what some people call a REAL job. I was still doing what I wanted to do. So anyway, that's what I did. The grad school, I got through the courses quick, but the thesis stuff took a while. It ended up when I got married it got to the point, it's like: ok, being park ranger's all fun and games, but now I've got somebody else, to be responsible for. It's not just me anymore, to do whatever and to make ends meet. Now there's somebody else- there's a whole new level of responsibility- and I had been seasonal, like, eight years at this point. So I mentioned to my wife, "You know, I think I'm just going to have to stop. I'm going to go have to get a job which is reliable, dependable, steady income, things of that sort." She said, "You know, you've been over there a long time, just hang in there a little longer. Something, SOMETHING, will come up." She didn't have to do a whole lot of arm-twisting with it, once I found she was cool with it, that's what I did- I hung with it. And probably in about 6 months to a year they did have some permanent jobs to open. They were subject to furlough, but I didn't care- they were permanent jobs so I applied and I got one of those permanent jobs, and I've been here ever since. Since then I've moved from a Park Guide into the Park Ranger and moved on up, and I don't see the cave nearly as much- I see an office and a desk more- but I still love working here. I've told this story before: when my wife was pregnant with our second child, I was talking to the doctor and he's like "Oh, so what do you do for a living?" I said, "Well, I'm a park ranger." He said "Well, do you like it?" I said "Well, it beats working!" and he kind of got a chuckle out of that. What I meant by that was when you love what you do, you never have to work a day in your life. One of the guys who just retired here said his dad gave him some good advice: if you're going to be doing something for 30 years, make sure it's something you enjoy. I thought, well, that's good advice, something to pass on perhaps to my children. The doctor knew what I was talking about. He said, "You know, my dad was a park ranger in Alaska and he said it was the best job he ever had." I hear that a lot. I see visitors that come today and shoot the breeze with them and I hear all the time "I had a job as a seasonal park ranger one summer and I loved it" or, "Man, when I retire, I want to come and be a park ranger" and things of that sort.

[0:09:23]
BB: You spoke about movement through this system, as a guide and then a ranger. That's one of the things I've been interested in, and I'm trying to explore with different individuals… When I was writing the narrative for this grant, in my mind I was seeing all these different people with education, and interpretation, and biology, and search and rescue, and law enforcement, and they all come together to do this job called 'the park ranger'… Maybe you can tease it out a little...

JM: Yeah

BB: ... these are duties or....
JM: It's kind of more based on your grade levels, and series, and things of that sort. I think, to the general public, a park ranger is anybody in the green and the gray, period. Whether you work for facilities management, or whether you work for the division of interpretation, whether you are in law enforcement, or whatever the case may be. I think most people, when they see the green and the gray, you are automatically a park ranger. We've got folks here that are IT specialists; we have visual information specialists; public information officers. We all kind of wear that umbrella. Park Guides are typically what we have here. They are first line interpreters, they're in the field every day; they are interpreting. And then the Park Ranger series folks, folks like myself and some of my office mates upstairs, like Chuck and Leslie and Cathy, they just happen to have a Park Ranger series. That's the title that they give it. But when I was a Park Guide and I was a front line interpreter, I probably never felt more like a park ranger ever than I did right then, because I was doing what I saw all those park rangers do when I was a kid. The title is just a title. What you feel when you're doing that, that's certainly much more. I don't think there's any guide out here that really feels that they're not park rangers. I don't consider them not Park Rangers: they certainly are to me, very, very much so, no matter what a title says. For me, moving up in the system here, I was very, very kind of the oddball in the sense that I never worked at any other park. I've been to a lot of other parks, I've seen a lot of other parks, but I've never had one I wanted to trade for. Beyond this work, there's also another entirely different component to who you see here in the green and gray, and I have a life outside of here, and everything I love and everything I care about is here, too. And so, if I moved up through the ranks and went from a guide to a ranger: great. And if I never did– who cares, you know? I was still living my dream; I was being a park ranger. So that makes me odd in many ways because a lot of folks have to move from park to park and work seasonally; a winter here... maybe summers at Mammoth Cave, winters in the Everglades, or summers at some park, winters at another park, you know, things of that sort. And [they] kind of get their foot in the door, make a lot of contacts, and constantly prove themselves to a lot of different people, and just constantly apply for jobs. So I'm kind of the oddball in that situation, kind of just being planted here and being unwilling, on my behalf, to go anywhere. I feel very thankful and blessed to be where I am.

[0:13:08]
BB: Do you think that the work environment has changed over time? You're very thoughtful, you've probably probed all your older colleagues and they've come through the ranks, or is this a special park that may allow you to do those things, or has this changed from the everglades, to here, or maybe going out west, and having to do this transitory thing. Do you think that has changed over time?

