Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription

Project name: Ranger Lore (LOCRP)
Field ID and name: #0013; Kathy Proffitt interview
Interviewee: Kathy Proffitt
Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman
Date: 2/20/2014
Location: Mammoth Cave National Park, KY
Others Present: Lilli Tichinin
Equipment used: Tascam DR-60D
Microphone: Audio-Technica AT803B, lavalier mic
Recording Format: .wav
Recorded Tracks in Session: 1 audio track
Duration: [00:49:07]

Keywords:
Corresponding Materials:
Forms: KFP2014LOCRP_0013_BBms0001 - KFP2014LOCRP_0013_BBms0003
Audio recording: KFP2014LOCRP_0013_BBsr0001
Video files: KFP2014LOCRP_0013_BBmv0001 - KFP2014LOCRP_0013_BBmv0008
Photo log: KFP2014LOCRP_0013_BBms0004
Photos: KFP2014LOCRP_0013_LTph0001 - KFP2014LOCRP_0013_LTph0018

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 is February 20, 2014. This is Brent Björkman, the director of the Kentucky Folklife Program. This is another one of our interviews that we’re doing for the Archie Green Fellowship, the Ranger Lore project, where we’re looking at the occupational folk culture of park rangers for the Library of Congress American Folklife Center this year, in 2013-2014. And today I’m back at Mammoth Cave Park. I’ve been doing some interviews away from the park at the homes of some retired employees as well. But it’s really great to be back at the park and talk with more employees. Can you tell me your name and your position here?


BB: Okay, Kathy. You know, when I’ve been doing these interviews, I really start out, kind of in, in a chronological way, and that seems to be fitting and, and that seems to be something that’s fine for you, you said. Can you tell me a little bit about, now, did you grow up going to parks? Maybe your first thought about parks themselves? But then, of course, the origin story, people thought, you know, how did, how did people, how did you come to, to the place right here today, you know, your first time here?

KP: Well, when we were in school, our fieldtrips would come to the picnic area and we would have picnics and sometimes walk down to the historic entrance. But we never got to go in the cave because school budgets were always so tight. And then a friend of mine, when I was thirteen, invited me to go on the Echo River tour with her and her church group. And so that was my first experience inside the cave. And then later on when I was about fourteen, my parents brought me over and we took a tour called the N-, Frozen Niagara tour. And then I got started working here, never dreamed about working here, but when Ronnie Doyle, who is the Pupil Personnel Director in the Barren County School System came knocking on my door at home one morning, my senior year of high school, and said, “I really think you should apply for a position to work this summer at Mammoth Cave National Park.” And handed an application inside the door. “And by the way, the
application is due tomorrow.” (laughs) So, that’s, so I filled it out and at that time it was called a stay-in-school program, so they were looking for people who were going on to college and it was to help you get through college. And I was looking for a job that would pay for my college. So that’s how I got started.

BB: What, what, what was Ronnie? Was he a family friend or how did he, how did that—

KP: He was a family friend. He went to school with my dad, they, and had kept in close contact over the years. And he also had worked here in past summers and he was always looking for great opportunities. He worked with students in a very positive way to help them better themselves and, and build their careers. And he just thought it was a good opportunity. And it was, a wonderful opportunity.

BB: So that first summer, I think I’ve heard some of the stories about how people were seasonal, and it, you know, the stars lined up and they, and they were able to pursue permanent kinds of things.

KP: Yes.

BB: What did you, what did you first do when you came here? Can you tell me the, maybe the first day of work?

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Or your experience the first week of work. Was it, tell me, was it overwhelming, exciting, all of it, you know. Can you, can you spin that out for me?

