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Kentucky Folklife Program Interview Transcription

Project name: Ranger Lore (LOCRP)

Field ID and name: #0014; Darlene Owens interview

Interviewee: Darlene Owens

Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman

Date: 4/16/2014

Location: Mammoth Cave National Park, KY

Others Present: N/A

Equipment used: EOS 70D DSLR Camera

Microphone: Rode, VideoMic Pro Compact Shotgun Microphone

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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]

[NO AUDIO UNTIL 00:01:17]

DARLENE OWENS: Looked just like him. And I got to a point in my career where I was not working inspecting meat and poultry. And I thought, I need to be outside and I need to do something more fun. So I put an application in for Mammoth Cave and been here for nineteen years. (laughs)

BRENT BJÖRKMAN: Okay, that was in eighty-something, maybe?

DO: Eighty-, yeah, '96, I think. That sound right?

BB: Right. Where were, where were you living at the time? Are you, are you a local person?

DO: Actually, I grew up in Southern California, but I've been in Kentucky since '79. I went to Western Kentucky University. I thought I wanted to be a veterinarian, but I just fell in love with Mammoth Cave.

BB: Um-hm. What was your first time up to this particular location?

DO: My first experience at Mammoth Cave was when we came as a family and went on a cave tour. My youngest daughter was five at the time and the thing I remember most is the guide going to do a black-out in the cave and asked everybody to close their eyes, and after, after everybody had already experienced the single match, the single candle, the lights were back on, my daughter says, "Can I open my eyes now?" And, and the entire group just laughed, (laughs) you know. But that was really a wonderful time for me. Had no idea that I was going to be working here.

BB: Yeah.

DO: Yeah.

BB: What was that process? Some people have spoke about taking a couple of years to make, until their application got through the process. Was it—

DO: I was told it's extremely competitive. You'll never get your foot in the door. I made an application in February and was called in March to see if I was available. I started working in the ticket office, did the phone room, did the information desk. Joy Lyons came out and said, "I've heard you talking to folks. Will you guide for me?" I said, "Yes, I will." (laughs)

BB: So the information desk, was that just part of the first year you went into interpretation then?

DO: Then I went into er-, interpretation.

BB: Huh. So how were your colleagues and your, your training in interpretation. You spoke that Joy Lyons was somebody who was astute enough to, you know, figure out you, you had what it took, probably. But then how does that, how does the training work and how would you describe that in your own way?

DO: The training was, I thought, really didn't lend itself to guiding. We did a whole lot of what everybody at the park does, administration, and we did our first aid and CPR training and what have you. They took us on a couple of cave tours. Basically said, "Hey, there's, there's the library. There's the cave. Now, put a program together." So it, I think it was made challenging on, on purpose, just so that they could see how we're going to develop ourselves.

BB: So, so was there a, was there a script about a certain, let's say you're training to do a certain tour. Was there a script or did it, is it something that, that you had to put together from the ground up?

DO: We put them together from the ground up. We go with somebody that's been doing this a couple of years, get some good ideas, and then we're pretty much on our own. [00:04:59]

BB: What are some memories of, of, is it start as, am I correct to think that there's a leader of the tour and then oftentimes a, most of the time there's a trailer? There's, so there's, there's two—

DO: Yes.

BB: Service ranger employees guiding? And for, do you start as the trailer and, and listening to the, the work of the other?

DO: That's typically how it starts. They encourage you to stand up in front of a group as quick as you can and I think the longer you wait to do that, the harder it is. So, if you can jump up and do it right away, you're better off.

BB: Um-hm.

DO: One of the most difficult things for people to do is stand up in front of a large group and talk and if you can just get the first one over with it's a lot easier. (laughs)

BB: Did you have any prior experience in speaking, public speaking?

DO: Not at all. I had no experience in public speaking.

BB: Was it stressful?