JM: I think that a lot of the ways people still get in today is just constantly having to move and to go from place, to place, to place. If I wanted to move up and go beyond whatever I am now, I could apply to go somewhere else, but I really don't have a desire to do so. Do I think that that kind of part of it has changed? In my view, I don't think that that really has changed. But what does kind of make this park unique and very different, that I do see, is just the unwavering dedication it seems that our seasonal staff possesses. I've been to a lot of trainings, nearly coast to coast in different situations, and when I start talking about, kind of, the guide culture here at mammoth cave they're just like "What?! You've got seasonal that's worked there 10-12 years? They don't go anywhere else?" "No. They don't want to, they love being here," and I would be in the exact same boat, you know. I was in that boat, and would have still been in that boat, probably, or whatever the case may be. I think this park is different in that fact. I've had colleagues come in and visit and they're like "So, how many of these folks here are permanent?" And it's like [whispering], "Actually, none of these people you see are permanent." "What?" "These are seasonals, been here 8 years, 10 years, 12 years..." and it just blows their mind that kind of loyalty and dedication at the staff at Mammoth Cave. That's one thing that makes it very, very different. I'm sure guides, park rangers, they have bonds whoever they're with, but when you have that bond and you
continually stay around that same group of people, I think that really intensifies it. And I think a lot of that bond is built around the big hole down the hill there. Just everybody has that core in common. You'll find all different kinds of beliefs and all kinds of opinions for whatever things, but one thing just nearly find consistency on is that they all love the cave.

[0:15:51]
BB: So these loyal seasonal colleagues that you've worked with for forever, what do they do on the off season?

JM: You know, some will go to school, some will just try to find odd jobs, some, you know if they've worked enough over the course of the year they will try to draw unemployment and scrape by or whatever. I've got a very good friend who, when we're not here, he's got his hand in a lot of other jobs and occupations to kind of tide him over until he gets back here. When I was seasonal it was kind of the same thing, I was in school. You just do whatever you could to make it work to keep doing what you wanted to do.

[0:16:34]
BB: So tell me about the first day at work, when you tried and then you finally got hired on, if that's a memory. Either that or take me through one of those first days of work during that first year.

JM: I very vividly remember the first day, and it was not like, maybe, people might envision. I was in a room all day and there were different supervisors that would come in and they would do different training sessions. I remember very distinctly my supervisor at that time, she was, she came in and of course she had on her outfit; we're all in plain clothes, we're all in civilian clothes, none of us have uniforms at this point. We're all just kind of sitting together in this room. She starts at the white house and the president and then filters all the way down showing the lineage and the chain to show where we are in that branch. So I remember that, and I remember the superintendent coming in during those weeks of training talking about himself and where he was from and how he was here. The first, you know, two week of this, I would say very little was actually spent inside of the cave, and it was very clear that there was a lot more than just knowing a lot about mammoth cave and being able to tell that to people that was entailed in this job. You had to know a whole lot of stuff that goes on behind the scenes. If there's an injury in the cave, who do you call? And in what order do you call? What information do you need to have about this person? What if there's a lost child? What if there's a fire evacuation? You've got to get first aid/cpr certified. You know, just on and on and on all these other things that you just never have any insight to without just being here. So those were the very first two weeks of what it was like. As far as beyond that, I remember the first time I was- I don't want to say forced- but let's say strongly coerced to talk in front of a group. You kind of got a window, a grace period. And if you haven't spoken in front of 120 people that you do not know and they're looking at you as the expert, it can be a bit unnerving if you've not done that or are not accustomed to it. I was with this lady here; she'd been here a few years, and she's like, "John I think you can do a stop today." And I hadn't seen too many programs, and it's like, "I don't know." all I had was a name tag, I still didn't have a uniform.

BB: A “stop” means a stop and talk?

