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Interview with Chuck DeCroix (FA 1098)

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Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription

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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.

[00:00:03]
[setting up mic and preliminary talk]

[00:00:10]
BB: It's December 5th, 2013. I'm Brent Bjorkman. I'm with KFP [Kentucky Folklife Program], directing that, and I'm here at Mammoth Cave National Park working on a Library of Congress/American Folklife Center project about the working culture of park rangers. And I'm here with several park rangers over the next few weeks, talking to them about work. I'm here with Chuck DeCroix. Chuck, you want to just say your name and talk about what you do here at the park? And then maybe we can go into how you got connected to the park, and the origin story.

[00:00:54]
CD: yes, my name is Chuck DeCroix and I'm a Park Ranger here at Mammoth Cave National Park. I've been working here since the spring of 1990, and the way I came to Mammoth Cave: back in those days you could only apply to two national parks in the country for summer work. And so I looked at the list of parks that were in my area, because I'm originally from Illinois, and I decided to choose Mammoth Cave National Park and Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. And I was fortunate that, in the spring of 1990 they called from Mammoth Cave. I'd actually never been here before, so when I arrived to work, it was my first experience ever coming into Mammoth Cave National Park. I was just- I remember being overwhelmed by the beauty of the park, because I left from southern Illinois where I went to College at Carbondale- the Salukis-, and it's about a 4 1/2 hour drive. And I just remember when I hit that park boundary and I saw that brown sign, just how overwhelmed I was with the beauty of the park. And I thought this was a good choice. It kinda felt like home, even from that first moment.

[00:02:08]
BB: Did you grow up doing camping or doing outdoor things with family? Or just exploring on your own?

CD: Yeah, my dad and grandfather were both avid hunters and fisherman, and we would go hunting morel mushrooms- what they call 'dry land fish' here in Kentucky. So I always had this connection with nature from an early age. But I really didn't consider being a Park Ranger until I had already been in college for almost 2 years, studying electrical engineering. I realized that that was not for me, and I had to switch to something. There was a guy in our dorm floor who was studying forestry. He always seemed to be the happiest guy on the floor- always in a good mood, and I talked with him about what he was studying. And I was like, “well I've always enjoyed the outdoors”, so I decided to pursue a career in forestry at that point.

BB: So that's your degree...

CD: Yeah, I have a bachelor's of science in forestry.

[00:03:04]
BB: So what was this first- when you got hired here for the first time- seasonal position?

CD: Yes.

BB: So tell me a little bit about that first position and maybe your first recollections about... you seem like you really knew it was the place for you, seeing the brown sign... but tell me a little more about that first time here.
CD: Yeah, my job was in interpretation, so I knew I'd be guiding cave tours, I'd be leading nature hikes. And that was a little bit intimidating, because I had had a formal interpretation class in college, but I had never done interpretation. And, it's funny, I remember when they called me on the phone, I asked if there were any jobs in the campground- something I could do along those lines. And they said, “No, you're going to be leading these cave tours.” So once we got into the training, I remember, very early into the training, they took us on a cave tour. It was the historic cave tour. And I can remember just how overwhelmed I seemed on that first tour, because it's such a big cave and the ranger who was leading the tour was excellent, and they were so professional- they knew all the history, all the years, all the science. And the cave, to me, was very confusing. All the twists and the turns, and I remember arriving at Mammoth Dome at the end of the tour thinking “I'm not going to be able to do this! This is a difficult job! To learn all this information”... but when I talked with other people they said “don't worry, it gets much easier.” So it was a little intimidating at the very beginning, but I quickly got it all down.

[00:04:43]

BB: Do you remember who the first people were that you were trailing, or who were the people that were leading that tour?

CD: Yeah, that tour was actually led by a good friend of mine Paul Brock, and he was originally from the Cleveland Ohio area and his family had moved down here and we became good friends. The first person I saw, when I drove in that first day, was a ranger at the desk named Leslie Mosely [sp]. I just remember how friendly she was and how professional she looked in the uniform. We're still good friends to this day, although she hasn't worked here in probably 20 years. So yeah, the people I met welcomed me in. And me being from Illinois, I guess technically a 'yankee' to some of the southern crowd here, that made me feel real good. I've always felt perfectly welcomed in KY.

