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**Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription**

Project name: Ranger Lore (LOCRP)
Field ID and name: #0003; Keven Neff interview
Interviewee: Keven Neff
Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman
Date: 12/2/13
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Others Present: N/A
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Context:

Technical Considerations: Audio file was created from the compiled video files for the purpose of transcription

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]

[0:01:03]

KEVIN NEFF: That is the Department of Agriculture and didn't know at the time, but I've always had that in the back of my mind. Wound up in the teaching field, so, I taught, teaching junior high science, seventh and eighth grade, in a little town called Ada, Ohio, up near Lima, Ohio, western section of Ohio. Both my wife and I were teachers so we had the summer off and although I did a little bit of work around during the summer months, needed something a little more progressive. (laughs) So I applied at Mammoth Cave after drawing a circle around Ada and figuring out a day's drive. And Mammoth Cave was one of them. So I applied the first year. Didn't get anything. Got the postcard, sorry. So I applied the second year, mmm, postcard, sorry. Applied the third year, and it was kind of ironical because my dad and my younger brother were planning to hike most of the Appalachian Trail all summer long. We had progressed a little on the Buckeye Trail in Ohio and kind of shake down cruises. We were ready to leave in two weeks. And I get a telephone call saying, "Kevin, would you come down to Mammoth Cave?" (laughs) So I knew I could not turn that down so I come down here, found a place to stay with my wife and little boy. At the time he was just born a few months earlier, Derrin. And just worked down here for one month, for three months and found it just exactly what I thought it should be. And so the next summer if I applied and, because I guess I did a decent enough job they allowed me to come out again for a second year and a third year. Then my wife said, "Why don't we try a different park?" And I said, "Okay, we'll try a different park." Well then when they sent my application, they offered me a GS5 instead of a 4, and I said, "Ooh, we went up in pay scale, can't turn that down." (laughs) So, we wound up coming down and I guess they say, the rest is history. I've been here since the summer of 1969, you know. The hardest thing about coming down here when you're living in another state is finding a place to stay. I couldn't stay on the park. That was for single people. You had to come down a month or a couple weeks early to look for a place. And you needed a furnished spot. You needed something, you had the kid, and then later we had two children, and had to be furnished. And who wants to rent for three months with a bunch of kids, you know, so it was hard, but I managed to find somebody who worked at the hotel and they moved up to Isle Royal

during the summer and their house was empty. So for many, many years, we just kind of switched houses, so to speak. That worked out well until he retired but then his son also had a house available so we were, pretty much by then I knew enough people here to, to be able to find a house afterwards. But that was the most difficult part, was, was finding housing so I could stay here, so. Was I making any money doing all this? Probably not. You had two houses to take care of and family. And, but everybody enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. My wife enjoyed the, the vacation from teaching. My kids enjoyed it and everybody said, "Hey, when your kids become teenagers, they're going to hate it because they want to stay back with their friends."

BRENT BJÖRKMAN: Yeah, I'm curious about that too.

KN: Well, as it turned out that they didn't want to go back. My one son was the head drummer in the school band and the drummer, the leader said, "If you don't come back in August when we start practice, you can't play in the band." And he said, "Okay." Of course when he got back there, they allowed him to play because he was too valuable to let go. But, you know, the kids really liked it, all the way down. My one daughter when she was getting ready in high school, she probably was the one that didn't want to really come back. {0:05:00} She had a lot of friends up in Ohio, but so, there was one year when she stayed with friends up there. But, the rest of the time, the kids were down here.

BB: So you said, one of the first things you said about, the first year I didn't get it, the second year I applied there. And you said, it was exactly what I wanted. What were the, what was the first, what were the elements that that said, this is exactly—what were the elements that, of what you wanted, at the time?