KP: Well I’ll even start back at my interview process. I interviewed for a job with three people, Joe McAllen, Lewis Cutliff, and Mikey Houchins, who is the human resources specialist there. And I interviewed at Barren County High School. Had never done an
interview, had never had a job before. So when I walked in and saw three people to conduct the interview, I was a nervous wreck. But they immediately put me to ease. And didn’t dream of getting the job. Thought it sounded like fun, working the information desk, talking to visitors, telling them about local things to do and about the cave and about the park. And felt pretty confident I could do that job, but didn’t dream of getting it because there were a lot of applicants for the job. And later that afternoon, I get a phone call with a job offer. And of course, I said yes, and as soon as I hung up the phone I really realized what had happened, and decided, I don’t know that I can talk to people. I was extremely shy, had never had a job before, and thought I’ve really opened a can of worms and might have committed to something I wasn’t sure I could do. But then I went on, showed up to work on March 1, 1987. They put me with a wonderful young lady, Laura Peppers, to train me at the information desk. And by the end of the day I had totally fallen in love with the place and the people and knew it was going to run a fierce career decision somewhere down the road, as, am I going to go National Park Service or am I going to pursue my dream of teaching in school. So for a while, I thought I’ve got the best of both jobs. I’ll work at the park for four years, pay my way through college, become a teacher and maybe I can work my summers out here. But then different windows kept opening, different doors kept opening, different positions kept opening. I’ve worked anywhere from working the information desk to answering phone calls and correspondence to guiding tours, working in environmental education program. I’ve done special events and detailed in other divisions in the park. And by the end of my junior year of college, I didn’t want to give this up. But I was too committed in the educational program to change careers, I thought, at that point. So my senior year of college I decided I was going to try to teach. Couldn’t find a teaching job. And term positions started opening at the park. So I applied for one of those. And it was a four year term. I got selected. So I did that position. At the end of four years, the job turned into a permanent position. And then I worked that job for several seasons and then this job that I’m currently in, Daily Operations Supervisor, opened up and I applied for it and was fortunate enough to get it. It’s a job I love. I can’t ever see leaving it unless they pull me out the door someday (laughs) and say, “That’s it.”
BB: So were you guiding as well?

KP: I did. I’ve guided all the tours with the exception of the wild cave tour. I don’t like the nine inch crawls or places like Split Rock are just not for me. But I have done all the cave tours, even the Echo River trip, which I despised. I’m not a water person and so my first experience at Echo River, I had never paddled a boat before, didn’t know the language of what it meant to tie the boats up, wasn’t for sure where the life jacket shed was. And I learned to paddle a boat sitting on the guide lounge couch. One of the older guides handed me an oar and said we’re going to practice before you go down. And that’s how I learned to paddle a boat: sitting on the guide lounge couch. Terrified on my first trip. I got down there and we’re supposed to talk to visitors on the boat while we’re paddling them on the boat. I was so concerned about where I turned around the boat at and not getting hung on the rock that I didn’t even know where the rock was to not get hung up on that I couldn’t say a word. Totally lost my voice and we all got back safely. I led multiple tours after that. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be. But I was a little relieved when I didn’t have to do that tour anymore.

BB: Right. So you mentioned somebody teaching you to paddle on the, as a, on the, on the table, you know.

KP: Um-hm.

BB: I think about, it’s such an intimate relationship with people here. It seems to be. Can you talk about mentors? Whether it’s somebody you were trailing, they were leading it, a tour, or maybe it’s just a mentor. Maybe it’s, this could be a whole piece that we talk about.

KP: Um-hm.
BB: Maybe mentors, you know, on site doing tours, but also just mentors throughout your life and some of the stories you have about them. Or what you feel about them and, and how they, they grew into what they grew into.

KP: We have, I have a lot of mentors actually. And I'll probably get teary-eyed about one of them, Joe McAllen. And he's no longer with us but he was one of the people who interviewed me for the job. And he gave me so many opportunities to grow. And he would be there to kid with you, be there to correct you gently if he needed to, but he was always a supporter. And we used to have a lot of conversations once I got this job. He loved to do the job that I did. He used to do this job. And he would come by every spring. And when we were putting together schedules and people wanting their special days off for summer, whether they get weekends off or whether it's weekdays. That's usually our decision to make. The people always have a preference and they would stop by and he would stop by in the spring, every spring, when I was putting together schedules. And, “I want weekends off,” and “I want all early shifts,” and “I want this set of tours,” and it was just a common little thing that we always had and did. And so I miss that. I think of him every spring when it's time to put those schedules together. So he was a mentor in my life. Ronnie Doyle, if he had not told me about these positions and this job, I would not be here. Because it wouldn't even be one of those places that I would have ever dreamed of putting in an application for. And it's been in my backyard my entire life. I grew up just right outside of the park, you know, near Glasgow. So Joy Lyons, I can't go without mentioning her. She's given me all types of guidance between personal life things or work things, work experiences and all types of opportunities and learning opportunities, taught me the art of delegation, that you don't have to do everything, and that some things are going to be hard to let go of, but you need to do that for other people to have learning experiences. Lewis Cutliff, he's also a mentor just because of his wisdom. And just, he has the knack of making you feel special and just kind words that he always spoke. And there's many more. Just about everybody that has ever worked here, whether it's a person that was their first or second year, we're family. So everybody has something special that they contributed that builds our character and makes us who we are. We're family.
BB: You’re a permanent employee. And—

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Is there a different relationship with seasonals? I mean, I, certainly there’s some inclusivity and you try to be that way, but is there a camaraderie that’s—

KP: Yes.

BB: Not the same? Or, or, how does that work? How does those relationships work?

