12-4-2013

Interview with Jackie Wheet (FA 1098)

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Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription

Project name: Ranger Lore (LOCRP)
Field ID and name: #0006; Jackie Wheet
Interviewee: Jackie Wheet
Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman
Date: 12/4/2013
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: [00:55:05]

Keywords:
Corresponding Materials:
Forms: KFP2013LOCRP_0006_BBms0001 - KFP2013LOCRP_0006_BBms0003
Audio recording: KFP2013LOCRP_0006_BBsr0001
Video files: KFP2013LOCRP_0006_BBmv0001 - KFP2013LOCRP_0006_BBmv0008
Context:
Technical Considerations:
Transcription prepared by: Jennie Boyd

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 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]

[00:00:00]
BRENT BJÖRKMAN: Okay. It’s December 4, 2013 and I’m Brent Björkman. I’m the director of the Kentucky Folklife Program. We’re continuing on today with the project we’re doing for the Library of Congress American Folklife Center, part of the Archie Green Fellowship. We’re looking at working America and the project here is talking to park rangers here about their, their working culture. Today we’re at Mammoth Cave park. We’re spending a lot of time here with a variety of people who are in different places in their careers here as rangers, as guides, as lots of things. And today I’m with Jackie Wheet, which is very great. We’re going to talk to him about his life, working at the park, and some of the things that, how he’s progressed through his life, and a little bit about the culture that he, he shares with his folks, his co-workers. So…

JACKIE WHEET: Yes.

BB: Jackie, tell me a little bit about how you started this. It’s kind of an opening that I’ve been asking everybody, but it seems—

JW: Um-hm.

BB: To be a good way to, to kind of share about where you’re from and, and how you got connected to the park and, and this kind of work.

JW: Okay. Well, I grew up in Bowling Green, Kentucky. That’s where I still live today. And I went to Western Kentucky University, and I majored in Parks and Recreation and I got a degree in that. And that led me to the park eventually, but I had to do an internship one summer. They told me there was an opening at a local cave to guide tours, up at Horse Cave, Kentucky, Hidden River Cave. And so I, I worked with them during the summer as a school project. And after I graduated I stayed with them about a year and a half and continued working with them and really got involved with environmental education, teaching kids. We worked with lots of school groups there. And so throughout my working with them, I really fell in love with learning about the caves, going into the caves, exploring the caves. And when I found out that they had seasonal
jobs open here in the summer, I applied. And, and—I always tell people I worked my way up to the big one, the big cave. So I got here, I started here in ’98, in 1998.

BB: So you did that job for a couple of years. I think you told me you graduated in ’96?

JW: I graduated in ’96 and I worked at Hidden River Cave in Horse Cave, Kentucky. I worked with them about two years, and then I came here in ’98. And I’ve been here ever since.

BB: So that was a, private, that was a privately owned cave? Or was it—

JW: It’s, it’s privately owned. It’s owned by a cave conservation group. So, it’s, it’s a non-profit organization and they basically concentrate in, in conservation efforts and teaching people about the environment. So—I really enjoyed it, but I, I got married in ’98 and I needed something to, to build on career-wise and support my family, and it’s hard to do when you’re working with a non-profit group because they want to keep everything as low cost as possible. So, I found out coming here I could still have my love for, for caves and, and the park and the outdoors, and, and, and try to make a career out of it here at the, at Mammoth Cave.

BB: Was, was the outdoors and the cave, love for the cave—was that something that you grew up with or how, you know, what was your fam-, how did your family, did they take you out and—

JW: We, no, they, they encouraged me to do that. And I really love, I love the outdoors. I, I grew up as a kid always wanting to go camping, hiking, fishing. I, I’m an outdoors kind of person, so to have a job where I can still, you know, be in a 53,000 acre park and the world’s longest cave system—I mean, I, I feel very blessed. I feel like I was, you know, that this is where I’ve always wanted to be.

BB: Yeah.
JW: Um-hm.

BB: So, I know that, it seems like all the, all the rangers bring, bring their own sensibilities to their work. Certainly—

JW: Um-hm.

BB: People have different degrees in school, where they had a concentration at a time, they have a personal love for something as well, right?

JW: Right.

BB: So, tell me a little bit about how, tell me your first day of work here as opposed to working, working there. How did, how did that come into, you know, applying for this job—

JW: Yeah.

BB: And, and coming in. And maybe that, maybe it’s not the first day, but maybe a first, a memory that, that’s solidified in your head.