KN: Well you wear the uniform and the hat. That's, that's part of thing because you're a member of a rather unique group. It's a service. Being a teacher, standing in front of people really didn't bother me that much. Of course, you're, something new you have to learn about it and, and go through it. But I, you're outdoors, or in this case, (laughs) indoors when

you're in the cave. But, because I didn't think I would be a cave guide. I thought I'd be a naturalist and wander around the woods and showing people the trees and the birds and the butterflies. But as it turned out I was assigned to be a cave guide, and that was a lot of fun. I knew geology, that was one of mi-, my minors in college. And you go in with a group of experienced guides and you listen to what they're doing and kind of following through. And of course we have a week's orientation before we go in and the big thing in, in doing all that was having your own style. Try to pick up, you, it's nice to sometimes copy somebody, but you really can't copy somebody else. You can get ideas from them, but you really can't copy their, their style. You have to have your own. And also, also I think many of us are very unique. And meeting the public, it's, it's most part, you know, people are on vacation and they want to have a good time. Once in a while, you get somebody who had a little bit too much to drink around the Fourth of July, but as long as you talk to them in a, in the proper manner, and you can kind of bring them down from their high and go through it. I've had very, very rarely any major problems with the public. And I have to say rarely because once in a while you do, but those are minor things. And so you're, you're away, to me, I was away from all the hum-drum of teaching. I'd go home at night, put my feet up, read a book, relax. I didn't have homework to grade. (laughs) One year I was the supervisor. They asked me to me a supervisor, a higher pay scale, and, well, I'll give it a try. Hated it. Because I couldn't wear the uniform. I was in civilian clothes. So I'd get on the bus, sit down, there'd be a kid behind me, I'd turn around, "How you doing here, young 'un?" And, mother would pull the kid away, "Don't talk to strangers." You know, you forget you're not in a uniform. So that was, that was hard. That was hard. So I told them, I said, "No more. I want to be down there with, in the trenches with everybody else." I, I think one of my most amazing enlightenments in terms of the National Parks Service, I was taking a, a class for some extra credit while I was teaching and we met in the, in this big room. And there was about thirty of us. And the professor on the first day was going around saying, "Well, what do you teachers do during the summer?" And I was halfway through the line, and the first one said, "Well I, I'm a tennis pro. I teach tennis." (soft clapping sound) Polite applause. Went the next one, "Oh, I, I train horseback riders. I have a horse field and sometimes even go to the Soviet Union"—at that time it was the Soviet Union—"And we help people over there train

horses to do certain things.” And, you know, (soft clapping sound). Well, he went through all of these and he came to me. I said, “Well I’m Kevin and, and I’m a seasonal ranger, park ranger at Mammoth Cave National Park.” And the place erupted. I mean, they applauded and whooped and hollered and stood up and clapped. Ooh. So, it’s a, it’s a job that a lot of people admire and I thought I was pretty lucky to, to have been that, so.

BB: It’s interesting. I talked to someone, one of your colleagues before you, and this, there’s this thread of educator and, and interpreter and—

KN: Yeah.

BB: There’s similar path—

KN: Yeah.

BB: That the two of you have had, your life, life careers.

KN: Right. Right.

BB: And are there com-, commonalities in—

KN: I think there is. First of all you, you know, you need to know what you’re going to be doing. At least have that ability to, to think fast on your feet when you come to a situation. Know about the environment, the world around you and hopefully be able to convey it to a variety of groups. Now when you’re a junior high teacher, you’re teaching seventh, eighth and ninth graders. You have to have a kind of simple and I think majority of the people don’t want complications. They want simple. How was the cave made? You don’t want to talk about carbonic acid and, and all the chemicals that go in. You say, “Water dissolved it.” And usually that satisfies most people. “Any questions?” “Well, is there anything in the water?” [0:10:00] And then you can add more to it. So I think that part is a thread that goes

through it. You have to be able to enjoy the public and the people and be able to research and figure out the various aspects of your particular job that you're going to do and so.

BB: Um-hm.