DO: Not really. I'd had so many contacts with people at the information desk that, you know, pretty much a people person. Standing up in front of a large group is a little bit different. They're closer in contact with you, you know, so you don't have that information desk as a barrier, but it's not that bad.

BB: Um-hm. So what were the co-workers like as you were going through this process? Did a few things at the desk, then got put into interpretation and guiding. Was it, what, what was, what is that process among rangers, pushing you forward and that sort of thing? Was it just certain individuals that are, that stand out or, I mean, you don't have to name names, but if you would care to....

DO: I think some of the older guides that have been here, that, there, they just take you under their wing and, you know, give you all the encouragement they can. That's, that's just how I st-, the process starts that way. But everybody encourages everybody else. It just seems to work that way.

BB: How about those first few years of, of interpretation? Do you have any special memories of an event that happened with some visitors or something that solidified, "This is why I do what I do." Or some, maybe some satisfaction or some, some stress that made you ponder. Is there, do you have any—

DO: It's like that "A-ha!" moment. Like when you get it. Gosh, I'd have to think about it for a couple of minutes to think of something really good.

BB: Sure.

DO: But I, I know I've had that "A-ha!" moment too. Like, "They got it! This is what I do! Woo-hoo!" (laughs)

BB: You've done interpretation, and I think some folks have also expressed that they've done a lot of things. They've guided different tours, more strenuous tours, less strenuous tours, and things evolve over their careers. But you've also done a lot of other things that I don't know if, if we talked before about doing some fire-fighting and things. Were those things prior to coming here? Or were they because you worked for the Parks Service?

DO: I got involved in a lot of different things because I worked for the park. But things I might be interested in. I've had coworkers that said, particularly my friend Bryce, who said, "You need to be doing fire. I think you'd like it." I'm like, "Well, what do I need to do?" And he said, "Well, you have to carry this forty-five pound pack for three miles in less than forty-five minutes." And I said, "I'm not going to carry a forty-five pound pack anywhere." (laughs) But then I found out I really, really like doing fire and I actually made the team to be a public information officer. I haven't been doing much of that. I'm just a trainee right now. But hopefully I'll get back on the team and still be able to do something with fire.

BB: This is fire training? How does that work? Because, you know, I'm just learning as I go here. Does that mean you would be fighting fires locally? You would be dispatched anywhere that the park service might want to, and if so, have you, and, and those sorts of things?

DO: Absolutely. I have helped with prescribed fire here at Mammoth Cave. I went down to Congaree Swamp in South Carolina to help them with the prescribed fire. We took a group of Job Corps students with us, so I got really involved with helping Job Corps students, helping get their feet wet in fire. That was kind of an interesting thing (laughs). I've been out west on a few fires. The very first fire I went on was 2006. And fell in love with it. If we think the Park Service is a family unit, firefighters are even closer. A little bit closer, a more intimate family unit. So that's why I liked it. It's really fun. [0:10:15]

BB: So you've met up, were you traveling there with other firefighters from our region or did you just get thrown out there and, and you started to create this whole other folk group for yourself?

DO: We travel as a twenty person crew. So the first fire I went on there were three of us from Mammoth Cave, somebody from Great Smokies, somebody from Land between the Lakes, and the rest of the guys from Alabama. They called themselves the Alabama Burners. The Bama Burners. Great guys. (laughs)

BB: I don't think this is jumping around but one of the interesting things about this project is to talk to all the different, so many different rangers, temporary, excuse me, seasonal—

DO: Yes. (laughs)

BB: Permanent, working in law enforcement and, and all sorts of things, but, and talking to women and, and how that's changed. You said you have nearly twenty years in here. And from talking to you, you've done a lot of things and a lot of, it's almost, maybe you can speak to the fact that, you know, was this, is this a, a, a male-oriented occupation, either as you're doing interpretation, as you're doing public information training, as you're doing firefighting? All those things are so interesting to me about the evolution of equality or perception of opportunity.

DO: I think this used to be male dominated and it's totally turned. It seems to be more female oriented nowadays.