JW: When I worked at Hidden River Cave, for them, I loved going in the cave. Even after work I would get permission for myself and some of the other employees there. We’d just go explore. I mean, we were ones that if you gave us the time and the opportunity, we, we were underground. We were exploring. We were finding new passageways. I’ve even got a passageway in that cave named after me now. So, I mean, we were just finding all kinds of stuff. So, when I wanted to come here and work, I wanted to do the same thing. They offered me a job selling tickets in the ticket office. And they didn’t have any guide opportunities to guide tours, and, that summer, so I took it. I wanted my foot in the door. So, my first two summers working here, we were seasonally summer workers, my first two summers working here, I was in the ticket office selling tickets. By the end of that second summer, Joy Lyons, who was in charge of the, the
guides and, and, and taking care of that part of the, the program here at the park, she come over to me, and she had seen me go into the cave on some training and, and jump right in there and start telling people about animal life and bats and how passageways were formed. And she said, “You know a lot about the cave. Would you like to stop selling tickets and come work with us?” And, I mean, that’s all she had to do was ask. And I was, I was up for the challenge. My first day working here was kind of a shock because working for a small non-profit conservation group you don’t see very many people come through the door on a daily basis, unless it’s a school group, and then you’ve got a busload of kids. And then I started here, and as, as summer was starting, as, June, and you see 5,000 people come through the door, and I’m trying to sell tickets to all of them, and I’m learning the reservation system and how to punch everything up on the computer, and it was either you learn quick or get out of the chair and let somebody else do it. So it was very, I guess, eye-opening, to say the least, just how popular this place was. I mean, I grew up knowing about Mammoth Cave, you know. I, I grew up thirty minutes from here. I know I came up here as a kid on school trips. But I didn’t really remember too much about Mammoth Cave until I was in college and we started studying it again. So, I didn’t realize just how popular this place was. But it didn’t take me long to, to, to fall in love with the place, really. It’s, it’s, this place just gets a hold of me.

BB: When Joy saw that you had, had a knowledge and had a desire to do, to do interpretive work underground—

JW: Right.

BB: Did she, what was that like? Did you, were you, as, as I’m learning, were you trailing? Who were the first people that you worked with? Do you remember some of their, anything you’d like to share about that?

JW: When you, when you start guiding tours, you’re, you’re going to trail tours for a few weeks until you get really comfortable with knowing the stops and hearing what the, the lead ranger—you got a lead ranger that’s guiding the tour, that’s answering all the questions, that’s telling the
stories, telling the history, doing the interpretive program. And then you got a ranger in the back
that’s trailing, so my job the first few weeks here, trailing tours, hearing the questions. Of course,
I already had background in guiding tours, although much smaller groups. So, my biggest thing
was to learn Mammoth Cave history, because I knew cave geology, I knew cave exploration,
animal life, biology. I had, I already had two years background on that. I needed to learn what,
what makes Mammoth Cave different from the other caves. And so—and how to handle the
groups. You’re going from guiding a dozen people at the other cave I used to work at, to now,
120 people on a cave tour. I had to just get used to the crowds. But—

BB: It’s a different way of working then.

JW: It’s a, it’s a different way of working. It’s, it’s, it’s different logistics. But once you’ve,
once you’ve been here a month or two and, and you’ve been doing it on a daily basis, by the end
of that summer, it just seems like it just comes natural. And, to, nowadays, fifteen years later, it
just seems like, just seems like that’s, that’s part of the day.

BB: Right.

JW: Nothing special. (laughs)

BB: Right. So, you have this, this growing body of specialized knowledge and skill that you, that
you create, but—

JW: Um-hm.

BB: Every individual ranger, guide, puts their own sensibility into it and, from what I’ve, I’ve
been told, you have a, you’ve helped Mammoth Cave through, through some specialized skills
that you have, was it, like in photography, or—

JW: Um-hm.
BB: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about how you’ve progressed and how you made, made yourself shine out a little bit. Or how did that, how did that unfold?

JW: Well, I got involved in cave research, which primarily focused on cave exploration. I started working with the survey teams where we’d go in the cave and we’d survey. That gave me the opportunity to see places underground that no one ever gets to go to. Beautiful places. Underground rivers. Gypsum as long as your arm, looks like chandeliers hanging off the, the—I mean just amazing places, but they’re hidden and they’re underground and no one’s ever going to get to see those except for just handful of people. And I thought what better way to show people these beautiful places that I love to go to than to try to photograph them. So, I’ve always loved photography, and I thought, how can I combine that hobby into my job and into some of my research here. So I, I went in the cave and started learning how to take pictures in the dark. (laughs) Setting up flashes with remote sensors and framing pictures underground. But it’s all about the light because you’re basically—it’s, it’s a black canvas. If you, if you think of a painter, they start with a blank, empty canvas. And they have to put the image on it. Photographing in the cave is the same way. You’re starting in a, it’s a, it’s a dark world. There’s absolutely zero light. So it’s how you position the lighting. It’s, it’s the intensity of what you focus on. You—

BB: Yeah, all the lighting is you.

JW: All the light’s me. So, you can take fifteen pictures of the same object in the cave, but if you’ve got the light rearranged in different directions, it looks like fifteen different areas of the cave. And I just love it. It’s a challenge. To me, it’s the challenge. Can I make a good quality photograph of this beautiful place and then bring it above ground and take it and show my friends and my family? And that has bloomed into a, more of a—over the last few years, they’ve used a lot of my photography for the postcards that they sell now in the gift shops. We got a new visitors center, which has all these new exhibits that talk about the cave. And they’ve used a lot
of my images in the exhibit hall. So, I, I’m, I’m just, I’m glad I was able to contribute in that way. It’s, it’s been a lot of fun.