KN: Yeah, I think it helps. And we have a lot of college kids come here during the summer months. And most of them are, since they're in college, they know the drill as far as studying and, and working and they have a good time. And I think the majority of people that work here were retired teachers or going to be teachers or were teachers. Now I was a teacher, but I was up in Ohio so I came down here. Many of the folks around here are still teachers, and yet they like to come here in the summer and during busy weekends, like last weekend and Thanksgiving, they came through. But now I'm a permanent member and I stay here all the time. But I didn't think I'd ever want to be a permanent. You know, I, I thought maybe it might sour me a little bit. I would get too used to it, too blasé about it. But it's been quite a number of years and it, every, every day, yeah, I get to go to the cave, you know, and talk to people and explain things. And now, you have a hundred and twenty on one tour, you pretty much give the minimums and, and you're on your way. Today, when I came back from the tour I just did, I only had eight. And it was like family, walk along, point things out, show them here, you know. Of course, you got to watch your time because (laughs) you can get two hours for a hundred and twenty is, you know, easy to do, but when you got eight people, you think, wow, you'll fly right through, but you, you think you got so much time, and so you want to show them all this stuff that you're aware of. And I like the winter. It's a lot of fun. But because I only knew summer for the longest time, I couldn't believe how anybody could stand it when there's nobody around. It's, like I say, it's a very relaxed, very relaxed atmosphere in the wintertime. And for the most part, again, the people are retired, they come here and they have a lot of time. They're not rushed. And they usually have a lot of interesting questions to ask, so, yeah.

BB: Yeah. So what were some of the—I think because you're a teacher, you're an, a genuine, probably, person that can interpret and, and read and read the human, the human nature.

KN: We like to think we can do that, yes. (laughs)

BB: When you first got here, what were some of the, who were some of the people that you learned from, or what were some of the elements that you remember see-, you know, maybe putting in your toolkit—

KN: Yeah.

BB: When you—

KN: Well, a lot of humor. When I first started here, most of the guides were, as you would say, old school. Very little in the way of education. Their main thing was telling stories about the cave and as far as facts were concerned, yeah, they had memorized some facts and they would throw them in there. But I noticed that when they were going through that type of thing, people were kind of shuffling around. But when they were telling a story of some sort, then interest perked up and they wanted to know how this story was going to end. So to me, being able to know the story, now, you're not going to repeat the story as they do because they have their own style. By keeping that in the back of your memory banks, when the time permits, then a story about something, a little humor tossed in the [] there. Today, many years ago, they invited me down from Ohio in February to give my historic tour. Apparently somebody thought it was, followed the themes in the, the way that they were trying to get people to do. I really didn't think of it that way. That was just what I was doing because, picking up. So it was much more structured and after a while, it was "Cut back on the jokes a little, Kevin," you know. Just give the, be a little more serious about some things, which was hard to do. But now that I've been here a while, I go back to my jokes. (laughs) I, I hope I give the people the trip they want but it's a lot different now than when I first started. So I think a person coming in today would be under a much more structured, "This is your plan, what are you going to say here? What are you going to say here? What are you going to say here?" Kind of all ready figured—I'm an extemporaneous

person. I might be thinking, hey this is a good stop to talk about subject A, but somebody asks you a question, you never get to subject A. You do that maybe somewhere else or if you don't do it at all, what's the, what's the big loss, you know? So those are some of the, the things the old timers would just—the camaraderieship, the support that everybody gives everybody is— [0:15:05]

BB: Yeah, talk about that. That []

KN: So when new people come in, you want to make sure they, they know they're part of this group and not afraid to, to ask somebody if they're doing, how they're doing. And you know, we usually, those of us that have been here a while, know how to ease in a suggestion or two. "You're twirling with your hair all the time. Don't do that," you know. "Oh, I, what am I doing?" "Yes, []" "You might want to put your hands in your pocket, even though you're not supposed to do that. Or put them behind you or in front." You know [], little things like that is what we try to do. Somebody says, "Yeah, I'm not very, I'm not really feeling very well." "Hey, I'll do your tour for you." That happens all the time. I mean, I've done it and people have helped me out occasionally on that. So I, I, they talk about the Mammoth Cave family. It, it really is. We're unique. I, I can't speak for all parks service personnel all over the parks service because many parks, like the Smokies are big and they're divided up into many little visitor center spots. And so they're in their own little groups. So I suppose in their own little group, you know, you work for the Smoky Mountains. "Yeah, but I work in such-and-such place," you know. [Cling and dome area] Here, everything is right here and people come here, it's the name, Mammoth Cave, so they're going to go in a cave. I know emphasis was on the outside world, which is fine with me, because that's what I studied and I thought that's what we should do too, is walk around the surface, but many folks, they didn't come here to Mammoth Cave National Park to walk in the woods. They came here to go in the cave. But things are changing. And the river and the bike trails and the hiking and picnicking and just driving through the woods in their cars, cycles and stuff is adding more depth from what it used to be. It used to be cave and that was really it, so.