JM: Yes, I'm sorry, let me clarify: a stop would be along the cave tour we stop in various areas and we present some sort of information to the visitors. And so she said "I think today you can do a stop." and I was like, "Well, I don't know, but whatever" so she kept going, so I said "Ok, let's give it a try". I felt more out of place because I didn't have a uniform yet, all I had was a name tag that said who I was, and
that was it. I remember having to give that talk to 120 people and then handing it back over to her. So it was nerve-wracking one, to not be in uniform and talk and number two is like, they're looking at you like I'm supposed to know everything and obviously I did not. And the longer I work here, the more I realize the less and less I know every day, because there's just new stuff all the time that comes out about this place. So yeah, you get your… you get that big cardboard box, I remember that, and you open it up and there's your grey shirt and there's your pants. You put that nametag on it, you've got your brown socks, your brown shoes and your flat hat, that iconic flat hat, you got the hat band that goes around it that you have no idea in the world how to tie that and get it to look like... so you're looking at somebody else to help you out with that…kind of showing up in uniform. And when you show up in uniform people certainly do expect you to know everything. They don't know that I've been here 2 weeks or 20 years, they don't know. They know that I work at mammoth cave and should know what's going on. Even today, when we have new seasonals that come and they're like "Oh, can I wear my uniform tomorrow?" and it's like "You can, but let me just tell ya, if it were me, I might wait another day or two, because the second you put that on, you're expected to know everything about this place. So if it were me, I would probably wait another... maybe let this first week end, and then maybe of the beginning of that next week, yeah, start putting it on and go from there." Because you gotta start somewhere, but you're so gung-ho to be in and to be that person.

[0:22:22]

BB: So that made me think about something that folklorists are always interested in is the informal culture of working your way up in any kind of job, and the mentorship and/or the insider folk knowledge of hazing or little jokes. I mean, you are giving insight to that newbie. Do you have a name for people that are new up to a certain time? Or is there a certain kind of rite of passage that you all think of? That you feel comfortable in sharing.

JM: Oh, you know a lot of people refer to them as "rookies". You know, it's their rookie year here, they've never been here before. We even have a 'Rookie of the Year' award that we give here. And our guides, as I was talking about, there is kind of a bond between them. Every year we have a guide's picnic, and anybody in the park can come, it's not like a guide's only club by any means, and it's open and inviting to everybody. But a couple of things they do is they have a "Rookie of the Year," and we just started that about 4 of 5 years ago I'm guessing, and basically it's voted on by your peers. Here's our new folks, you guys have seen them, who's “Rookie of the year?” We have a “Guide of the Year”, and you have a researcher of the year award we call the "Ed Bishop award". There's certain awards that we give out annually to the folks here: the guide of the year and the rookie of the year. I think to those who receive those, they mean a lot because they're not given by an authority figure or management, and those are always welcome accolades, but you're getting it from the people you work with, day in and day out. So knowing that your coworkers, that you're side by side with every day, think so much of you is pretty humbling. So that award, generally, we give those out at the end of the program. It's kind of like 'best actor of the year' at the Oscars: you've got to give it out last. People kind of know who it is, but you got to kind of hold off, yeah.

[0:23:30]

BB: Who makes those decisions? The collective or the...

JM: The guide force, so all the guides get together and, in fact, my buddy Chuck Decroix, who I work alongside with, he and I, we get the ballots ready, we get them out and we do the counting of the ballots, and he generally calls the award place and haves them print out the little plaque. And we give them a little, well it's not little, it's a (to-scale lard oil lantern and it's silver, it's got their name on it, the date, and it says "Guide of the Year." So yeah, we do that. As far as hazing goes, I don't think there's a statute of
limitation [laughing] on hazing and how long that you work here, that just seems to be a fairly perpetual... you know, people have found... and sometimes we have to wear different hats at our job, you know? Some days we're wearing this and the flat hat and we have to change and maybe we're doing a crawling tour later with a helmet and a headlight. And people have left items laying out in the lounge, and one day they might find their boots in the freezer, some personal item like their flashlight in the freezer. It has been known that people will take notecards and keep them in their lockers to kind of keep their information straight, and people will [laughing] change the information on the notecards, just little things like that to kind of throw folks for a loop. So yeah, there's kind of hazing, but nothing malicious by any means, it's all in fun and the folks here, they've all got such a good sense of humor for the most part, and we go from there.[laughing] But yeah, we just have a lot of fun.

[0:25:18]
BB: So in '96... I'm thinking of maybe how equipment in the cave has changed. Whether it's lighting systems, certainly the lamps you alluded to the facts that you used to burn oil in the lamps, but that was way back.

JM: Yeah

BB: And you've been here since '96. I don't know if you can speak to that; if there have been changes to equipment and to protocol in the cave since you've been here.