BB: How so?

DO: It seems like we have a lot more women that come on staff than, than we see men hired on. And I think more women stay with it once they get in. Maybe it's just here at this park but we, we see a lot of women coming into this. We like to talk, you know. (laughs)

BB: And the firefighting aspect, you know, and I'm, I'm stereotyping, but I, I'm thinking about, and I'm stereotyping because of the physicality, I guess. And you had—

DO: Um-hm.

BB: You mentioned it, about the forty-five pound pack and, and the testing. You started that in the '90s?

DO: Two thousand six.

BB: Okay,

DO: And I, you know, should have taken Bryce's advice and done it, started much earlier with it. But—

BB: How were those colleagues, I mean, once you get out in the field?

DO: Oh, gosh. Those guys are great. My first experience was the best fire detail ever. We—

BB: Tell me about it.

DO: We went to Oregon. We were on the Cascade Mountain Range, hiking at 6000 feet. First few days a little rough on this flatlanders. But after we got that elevation taken care of, we just had a great time. Wonderful guys to work with. I was the only woman on, out of the twenty people crew. So I think more women are starting to get involved with fire, but my second fire, there were two of us on a twenty person crew. Two women. So it's not as predominately women as it is men. It is hard work, you know. It's very physically demanding. But I enjoy that. I like the challenge.

BB: This job allows you to try new things and new challenges?

DO: It really does. If you're in a fire, if you have a red card, sh-, showing that you're a firefighter, if we go to level five in the nation for, you know, catastroph-, catastrophic fire, then they, they say, yeah, you can be available. And pretty much all hands are on deck. It's not just for fire though, because I got to go to Hurricane Sandy detail. About three weeks in New York doing, just helping them get their, you know, footing again.

BB: Tell me just some of the daily duties of, of that particular—

DO: That, I was actually on a camp crew, so I was the camp crew leader and we were basically taking care of the facilities to enable our folks to get the job done. So sometimes it's a low-life job, but, you know, all, all work has to be done. I actually had somebody on that, I was emptying trash and, and one of the firefighters said, "Aren't you a firefighter?" I said, "Yes, I am." "Why are you emptying trash?" "Because it needs to be done." And, you know, no job is really too small. I think it all needs to be done. Everybody plays their part. So I got a letter of commendation from the park police up there because I went and scrubbed down their bathrooms for them. So that was kind of neat, you know. [0:15:31]

BB: It's about teamwork, isn't it?

DO: It is all about teamwork. And I don't know too many people that got a commendation for scrubbing a bathroom before, so. (laughs)

BB: So you've explored a lot of things that you've been asked when you do interpretation to kind of find your own way.

DO: Um-hm.

BB: Listen to other guides as you do. But I think Joy Lyons was a big proponent of, you know, making that an, a crucial part because you had to really figure how you were going to present it in your, in your way. Can you tell me a little bit more about your natural, your natural, naturalistic approaches and, and what you're drawn to. I know that, that you know a lot about plants. And how did that come about? Is that something you brought here? Is it something you started to explore once you got here? Can you tell me about how you, how you shared that with people and, and in what ways?

DO: Sure. I took a course when I lived in Florida. It was a greenhouse operations, nursery management, landscaping type course. Learned a lot about plants because I really like having my hands in the dirt and gardening and what have you. And I just kind of lost that information for a