KP: It is. We have permanents and we have seasonals. We have some who work part-time, some who work full-time and some who just come in intermittently. But we all work as such a team and such a family that you really don’t see those divisional lines. I think of people who work here, it doesn’t matter what your title is or what your status is, if you’re part-time or full-time, you’re an employee at Mammoth Cave National Park and I feel like our working relationships are very smooth and there’s not that division between permanents and seasonal staff. We all jump in and do what needs to be done when we need to do it.

BB: Right.

KP: We have good working relationships.

BB: What’s your definition of a ranger? I mean, there’s, you know, a park ranger and it’s—

KP: My definition of a ranger, oh, a person who is friendly, approachable, out-going. They’re there for the visitor, to answer their questions, try to make a connection to the resource.
Professional, always a smile on their face, approachable, trusting, trustworthy. I think rangers should be trustworthy. Those are some of the characteristics I look for.

BB: Is ranger a universal term in your eyes, of both people that are in the divisions? I mean, I, is it throughout the division, they’re all rangers, and the guides, you know, how they feel about themselves, as a unit, they’re rangers as well? Or can you explain that?

KP: Um-hm. I think there’s rangers and I think there’s guides. I think the guide force here, they consider themselves guides, because it’s tradition. There have always been guides at Mammoth Cave, even before we were a national park. They referred to themselves as guides because they were guiding people through the cave on tours. Ranger is a term that covers us all under the National Park Service. We’re all rangers working for the National Park Service. But then I think there is a slight division if it’s just mentally among ourselves of how they think of themselves.

BB: You were talking about mentors just, several mentors, and I’m sure you could even go on.

KP: I could go on. (laughs)

BB: But, you know, can you talk a little bit more about, you know, you said Joy was a mentor in many different ways, about life and about work and, and how to delegate and those sorts of things. Can you talk a little bit about gender and, you know, women working in the park system? Because you have been here a while now.

KP: Yes.

BB: And, and I think that’s really interesting to a lot of people. It’s interesting to me.

KP: Um-hm.
BB: About how that’s changed over time and how that’s changed for you even. Or your outside perspective and maybe a personal perspective as well?

KP: I think people like Joy had laid the groundwork that it made it exceptionally easy for me to move into positions that traditionally had been held by men. And the park service, many people way before her also had laid the groundwork. But traditionally women did not guide tours in the national park here. At first, when they first started guiding, they even had to wear the skirts and high heels and hose. You didn’t get to wear the uniform that I’m wearing today. So we’ve come along way as far as even what we were allowed to wear once we got into the guide force. But women I think have an important role in the park. Even in early times, hotel managers’ wives were taking people into the cave, but you may not hear about those stories very often. But we’ve got some great researchers in our seasonal staff now that are finding those stories. And some, we’ve, we speculated before that they were probably taking people underground, that it wasn’t just the men who were going underground. But things have changed a lot over the years and women are in more traditionally held positions that the men had. I’ve not had any barriers in my career. I’ve worked very well with everyone, men, male or female. It’s been a pretty smooth ride for me.

BB: That’s good.

KP: Um-hm.

BB: How do you think rangers and your work, every, every park has concessionaires and, and people who supply, ex-, outside support or, or ex-, ex-, extra, maybe it’s ferry boats, you know, or they deliver food, or they work in food services. How do those relationships work with the park? Do you have any thoughts about your personal relationships and, and, and how that kind of all works as a system—
KP: Sure.

BB: Over the years? Because I know that, talking to Jim Carroll, he was the head of the, you know, a lot of these kinds of things and he had something to say. But it’s just a really interesting thing because they’re not technically, you know—

KP: Parks employees.

BB: Federal employees, park service.

KP: Um-hm.

BB: But, and from your experience, knowing that, knowing the park service nationally, well you have pride, you have pride for Mammoth Cave and working here too, but what is that like? What has it been like? Has it changed over the years with, with, maybe at the very, from the, the very beginning as you know, when it became a park?

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Seventy-three years ago. And the families that did that support. And just the whole thing.