[00:05:38]

BB: Some people have commented on the cultural structure of this park and that it's different than some of the other ones they've worked at. And I know that maybe you don't have that experience- you haven't worked all over the country, but talk to me a little more about what you alluded to, the “I was a yankee but they welcomed me here”. What is the culture like around Mammoth Cave, historical? Is it generational, people working here, you know?...

CD: That's kind of a tough one...a lot of the people who were established here were locals and were people that had grown up and had connections with the cave as maybe a student. They came here on their class trips and they grew up in this area and they knew the region. Where to me, everything was brand new. And so, I think to be welcomed in and accepted by those people- they kind of steered me in the right direction, and befriended me, and that seemed to make a big difference. Culturally, it wasn't too different from Illinois. You know, the same types of foods. Maybe certain phrases or the way you say a word might be a little different, but, pretty similar.

[00:06:52]

BB: Some of the people I have talked to this week, they either were coming at this as a summer job from a different job, or they're from around here. But I think one of the things we talked about when you were helping me set up some of these interviews, was the fact that you came here, you weren't married at the time, and I haven't heard that very much about - I don't know what it's called-seasonal housing?

CD: Yes
BB: I think that's a very interesting thing- there's a lot of different dynamics, and I think that's important to get on the record, in any way you'd like to show it.

CD: To me, it reminded me of college. Because I had just graduated college in the spring of '89 and I came to work here in the spring of '90. And for people coming to work from out of state, like myself, they had quarters available for you to rent, and they would deduct it from your paycheck, and it's called seasonal quarters. Typically you have a roommate, so it's kind of like college; at some point you're going to have to room with somebody. I think the maximum number over there is 24, so there's 24 people living in the seasonal quarters. And there was a volleyball court set up, and horseshoe pits, and they'd have barbeques and parties, and there was a really nice social atmosphere. Maybe on a Monday night they'd have a volleyball night, and people from all divisions of the park would come over after work and they'd cook out and have a good time. So that was a fun part of the experience. There's other young people like yourself, and older people lived over there as well, but everybody seemed to get along really well. We'd have socializing events, and there'd be summer romances, and all that stuff that goes on.

[00:08:39]
BB: Sounds a bit like college...So did supervisors stay away from that and that was kinda your place, or what?

CD: (laughing) Yeah, it's funny, because the stories that you hear throughout the years are kind of the same. Quiet hours were supposed to be about 10 pm, but it's kind of hard to keep a party down, so typically someone from law enforcement might have to come in and tell everybody to keep it quiet. But yeah, to a certain extent, I think they knew what the young people were doing over there and they kind of kept away, if they could.

[00:09:20]
BB: Some of things we talk about as folklorists are some of the traditions, the lore, the sayings. One of the things that Jackie said to me was the first one, and then it started coming out more that you get “bitten by the cave bug” and those kinds of things. There's some kind of language, or sayings, that you could share, that are very much Mammoth Cave. Maybe some of the words for some of the tools you use...

CD: hmmmmm... I can think on it. Maybe something will come up. Phrases, you mean?

BB: We can come back to that. So this job, I've talked to a lot of people, and their jobs have progressed in different ways, and it seems that the management and administration of the park-and especially this park;-they play on people's strengths.

CD: Sure

BB: Jackie is photography-that sort of thing. Helping you gain, or reach the height...Tell me about the progression of you. You mentioned little bit about that first interpretive summer... That was many summers ago, now. Tell me about your trajectory through this organization, and how that's worked.