BB: So we have people that, that lead tours underground, then, but then we also have people that, maybe you, if you would have started in, you know, a couple years ago, rather than in the '60s—

KN: Right.

BB: Sixty-nine, you may have really been doing a lot—

KN: I would have concentrated on the surface and evening programs. I would never have gone in the cave.

BB: Would that, would that be a naturalist position? Or what would you call that?

KN: That was a naturalist. Yeah.

BB: Okay.

KN: You started out with naturalist, law enforcement and guides, then of course maintenance and administration and all the rest. But there were really three different divisions and in, in the, in the beginning, guides were guides and naturalists were naturalists and rangers were rangers, law enforcement. We did have a superintendent one time came in and said, "We're going to mix you guys up a little bit." So I, I actually traded with one of the naturalists to do their job on the surface for a day, and they did my job in the cave. And I think that kind of broke the ice. And after that, it was fine. Even had some did law enforcement, but because of the rules of law enforcement, you can't do that anymore. You have to be specially trained in law enforcement so they're still the unique group. Unfortunately when people see a law enforcement, it's, they're either in trouble or they're violating a law of some sort, (laughs) you know, so they always get kind of the, the

bad reputation. “Hey, you’re speeding,” or “Hey I have a flat tire,” you know. In the cave, hey, you know, we’re more friendly. (laughs)

BB: Are naturalists, cave, cave interpretation and law enforcement, are they all considered ranger? Or what is a ranger?

KN: Yeah, we’re all given the name ranger, as it’s written on our badge, ranger. But I think we really consider ourselves interpretation, interpreters, you know interpret that certain things. We like to call ourselves guides. I know that part is kind of antiquated as far as what the administration would like us to be ca-, but we’re, as far as I know, I’m guides. I call this the guide house, even though a lot of people call it the lounge, you know. To me, this is where the guides are. But we don’t have naturalists anymore. We do it both, so I, for the longest time, did evening programs, I did surface walks, even did interpretive ones when we had the Green River boat rides down at the Green River. We did some interpreting on that. We had bus tours that actually took people through the, through the outside on, on trails, backroads and so forth, on schoolbusses. And so, yeah, we’re supposed to be able to do any cave tour, any program, any natural trails because it’s all written out now. There are ISPs, you know, the way in which you’re supposed to do certain things. But it’s up to you on how you want to put it together. The slavery walk. I think if you went on a, on each one of our slavery walks, we tell about the slaves at Mammoth Cave, but we’d each have our own way of describing, you know, what was going on, just like we do in the cave, you know, so. [0:20:04]

BB: Um-hm. Um-hm. And it sounds like there’s more speaking of, there’s more multi-use trails. And, and did that come about because of public demand or is it just something, is it marketing, and hopefully we’ll get more visitors or—

KN: Oh, I think a combination of all those. It, it happened about the ‘70s, when visitation had been cut drastically because of the gas crisis, you know. We, we didn’t have anybody coming and so they start thinking about, what if we offered a backcountry trail deal,

because we had a few surface walks around here. How about a float ride down the Green River in canoes, you know, we could do that. So it was a, it was a pretty good push for, in a couple years to diversity, to get on the surface. We have 53,000 acres of surface spot, but a lot of history on its, on its own up here. A lot of nature, you know, the whole business, because it was all privately owned at one time and there are still remnants of houses and churches and schools and cemeteries and old roads and fencelines. And, and walking down the trails, “Hey, you see that, how those trees are all the same age, and they’re growing in a line? That used to be a fencerow right there, and on both sides was farmland.” And maybe go, “Ooh, see that great big old tree over there with all the branches coming out? That was probably growing in the front yard of a house.” And you walk over there, and you see these four piles of stones where the foundation of, of that—those are, those are the types of things that I think were lost in the early days, but we’re starting to try to bring them back and so, yes, it’s Mammoth Cave, but it’s, it’s also Mammoth Surface. There’s a lot of stuff up here. So personally, I’m happy that that’s finally occurred because like I said, when I first joined up, that’s what I thought I’d be doing. (laughs) So—

BB: Right.