JM: You know, you think of the cave as almost this kind of timeless place, and in some ways it is. I mean, I've not been here forever, but I've been here long enough to see a tremendous amount of changes involving the cave. When I first got here, we were giving tours on all dirt trails everywhere. The rotunda still had dirt trails, Broadway had a dirt trail, Raf Nesk (sp?) had a dirt trail. Those have been replaced now with these kind of concrete pavers kind of levelling out the surface. We've just had a big handrail restoration- we've replaced all the handrails with stainless steel. All the lighting that was in the cave when I first started has been removed and replaced with a new lighting system. The tower in mammoth dome, I remember climbing many, many times, it's been taken out and it's been replaced. The cave looks very different, I think, from the eyes of a first-year seasonal that when I first came here. In fact, there's a lady that works here, and she saw a picture laying out on the table she was like "Oh, what is that? That looks so cool." And it was just a picture of Broadway, but there was no pavers, there was none of this. I felt like the old timer. I was like "Oh yeah, well when I started, we still had that dirt trail." And I got to thinking: we often reminisce and become nostalgic when we think of days gone by, whether it's the days of the lanterns and things of that sort, or just the old trails that the guys had. And I realized that, sometimes I've gotten so hung up and it'd be so cool to be back then and to see what the cave was like, that you miss on now and what will be nostalgic later. You know, those dirt trails are gone in many parts of the cave, and over the years that will probably continue as they continue to rehabilitate the cave trails. And so I have very fond memories of walking down those old dirt trails that was just part of the cave when I got here. So I've not been here tremendously for forever, but yeah, there's been a significant number of changes in the cave just since I've been here.

[0:28:20]
BB: Is part of the interpretation of the cave- there seems to be a lot of tradition and reverence for that and for the people who came before you, and the history of the guiding itself and the ranger-ing itself. Is that something you talk about or is it pretty much, this is on your tour showing a particular site, or do you allude to that in any way? Maybe it's not during the cave tour, but is there interpreter stuff where you talk about the guides that came before us?
JM: Sure. I don't know if it would be possible for visitors to go today on a historic tour and not hear about Stephen Bishop, who was a guide who was here in the 1830s through the mid 1850s. So about 1838-1857 he was here, and he was enslaved and I think one reason we have such high regard for this guy is just what he was able to accomplish. This is a guy who discovered miles and miles of mammoth cave, crossing the subterranean rivers to unlock miles and miles on the other side, you know, and probably during his tenure here he over doubled if not close to tripled the known length of mammoth cave in approximately 20 years.

[pause while machinery is checked]

[0:30:05]
JM: So, here's a guy who did so much and we still see his signature all over the cave today. And it's like, "I am where Stephen was", and here the date- 1850-whatever, or 1830-whatever, or 1840-whatever. And it's like you see all of these really cool dates and then you realize that this guy was here probably many times and often times alone, and the only thing he had in to the cave was the historic entrance. I did not come in that way, and I'm still miles from where I came in, and here's this guy... and it's not just him, there are certainly other guides who have been here in the past, and that history lives and breathes in Mammoth Cave. Those signatures are there- the cave is just a time capsule- and you can't escape it. In many, many places that you go, it's all around you. And so, if there really was a way to go back in time, the closest way to do it would be go inside the cave, and you can almost just recreate the exact conditions and see the cave, and the walls, and the ceiling as they were when those folks were there. So I think a lot of people here have a deep respect for the guides who were here before, a deep interest in the visitors who were here before, and certainly those sort of things are still talked about on cave tours. You know, we stop at a place called "Jenny Lynn's Dining Table" and often talk about how people ate here in the 1800s. And what's cool is that it's not just a story I'm telling you, here's a chicken bone. Here's a broken piece of wine bottle. Here's all these things, and they're still here, 150 years later that we can see.

[0:31:50]
BB: So the visitors must love that, but I think about you talking about the camaraderie with the people that work here- it must be something extraordinary, the bonds you have.

JM: I think so, and, you know, even when you look back at Mammoth Cave, we're talking about Stephen Bishop being enslaved, Matt and Nick Bransford were also enslaved individuals here, and of course they ultimately got their freedom, but, when you start reading about the black history here at Mammoth Cave, they weren't ostracized by any means. You've got examples of where some of the Bransfords and Frank Barry, another guide here, they'd hand out at each other's houses, and Frank Barry is a white man. So you don't... that's not something that commonly happened in this part or certainly further south from here. You didn't have that kind of bond between the races of that sort, but you seemed to have that here at Mammoth Cave, at least on many, many levels. And it's cool, you can go to the courthouse and you can see who sold individuals land, and you can see white folks selling black folks land and getting stuff set up, so... the community, in particular the guide community here, seems to have always been, for the most part, very, very close knit for probably since it started, it seems. So yeah, it's something about the place that just kind-of bonds you to the folks around here.

[0:33:31]
BB: So you've kind of risen the ranks and you're happy where you are, I mean, you love this place and you'd rather not move around.

JM: mmmhmm
BB: And I understand that you're in a supervisory position now, and you are a certifier for the interpreter development plan. Is that something that goes on here, or is that a NPS contribution that you give as part of your job? Can you tell me about that?