[00:10:49]
CD: Starting out as a seasonal we're all very limited as to how long we can work in a park. So I worked here spring, summer, and fall, and then I got a phone call from Indiana Dunes Lakeshore, my other summer job I had applied for, and they were able to hire me for a winter position off of that register. So I did get to go to work there that winter. And once I got away and went to a different park, I found it was very similar. And I kind of fell in love with the resource up there...the same kind of camaraderie with the
park rangers I was working with. But I really began to miss Mammoth Cave. There was something about it: it really felt like home, even from that first summer. I missed the cave itself - the resource, the ability to go in to the cave and feel that cold air. I had already begun to get in to a little bit of the exploration of the cave and going on some of the after-hours cave trips that we get to do. And so there were a lot of passageways I hadn't seen yet, and I really wanted to be able to come back. After my winter at the Indiana Dunes, I came back for another spring, summer, fall, at Mammoth Cave. And I found that each time I came back, the more secrets were kind of unlocking themselves within the cave. I guess my main interest began with the history of cave exploration - that's something I've been fascinated with over my career. And each time I would go to work at another winter park, again, missing the cave, I would be really anxious to come back. I think I did my seasonal work for about 5 years total. For 3 winters I would go to the everglades in South Florida and work there as a park ranger. And again, develop the same bond with the resource. I mean, the Everglades are so beautiful, but each time wanting to come back to Mammoth. And I think after 5 years of moving around the country, it dawned on me that this really was my home, and I was getting to the point where I didn't feel like I needed to keep travelling and that I would probably be better here at Mammoth Cave to maybe make a difference with the research I was working on, and doing the interpretation for the public.

BB: The historical interest- did you have other coworkers that, and I’m thinking of Joy Lyons, for instance...I was thinking, you have close bonds with different people but, how do you balance that enlightenment and vitality off of one another? Is that something that happens?

CD: Yeah. And Joy, as you mention, she really encouraged us. She has always been an advocate of original research, you know, “don’t just say what the other guides are saying on their tours: dig through the vertical files, do original research, come up with something different, something that you’re interested in, and incorporate that”. I think when she chose her staff, she looked at different strengths. Everyone had particular interests and she was really good about pulling people in and then letting you do what you were most passionate about. And with me, it was a lot of the original research with the exploration of the cave - some of the old cave maps...that was a lot of fun.

BB: Was that done on work time?

CD: Some of it was done on work time, but most of it, typically, volunteer time. All of the after-hours trips that we do, that’s all done on our own time, our free time, and a lot of my trips to the Kentucky Library were on my days off. Something you do; you just get into it. I compare it to homework: there’s only so much you can do in class, at school, and some things you just have to do on your own. I don’t know if that’s true in a lot of professions, where people dedicate their free time to things that are work related, but I think that shows how much the employees love Mammoth Cave, and fall in love with this great resource.

BB: I know that you’re married and, from what I understand, it’s a relationship that didn’t happen here, but I guess I was curious, with that said, how does your wife and your son and daughter- how have they learned about this and have they embraced it? Is it something that you have brought them in to?

CD: Well, actually there is a Mammoth Cave connection. The first time we met was over at the Mammoth Cave Hotel and, it’s funny, you think about the Mammoth Cave romances, you hear a lot of these connections where people that get married had something to do with Mammoth Cave. It was kind-of a blind date, actually. I was aware that she was coming and a friend of ours who had also worked at
Mammoth Cave had kind of told me that “there's this girl, Wendy, and she's single, and I think you guys would be good together.” So we met with a large group for a meal at the Mammoth Cave Hotel. And I thought that they had told her that “there's this guy Chuck, and we think that he'd be good for you,” but they didn't. [laughs] So it was kind-of a set up for her, but I had a little idea what was happening. We didn't get a whole lot of time to talk, but we did meet at the Mammoth Cave Hotel, and we started dating a short time after that. She works at Western Kentucky University in the Dept. of Geography and Geology, so she has connections with a lot of the people that have worked at Mammoth Cave. A lot of our early dates were spent out here hiking on the trails, and I remember we took both kids on a personal crawling tour that I took just the family. We were with our helmets and lights, crawling through, and we still have some of those framed pictures on the wall in our house. It's fun to look back at those.

[00:16:54]

CD: I guess another connection with Mammoth Cave is that I decided to propose to Wendy inside the historic entrance. We had been on a hike where we were watching the sun go down on one of the trails, you know, all very romantic. I had a bottle of wine and I had some cheese and crackers, and I had it all set up so well. And just about the time I think she thought I was going to ask the question I said “well, it's getting late, maybe we should head back to the house.” And she's like “okay,” but my plan was that, as we hiked back up the trail, then there was the historic entrance. And so we walked down the steps at the base of the waterfall, and you know, the nice cool breeze, and that's when I pulled the ring out and asked her if she would marry me. And thankfully she said yes.

BB: Very nice. How long have you been married?

CD: This makes about 8 years now. So we dated a couple years, and then going on 8 years coming up next April.