KP: Since I’ve been working here, I feel like we’ve had a wonderful relationship with the concessionaires that’s in the park. When I was guiding tours, of course, we’d take the busses to and from the cave entrances. And the bus drivers are concession employees. But to me, it’s almost like they’re part of the guide force. They may wear a different hat and wear a different color uniform but they’re dealing with the same general public that we’re dealing with and you build a report with those drivers just like you do with the staff that you’re working with. And that carried on in the position that I have now. I have to communicate with bus drivers for random pickups or schedule changes. And so we talk
almost on a daily basis at times. And that, that has not changed in positions, from going from guide force to a manager type position, that feeling of everybody’s on the same team. We’re all here to do the same job and make, and do it as safely as we can and, and have fun while we do it. They, they often joke with the staff and stop by for visits every once in a while. But we’ve had a really good working relationship with the concessions. And we have even been invited to some of the special events that they have started hosting like Roots in the Cave to help coordinate and to help present, and we work closely with them to offer tours to areas of the cave that you wouldn’t normally get to go to. Getting family members who attend these genealogy events through the concessions. So we work closely together, network closely together to get people into those special places that family members might have written their name on the cave walls, or there’s a specific story that relates to that family. Maybe they discovered the passageway, and we were able to take guides who had been to these locations and get those family members in. We worked through concessions to do that. So it seems to work well.

BB: You talked about special things with concessionaires.

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Can you tell me a little bit, as we were working on today, the Folklorist in the Park application, and you as a partner for next summer. Tell me a little bit more about the special events and how have they, have they grown in a certain way? You certainly, I imagine you’ve had a hand in that to a degree. But can you give us an idea about the scope of those? What each, each one is, give us some examples and what they mean, when they’re held, what’s, what’s the focus?

KP: The focus? Our focus is always trying to draw visitors to the park and into the resource and try to share our knowledge with them and have them have buy-in in the park. One of the special events that we do is the National Park Service week and that takes place in April. We start off that weekend with a wildflower day where we take guides and they do
hikes out to Cedar Sink and other places in the park. And we partner with local volunteers to also help lead these hikes and we identify wildflowers and how they were used and how they’re important to the park and why we protect those things for future generations. That leads into different activities, like we may do some free cave tours during National Park Week to let people get in and see a resource that they may or may not can afford to go to. So we give them an opportunity to come in and do that for free. Something short, just kind of the introductory type thing. And then we’ll do things like Junior Ranger Day where we focus strictly on the kids and how to instill in them what the National Park Service is about, protecting and preserving and trying to get that buy-in and maybe opening a door that they didn’t know about that could be out there for their future. And learning about their world around them and how it’s important to protect and preserve that world so that it’s there for them to learn from and survive by. Other special events we do is Cave Sing, which is an extremely popular event. We take visitors down inside the cave in December, first Sunday of every year. And we bring in groups and they sing traditional Christmas carols inside the caves. Singing and music has been a tradition in Mammoth Cave for, ever since the tours have been going on and people going in the cave, because the acoustics are so good. You’ll read about where people blow bugles and horns and made music and sang and, because they liked the acoustics. So that’s a tradition that we carry on, do the Cave Sing every year. Other special events that we do, I’m trying to think, we used to, years ago we had homecomings in the park on the Fourth of July. That’s something that was a partnership with the hotel concessions also. It’s not been as well attended in the last couple of years, so we probably won’t do that again for a few years, but maybe something big in 2016 with our special events that’s coming up. For that, we’ll have some type of homecoming event. So our special events are designed to get people into the park and feature a certain aspect of what’s going on. It may be cultural, it may be natural. We’ve done, several years ago, we did something called Earthspeak. And under that umbrella, we did Color Fall and Spring Fests. And we had concert series in the park. And we brought artists into the park. We brought basketmakers and chair bottomers into the park. We had artists come in and teach watercolor painting, and we would go out into the resource and they would show people how to paint flowers or plants and then we would take a, and we had a juried art show. So
those were some huge special events that we do. Unfortunately, funding and times change, and we can’t always continue some of those traditions. But those are along the lines of some of the things that we have done.

BB: And you coordinate, I mean, that’s, it’s, has that been an evolving thing for you as far as—

KP: It has been. I love doing the special events. And the position that I’m in now, I have to delegate a lot of that and give other people opportunities to do that. But National Park Week was always a big event that I helped coordinate. Wildflower Day, I’ve coordinated that. Cave Scene, for several years I was a coordinator, we usually do core coordinators in most of the events, so it changes up, but for several years those were things that I was able to do. One year during my term position, I was supposed to be furloughed for four months. And Jim Carroll was one of the people who came to me and asked if I would like to do a detail into his division in external programs to work for four weeks with him working on Color Fall Spring Fest and Earth, the Earth Speaks series. And so that was how I got into even more special events and that was very interesting. We got to go out and meet artists and talk with them about what they could do and present in the park and put together programs and activities that we were going to do and meet with people who were going to perform in the concerts in the park and do press releases and getting things together to invite the public to these. So that was very interesting. It was a fun time. Brought a lot of people into the park that may or may not have come just to take a cave tour. Maybe they couldn’t get in the cave, but these were things on the surface that they could get to very easily. So it brought the neighboring counties into the park and gave them a sense, I hope, of ownership that this is their park, it’s in their back door, make use of it.