JM: Yeah, the interpretive development program was started about 20 years ago. Up until that time I guess interpretation was just something people did, it wasn't a recognized career, per se. and I think, historically speaking, even at Mammoth Cave in probably the 20s, 30s, 40s - things of that sort - 50s, 60s, anyways, 70s, whatever. A lot of the programs were tailors like, this is a saltpeter mine operation, we made gunpowder for the War of 1812. So many Kentuckians fought in this battle and on and on and on, and you go to the next stop. So that was kind of the way, quote on quote, interpretation was done. And it was really just giving folks information about the place. But every now and then people would hear programs and they would somehow be outstanding. They were saying the same thing, but they were saying it in a different way. So all these folks got together, and these were pretty much front-line interpreters, they weren't like people that sat off all day - these were front line interpreters. And they got together and I guess over a course of an extended period of time - had a lot of debate, probably had a lot of arguments, probably got very heated, it got very passionate, but they finally came down to realize that all of these really good interpretive programs had certain things in common with each other. And that is: that they were expressing why the park or the place was significant; they were telling a specific story that ran the gambit of the program from beginning to end - it was a thread you could follow and flow -; and that it gave a sense of relevance to the place. And so they developed a number of competencies based on this kind of rubric, if you want to say. Each one has their own specific rubric, but kind of all revolves around that idea. And so what happened was they had these competencies, and there was ten of them, and they were released, and you could submit to the interpretive development program. And basically what you would do is you would maybe tape yourself giving a talk, so you could go for the interpretive talk competency, somebody would film you, you would ship it off to Harper's Ferry. Harper's Ferry would take it and give it to two kind of certifiers, people who had gone through this very rigorous training to evaluate these programs. They would independently evaluate it, they would enter their comments, and then they would collectively get together, look at each other's comments, discuss their comments, and either agree or disagree that this meets standards for what we're looking for in an interpretive program. And if it was, then you got a certificate or a letter back saying that you met certification standards.

[0:37:09]
Now, I'll just tell you about Johnny. And that is, when the idea about this came around, I didn't have any, and I mean ANY, buy-in in this. I thought this was a bunch of garbage. I thought this was a bunch of touchy-feely gumbo that made no difference in the world, ok? Nobody probably had more resistance to this thing than I did. So what changed a little bit for me in this was my chief of interpretation was downstairs, and he was talking about this interpretive development program, and that it was going to be around for a while. And it was interpretation for now and for the future. And, as a seasonal, I thought, well it might behoove me to get certified in some of these competencies so that if a permanent job does come open, I will have the most I can put on my resume that I can. So that's what I did. I started to work and I submitted one for informal contacts, and I was certified. I still didn't have in buy-in in it. I just didn't have any buy-in because I thought, "The folks are coming, I'm giving them correct information, they're filling out comment forms saying they really enjoyed it and how much they enjoyed me, they're applauding at the end of the tour, they're laughing at my one-line cave jokes, they're having a good time, I'm doing my job. I'm doing what I'm here for." So that was my mindset at the time. And so I went ahead and got certified. Whatever, I'll put it on my resume, but.... Actually I got hired permanent and one of the things on there was 'knowledge of the interpretive development program.' so not only did I know about it, but I had demonstrated success in it. I think that probably played a part in helping me get a permanent position, and I don't think this was lost on a host of seasonals across the service - they saw this as way in.
So when I got hired in, Mammoth Cave does more interpretation than the Great Smokey Mountains- the most visited national park; we do more than the Everglades, we do more than Shenandoah combined. We do more interpretation here than all of those places put together. And our chief of program services thought, since we do so much interpretation, it would just seem good to have a certifier on our staff. And so, I think Joy may have approached me with this, or there was an email circulated about this. I was permanent, so I thought this would help just boost the resume. So I expressed interest- I'll go through training, I'll do whatever, it's fine, I'll do it. So I expressed interest to her. You had to apply for the program and try to critique a something, a writing or whatever, in the best way that you knew how, and I got accepted into this program. So it was two full weeks at Harper's Ferry, and if interpretation had a boot camp, it's that program. So I just want to make this clear- I went with no buy-in. [laughing] Even though I had demonstrated in it, and at the end of those two weeks, and even today, it's just almost shameful that I was ever in that state of mind, because, when you got up there, all you did was view programs and critique them. They would intentionally give you really, really good ones, they would also give you some that obviously did not get standards. Programs were the same, as far as the information goes, but one would stand head and shoulder above the others. And the ones- basically those people who were actually interpreting, who were creating opportunities for me to connect with what they were saying and where they were, made me care more about where they were. I'd never visited there. I have seen a program- I don't know how many programs I've seen about Grand Canyon Condors. I've seen bunches of them. Oodles of them. And they all say the same thing, but there was this one guy, he delivered this program and it was like [sighs] that makes me care about the condor. And that's what we want to strive for, because the end game of what we do as interpreters is we want to give people a pathway for stewardship of the parks. I'm not going force anybody on there, just like, I want to tell you a story about this place in the most engaging way possible so that, when you get in your car, it's great that you might know more about Mammoth Cave, but it's more important to me that you CARE more about Mammoth Cave.