little bit, and then I kind of went back into it once I got up here in Kentucky. Went to school, learned a lot about animals. Put those two things together and did a lot of farming and those kinds of things. Then when I got here to the park, we have over a thousand flowering plants here. I'm very interested in how these plants had been used medicinally by native people and by early Europeans to come to the country. So I put th-, all of those elements together into a program, Folk Medicinals, and did an evening program about that. May get to do that again. As we get closer to the centennial, we're going to be doing some costumed interpretations and I had an idea to do something like grandma's herb garden or something. And, you know, just do something kind of interactive with people. I've even taken sewing skills and turned that into a program where we were doing a quilting bee and talking about folklife and how people come together to do different activities. I even got a group of Boy Scouts to piece a quilt together. And I thought, how is, how is this going to work? I've got a whole auditorium full of Boy Scouts, I don't know, you know. But it worked and they were great. So I was like, this works for a lot of people, you know, just showing how communities can come together through plants, through sewing, through all of these horrible chores that you had to get done, you know. Talk about pe-, how people do that as a community and take kind of the burden off of each other and make a party out of it, so. One program I did one day was with the kids' program. And one of the bus drivers had brought a big watermelon. And I thought, how can I eat watermelon and do this kids' program at the same time. And I figured out a way to do that. And I took everybody out back. Everybody had their own watermelon. We talked about gardening and canning and putting up food. And then I talked about the fun side of having a watermelon seed-spitting contest. So I had even Grandpa and everybody out there spitting watermelon seeds, so. (laughs) I just kind of do stu-, stuff impromptu sometimes.

BB: Your "A-ha!" moments.

DO: My "A-ha!" moments. (laughs)

BB: That's right. [0:19:59] You said you mentioned you had, when you first came to the park, you had, it was on a family trip, meaning your family.

DO: Um-hm.

BB: And it was, you had a five year old child, at least. We'll get one child, at least, one child. Has your, has your family been, how have they approached this, on your journey here, your occupational journey working here? Have they been drawn to it? Have, have they followed in your footsteps? That's maybe not the right thing to say, but, you know, is it something that has given them a specialized passion or respect or can, can you speak to that, if it's appropriate?

DO: Absolutely. I think national parks are, lend themselves to be family-oriented. Everyone here embraces family, so my daughters, as they have grown, they've been out here at the park a lot. They've brought their children out here to the park. Both of them got into natural, outdoorsy kinds of things, you know, as recreation. So I, I think just the whole setting of national parks lends themselves to be family-oriented. And I know a lot of people here raise their families in the park and some of them, as you say, some, some of them love this and some of them, you know, just kind of push it away, but I think for the most part they embrace it. How can you not love a park?

BB: Right.

DO: You know.

BB: How old are they today? Well, twenty-four and —

DO: Yeah, it's like you're making me think now. (laughs)

BB: Five plus nineteen is twenty-four, probably or something—

DO: Actually, let's see. We came before I even started here, probably a good ten, twelve years so, yeah. My girls are grown. I have six grandkids. The oldest granddaughter just turned eighteen

in December, so, and then the youngest grandson is six, so. And they're all involved with the park too, so.

BB: Satisfying. Yeah. When you think about your concept of stewardship. You know, I was watching that Ken Burns piece and just thinking about that as a touchstone, you know, for, for why you, you do what you do or, is that something you could speak to?

DO: Stewardship to me means not just for the park but the planet. I'm one of those people that picks up trash as I walk up the road, you know. I'm taking my dog for a walk, I'm picking up trash. Sometimes I have so much of it that I have to go back with the truck and load it up, but st-, it, it, it means much more than just taking care of the park. If we, if we don't work together and take care of our planet, we're not going to have anything here.

BB: Um-hm.

DO: So, just teaching other people how to do, take care of it and igniting something in them that makes them care enough to do that.

BB: After almost twenty years, has there been a change in visitors' perceptions? They way that, maybe not, you teach, you evolve, just like we all do. Have you seen a change in, in how we, how you present, your, you and your colleagues present the park or an increased awareness about special subjects about the planet, the park, the environment?

DO: I would like to say I've seen an increase in people caring, but I've seen an increase in people caring about their electronic devices. And they seem to be learning about the world around them by something electronic and that's disturbing to me. Learning about the planet means getting out and touching things, not holding something in your hand. I don't know where we're going to go. This last summer I almost had a fist-fight break out at my program, one of my programs, because a lady answered her cell phone and was talking really loud. So somebody, "Please step away from the group." And they started an argument at the back, (laughs) at the

back of the amphitheater, so I don't know how to address that, you know. I just kind of laughed about it and just kept on talking. (laughs)

BB: And they finally resolved to cooperate or something.