BB: You just mentioned Jim Carroll and he delegated that four week piece of work to you and—

KP: Um-hm.
BB: It just really shows that, this idea of giving people—can you speak to this idea— about giving people chan-, you said—

KP: Chances.

BB: Your current job now, gives you this chance for delegation and the opportunities.

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Can you talk a little bit more about, maybe, some experiences of you being able to do that and, and how other people have, have given you feedback about is it a good thing? Was it a, was it a worthwhile thing?

KP: Yes. We try to look at everything as a learning experience at the cave. And if you don’t get the opportunities to do it, it’s hard to learn from it. When I got to do the detail in external programs, we worked as a team. There was a team of us who worked together in pulling all of this together. So it wasn’t just one person has the lead type thing. It was a group effort. Other opportunities that I’ve been given, just schedule-making for example. I was doing schedules way before we started this position, but it’s what led to me helping to get the position. By giving people opportunities to do things that are outside their normal job of duties, it allows growth for the individual and a sense of buy-in and reward and that they’re valued for what they can offer to the program. And just because it’s always been done a certain way doesn’t mean that’s the way it has to continue to be done. There might be a better way of doing it. So it can be a learning opportunity for the person that it’s been delegated to and they in turn can sometimes teach the person who’s been doing it for years maybe a better way of doing something. So it can be a win-win situation. It doesn’t always mean I’m delegating this to you to give you an opportunity to learn to do something but I may get something out of it in return too. I may learn a better way of doing that. So it’s a win-win situation. Um... at a loss right now.
BB: We talked before when we had our meeting this morning about another, another thing with you and you had kind of ended and you were talking about, I think it’s really interesting, you, you feel like a lucky person having this job and progressing in the way you did. You, you told me a bit of a story about somebody who came back and, and had reflected on their time with you. Can you, can you kind of reiterate that for me.

KP: It was actually in a letter. Joy Lyons was retiring and we had asked for people, if they couldn’t come, to wr-, send in comments and, and we would put them in a scrapbook for her. And one of our former seasonals who worked here had written to Joy, basically thanking her for giving him an opportunity to come to Mammoth Cave, that before all the jobs he had worked at were just jobs. They got him through the day, they paid the bills and he did the bare minimum to get by and then he went home. But he said in his letter that when he got here, things were different. And he said that the job that he was given by Joy and by me to do and what we had said to him at some point along the way had actually given value to the job and that a job could be more than just a paycheck. That it could be something much more rewarding and he actually started caring what he did. And it wasn’t just a job to go to every day, get the money and go home at night. It became something he wanted to do and instilled in him to do his very best. That it was something special. And he had never felt that way before until he started working here. We really feel like people, seasonals say all the time when they first start here, I don’t want to mess up. I don’t want to mess up. We’re not going to let you mess up. And we go in and we audit tours. And it’s not a— I tell them all the time—it’s not a “got you” moment. We’re not going to audit your tours to see what we can find wrong, to say we “got you” on this. It’s a how can we make your program the best it can be. You’ve already got the skill set or you wouldn’t be working here. We’re wanting to make it the best program we can make it. And we’re not her to say “got you.” Our goal is to see that everyone succeeds everyday and feels good about themselves when they go home at the end of the day. And we really believe that. It’s not a “gotcha,” it’s a success story every day.
BB: As more and more people around the, Kentucky learn about this project I’m doing—

KP: Um-hm.

BB: It’s amazing how many people, “Oh, I worked there for a summer.” Or, “I've always wanted to work there for a summer.” Or—

KP: Um-hm.

BB: “It must be fascinating,” or, and I tell them a story that you’ve been telling me or something.

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Is it, tell me historically, is it hard to get into these positions and how has that changed over time? I know there’s not a lot, there’s not a lot of nepotism, you know as far as—

KP: No.

BB: But there are people from different families—

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Maybe a child of a worker that maybe is drawn or—

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Sometimes they’re drawn or are they repelled? Or, you know, maybe both? But can you tell me a little bit about how that’s changed, maybe using your own experience.
KP: Competition for National Parks Service jobs have always been very difficult to get. There are lots of guidelines that we have to go by through OPM and human resources regulations and, so, and it depends season on season on how many positions that you may have to fill. Oh, there’s lots of competition. It’s hard to say how sometimes people get selected, other than there’s criteria. They fill out the application, they make a score, you end up on a list and we go through that list and then we look at each application. And we have a series of questions that we ask the people that they’ve listed as their references. And then we follow up by talking to the person the phone. It sounds like if they’re a good match for the team that we have here and that their experiences that they’ve had other places will help them here. As far as family members, I think it’s a bug that if you really like the job, if you live it not only here at the park, but you live it at home and either you love it or you don’t. And the people who have come back and their family members have worked here, I think it’s been such a tradition that their family worked here and they loved it so well that they’ve tried really hard on their application or done career fields or taken courses at, at Western or other colleges to try to open that door to let them into getting a job here.