KN: Yeah.

BB: When you and your, so you were seasonal and then after you retired from Ada—

KN: Right.

BB: You moved here?

KN: I came down. We bought some property, which by the way, I own a piece of Mammoth Cave. It goes under my property. (laughs) I bought some property, built a house, and my plan was hopefully I could work a month before the season started, a month after the season was over with. You know, kind of intermittent, in between. But I guess I was lucky in

a way that a position came open a number of us were offered these extra positions, and I was one of them, and I said, "Well, okay!" So, now I'm full time.

BB: Um-hm.

KN: And I, I really do enjoy it. Like I said, I, in the beginning, I didn't think I ever wanted to be permanent. I did try for a permanent position in another park, another national park, but at the time, the amount of money you would get was even less than schoolteacher's salary, and I said, "I can't afford to do this," you know. So by keeping my teaching job and doing this in the summer, it was the best of both worlds, back and forth. Get all charged up at the end of the year and run back into the classroom. And by the time June rolls around, you're ready to come back here. (laughs)

BB: Yeah.

KN: Yeah. I, I led Heckle and Jive, Heckle and Jeckle, Hyde, job in the sense that you had two different personalities because when you're teaching you have to be a little more formal with the kids, and although we had a great time, and...down here, you know, you could kind of let loose. And we did more social stuff down here and parties and visiting. So we had more friends, the folks down here, than I had back in Ohio because you just didn't have the time, you know, you're always working on school stuff.

BB: Yeah. I know.

KN: I did belong to a lot of organizations up there which dragged me down. So, it was easy, "Oh, I can't be president. I, I'm not going to be here during the summer months." (laughs) Sneaky. So.

BB: So you moved up, and you were talking about it was hard getting, at, at first, a place to stay because you were a family.

KN: Right.

BB: So, so there's, you know, there's quarters where single people live.

KN: Right.

BB: And then, were there people in your kind of, not predicament, but in your situation where there was a married couple that would come? And was that part of your cohorts you're talking about?

KN: There were, there were a few of us that did that. I don't think anybody anymore from the summer comes. The summer months down here unfortunately are only, you know, two months long, at most. When I first started, it was from Memorial Day until Labor Day and maybe a day or two on either side of that. Now, it's, I mean, they don't get down here until the end of June and bye-bye in the middle of August. And those people who are out of state, there's just no way they can begin to do that, so you, you have to get local folks to do that. [0:24:59]But yeah, there were people coming from California, from Oregon, from Illinois, Pennsylvania, that we knew down here. Some of them actually camped the months that they were down here, in trailers or tents or motor homes, that kind of stuff. So, definitely devoted. (laughs)

BB: Um-hm.

KN: But I needed a house or a solid roof over my head, so. But I've always managed to find some, some pretty neat spaces, so.

BB: Say somebody told me that you, you liked to guide off the beaten path kind of tours. Is that—

KN: Taking folks in on an extra hours trip or evening tours, yes. I do.

BB: Is that for people, like an interviewer like me, or other, other staff members, or—

KN: Generally speaking, it's, it's members that are here. When you're here for a couple of years, and, "Well, where's that tunnel go?" You know, you never get a chance to do that stuff. So in the evening we would set up an after hours trip and we would go down into those areas and show the people what was around that corner when you have an opportunity to do that. As far as the folks such as yourselves, there have been special tours set up. They have what are called Roots of the Cave where people who used to live here, they have their little get-togethers, and sometimes they get some of us guides to take them into parts of the cave they might have been familiar with when they were here living in the park. Special groups, maybe, I took a group of superintendents including our own into part of the cave. We get VIPs of a variety of organizations and groups, they might say, "Hey Kevin, could you take this group down into, show them the river?" Because even though the river's not on a normal tour usually. So those are kinds of things, but I belong to Cave Research Foundation, CRF for short, and I got a chance to do a lot of back-, off the beaten path hiking. I would come down in the holidays—my wife hated this—Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. She said, "You got to stay home one of those holidays." So, I would come down on Thanksgiving, that was my one time to do that. And used to go in the cave and go over all these far off places and learn all these different places and cave with the gurus of the caving world. Roger Broffer, Richard Zoff, these are names I just toss out. But the—