BB: Yeah.

JW: To take something that is a passion, a hobby of yours and then be able to bring that to your job site. And, and then—I’ve had some great supervisors that’s given me the freedom to, to do that as well. I mean, I’m sure a lot of people that work, their supervisors just wouldn’t give them the opportunity, but I’ve been very blessed. I’ve had supervisors that would encourage me and say, “Yes, go do that.” So, it’s worked out great for, for everybody. It’s, it’s benefited the park, the public, me, everyone.

BB: Right. Right. So, was that, was that just a, what it a hobby that you learned? Did you have courses in that or did you just—

JW: I never took a photography course. I, I looked at some things online. If you, you pull up a YouTube video and, and get some pointers and tips, but basically I had to teach myself. I was one of those people that I just went in the cave with my camera and my different flashes, and fortunately I work here at the cave so my supervisors would give me time to go down there and figure it out on my own. I’m—

BB: So you did it on work time a lot, most, a lot of the time?

JW: Or after work. After work. We would do after-hours trips in the cave. We would get special permission to kind of go in the cave after work. I don’t know if they’d want me to do this all the time on the clock, but, but they would allow us time to, you know, they want us to grow and contribute in different ways, whether I’m studying the geology, the signatures in the cave. They knew that I had a passion for photography so they said, “Okay, we’ll allow you to do some research projects with that.” So I had the time. And, and supervisors were very understanding that—this is something that hadn’t been done a whole lot. Everybody comes and their history,
their geology, they’re, they’re doing, dye tracing underground rivers. They’re doing all these different studies, but we really hadn’t, hadn’t had anybody photograph it and record it. If there’s a special event in the park, we had a special concert in the cave last week, you know, special events like that, they’ll let me go in and be the photographer and photograph it. So that, I like doing that.

BB: Is it your own equipment or have they been able to—

JW: Um….

BB: Probably both, a little bit of both?

JW: Most of it was my own equipment. And over the years the park has finally bought some stuff so I can use park equipment now. But I still, I still bring some of my own equipment because that’s what I’m used to. I already know how it works. Hopefully they’ll keep buying more. (laughs)

BB: Right. Is your wife connected in the park? You know, one of the things that I have thought about is, and some of the interviews I do, certainly, it’s just so far, have been no, but some, that’s part of that, the culture. Sometimes there’s family culture and—

JW: Right.

BB: And I think the people I’ve been interviewing most recently are not, are not that way so much. But maybe there, is there a connection to your, your wife or do your children have—or do, if, do you have—

JW: I do have children. Yeah. I get, I got married in ’98 and I, it’s, I now have two children, a daughter that’s eleven, a son that’s eight. And at first no Mammoth Cave connection when we met and got married. My wife is from Georgia. And so, when we got married and she moved up
here, she very quickly learned that Mammoth Cave was a big part of my life. I have a second family up here. The, the fellowship and the, the friendships and the bonds between the co-workers, we, we have this common bond: we just love this place. And, and she quickly saw that. And she has her own career. She works in Bowling Green still today for a CPA, a tax person but she, she did work up here one summer selling tickets in the ticket office for, for cave tours. And she absolutely loved it. And if they would have offered her a permanent full-time job she would have taken it. But it was more of a seasonal hire. There was an illness in the park and they needed somebody to come in and fill that position, and she wanted to. So, she, that summer working up here, she had always heard the stories of the bonds and how great it is and, and she didn’t really understand why, why do I love this place so much, because most people don’t have so much fun or enjoy their job, but it seems like the people at Mammoth Cave do. Once she came up here and worked that summer, even though she was just selling tickets, she, by the end of the summer, she said, “I’ve got it now. You know, this, this, this place is different than any other job I’ve ever had.” And that was seven or eight years ago when she done that, and, and she still, she still remembers, you know, this, of all the jobs she’s ever had, and she enjoys her job now, but she says that place was just, that was a special summer working here.

BB: Well, it’s good for you to have that. Now she has that, that deeper affection—

JW: Yes.

BB: About you and why you have these sensibilities—

JW: And I can come home and tell her stories of what happened at the park and she’s, she understands now. So it’s, it, it helps us out. She’s not a cave person. She’s slightly claustrophobic. She’s been on some caving tours with me and she’s gotten into some crawlways. And she has not liked it so much. You know, start the heavy breathing, the panicking, the get a little nervous. So she’s not much of a tight squeeze and a cave type person. But she also understands how much I love it and so she supports that. She supports that. We’ll go on a, I’ll come up here on a day off work. We’ll have expeditions where we’ll still explore the cave.
We’re still finding new tunnels. And she’s not going to do that with me, but she will prepare a big meal and have it ready because she knows when we come out of the cave, we’re going to be starving. We’re going to be hungry. And so, she’s there to, hey, here, here’s food when you come out of the cave. So she wants to participate in her own way.

BB: That’s good.