[0:42:23]

JM: I don't care if you don't remember my name, I don't care if you don't like my joke, I don't hardly tell any of those any more. My whole outlook, perception of what my job is, I guess, really became clear. I'm not here to just give info and answer a few questions and hope people are smiling and having a good time and let them get back on the road for some ice cream. I'm here, again, to tell the story in an engaging way that, hopefully when they care they will have had the opportunity to care more about this place when they leave. And so, that's... kind of my thoughts on interpretation and what I strive to do. Guiding or giving in formation is easy, interpreting is not. So, when you go down to the saltpeter works, I don't want to be that guy that's saying, “We took nitrates out of here, we made saltpeter for the war of 1812, we did all this,” and go through the whole process, because you might find a handful of people who might find that interesting. What more people might find of interest is that industry of saltpeter at mammoth cave and other caves in this area and in this country, but that industry right there, has completely shaped the face of our American society today. And if you want to stretch it, in many ways, helped shape the face of the world. So that's something that all visitors coming in, no matter where you're from, this- what happened here 200 years ago has been important to all of us, and here's why. And if you can tell that in a way, you know, people will walk away from there hopefully more engaged about it and really appreciate what they saw as opposed to seeing, “wow, that was a lot of hard work,” and just leaving. It means something to them. And that's what I want people to think. When they leave, I want it to mean something to them.

So, yeah, I became a certifier, I've been doing that for close to 6 years now. And I enjoy it, and it's good to have a room full of folks that you're with and you're all on the same page and know what interpretation is and can just openly talk about it. And there's still times I was given a critique- a critique, I hate saying that. We were meeting after an audit. I had audited a specific guides program here. That's what we have to do in our kind of position here: I have to go on a tour and listen to it and go from there. So we were sitting
down in the audit. And I said “well, you did good, and you did all this,” and explained. "Is there a way you could tell what you're doing and just have some idea you're trying to get across so people would be more engaged in it?" And he just said "look, Johnny, I understand what you're saying. I get it. But I'm not for sure that's what people are looking for. People are driving down the road, they're seeing the brown sign, mammoth cave sounds cool, let's stop in, let's take a tour, soon as we get done we'll get some ice cream and we'll keep going down to Florida. So I think that's what they're doing." And I looked at him and I went: "You are exactly right. That is what they're doing. Nobody's going down the road going 'I'm looking for a memorable experience where I can care more...' Nobody's doing that. And so what you want to do is, when they get here, is your job is to give that to them. They don't know to ask for this. So that when they leave here they can care more about it. They are wanting something of value here, and just spending time with their family is something of value. When they're here, give them more. Give them reasons to care about this place.” And what's particularly rewarding is sometimes, an evening he's come back to me on a couple of occasions and said "I've thought about that talk a lot. I know I need to give them a reason to care about here, and not that they just know more about this place and that they had a good time, but that they do care more about it.” So just hearing people become more aware, more cognizant of what the job truly entails is kind of rewarding in and of itself.

[0:46:41]

BB: Well you're a mentor. That's great.

JM: I think we all kind of help mentor each other. We all have our own strengths and you can't be knowledgeable and an expert in everything Mammoth Cave. If I wanted to know something about, you know, history, particularly the 1890s, Chuck is upstairs; I ask him. If it's archaeology, I got Dave Spence. I think we all help mentor each other and we all got our own niches that we can help each other do that, just continually become better over time.

BB: Yeah, I was going to ask you about what would you give- what advice would you give somebody starting in the job field today. You've kind of been weaving around that, but do you have some kind of a thought if somebody says "Johnny, I've been watching you and I know you know a lot, what can I do the best I can be?"

JM: … First of all, I would ask, what is it that you want to be? And if it's something I can give feedback on, I certainly will. If not, I will direct them to somebody who will be able to direct them more. Bust just strictly being a guide?

BB: Probably coming from that...