BB: Tell me more about, so the Cave Research Foundation is a, is a national, international—

KN: It is now. It had it's start here, back in the 1950s when it was surveying and, and mapping a privately owned cave within the park service called Crystal Cave. When they were buying up all this land to make it into a park, it was one of the in-holdings they couldn't buy. Privately owned and it really wasn't worth the fight to tie up all your

resources, so to speak, to try to get that. Although, it's a big cave, nobody had this wildest idree, idea, that it was joined to Mammoth, you know, so they finally bought it up in the '60s, but the fellow who owned the cave was a caver himself, but he knew he had a lot of cave and he needed some help surveying and mapping it, so an offshoot of the NSS, National Speological Society, came and did a lot of work. And when they got done with that particular expedition, a number of them said, "Well, there's a lot more caves, we need to keep doing this." So they incorporated themselves into more of a scientific organization, cave research. And when the park bought that cave, they said, "Can we still keep exploring and mapping it?" And so they had to go get an agreement, obviously, with all that, and that just kept growing and growing and they used, they go to Hawaii, and Costa Rica, and they used to go to Iraq and Iran. I mean, they were—China. You know, cooperation all over. But this is their headquarters and they could spend all their time in Mammoth and still have plenty left over. But I managed to, I was reading a book called The Longest Cave. This, a book describing how they connected up some of the big caves in the area. No, it wasn't that one. The Caves Beyond. It's about the expedition that took place, the NSS one. And I was reading that, in my, I had a few minutes. I was reading a chapter of it, and this one lady, her name is Diana Dant. She said, "Where are you in that book, Kevin?" And I said, "Well, right now I'm going through Floyd's Lost Passage." She said, "Ooh, would you like to see that tomorrow?" I said, "Would I like to see it? Yes." That was my first or second year working down here. She said, "Well, we're going tomorrow." Now the reason I know Diane is, we babysat for her boy. I had two boys, she had a boy, so we kind of babysat. So, she said, "We're going tomorrow, would you l-"

[INTERRUPTION—RECORDING STOPS]

[0:30:00]

BB: It stops after—

KN: Yeah. (laughs)

BB: So she says, "Yeah, I'm going."

KN: She said, "Do you want to go?" And I said, "Sure." So the next day we went. And apparently I did a good enough job keeping up with her. (laughs) It's a long hard road to go and, but I enjoyed every minute of it. And she said, "You know, we have this organization, Cave Re-" I said, "Yeah, I know." She said, "Would you like to come down on an expedition and actually go in and map and survey?" And I said, "Okay." (laughs) So that's how I got started doing that. A lot of fun. Got to go see a lot of places. So and even in Mammoth []. So when somebody would say, "Well, this, this tunnel over here. You know, I'd like to see what's there." And somebody said, "Well, I bet you Kevin knows where it is. So Kevin, can you take us in?" And in the early days it was pretty easy to do so. All you had to do was write out this little paper and say we're going in such-and-such cave and, and tunnel. We'll be back at such-and-such time. Okay, well, but I was still a seasonal. And seasonals could not lead expeditions. You had to be permanent. So we'd have to rope up some unsuspecting permanent (laughs) and put them down as the lead even though they had never been there. I had, but they hadn't. And, but I had to have that name, and the, them on the, on the group. And when I became permanent, it was, ah, yes! Now I can go anywhere I want! Then he changed the rules. (laughs)

BB: You can't lead?

KN: No. You have a, quite a lengthy process of going through. The idea of just going in the cave to see where it goes is more, you have to be more educational, learn something, which fits in, because George Morrison who found the new entrance part of Mammoth Cave, he didn't find just where we go today. He found a lot of other stuff. And so, if you really want to understand about George Morrison, you've got to go to some of the places he also went, or his crew went. And, otherwise you think, well, gee, this is all he found. No big deal. But he found a lot of stuff, really. Like I said, his crew did. So those are the kinds of things that are definitely educational. And some of the surrounding caves in the area we used to go to,

unfortunately, white nose syndrome, the disease that attacks bats, has pretty much put a [] on many of the outlying caves where the bats hang around because we're worried about transmitting the fungal disease that kills bats. And I understand, you know, bats are interesting creatures and just can't go in and look around if it causes some damage to them. So many of the outlying caves we used to do are no longer on our afterhours list. But still plenty of stuff right underneath our feet that—every year you get a new crop coming in, new group. So you take a lot of afterhours trips in, when you can work it in.