BB: That's great.

CD: I think there's a lot of those connections with people that met their spouses or future spouses at Mammoth Cave. You might catch that throughout your interviews.

[00:18:02]

BB: You've continued to be a real resource to me, and one of the things that I've been really grateful for, is that you have a love, and you've actually conducted some oral histories.

CD: Yes.

BB: You see the importance of primary research. I'm really interested, and I'd love to get for the record, some of the stuff you have done.

CD: A lot of it started probably in the early 90's. Maybe '91 or '92, when I was selected to lead the Wild Cave Tour. That's our 6 1/2 hour crawling trip, where the guides and the visitors wear helmets, lights, knee pads. We cover maybe 5 or 6 miles in the cave over a 6 1/2 hour time frame. And it's a blast. I mean, if anyone's into crawling and climbing and seeing parts of the cave off of the trail- it's great. A lot of the cave passageways we utilized an old historic map called the Kemper [sp] map. This was a map that was drawn in 1908 by this young man from Berlin, Germany, named Max Kemper. And we had copies of the map; it had been reproduced and it was being sold, but there were so many passageway names on his maps that were unknown, and a lot of those were featured on our Wild Cave Tour. So, example: on our wild cave tour we go through a place called "Becky's Alley" and that adjoins another passageway called
"Lida's Pass" but no one could tell me who Becky was or who Lida was. So over the years as I'm going through the cave, looking in these passageways; there's a lot of signatures. Back before Mammoth Cave became a national park, visitors were allowed to write their name, explorers could leave their mark on the wall as a testament to maybe when they found the passageway, or just to leave their mark. I noticed that I was finding the names of Becky Wilkins and Lida Flinnican in the area of the cave with Beckys Alley and Lida's Pass. I also noticed that I was finding the initials of Max Kemper and Ed Bishop, the men who made the map back in 1908. So I started to do research at the library on Lida Flinnican and I was able to find obituaries and census records, and then research different people's families. This was before I had good computer access, and nothing on the internet, I think. This would have been early 90’s, so it was kind of old school research where, basically, I would find one name in the obituary and, in Lida's case, she never married, never had any children, but she did have a couple of sisters. So then I researched her sisters. I found the wills in the courthouses and then I tracked down their descendants. And then one day I found myself on the phone, speaking with the lady who was the niece of Lida Flinnican. She was overwhelmed and enjoyed to learn that her aunt had done some cave exploration and that there was a cave passageway named in her honor. She was able to provide photographs and remembrances of her aunt. Turns out Lida was her favorite aunt, so she was so excited. So it's little pieces like that that I slowly began to figure out who these people were on the Max Kemper map.

[00:21:29]
CD: And other researchers were taking note of what I was doing. Dr. Stan Sides, who is a member of the Cave Research Foundation, Rick Olson, who is the park ecologist, and they began to assist and work on the project as well. But ultimately we knew the main mystery was Max Kemper. You know- what happened to the man who made the map? All we had were these legends: that he produced the map for the owners of the cave, he went back to Germany, and that he was killed in the war. And that's all we knew. So eventually we got a German researcher who was interested in Mammoth Cave, and we went through the whole story with him, and he got on board. And he actually went back to Germany and, over several months' research, he found the son of Max Kemper- a man named Hans Kemper, who was still alive at the age of 87. The Kemper family had all kinds of photographs; they had a little journal that max kept while he was here at Mammoth Cave, and they were overwhelmed because they knew that max had been to America, but they didn't really know about his connection with Mammoth Cave. They didn't know that there was a map that he produced; that there were passageways named after him and their family members. So that turned into a whole big project, and several times the Kemper family have come to visit us. We had a 100 year celebration in 2008, where we had a concert in the cave; the grandson of Max Kemper, whose name is Klaus Kemper, he played the cello, and one of our park rangers names Janet Bass Smith played the piano, and we had a concert in the cave. So it really snowballed and turned into this huge project, all starting off with looking at some signatures on the wall and trying to fill in the gaps on that map. That's probably a long answer to your question.

[00:23:21]
BB: So that's really- you're very proud of that...