JW: Um-hm.

BB: Tell me about some, or share some, if you, if you, if you would, maybe some memorable thoughts about, others have been sharing memorable thoughts about, maybe a, a visitor, somebody on a cave tour. Good, bad, scary, you know. Maybe even like a rescue, or something that —

JW: Um-hm.

BB: That really influenced you or made you, made you think more about your job or…

JW: Um…. I guess a good story, you, you want to take people in the cave and pass information on to them, and you, you hope that that will stick with them. That maybe it will make them appreciate the cave a little bit better. But you really, you know, you, you don’t really know sometimes if you’re really connecting with the audience. But early on in my career I learned very quickly, I had a young child on my tour. And this kid was on the trip. And he must have been only six or seven years old, you know, somewhere around that range. And he had never been to Mammoth Cave before. I think his family was from Michigan and they were on their way to Florida for vacation, so they stopped, they took a cave tour. That’s very common. And, and they were walking right up front with me the whole time. And, and I’m telling the stories and when we, when we come out of the cave, he—well, when we, when we walked into the first big room, the rotunda room, and I turned on the lights, I heard the kid, “Wow!” You know, just, “Oh my goodness!” You know, so, I knew that that was a moment for him, you know. Maybe he’ll
remember that. Just how massive and huge when you flip the lights on and there’s a half-acre room. But after the tour, after the two hour tour, we come out of the cave and he, he’s just, he’s going on and on and on, telling his dad, “Did you hear the story about the, about the salamanders that live in the cave? Did you hear the story about the slaves that used to work here?” I mean, he’s trying to repeat my tour to his parents, and they were just all on my tour. And, and then a few years later, you know, you, you may hear these people come back through here again. We come back and we had such a great time that we wanted to come back a couple of years later. And so, it’s those moments that I realize, hey, I, I am, I’m, I had a “Wow!” moment for that kid. And I hear people say, “I was here forty years ago as a child, and I remembered Mammoth Cave. And now I’m bringing my children here.” Hopefully that kid had that “Wow!” moment here and years from now he’ll be bringing his children. So, you know, he had one of those moments on a vacation, hopefully that will last with him. And I got to be a part of that. And to think that I got to share a, a family memory for that family that I don’t even know. That’s, that’s awesome. To me, that’s just, that’s amazing.

BB: Absolutely. That’s great. How about your, your job? You were telling me about how you progressed in your job and you’ve been given free rein to do some things and explore your—

JW: Um-hm.

BB: Explore your set-, your professional desire to help share images and that sort of thing.

JW: Yeah.

BB: Where’s it going, I mean, where, where are you at now—it looks, the new visitor center, sounds like—

JW: Um-hm.

BB: There’s been postcards and there’s also some of your images that are used.
JW: Yeah.

BB: Is, are you, do you still feel, I know you love this place and, and, and love all about, you know, your colleagues and everything—but is there, is it progressing in that same way today or….

JW: As far as my photography here, I, I want it to continue. I don’t know, we, we just finished that big project with the new visitors center. A visitors center and all the exhibits and they were able to incorporate a lot of my images in that. We don’t have any current projects that I can really use my photography for. I know they’re doing some more postcards and I may be involved in that. But I guess really my photography, I’m just going to continue each summer to try to take a few images every summer that I can. And time is limited. I’m not able to go in the cave, you know, as, as much. We, we don’t have, you know, it’s just we’ve, we’ve gotten a little tighter with, with budgets and everything, so, if I’m in the cave, I’m usually with visitors doing tours. Or, or I’m here participating in an on-going expedition. And some of the expeditions, you just can’t drag all that equipment into the cave. It, it would get ruined. So, I’m, right now, I just, I’m waiting for opportunities. I’m waiting for opportunities.

BB: Is the, you’re talking about exploring caves, is that connected to what some others have talked about, like, the Cave Research Foundation, or is that, or is that internal—

JW: No.

BB: Is that an internal business with the [ ]—

JW: The, I’m, I’m a member of the Cave Research Foundation. And it’s a separate group but the Mammoth Cave National Park and the Cave Research Foundation, we, we partnership together. And that partnership allows, since I’m an employee here, it allowed me to join that group and start participating on their expeditions. I already had knowledge of the cave. After you’ve been
here several years and been on several training trips and educational trips and all the research we do, we know passageways off the main trails and if you know the cave, they want you to be involved in that research because you’re there day in and day out. I mean, there’s, so, I, I guess about ten years ago I joined the Cave Research Foundation. And, and they do a lot of survey work. They go in the cave with compasses and tape measures and they’re mapping and measuring and documenting all the new tunnels and crawlways and river systems and anything you can think of. It is a research organization, but it has to be, it has to be my time off work here. Their expeditions are usually held during holiday weekends. A holiday weekend, people have time off work. They can all gather together, do their expedition, go back to their other jobs. I mean, there’s, there’s park rangers involved with this. There’s school teachers involved with this. Computer programmers, gas station owners. It’s just, it, and it’s a way to meet new friends that have a common passion with Mammoth Cave. And it also helps me with my interpretive programs. When I’m doing cave tours, you get a lot of questions about how do they explore the cave. Well, now that I have participated in that activity, I have that firsthand knowledge and I can tell them, “Yes, you know, cave exploring is, it is dangerous.” “Do you have to wear wet suits in rivers?” “Yes, we do. It’s, it’s cold water.” So, that’s something I love to do. If, if, and we do that as volunteers. We don’t get paid for that. And if I don’t work here at Mammoth Cave, I will still come back and participate in those because it’s something that I absolutely love to do.