BB: Um-hm.

KN: One of the things that makes it a little bit difficult is that you all have different time schedules. In the summer you could be here as early as seven in the morning or as late as noon. So you're in the cave, they're eating lunch. You're eating lunch, they're in the cave. So sometimes you never even meet the people who are here that summer except in a picnic or social get-together afterwards. You have Wednesdays and Thursdays off, they have Friday and Saturday off, so there are four days when you're not going to see one another. So it, it makes it a little difficult, but that's what makes it fun when you do finally meet these people at a picnic or some kind of awards ceremonies that the superintendents and them put on. "Oh, you work here too?" (laughs) "Yeah, we were going to go—" Or these after-hour trips, that's how you get to meet some, so, it's a good way of getting more camaraderie.

BB: Was there any animosity between Cave Research people doing that and then the people that I've, the cave guides and that sort of thing or—

KN: Yes. (laughs)

BB: Yeah?

KN: In the beginning it was because a lot of the old-time guides were told, "Well, you guys can't go there." But I don't think many of them wanted to go there. There were a few of

those who had been, in their younger days, crawling around a lot in the cave. In fact, even though they weren't supposed to mark on the walls, a lot of times it wasn't a national park yet and so you find their signatures occasionally, of those old-timers. And, but as they got older they may not have wanted to cave as much, but the ability for them to go wherever they wanted to when they wanted to was suddenly kind of taken away from them, you know. They still had to get permission to go, "But CRF could go anywhere they wanted to." (grumbly voice) You know, and, "They have keys to every cave in the place. If I want to go in there, I have to go beg for a key to get in that cave. They've got keys." [0:35:01] Well, it wasn't quite that way, but obviously, if you're doing research and scientific work, not to say the CRF didn't go in for a lot of fun too. I'm sure they did, but the big thing is, if you're going to go explore a brand new cave, you might as well map it as you go. That way, you're doing minimum damage and you're getting a record of what's happening as you go through. I, I don't think there's that, that feeling anymore. I know when I say, "Oh yeah, I'm going to CRF," they say, "You're doing what?" (laughs) You know, but we had a number of guides that were CRF people and guides here, so it's, and the old-timers, a lot of them are gone, you know. I know some folks who were giving a tour and here comes four or five CRF people with their headlamps and their dirty clothes, "Make way, we'd like to get through," because they were in a big hurry. That would really rile some of our guides. That disrupted their tour. So word got out. You don't disrupt tours. You wait until they're out of the way. I don't care how hurried you are, stay away. And sometimes that made fun because you could hear a tour coming. When I was doing it, I said, "Well, we'll hide in here," you know. So you go sit down in the dark, turn your lights off, you know, and watching the people go by. And I remember one time somebody asked the guide, "Well, what do you, what's back there?" And the guide kind of, on a, "Oh, that's where we keep the bears." You know, of course we heard all that. And there's always that kid with a flashlight. Schwit! (like flicking a flashlight) Grrr! "Mommy, there really are bears back there!" (laughs) Little things like that happen, so.

BB: So you mentioned your kids before. Some, they were, they didn't really flee. They, they, they really enjoyed it here and—

KN: Well, they were, they were born, so to speak, into caves. And they were here all the way up until they graduated from high school, went on to college. So, in fact, my one son actually helped out making one of the movies down here that they had on national, what was that? Na-, Readers Digest made a, a movie and he helped carry equipment around during the evening, during the nighttime. And they said, "Well, go stand over there. Pretend you're crawling through a hole." So he's in those types of things. He did research with Earthwatch. They did all the way from Violet City to Natural Entrance, which is about three miles. For many years, they recorded and documented every piece of Native American stuff that they could find along the way and he helped with them, with the computer work and the, see all the light and the grunt, crawling around and holding, so they could bounce a laser beam off of it. So he did that for many years. My other son was a nice little thin wispy little person and he got into CRF and they love him. "Go through that little hole," you know. So he was able to do that. My daughter's in a number of different publicity pictures because the person who took all of those was a friend of ours and they needed models, and, "Kevin, get your uniform. I need you to stand there," you know. So, when President Reagan showed up, that was his first visit to Mammoth Cave. I didn't meet him personally, but he got to see me a lot, because they had a display of photographs of Mammoth Cave and I was probably in about every other one of them. (laughs) "Who's that guy?" "Well, that's Kevin." No, he didn't ask that, but one of the first presidents I actually got to wave at. (laughs) He came here to visit, so that was kind of fun.