CD: Yeah, that's something that... especially the concert, because it turns out that Max Kemper was a musician- he played the violin. One time I was digging through the microfiche and I found an old newspaper article where there was a concert on the Mammoth Cave Hotel Porch, and Max Kemper played the violin and a lady from Glasgow named Mamie Depp played the piano. So, the fact that his grandson was also a musician and one of our guides was also a pianist, you know, we couldn't pass up on an opportunity like that. We had the concert in 2008. Klaus actually brought music that they had from the family's collection, so the music that they played was the same music that Max would have been playing when he was here 100 years ago in America at that time. Pretty deep stuff. (laughs) It was a lot of fun.
For every success story there's a lot of blind ends and leads that you don't come up with anything, but that was one that really turned out well.

[0:24:24]
[water break]

[0:24:45]
BB: In that story you were talking about collaboration with park ecologists and different professors and then, I've heard that as a theme running through lots of things- the collaborative nature; being encouraged to do your own research about things. Tell me about the collaborations or how you help one another, your philosophy about maybe how you strengthen and get strength from your colleagues.

CD: Yeah, well everybody seems to know quite a bit about Mammoth Cave. Joy Lyons, who was my supervisor, of course her strong interest and background was with the African American history. She was always very open to share her research and publish little articles and make copies of everything to put in our files down here in the library. I picked up on that as well- I did several PowerPoint presentations on African American history. There seems to be a lot of overlap with the research that we do. I like to think of it as little chapters and stories in the big history of Mammoth Cave. You can pull out any one little singular person or story of the cave, and turn it into a huge project, if you prefer, and they're all connected somehow. People are really good about sharing what they find, and with our new and returning seasonals, one of their criteria is that they do some kind of research project; some kind of original research project that they can leave in the library so we can continue to grow what we have as far as our files are concerned.

BB: So you can be proud that there's not turf-sim.

CD: Not too much. Of course, I could see that to a certain extent. I mean, if you're doing research on your topic and someone comes along and maybe... but it's all pretty easygoing around here, as far as sharing.

BB: The other stories about sharing is the interpretive quality- it's just being able to interpret the passage ways on the tours.

CD: Oh, yes.

BB: There's sharing there as well

CD: Right. In fact, Joe Duvall, who I know you have already interviewed... I was talking with some of the guides the other day. People like Joe Duvall and Kevin Neff- to a certain extent all the interpreters at Mammoth Cave are probably pulling from what they have seen and experienced going in to the cave with those guys. [pause while interviewer checks the machines] As interpreters, I think we all tend to borrow and to learn from each other. A good example would be: when new folks come on to be trained, we have a lot of seasoned veterans that work here like Joe Duvall, Kevin Neff- people that have worked here for decades- and they have influenced all the new employees to a certain extent. They're kind of the template of what we say, and the styles, the mannerisms, being professional, certain logistics and tour dynamics. To watch those folks lead a cave tour is great training. Everyone kind of borrows from each other and shares until you get comfortable with the cave, and comfortable with leading a tour, and that's when I think interpreters tend to branch out and think: “well what can I contribute? What kind of research or something new or different that I typically don't hear on a cave tour?” And so we do have that leeway. We have certain objectives that we have to complete on a cave tour, but we are not mandated or scripted in
any way. I think that is something important to know because I'm sure, maybe at some private cave or places like that, you might hear the exact same thing every time, but at Mammoth Cave you could take the same tour over and over again with different interpreters and get different stories completely.

[0:28:43]
BB: How long did that take you? Is it a season until you're comfortable?

CD: Yeah- maybe a couple, two or three years. And then I think once I started leading some of the specialty tours...it's really set up nice like that, because you have your main tours like the historic tours, the New Entrance tour- you know the main trips-, then after you get those mastered, then all of the sudden you might be offered a Star Chamber tour, or a Violet City Lantern tour. So then there's more research and then more skills to lead those, and then the crawling tours. It's great because the schedule that we have here is never boring. One day you might be crawling, next day you might be on lantern tours, and the next day you might have the old echo river trip. A good variety, I think, is important, that way you're just not doing the same tour or saying the exact same thing every time.

BB: Could you lead any one of those at the drop of a hat now?

CD: Yes. I think the hardest one, and everyone I've talked to agrees with this, is the Great Onyx cave tour.

BB: Why's that?