DO: It, it sort of resolved itself. The lady wasn't going to let it go real easy, [0:25:00] so she continued with it even after the program and finally the guy says, "You know what, I'm sorry for starting trouble at your program." But he wrote a little, nice little note later, which was kind of neat. Sent me a, sent me a CD, Woody Guthrie. I was doing a program about the Civilian Conservation Corps, so.

BB: Nice.

DO: Had some Woody Guthrie music.

[INTERRUPTION—RECORDING STOPS]

BB: So, Darlene, we were talking a little bit about other things, or you know, maybe some stories, and you mentioned something about a personal experience narrative that you had in the cave. Can you talk about it?

DO: A few people have already had an experience in a place called Methodist Church, where most of us believe there's something going on there. Maybe it's haunted. I had a personal experience while I was standing at the church one day. My partner was going to do a blackout. And I heard shuffling around. I was getting ready to turn off the light. I heard shuffling around, and I glance over, and I see somebody kind of moving around. And I wait until they get back to the group. And I turn the light off. All of a sudden, footsteps are coming straight towards me, like somebody's going to run right into me. And I [gasping sound] held my breath because it stood like right face-to-face with me. And what I noticed was I couldn't see the lantern lit across the room. And then I realized that I was holding my breath. And as I let my breath out, all of a

sudden, it vanished, whatever this thing was. Much later, the same guy and I were on a different tour, this might have been a couple of years later, right after the new lights were installed in the cave. And the guy that was doing the lighting project said, "I can't understand what happens there. The church with the lights. But all of the lights are off right now, so you're, should have a tour because we have a lantern tour." Well, we get down there. Bobby's leading and I notice, as I look up the boardwalk, that the light is on at the Church. And I think, okay, I'm going to walk on up there and turn it off. I took two or three steps and the light went off. I'm like, okay, whoever's back there's going to be coming up here. I'll just wait and see who it is. And nobody ever came. Bobby finished talking. We started walking. And the light was on at the Church again. Like, I don't, I don't get it. So I turned the light off as we go through. We go back to Star Chamber and on our way back the light is on again. So I turn it off. We go up into Gothic Avenue. And on our way back out, we have to, have to use a key to turn that off, so I turn that light off. And I'm like, there's still a light on. The light was on at the Church again. So I turned it off and I told Bobby, I don't know what's going on, but we're leaving now. And nobody can explain the light at the Church. Mysteries. Mysteries of Mammoth Cave. (laughs)

BB: So you have something connected with Bobby, that very special thing, because he exper-, I mean you experienced it in your own ways, but you experienced it together. Bobby Carson?

DO: Actually, it's Bobby Beams who was standing at that particular light switch with a different partner getting ready to turn the lights off. Another guide noticed that he was standing there and ra-, because he cannot hear very well, snuck up on him in the dark and grabbed ahold of him and made him scream like a little girl. (laughs) So we all still laugh about that too. So we individually have issues there. And then together had some, twice now.

BB: It's a close-knit group, some more than others. Of course you probably have disagreements with people, but can you tell me about some of the, can you tell me about camaraderie, maybe that's—and again, I may be putting you on the spot, but it's just, I've had little de-, little details about how people take care of one another or, or do things, or these s-, little things. I don't know if that's—

DO: I think we do have a tendency to kind of take care of each other, you know, like a family group. One guy got a foot problem one day, said, "I'm afraid to go tell them," because, you know, [0:30:00] whatever, for what-, whatever reason, so I said, "Well, I'll go ask if I can take your place," you know. The other day I had an issue and I said "My neck has been bothering me," and my coworker says, "Hey, well, you know, I'll do that for you then." You know, so I think we really kind of work together and try and take c-, care of each other.