BB: So your kids still have an interest in the nat-, the nat-, the natural—

KN: Oh, yeah, my one son's, he's, he got married and they started to have a family. And when you reach that certain stage when you've got young kids, its hard to get away. I got away, but it's a little harder for him to get away. (laughs) So he's still a member of CRF and occasionally we'll come down. But he stays at our house now instead of at the headquarters and setting up a tent or whatever because we live so close to it. He lives in Defiance, Ohio. And our other son, he would do things like that Earthwatch. He, he won some exploring

things, but now it's hard to get your family members to go with you on these after-hours trips. Technically they're not allowed to go. You have to be an employee of the park. And when they ac-, he actually worked for the park the one time, helped with computer stuff, he could go anytime along with us, but once he non-volunteered, as the volunteer job was over with, then no. But they come down but not necessarily go caving anymore, so.

BB: Um-hm.

KN: Yeah. But I, I think it was a great experience for them. [0:40:00] And you read the book Old Ranger or something, and they talk about the family, the kids, and they're out in the woods and learning about this and tracking these animals and, you know, it's almost what they did. So.

BB: Mm. It's a good way to raise a family. []

KN: Yes, I think it is. Yeah. And there are families down here, that, you know, that still are able to do that. A number of our permanents have families and their kids have been involved and we had, you know, generations of cave guides that were here from pre-slavery days and until post-slavery days and even on up today, you know. Three or four generations of father-son passing the information on down. Doesn't happen that often anymore, but you still have families that are part of the Mammoth Cave family, you know, as far as guides and they all know one another, so, yeah.

BB: So any final words about the meaningfulness of this whole thing and how far you've come? You've come this far and—

KN: Yeah, if you'd, if you'd have talked to me back in 1969, that I'd be here in 2013, I would say, "No, no you're crazy," you know. But the first, second, third year, it starts getting in your blood. It really does. I wish I'd have bought a piece of property back then (laughs) you know, but I couldn't afford it at that particular time. It was really, "Am I going to always

work here?" You know, you want to do some other stuff, but I I really have no desire to go up the ladder, so to speak. Being a cave guide, you know, second career. Alright, I've already had the one career I retired from it. But this is the fun part, you know. I don't have to do it as such. I said, the only way you can really go up the ladder in the parks service is you get away from the people. And all of a sudden you find yourself in an office and the only contact you have with people maybe would be with somebody that's got a complaint. (laughs) And you have to be the mediator that way. So I had no desire to ever do that. That one, my one year, one summer of being a supervisor cured me of that right away. I enjoyed doing it, it was a lot of fun. But in terms of the people I was helping, but as far as myself, I didn't like the, I don't know, the prestige, whatever you want to call it, of being called a guide and being able to walk out there and talk to people whenever I wanted to. You, you just, suddenly you were a stranger. But not to the guides, because they were, hopefully learned something from it. I had about, I had eight people, I think, that I had to train. Those that had been here a few years were very easy to, although sometimes a little hard because you, "Now, let's try something...." Arrarrarr... (laughs) You know, they were here before I was. How in the world am I going to tell them what to do, you know? It's, it's, it's sometimes a little difficult but to me, yeah, the best of both worlds, and now I have the best of one world, and that's here. Now I only have a couple more years. I put in my resignation papers in for the end of 19-, 2016, because that's 200 years of guiding, 100 years of the National Parks Service and seventy-five years of Mammoth Cave, and almost fifty years of marriage (laughs) so, I kind of, all this is celebrating the same time, so I figured this is a good way to say good-bye, but probably never do. I live too close. (laughs) This is always home. Thank you very much for being able to do this. I appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]