CD: Great Onyx is, it's a cave that's in Mammoth Cave National Park, it's in the flint ridge system, but it does not connect with Mammoth Cave. And typically it's a tour that we only offer in the fall for maybe two months. That is a cave and a resource that you kind of have to study up on it before the two months, and then you just don't use that information as much. And so that one, if you told me I was leading a Great Onyx, I would probably want a little bit of time to go over my notes again and make sure I'm giving the correct dates and the years, and think about a theme. But the other tours, yeah, I could take those.

[0:30:23]
BB: You have worked at a couple other parks- do you think that the idea of collaboration of borrowing is something unique to your years here, and your colleagues, and your camaraderie here, or is that something you've found in the Everglades?

CD: Yeah, I think I did see that in the other parks. The more experienced interpreters are always willing to help out the new folks. It's funny because seasonals have often been called "90 day wonders", and that's because you have to go to a brand new park, a place you've never even been to, and once you put the uniform on and step in front of a crowd, you're the expert. You're supposed to know everything, so you have to learn that from the more seasoned seasonals and the permanent employees, and so I think that sense of mentoring and sharing and working together is really good within the National Park Service. Then you might have to leave after your 90 days and go to another park and start all over again- that's one reason that seasonal employees tend to go back to a park where they've already been, because then you've got your base; you've got the fundamentals down, and it's a little bit easier. And then you can start to branch out and grow from there.

BB: Have you ever been able to distill a general- everyone does and has different interests, but is there...what are some of the consolidating threads about a ranger? What drives them to do their job? There must
be some things that “well, they're just like because of this or because of that.” I mean you must have thought about this over your career.

CD: I think to a certain extent, all park rangers have a love for nature. You know, that's got to be one of the best things about our jobs—we can work outdoor in woods or down in the everglades, or in sand dunes—all the great national parks-, or in a cave. We can immerse ourselves in the resource. I think we all have that love of nature, and I think, overall, park rangers are very easygoing, caring people that work well. I kind of find that at the different parks I’ve worked at.

BB: What do you want to tell me? You've been helping me coordinate this—again, thank you...

CD: It's been fun

BB: ...And I'm glad you're finding it fun, because my work is collaborative in nature. Folkloric, ethnographic work is discovery research as you know, and so that's what makes it fun. Do you have something that you would really like to get across? Something you think others haven't said or, even if they have, something that you are very passionate about that you would like to have a historic record about why we do these jobs and why it's just something...

[0:33:16] CD: Well one thing I’ve noticed, especially here at Mammoth Cave and in the summertime, when it's just crazy busy, and you're leading three tours a day, you're in the cave maybe 6 hours, taking sometimes 120 people on a tour, it's bustling, it's hot- that's when you really see the interactions of the coworkers, and people coming together. It's very much like a family. At the end of the summer we have our big guide's picnics and we give some serious awards and some funny awards, and it's a time to cut loose. But you know, you see all these people from 18 up to the 80s, working side by side, eating lunch together in the guide lounge, and I don't know of many positions where you have that broad spectrum of people working together and bonding, and there's the camaraderie and the teamwork. It's really special. So many times I've heard from, especially people, maybe their first or second year, they come through and it's like: “Man, this is great,” you know, “I really want to come back.” And on the flipside we've had people that have come through here and maybe they've had to move on to other jobs in life, or other careers, and a lot of times we hear them talk with us and it's like: “You know, the best job I ever had was working at Mammoth Cave.” We get that a lot. I've thought about that too, you know: what is it about this one particular park that bonds people like that? It's just kind of a unique setting, I think, to be in the great resource of the cave, working with different people- sometimes every day you might have a different partner- and then working in a setting like this is just unique.

[0:35:14] BB: Tell me about 'guide force'.

CD: Ok, yeah. It's funny because, you know, guiding has been taking place at Mammoth Cave officially since 1816. That's the official tours. I'm sure there were some unofficial tours in the cave before that, but 1816 is what we go with. And even though our titles may be ‘park ranger’ or ‘park guide,’ that term 'guide' is taken very seriously by the guide force because we're carrying on in that tradition of famous African American slaves like Stephen Bishop and Nick Bransford and Matt Bransford. So to be a part of that legacy is really interesting, and I think it's something we all take seriously. It might sound a little bit silly, to think that when you guide your cave tour, there could be someone on that tour that's waited their whole life to come here for that tour, and I think we do get that. We get people that are travelling internationally- this might be their only chance ever to come to Mammoth Cave. And so I think to step up
in front of a group and give every performance, every interpretation, the best shot you can because this might be their only chance to see the cave. And if you're having an off day and you're not feeling well, it could make a difference. There's that bond that comes together that people just seem to love working at the cave.