[0:47:54]

JM: Yeah, if it's somebody new- what can I do to be the best I can be- I think, for the most part, you don't have to browbeat these people in here to have a better work ethic, because they love being here anyway. But to be the best you can be here, it's certainly more than being a good interpreter. To the best you can be you certainly need to be one, and there are courses and online things, and just feedback or directions I can give for folks at that level, but always, I think another thing is for guides that just really want to be stellar. And I think a lot of them have this mentality now. There's a guy out here and I've seen him come in or be here and he doesn't feel well, he's having an off day. But you go outside, man, you just never know. The guy's smiling, it's just like it's his first tour ever. And, you know, it doesn't matter how long you've been there, at certain point you're just like, "Wow, I got to do another historic today? That's my eight one this week, or something" and you just kind of ask that guy: "Hey man, I know every time you go out, I'm just amazed, it's just like your first trip every time." And he says, "Well, I figure it's like this"
he goes "This may be the only chance any of these people will ever have to see mammoth cave, and I got to give it to them like it's their last one." So basically treat every visitor like this is the only experience they'll have here, and just give your all to them, give the best programs you can give, be upbeat... and sometimes I'm just amazed at the resiliency of this staff. We've had coworkers to pass away during the work day- they're on their off day, maybe they passed away at home that morning- we find out about it. And people that you care about and love and you've worked with for a long time, it's like... It's easy if you don't have to face people; you can have a little mourning period about it. But man, when you're the front line guide there's none of that going on. It's like, you've got 120 who don't even know this person that you're grieving over and honestly they're not here for that, they're here for the cave. And you've got to just- I just watch them go out and perform and give their best and they put on their happy faces as if the world just planted in roses and there's butterflies flying everywhere, and everything's great. So, yeah, sometimes being a guide can be tough because sometimes being a guide is... There's other jobs and functions in this park where, if someone is sick or they don't have to come in, then maybe this meeting can be postponed or we can change this or change that- we can't do that with a cave tour. It's not even like airlines, you know, we can just cancel this flight. I mean, it hardly ever happens. You've got 120 people, they're ready to go inside the cave, they've made plans 6 months ago, they bought their tickets 3 months ago, and they're here, and this tour is leaving now. So you got to get somebody. The show must go on! And you have to go out and you have to give it to folks.

[0:51:28]

BB: So you mentioned being married earlier in the interview and alluded in the past that you have a couple children, and that was one of the things that I talked to our mutual guide friend who was helping me conceptualize some of the things I wanted to learn. What about families? Are your kids at an age where they're intrigued by what you do? So you see them going in your footsteps? Too early to tell?

JM: I've got one that's three, and so he just pretty much follows in my footsteps everywhere I go. He just 'prap prap prap prap prap' [noises] just going everywhere. The other one is eight, and he certainly enjoys coming over to Mammoth Cave. We came over last August, I think, during Bat Night and he got to wear goggles and see bats flying in the dark with these cool night-vision goggles, and he got to ask scientists questions and he got to hear bats kind of squeak and make a noise and he loved that. I've taken him into the cave on different occasions, and he really, really likes it. As of right now, he wants to be a chemist. But he's eight, things change. As far as families go, one thing I do want to try to instill to them is, right now they don't know how deep their roots are here. And I did not know how deep my roots are here until I started working here. I think because my family was local, and we grew up here, it was like, "Well, there's the cave over there." I'm sure there was somebody living next to Churchill Downs going "eh, that's just Churchill Downs, let's go somewhere and do whatever." But you know, the cave is here and whatever and so-and-so used to work here, and I just had no idea of a lot of things growing up. I did have a great uncle who drove one of the busses up here, and I had another cousin that worked in the still ballroom for concessions. I've had cousins over the years work for concessions at different times, and then my great grandfather use to clean off the old wooden stairs at the new entrance. Which I really didn't know about until later. And so I started working at the cave and then next thing I know my granddad is telling me "Yeah, it's been years since I've been in Great Onyx." And it's like, "You've been in there?" and he's like, "Yeah I packed wood in there to build the staircase that went down to the river." And it's just stuff you just don't even know and stuff I never would have known. It's like well, no kidding! And my grandmother, just a few years ago, just produced this, literally, shoebox full of black and white photos, and she's showing me picture of my great aunt and my great, great uncle who were out there at the Floyd Collins crystal cave when it was privately operated. He was guide. They were living in a little house out there. She's got all of these wonderful pictures and it's just like, "Wow! I did not know all that!" Had another great grandfather that was the last pastor out here at the Mammoth Cave Baptist Church. So that's
stuff that my family did know. But when I worked here, you sometimes get in charge to help coordinate special events, and one of the things I was asked to help coordinate was a genealogy weekend, and we had it in Brownsville. And so that year there was a big turnout, because genealogy is big here. It's big because a lot of the families that use to live in the park, they have descendants that are living just immediately outside the park. And it's one of those things that they don't want to lose those stories. So the park, in many ways, is bittersweet, it's kind of sad that these folks had to give up their homes, but...