BB: So your career's been a, a period of exploration and education, you educating others, you being educated. Nineteen years in, where are you now? What are you, what are your hopes and aspirations for the future as you, you know, go forward in your career?

DO: I think I can do interpretation just about anywhere now. I've been doing interpretation for our fire workshop, fire interpretation workshop. I've done interpretation for National Association for Interpretation. I mean, I think that just carries over. People, people see you walking down the street and ask you questions. You have no idea who they are. And you're not in uniform, but maybe there's some glow about you that says, hey, I know the answer to this, or you know (laughs), I can help you. That, I just really see kind of see just continuing with this whole process of getting the word out about whatever needs to be talked about. I can talk about anything. (laughs)

BB: And make it engaging.

DO: Hopefully.

BB: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about? I mean it's just been a, seems like it's been a rich experience for you. And anything about this working culture we call park rangers?

DO: Huh...I can't think of anything right now, of course, because I'm sitting in front of the camera. (laughs)

BB: Well, it's been a great, thank you for your time.

DO: You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

BB: Okay.

[INTERRUPTION—RECORDING STOPS]

BB: So as you're guiding and doing interpretation on a cave tour, it's pretty important to listen to any stories about how people listen or don't listen or, or, or something like that?

DO: You bet. Crawling tours are really important to follow instructions and you get people down there that don't pay attention. They're not following instructions. And I had one guy that fell on his head and pile-driven his helmet and scalped him. He ended up with a concussion. But miraculously he was able to walk out of the cave on his own.

BB: So how did he fall or what was the—

DO: He was climbing up a place called the Lion's Head. And it, as he tried to sit on the top of the Lion's Head, like we do, he had a water bottle in his pocket that caused him to roll off. It was pretty scary. I had a guide, the guide working with me that day was freshly trained. This was his very first trip. And I said, "Spencer, can you get to Grand Central from here to the telephone?" And he says, "I think so." And I said, "No. Can you get there?" And he says, "Yes." And, and he took off. Miraculously, he got to Grand Central in like thirty minutes, just record time. He's real tall, gangly guy. I also had a guy with me on the tour who has been on the tour about a hundred times. And he asked me if, "Should I go with him?" And I said, "No, Tom, I think I need you to just do group entertainment up there while I'm down here dealing with this." So we were able to make it all work and got the guy out and—

BB: So did he need medical attention? Was there anything going on outside? Who was, what was going on at the park when he, when you had, when you exited?

DO: This was Fourth of July weekend, so we had a lot of Cave Research Foundation folks there. They were surprised that the guy was walking out on his own. I was supposed to go to a party that night, but I was like, you know, I think I'm a little stressed out for that. (laughs) So I didn't go to the, the Fourth of July party. But, and it took me a while to be able to get over the fact that this guy had gotten really hurt. I mean, it could have been even worse than it was. When I first looked at him, I thought he was dead. So, thought he had maybe broke his neck. And he was breathing horribly, like "eek, eek." [0:35:00] And his girlfriend was up on top of the rock with me looking down and I had to pre-, grab her from being a victim. Because I'm like, no you can't just jump down there, you know. So there's a certain way you have to do that climb up and down and if people are not listening—I know a lot of people do not climb up the Lion's Head anymore because of that. And we, we do have good caving helmets now because of that incident, so out of the bad, something good happened, you know. But, yeah, that was, it could have been a tragic incident, but [].

BB: That was probably the most intense time of all your many, many cave—

DO: That's probably the most intense moment in my career here at Mammoth Cave.

BB: Do you see the Lion's Head as a different place after that?

DO: I climb up and down it. I wouldn't ever take a group back up it after that. It was just, just left, kind of left its mark on me. Maybe, maybe people shouldn't be doing something that is that unsafe if they're not going to listen. If they listen, they can do it fine. But if they don't, bad things can happen.

BB: Let this be a lesson.

DO: Let that be a lesson to you. (laughs)

[END OF INTERVIEW]