[0:36:55]
BB: The “cave bug” - that's a thing, isn't it?

CD: It is. I think the afterhours trips really help that, because you can learn the regular tourist routes and you can get familiar with those parts of the cave, but when you have a system that’s 400 miles long, and we talk about underground rivers, and very rarely do we have any tours that go down to look at the river levels anymore, but we used to. It's important for employees to be able to see the underground river, or other parts of the cave system, so we organize these educational afterhours trips on our own time and, again, the list fill up like [snaps] that. It's amazing! This is all done after work, when you might work an 8 hour day and 6 miles, get a little bit tired, think “oh, you know it'd be nice to go home and kick off the boots and relax”, and what do these people do? They stay. And they'll go in the cave for another 6 hours, maybe up until midnight to see these other parts of the cave and learn about them and then have to go home, get a few hours of sleep, and come back to work the next day. And again, like I mentioned earlier, I don't know of other professions where you do that. Once the whistle blows, most people are heading to the house. But here, the potential to see and learn more about this resource is so captivating that people want to do it. They get bitten by that “cave bug” and it's just... it's just... there's so much that's to it—not just the mileage of the cave, but so many stories and so many passageways and histories to learn, and the studies of the cave, too, with the cave life and the geology. There's so many learning opportunities here that you can't quite get it all in one season. So I think that's why people keep coming back time and time again: they get bitten by that cave bug. Sometimes it leads people into exploring the cave or doing research, or working with environmental education, taking kids into the cave; it's a big spectrum of effects that it can have.

[0:39:04]
BB: How about your connections one on one with... about when you're leading or you're trailing a tour. Can you tell me any funny or unsettling stories? I mean, that's got to be a bonding experience.

CD: [laughing] It is.

BB: It's something one on one, I think, you have this collective that you have part of the force, but then you'll always have that time with so-and-so. Is there anything that you can share? That's part of the research is here, to talk about different stories about your working life…

CD: It is really rewarding to lead the tour, especially when you have a small group. It's funny, you find yourself coming out late with 4 people, when you can come out on time with 120. And that's because you kind of want to give them that personal tour, and maybe you can show them something down a side passageway that you couldn't show 120 people. I think those tours are indicative of the early styles of cave tours. Sometimes when you're trailing in the back, it kind of gives you a chance for your mind to wander a little bit. You're still doing your duties- you're turning lights out, you're checking the first aid kits there for safety, making sure everybody is ok-but it kind of detaches you a little bit where you can maybe enjoy the cave, to a certain extent, with a little more peace and quiet. And as far as particular stores go, I'm not thinking of anything right off the top of my head... But when visitors comment at the end of the tour, when they come up and shake your hand and say “Thank you, you made our trip,” when you see the kids eyes light up- that does it every time. I led a tour just yesterday, and these kids were just
so excited. I showed them hundreds of cave crickets on the ceiling and they had no idea they were there, and they were just overwhelmed. And just little things like that, I think, make a big difference.

BB: Something every day, probably.

CD: Yeah, it's a little bit different every day. Early on in my career I remember several times people coming up after a tour saying, “When I was in college I thought about being a park ranger. That's what I wanted to do, but I became a doctor,” or “I became a lawyer.” It's funny, because people that are in the career to become a park ranger, sometimes from our parents and elders we get: “Well, when are you going to get a real job?” And you know, sometimes you do hear that because, when you're working seasonaly and you're going form park to park, and maybe sometimes you don't get the winter job that you were hoping, and you end up back with the parents for a short time- sometimes you do get that. But it's amazing how many visitors see us do our jobs and think: “I think I would have liked to do that. That's a neat occupation- something that would have been fun.”

BB: I know that feeling.

CD: Yeah.

[0:41:57]
BB: Do you have any last thoughts?