(Background noise) Sorry.

BB: Tell me about the guide force.

JW: The guide force? That’s—

BB: Who is that? I heard that used the other day.

JW: We—the, the vision of interpretation here at Mammoth Cave. We are the, us that lead cave tours, we just call ourselves the guide force instead of cave guides or tour guides or, or park guides. We just refer to ourselves as, as a guide force. And I, it’s, it’s kind of like a second family if you will, because we, we bond together throughout the summer. We do hire a lot of
new people that will come in and help us during two or three months out of the year when we’re busy. So we do, we train these people. We love telling people about the cave. So if, if you work with us one summer my passion, hopefully, if, if there’s stories I can tell you and you can use that to tell the, the public, you know, we, we help each other out. We encourage, I’ve never worked at a place where everybody wanted everybody else to grow and get better at what they did. You know, you work in some businesses and there’s those people that are just out for themselves and those people that like to complain about everything. Here, it’s just, we, we, we want everybody to do the best job they can do. And we enjoy what we do. I mean, we’re working in a national park. People want to go on vacation where we get to come and, and work, so, we, we form a bond with one another. The guide force is just a second family. When we get off work, sometimes we’ll just, we’ll all go out to eat together. We’ll all go play volleyball in the summertime after work. So, we really do kind of stick together. And if one of us gets sick, we, we help each other out. If, you know, you, you, before the interview, you heard one of them come in and start talking about the family, you know. We, we talk about family, help each other out.

BB: Right. Yeah. Or if they’re sick and they’re not feeling well, you do their cave tour.

JW: Yeah, yeah. If, if one of them’s not feeling well, I’ll do the tour for them because I know that, I know there’s days when I have a bad day and, and, and they’ve got my back. So we really help each other out.

BB: Yeah. It must be fun watching these seasonals who might have a desire to, you know, if there was ever an opening, to go to full-time. And to see their passion and to maybe help it, help it grow or, you know, do you have a special way you work with somebody or identify somebody who seems to have the same passion you did—do have and did have?

JW: You, yeah, you, when new people come here each summer, and they go through a couple weeks of training and then they start out trailing tours, just the same way I did. And, and they’re nervous, and they may be, “Can I do this? Man, there’s thousands of people here.” And you,
they, they’re wide-eyed. They get overwhelmed, you know. They’re like, “Man, this is the national park. Thousands of people. Can I handle this?” And then, by the end of the summer, you, you see that transformation take place to the young wide-eyed person, “What have I gotten myself into?” to the end of the summer saying, “This was absolutely a blast. This is the greatest thing that I’ve done, summer-wise, you know. This is the best summer job that I could ever have.” I see that because it happened to me. I went through it. I saw my wife go through it. And, and, and you still see the people do it—once they’ve been here a month, you can tell if, if it’s, we, we always say they got caught—they got bit by the cave bug and caught cave fever. That’s, that’s the way I always say. You got bit by the bug. And some people, you know, we’ve got our own little sayings among the guide force. We’ll say you’ve been bitten by the bug or you’ve got cave mud in your blood. You, you know, just the, it becomes a part of you.

BB: Yeah. And where do you live now?


BB: Oh, okay.

JW: It takes me thirty-five minutes to drive in each morning. Um-hm.

BB: So, if, when you retire someday, you’ll still be connected to the park probably, most likely.

JW: Most likely. You know, and one aspect, you know, it’s a job. I have to provide for my family. But in another aspect, it’s, it’s very close to the place I grew up. And I get to share all the history of this area with the rest of the world. And again, I have that passion for exploring. Like I said, as a kid growing up I wanted to hike, I wanted to go camping, I wanted to explore out in the woods. I get to do that everyday at work. So, you know, my career here has just been, again, to me, of course, I’m a man of faith also. I just feel like I’ve been blessed, that I, I’ve been blessed because I still get to do what I loved as a kid. You, you grow professionally and you learn how to professionally tell the stories and interpret it where it connects with other people where, I can tell
them about Mammoth Cave as being the longest cave in the world. Well so what? What’s that mean to somebody from China? So I got to make that connect to them: well, here’s why that’s important. So, you have to grow professionally and be able to make those stories seem relevant to the public. And hopefully they’ll go home with that passion and appreciation too.

BB: Do you have any other things you wanted to get across to me when you’re thinking about, okay, I’m going to go and have an interview here and...

JW: Well, (laughs) um… I, you mentioned stories, good, bad…. 