Competition’s just fierce. And I keep telling people who have tried for years and years and years to get on, keep applying. It just doesn’t mean that you're not qualified, it just means that we have a lot of applicants. And there’s procedures that we have to go through in the hiring process to pick you up. So don’t get discouraged. Just keep applying. Some years we have more budget to hire people. So money is a big factor in how many people that we get to hire every season. And a lot of people, when they get their foot in the door, unless they're moving on to a permanent job somewhere else, or maybe it wasn’t a good fit for them, they may return season after season after season, which means we don’t have a high turnover. And then sometimes it’s just a college job, like it started out for me. I’m going to work here for four years, pay my college bills and I’m going to go on to my other career that I’ve been training for in school. And when they graduate, they leave, and they go on to their career field, so then we’ll have openings. So we have a wide range of people. We have families who traditionally work here, we have college people who are coming through and this is just a summer job for them. We have retired teachers who come here. They’ve worked and they want to do something, still with the public, and they feel like it’s a teaching opportunity and
an interpretive opportunity. They can continue in the field that they like. So we have a wide range.

BB: You mentioned that you, initially you thought maybe it was your four years and then you’d go into your, your career path that you were going to the university for.

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Tell me about that. That seems like, it, you said it was teaching.

KP: They kind of go hand in hand.

BB: That’s what, I wanted you to speak on that.

KP: Um-hm. They do. Both of, for you to have an indoor classroom or an outdoor classroom, is the way I look at it. I was going to be teaching somewhere. I really thought I’d probably end up in environmental education. When I ended up in the park service and getting a job. But then other doors opened for other things. But every day’s a teaching moment, whether you’re a teacher in the classroom and you’ve got your chalkboard and your computer boards that they have now or you’re in the resource, in the cave teaching. We like to say it’s an interpretive moment, but really on some level, you are teaching something about the resource. And but you’re trying to make that emotional connection that they can take home with them. And I think, in a classroom, you’re probably doing some of the same things. You’re wanting them, to instill in them something to take home, something they can better themselves with, and learn from. And we do the same thing here. They kind of go hand in hand. Teachers make good interpreters.

BB: Do actual classroom teachers, probably in the region, do they also bring students?

KP: They do.
BB: So you must have a, I was wondering if you have a connection with them because of who you are and what you’ve trained to do.

KP: I do. We have school groups that come in and bring fieldtrips here all the time. It’s part of their curriculum in Kentucky that they get out into the resource and that’s what the environmental education program does. But they overfill, so they can’t take all of the groups that want to come here. So one of the things that I started doing in this position is, we started doing special groups for teachers in schools who could not get into the environmental education program. And we started seeing our numbers drop because tour prices started going up and a lot of the school students couldn’t afford the ticket prices that were there. So Joy and I got together and went and made a proposal to the superintendent’s office several years ago, could we come up with an educational school rate to benefit schools so that students could come at a reduced rate and take the historic tour. And they approved it. So now we have a five dollar education rate. And that became so popular that I couldn’t keep up with all the phone calls and requests of special groups or working them into already scheduled tours, that now we’ve had to even turn that over to two individuals to do. And they track that, and we work closely together. They schedule the groups and then coordinate with me to make sure we have staff, you know, available to accommodate those groups. So we work daily, I have a stack of papers in my box right now, and several emails to respond to, of groups wanting special trips and when they can get into the cave. So education in schools, they make a great use of the park here.

BB: Are those, are those, that historic five dollar tour for students, special student rate—

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Is that led by somebody like you or does a regular, a regular guide—

KP: A regular guide leads that—
BB: Is it a different tour, is it different? Did that person have special training?