BB: And that was in the year of...

JM: That was in the, probably through the late 20s and 30s. So folks were having to give up their homes in order for this to become a national park. But one of the bright spots is because they were losing their home, they were going to hold to those stories. People have managed to keep hold of these things, and because of that we can put together map like you see up here, a picture of the park where all the landowners were and their acreages. People are doing all kinds of research today putting all of the genealogical research in databases and mapping, and stuff that would never have happened here, had this not been a park. They're not doing outside the park- they're doing it here. GPS in cemeteries, getting all the information from the headstones; these are all projects that are going on that, again, never would have happened here. So that these descendants, and even their descendants, can come back and find their ancestors. It's just truly remarkable. All these communities that we can find on those maps, we know about them, research them, there's been all kinds of communities disappear outside the park- they're just gone, and you don't know much about them unless you find one of the aged locals. So as far as that goes, I was doing this genealogy thing, and there happened to be another Meredith there. And he said, "Are your parents- and he named them- are those your parents?" and I said "Yeah." "Is this your granddad?" I was like, "Yeah." "Is this your grandmother?" And I was like, "Yeah." And he goes, "Ok, I'm going to give you this book." And it was called "The Ancestors of Johnny Meredith". What he had did is he had all of this genealogical information and he had typed my name in it and had pulled up me and my entire ancestry back to the 1600s or something. He said, "here." And it's sorta like "Man, people spend lifetimes getting this and I've gotten it just for showing up and helping coordinate this event.” Joy Lyons, who is my supervisor, and she's looking at it she's, you know, all about history. And she's looking through it, and she's looking through it, and she's looking through it, and she goes "You're related to this guy?" It's like, well, I guess I am. "But do you know who this is?" "No, I got nothing.” She said, "Well, this guy was one of the early people who leased Mammoth Cave.” It's like, “Really?” Well it turns out, this guy, his name is Robinson Shackelford, and he is my great great great great great grandfather who, in 1837, along with Archer Bond Miller Junior, kind of helped lease out Mammoth Cave. And they were charging people a dollar a day. His son, Oliver Perry Shackelford, wrote a… in these files sitting next to me, he's got a good two different papers that he wrote about his life in this area. Well man, so I can read about my ancestors owning and operating Mammoth Cave or doing work in this area and they lived just down the road from us, from where we are right now. No idea any of this was going on. His grave, my great great great great great grandad's grave, it's just down the road. And I was able to go to it and I was able to see it and it's just like (exploding nose) mind-blowing.

[0:59:18]

JM: so I learned- I've been able to learn more about me by becoming a park ranger and by being here. And again, that's stuff I would never know. And so that was on my mother's side and on my dad's side, I think if you open an Edmonson County phone book, you'll find pages and pages of Meredith, and a lot of them lived in what is today within the boundaries of the park. Some were cave guides in the 1860s, and it's just really wild, that I've got ancestry here that I can trace that far back, that pre-dates even the guides who were slaves. In fact, Oliver Perry Shackelford notes in that book that his brother and Archer Bald Miller Junior helped show those guides the routes. And I'm like, so here's my great great great great uncle
and this other fellow helping to show Stephen and Matt and Nick the routes of the cave. It's just mind-blowing. I mentioned all this to my parents, and my mother, and she's like, "I had no idea we were even related to those folks!" And of course that's so far back, it's not, you know, a lot of people can't name all their great great grandparents. You've got eight of them, how many can name all eight? Much less, when you've gotten that far back, how many you've got. So that's one of the things that I want my children to know. It's like, well this is not just some big green island over here- this is a place that is living and teeming with your roots here and stuff I didn’t know growing up and I just didn't have the knowledge and none of my family did. But it's just been truly amazing and certainly, regardless of what they want to do, I want them to know where they’ve come from. I've got a trip when the weather clears up and the road’s not wet to go out and see my great great granddad’s homeplace. There's a local historian who goes, "Yeah, I know exactly where it was, and we can go to it, and I’ll show you." Again, stuff you just never would know and stuff I never would have known, had I not been here. And I'm not alone in that- there are other guides here who have found out that their interest and their roots here and much deeper than just running out on the surface- they go down, deep as the cave itself.

[1:01:46]
BB: I was just going to ask you if you had anything else to say. That was very captivating.

JM: Oh

BB: Yeah. Did you want to say anything that I haven't asked you? I know we only have about an hour to meet...

JM: I'm good. I'm open to talk about- I can talk about mammoth cave all day! We can keep it rolling!

BB: Well than you very much!

JM: Yeah, you're welcome. Enjoyed it.

[1:02:09]
Recording ends