BB: Yeah. I would love to hear any of those kinds of things.

JW: You know, we, guiding tours, you never know what questions you’re going to get asked, so you’ve always got to be on your toes. And it’s something that park rangers, no matter if you’re at Mammoth Cave, the Grand Canyon, Everglades, the, you know, you always have those questions that people ask. And you’re like, “Aw, you wouldn’t believe what I got asked today.” So you’ll be in the middle of, my train of thought is talking to them about a certain part of the cave, and then out of the blue, someone will ask, “Is all this cave underground?” You, and, and you’ve got to, okay, you know, well, you’ve got to answer it without making that person feel beneath you, or something like that. You, there’s, there’s, there’s animals that live in the cave that have no eyes. And we’ve been asked, “Well, if they don’t have any eyes, how do we really know they’re there, if they can’t see?” So, we, we get those questions, and, and we have to be very diplomatic in the way we answer it, you know. I, I work for the government. I can’t just say, “What kind of crazy question was that?” That’s what I’m thinking, but hourly, we’re like, well, we’ve been in the cave and we’ve observed them. You know, we, (laughs) so, you, you always get a question that may just throw you off into left field somewhere. So, crazy questions sometimes. Sometimes I will get people in the cave that just freak out, totally claustrophobic, got to get out of the cave. Enough that it makes them sick at their stomach and everything else, and you got to handle those situations. I talked—
BB: What’s the process? Does the trailer take them out?

JW: Yes. (laughs) Mostly. It, you know, each situation is different. I mean, if you’re near the entrance of the cave and they’re going to freak out going in, you just quickly get them back out. You, you start talking to them about where are you from, why are you on vacation, do you have family? You try to distract them so they’re not thinking, I’m underground, how many tons of rock is over top of my head? So, you, you learn little tricks to distract them, but if you’re deep, deep in the cave, and then you have a problem, you know, little Johnny has to go number two, oh, no, you know. Sometimes, they have an accident and then you’ve got to deal with that. And, and, you know, you deal with it the best way you can. And then at the end of the year, the guide force, the little family, we have our own little picnic at the end of the year. We’ll give somebody a little plastic shovel and say, “You get the pooper-scooper award at the end of the year.” We just kind of tease each other at the end of the year. Here’s what, here’s what ranger so-and-so had to deal with on his cave tour. Or a, a rookie, a new person, their first tour they led, they turned and went down the wrong passageway and couldn’t find the light switch because there wasn’t one, you know. So luckily, I never did that. I’ve, I’ve never gotten lost in the cave, but I have, I have been with rangers, I’ve been trailing rangers before that started to turn and I would yell ahead, say, “Why don’t you show them the passageway over here. This would be a great tour to see this tunnel.” And they’ll be like, “Oh, yeah, let’s, let’s do that one instead.” As a way not to tell the people, your ranger doesn’t have a clue what they’re doing. I will tell this one funny story that I was a part of. A little background, there was a Native American body discovered in the cave back in the 1930s. It was a completely mummified, just dehydrated body. And it made major news and kind of put Mammoth Cave on the map. And they nicknamed him “Lost John.” He was a prehistoric Native American. Torch sticks, scraping gypsum minerals, gourd bowls, you know. I guess collecting salt in the cave. So, this body was discovered and it was on display for many years. And then eventually they decided, we can’t show human remains on a tour. And, and national parks don’t show human remains anywhere anymore. So, he was taken back in the cave and kind of, not reburied, but he was placed back in the cave in a place that I don’t even know about today. They won’t tell us where this is. But a few summers ago, I was working with a ranger, and this was a new ranger, he was a seasonal, and his great grandfather was the person
who discovered the body in the ‘30s. And when the body was taken off display and placed back in the cave for safe-keeping, it was his grandfather who placed him back. So, the, this ranger’s leading a trip, one of his first trips in the cave. I’m trailing. I’m kind of helping him along. And he, he stops in the cave. And he starts telling this story about, “My great grandfather found a body down here.” And he had them in the palm of his hand. I mean, he’s, he’s telling this first, you know, a personal account. This is my family, my great grandfather actually discovered a body and talks about how his grandfather actually took the body back. And so, his family has had ties with this amazing discovery. Well, something you’ve got to know about the body is the body still had skin, fingernails, hair. In its stomach, it still had hickory nuts preserved in his stomach. So, he’s up on this rock that he climbed up, and he was up on this rock, and he was talking to the group, and this was a sold out tour in the middle of the summer, 120 people. He turns out all the lights, lights a lantern, and by the glow of that lantern, he’s telling them this story of what his great grandfather and grandfather did. And I mean, you could have heard a pin drop in there. Amazing. And I’m thinking, wow, he’s really, he’s got them. You know, he’s, he knows what he’s doing. And he was going to tell them how well preserved this body was, and he, and you know, I said he still had hair and skin and fingernails. In his stomach was hickory nuts, still preserved in his stomach. Well, something every ranger does in their career is slip up a little bit. And he’s telling this great story. He’s got everybody’s attention. You could hear a pin drop in the cave, and he says, “You know, and this body was so well preserved, it still, he still had his hair and his skin and nuts.” And there was a pause. And people kind of chuckled. And he said, “What did I just say?” And a little old lady in the crowd said, “You said he still had his nuts.” A hundred and twenty people starts bursting out laughing. I’m, I, I had, I lost it too. We’re all laughing. And of course, the ranger telling the story, he was just like, “Well, I guess he probably had those as well.” You know, and just trying to, but I mean, the roar probably could have been heard a mile away in the cave. I, people were laughing so hard they were crying, tears, I mean. And, and of course, at the end of the tour, of course, everybody’s going to go home remembering that story, remembering their trip to Mammoth Cave. But you know, sometimes we, sometimes we mess up. You know, we’ll talk about Native Americans, they have grass-woven slippers. Sometimes, we, instead of saying grass slippers, we’ll say the glass slippers that they wore. You know, every once in a while we’ll have a little tongue-twister come out and
instead of saying the cave is four hundred miles long, we’ll say, “This cave is over four hundred feet long.” And, we, we just get our terminology mixed up sometimes. So, those are the days where you got to just, yeah, I, I messed up, it’s, this is what happened. That’s part of the job. And we, we have to laugh it off instead of getting upset about it.