KP: Actually, any of our guides do that. They’re really good about—I keep a book and a special group sheet on every group that comes so we know where they’re coming from that day, how many students they have and how many chaperones. And quite often, the guides, I’ll put it on their schedule, “You’re having a group of seventy from Park City Elementary School today.” And they want to come up and find out the teacher’s name and see if I have any other background information. “Do you know what they’re studying? How do I need to tailor their tour so that it meets their curriculum that they study?” And so they’ll me-, if we don’t have it written down, they meet with the teacher before the group, “Are you studying geology? Are you studying history? Or is this just a fun trip?” And sometimes, it’s just a fun trip. It’s just a reward trip. So whatever the guide wants to talk about, they talk about. But a lot of the time, it’s curriculum based and the teachers have a certain goal that they’re studying and they’re following up a unit that they’ve just finished and so the guides are able then to cater their tour to what they’ve been studying in the classroom. And those are the most rewarding ones because you can get interaction with the kids when you’re doing that. And those are groups that I miss. A lot of people will shy away from the school groups but they’re always fun, especially groups that were prepared to come here. So those are days I kind of miss. I guess with the education background, is the one-on-one with the kids and seeing their excitement. And yes, they’re loud, but they’re excited. And they’re like sponges, absorbing everything that you say and try to relate to them about the resource.

BB: Right. So yeah, as you progress in the, in your job, now you delegate more. So you’re not having the hands-on as much perhaps.

KP: I don’t. I don’t have the hands-on that I used to. Most of mine is spent in paperwork and dealing with day-to-day situations. Putting together schedules, putting together training, getting ready to hire if we have hire-, new hires this year, dealing with any incidents that may come up underground. I’m the first point of contact if we have any type of medical
situation underground. So I work closely with the law enforcement division here because they respond to our medical emergencies or any other type of emergency that we might have underground. So my job, my position, works directly with the staff more and with other division-, divisional staff to get any job done that we need to get done. I work with maintenance closely. If we have a lights-out situation, I'm the in-between person to pass on that information. A lot of paperwork now, so, earlier today I was just walking across the lobby and someone comes out of the exhibit areas, like, “That was wonderful, that was great.” And I was like, I can't pass up those opportunities. I was like, “What did you like best?” And he was like, “Well I like it all. This place is worth driving three hundred and twenty miles to come back to to take a cave tour.” He was like, “Can you get me some information?” And I love opportunities like that because they're impromptu and it gets me back in touch with the visitor and why we're really all here, even though my job has changed and I'm not with the visitor as much unless there's a medical situation or unless someone’s occasionally not happy or sometimes they're extremely happy with their guide and they just want to tell somebody about it. And those are opportunities. I miss the visitor one-on-one. So every once in a while I have to slip out of my office and, and get that visitor fix.

BB: Some of the other interviews talked about building this idea to, in the conscience of, of visitors, that this is a special place. And I wanted to ask you about your concept. You've touched on it in many different ways for the last thirty-five, forty minutes, your concept of stewardship. And do you, you know, do you have a personal definition for it? And how do you see yourself and others fitting into the definition? You know, what do you think your contribution to preserving this place for future generations is—

KP: Oh, that’s a hard question. (laughs)

BB: It’s very long too.
KP: Yeah, it’s very long. That’s okay. I think buy-in is important. I think feeling a part of the resource and a part of the decision-making processes of why we’re here and why we do the jobs we do, why is it important? And keeping that in the forefront of, not letting all the other little tidbits of things that, that take you away from that main job, to try to stay focused on why we’re here. We’re here to protect that resource for future generations. If somebody doesn’t do that, and when we don’t have the buy-in to help preserve it, it’s not going to be here for the future, because things just get whittled away and they disappear and there are things that have disappeared over the years that we can’t get back and if we don’t have buy-in to what we do and in, pass those traditions on, whether it’s guiding or making schedules or just meeting with the public and answering their questions, then those are things that I think we’ll lose, and we may not can get back. Things disappear and you can’t get them back. So buy-in is big. Believing in what you’re doing and, and doing the best you can do every day is what I think is very important. Be the best you can be every day, put your best foot forward, and if today’s a bad day, tomorrow’s going to be better.

BB: Like I said, you know, talking to other rangers, talking about the goal of the park is to make, have visitors make intellectual and emotional connections to the resource. Can you tell me about your emotional connection to this particular site? Maybe think about, can you tell me, because you have this wide range of, of duties, you’ve seen a lot of underground, you’ve probably seen a lot of topside as well.

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Like what’s your favorite time of day at the park? And, and where is that place? And what place do you like to, maybe, like, go by yourself or what place do you like to maybe share with your intimate friends that, that know about—