CD:... Sometimes it's hard to put it into words, but I think just overall, all National Parks- and I was thinking about this earlier- the stories that we tell here, the experiences that we gain from working at, say, Mammoth Cave National Park. I think these same experiences are happening in all the national parks. Early on in my career I told myself “I will go work at any national park in the country. I'd travel anywhere.” And as you start to move around, you develop these connections, and maybe you have a park that becomes home, but I think the same thing that happens here is going on in other places, as well. It is a big family of park rangers, and it's amazing, once you start to network, and maybe begin to travel. I mean, when our family takes vacations, where do we go? We go to the national parks. [laughs] And some people would say, “My goodness, that's what you do for a living! Do something different!” but that's what we like. We go to national parks, and all of the sudden you know someone that works there, and they give you the behind-the-scenes tour at their park, and you get see to some neat things you've never seen before. So it really is a big family. And it's a small family in many ways, because you start to see names and you realize, “Okay, I know someone that works at that park, they used to work here and I worked with their supervisor over here.” There's a lot of networking that goes on. I can't think of a better career than to work for the National Park Service. It's been 23 years that I've been here, and I'll probably retire here because this is home, but I think we'll keep on visiting other national parks, and I hope to continue with my research, maybe even after I retire, because I think once you get the cave bug, you can't turn back.

[0:43:56]
BB: You have an employee friend who transferred out to a different park, and what was that you were saying...we were talking about where you go and your connection to place...

CD: There was a friend of mine and she worked here at Mammoth Cave for many years- she led the crawling cave tours- and now she's working out at Mesa Verde. We took the family out there and she was able to give us the tour. She said that as much as she loved Mesa Verde, she had a better personal connection with Mammoth Cave, mainly because of the afterhours trips- the educational trips where we
can get off the trails and go in to parts of the cave to see what that's like and to learn. Where at Mesa Verde, certain parts of the park are off limits to everybody, except for maybe someone doing research, or scientists. So she loves Mesa Verde, and it's a nice place, but she says she just can't quite get that connection like she had to Mammoth Cave. And that's where those trips into the cave are really important. We try to maintain safety and we try to go in carefully and not to damage any of the resource. Before every after hours trip we always tell the employees that this is a privilege, and it's not a right, because we don't want to lose that privilege. It's important, I think, for the guides and for the park rangers to know the resource, because visitors ask us all the time, “What's it like down at the underground river where the eyeless fish live? How big is the river? Is it deep? Is it cold?” and if you've never been to it to experience it, it's hard to answer those questions. So it gives you certain credibility to know those answers and to know the resource.

BB: It seems like you are the insiders, and you... it's a privilege for you and it seem like it would deepen your connection…

CD: Exactly, yeah. I think that's a big part of it, too: the love that people have for any national park, as far as employees go, the more time you can spend in the resource, the more connections you can make. Then you become the steward and you want to share your love and respect and appreciation for the resource, just so they don't just have a good time, but when they leave, they realize, “Mammoth Cave and these other national parks, these are special places. We need to protect them. We need to make sure that they're here for future generations.” And so that, that's good, especially with the kids. We always tell our groups that the kids are the future- they're the hope- and when kids leave understanding and respecting Mammoth Cave, then I think we've hit a home run.

[0:46:38]

BB: We were talking a little about the guide force and you were talking about the guide picnic... it's interesting, because it's a point of pride, and sometimes it's not understood by everybody around.

CD: That term, “guide”, goes back to 1816, when the first guided cave tours took place. As the National Park Service made this a national park in 1941, the titles have changed. Sometimes park technician, park ranger, park guide- all these different titles - but that title of guide has always applied. So we have a guide's picnic, we have a guide's reunion, we have a guide lounge where everybody has lunch and has breaks between their cave tours. Over the years I've been here, I've noticed that some management folks, that might be a term that they don't like as much. Therefore sometimes they say, “Let's call it the ‘employee lounge’ ” or “Maybe we should have an employee’s picnic,” but the folklore around the guides is so thick, and there are so many guides that sometimes the awards that we give at our picnics are very specific to the interpretive guide force. In other walks of life, maybe if you're a tour guide, you could see that as kind of being demeaning, or almost a put-down, maybe, but to be a cave guide at Mammoth Cave is something that the employees really appreciate.

[00:48:15] End Recording