BB: Yeah.

JW: But that’s, that’s, that was probably one of the funniest moments in the cave where a whole tour just instantly lost it. And in a good way. I mean, they kind of knew, you know, he, he corrected what he said later. But, oh, man, we still laugh about that today in, in among the guides here. We, remember that time they told them that story.

BB: Well, you had them in the palm of your hand.

JW: Oh, yeah.

BB: The silence and that. But you also had that levity that, that, like everybody came together by laughing as well.

JW: They did.

BB: So it was all a good thing.

JW: Everyone come together and, like I said, these people are on vacation, and, and they’re there to enjoy the cave and learn about it. And boy, they did that day. (laughs)

BB: That’s a great story. You got one to tell on yourself or not?

JW: I’ll, I’ll tell a scary story—well—one of the most exciting trips I ever took in the cave also became one of the most scary trips I ever took in the cave. The guide force, our supervisors
encourage us to learn about the cave. They really want us to, to know what we’re talking about. If we’re going to tell stories about there used to be boat rides in Mammoth Cave, they don’t want us to just, “Well, I heard there used to be boat rides.” They want us to research it. They want us to know about it. So, at the end of work one day we had filled out all the paperwork and documents and got the superintendent and everybody to sign off. There was about a dozen of us put on wetsuits and we were going to go down to the old boat dock. And we had wetsuits and some of us had little inner tube floaty devices, and we were going to, we were going to retrace the old river route and look at the old boat dock. There was an old boat that was sunk in the water. We were going to see this old historic boat underwater for over a hundred years. And so, they allowed us to do this research trip. So, I mean, that was a blast. We went all the way down to the river, you know, we’re chest deep in the water. I mean, we’re thinking, man, here I am, I’m swimming in Mammoth Cave. I’m, I’m, I’m retracing the steps that you read about, the old explorers, the pre-Civil War days people were going down and doing this. So, we’re getting to experience that. And there’s a stretch that’s probably a hundred yards long where you can’t touch the bottom. You’re swimming it. And some people had floats and devices and innertubes and little, little floaties that we had brought with us. I was in a wetsuit. I was wearing a cave helmet, with the lights. That’s the only light you got down there. So you’re in this black water. And I can’t touch the bottom. But I’m a good swimmer. So I’m swimming along and everybody’s just whooping and hollering. Everybody that yells, it just echoes. Just bounces off the water, bounces off the rocks. It was a, it was a great experience until I started getting tired swimming. And I was wearing big leather hiking boots that had soaked and filled up with water. And so it felt like my feet were weighing fifty pounds apiece. And I’m trucking along and others getting pretty far ahead of me. I can see they’re reaching the end, and they’re standing up and they’re walking. And I’m thinking, man, I, I don’t know if I can hold myself up much longer. I said, “Surely I’m at the end.” And I try to touch the bottom. And I blub, blub, and I come back up, and I’m like, I can’t touch the bottom, and I can’t swim no more. My arms are, are dead. And I’m thinking, oh, no, here I am in the famous Echo River in Mammoth Cave, and, and I’m, I’m going to go under. And I, that’s the one time I, I felt a moment of panic. I felt a moment of panic. And I, I reached for the wall. The wall’s straight up and down and just little nodules off the wall. I just clinged to them and held onto them for a moment and just, I caught my breath, and, for about
twenty seconds just let my arms rest, catch my breath, and I said, “Okay, I’ve got, I’ve got my breath. Let’s go the rest of the way.” And I took off. And after I went probably another ten or fifteen yards, my boots and everything, it was just weighing me down. And a friend of mine, he’s paddling by in his innertube, just happy as you can be, and as I was getting ready to go under, I just reached over and put my arm around him and I said, “Drag me on across.” And he said, “What?” And I said, “Go.” You know, I was out of breath. I just said, “Go.” And he paddled another, eh, we probably only paddled another ten or fifteen feet, and I was walking on the floor again. You know, I was back to where I could stand and walk. I didn’t know that, but that was the scariest moment, you know, in water, getting ready to go under. I mean, we’re having a blast. We’re having so much fun. And…

BB: But it turned quickly there.