KP: I don’t know that I want to share my favorite place. Then everybody will go there. But (laughs) I will. (laughs) I guess one of my favorite places in the park is Three Springs Pumphouse. It’s on the surface, out Flint Ridge Road. And it’s a little area with a quaint little
stone building that was built many, many years ago and it’s just a conversion where all of these springs come together. And it’s just a short, leisurely easy walk into peaceful quietness that not a lot of people know about. Joy Lyons was the first person that took me out there. Very few people I take out there to share it with, because it seems to just be a special place. And I, sometimes special places get overused. So it’s not, I share it with special people that we go out there. It’s quiet. My favorite thing about coming to work is my drive. Once I hit the park boundary, it’s like a sense of relief. And I just enjoy, morning’s my favorite time. I’m a morning person. I like to see the sun come up. I like the way the park looks. It’s fresh. The birds are coming out. It’s like everything is waking up. I love the springtime drive in of a morning when things are just fresh. Maybe right after a rain and the sun’s just starting to come out and there’s a little bit of steam coming off of the roads. Those are those days when you think, do I really get to work in this place every single day? It’s like, yes, don’t wake me up if it’s a dream. (laughs) Special drive in is probably my favorite part of the day. Kind of relaxing, thinking about what the day’s going to start to be and just gearing up for what’s going to happen which you never know. (laughs)

BB: So it’s 2014. What, do you have any thoughts and hopes and dreams about National Park Service and Mammoth Cave and, as we go forward in, from this very moment right now, forward?

KP: Forward? I would love to see more permanent positions in the park, but I know that’s a huge budget thing. We have so many dedicated, qualified employees that are seasonals, and I’m afraid we’re going to lose them and their talents because we don’t have the budget and funding and I think the Parks Service across the nation, not just here, but all of our units out there are seeing the same thing. We’re seeing dedicated seasonal people who have so much to offer but we just don’t have the funding to make positions to pick up those dedicated people that can make a difference. So that’s my concern for the future is that we’ll continue to lose positions that we cannot fill and the turnover is so great. And I think in some positions you need the continuity to do that job the best that you can do it. It’s a building, you build on experiences and over the years, that’s what I’ve done. I’ve built off of one
experience to another, from leading my first tour to what I do now. It’s a building experience.

BB: Over your career here, you, you love to have those little moments with visitors.

KP: Um-hm.

BB: Especially if they’re positive, I guess, but even—has that changed people’s conception of, of why this park is important, in the last, I don’t remember how many years it would be. Twenty-seven years, did you say?

KP: Almost twenty-seven, yes.

BB: Yeah.

KP: It’s hard to say. Some visitors, when they come here, they already have a preconceived notion of what they’re here to do. They’re just here to not be talked to. They just want to come and see the resource and go on. And others are here to learn every single thing they can about the job that you do, from how do you get this job to how long the cave is and who explores the cave and how connections are made. And some people come here with a purpose of following their genealogy and they want to know about a specific person, whether it’s the Bransford family who guided here or whether it’s Archibald Miller who was one of the first owners of the cave or John Houchins, you know, he was known as the legend who found Mammoth Cave by chasing a bear. So some people are coming here on a mission to find out more about their family. And we hold the key to some of that past. Maybe they’re looking for a cemetery that a family member has been buried in and it’s in the backcountry somewhere or that somebody thinks everybody’s forgot about. And then they’ll come up to the desk and it’s like, “Oh yeah, I’ve been to that cemetery. I know where that’s at.” And they just light up. And you know, you’ve made that connection and you’ve got buy-in that they have a newfound love for a place. It started out as, “Oh maybe we can
find it. And maybe somebody can find it in a book or look it up on a computer.” But then when they find someone who has, you’ve been there, you’ve seen this grave, or you know the vicinity of this grave, then it’s real. And they know that it’s important that we have continued to preserve that and know where those places are.

BB: Satisfaction.

KP: So this—satisfaction. On both sides. It’s like somebody’s asked about something that I found was interesting and I’m glad I knew that so that I could share that with them because when they leave happy, you’ve left happy too because this tidbit of information that you thought, I’ll never use that. And then somebody comes in and asks for it. And it’s a reward.

BB: Yeah. You shared a lot of great stuff. Do you have any other things that you’ve been, you know, that I haven’t asked you that you’d like to share? I mean, it’s just been a very rich conversation.

KP: Just Mammoth Cave National Park has just been wonderful to me. The family here, whether you’re a guide or whether you’re in law enforcement or a maintenance worker; I don’t look at us as a divisional park. I look at us as a park as a whole. We’re one big family. Doesn’t matter what our job titles are. We work well together. And I like the sense of family. We have a little saying, “Once a Mammoth Cave guide, always a Mammoth Cave guide.” And that extends to everyone who works here, whether a concession employee or whether you’re someone from another division. It’s not just the guides. Some places I hear people talk about that they go in, they do their job, they leave their job every day, that they don’t have the family feeling. I often tell people, “I have three families. I have my birth family and the family I married into. I have my church family, which is equally in some ways important. And I have my Mammoth Cave family.” And all of them have special places in my heart everyday.

BB: Thank you.
KP: You’re welcome.