JW: And when we come back through, I had a floatie. I had a, I had a float device. And I mean, we all just had so much fun. I say we had fun, but that was an experience where, for the next month on cave tours, any time someone asked about, “They used to have boat rides. What is the river like?” I, you know, I could tell them, there’s places where the water’s over your head. There’s, it’s, it’s thirty feet wide, over ten feet deep, it echoes the sounds. I mean, I was able to use that as an interpretive moment now, for my, for my tours. So, and that’s why our supervisors allow us to do research is because we come back and we just grow in knowledge and of course you talk about a bonding experience with your co-workers too. I mean, you, that’s a bonding experience. Yeah.

BB: That’s a great story.

JW: Yeah.

BB: That’s a great story. You’re a good storyteller.

JW: Well, thank you.
BB: You’re an interpreter.

JW: I’m an interpreter. We like to talk.

BB: That’s great.

JW: Which is amazing, because I will say this. Growing up I was a shy kid. I did not like to talk. I hated getting up in front of groups of people. I, I’m still kind of nervous when I do that at, at church or something like that. But it seems like when I do the cave tour, you’re on my turf now. This is my cave, I feel like this is my cave and we can have a group of two hundred people. I, I was the MC of a, the Cave Sing a few years ago that we had, had five hundred people there. I was not nervous at all. But if I went to Western Kentucky and had to talk to an auditorium full of fifty people about Mammoth Cave, I might get a little nervous because I’m out of my element. But I feel like this is my element. This is my place now. So, I feel at home here.

BB: That’s great. Anything else you want to share?

JW: Well…I, I, I don’t know. The, the other, the, I guess the other best part of my job is a lot of the interpretive tours that we offer, we offer a crawling tour, called the Wild Cave Tour. It’s six and a half hours long, we dress up visitors with helmets and lights and coveralls and, and we get to give them a little taste of what a true explorer has to go through. That by far is, is my favorite tour to lead and see people that have never been in a cave or never done that. You talk about, we talk about people coming to work here, they’re wide-eyed and they’re new. But by the end of the summer, they’ve got, they’ve been bitten by that bug and they’ve caught the fever. You can see that on a six hour tour with just a visitor. You know, you see that growth. You see them start to trust you. Yes, I, I know there’s a ten foot drop where you walk this ledge. And I show them where to hold on to. And they don’t know me, I don’t know them. But in those six hours, we bond. And that little small group that we take in the cave, by the end of the tour, I mean, people are exchanging email addresses and, and some of the visitors, you’ll have one family meet
another family on that tour, and they’re all going out to eat together, or they’re talking about their trip, or they’re, they’re sharing photos that they took. To me, I, that’s one of the best things about this, about working here, is, is we can get to give them an experience that they will remember for years down the road. And, and you get to see them bond there for the, for that day. For that day, this was my little group, this was my little family that I got to be with in the cave. So that’s, that’s my favorite tour. It’s not for everybody. It’s not for my wife or for anybody that’s claustrophobic. But I, I, you know, when people take that tour, they never come out of the cave saying they didn’t get their money’s worth, they didn’t have a good—you know, they’re always, you know, just like, “I can’t believe we got to do that.” And I think that’s what it’s all about. That’s what it’s all about.

BB: Is that available all the time?

JW: It’s, that tour’s only available during the summer. Spring, summer, early fall, it doesn’t run in the wintertime. It might run around Christmas-time, during, on the weekend. So, it’s, it’s not a year-round thing. It’s a specialty tour. It runs every day of the week during the summer. And usually in spring and fall they’ll start cutting it back to weekends only. And then, wintertime, it won’t run much at all. So…

BB: Based on visitor numbers?

JW: Based on visitor numbers. A little bit of it’s based on budget, you know. We have a lot of employees that go home for the winter. They don’t come back til summer. Some of those are trained to do that tour particularly. So, some of it’s we just don’t have anybody to do that tour in the winter. We’ve got a group of permanent employees, and I’m the only permanent employee that still leads that tour. And then if we train new people to lead that tour, I’m the one that trains them. I, my supervisor knows that I’ve been doing it so long, and also I’m a member of the Cave Research Foundation which we, we do that professionally, even though it’s unpaid professional work. So they, I think that’s why it’s my favorite tour. Again, it all goes back to that childhood passion of exploring and, and just being able to see new areas.
BB: That’s great. Yeah.

JW: There’s, there’s nothing like working at Mammoth Cave. I’ve had jobs, I’ve worked at toy stores, and I’ve done landscaping and mowed yards, and I’ve worked at hardware stores, and I’ve done mechanical work. By far, this is, this, this is a job that’s been like any other. I love it. I love it.

[End of interview]