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Interview with Vickie Carson (FA 1098)

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Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription

Project name: Ranger Lore (LOCRP)
Field ID and name: #0016; Vickie Carson interview
Interviewee: Vickie Carson
Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman
Date: 4/16/2014
Location: Mammoth Cave National Park, KY
Others Present: N/A

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Recorded Tracks in Session: 1 audio track (compiled from 7 video files)
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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]
BRENT BJÖRKMANN: All right. Today is April 16, 2014. This is Brent Björkman, the director of the Kentucky Folklife Program. And we are continuing our interviews for the Ranger Lore project. We’re going to, we’re looking at the occupational folk culture of park rangers. Today, we’re at Mammoth Cave Park and we are going to be talking, doing our third interview today. And I’ll let my interviewee introduce herself and her job title and then we’ll go from there.

VICKIE CARSON: Well, first of all, I’d like to say you’re at Mammoth Cave National Park, Brent.

BB: Did I say state park?

VC: No, you just said Mammoth Cave Park, so. (laughs)

BB: Oh.

VC: But, but I guess maybe we’re sensitive about that. We’re Mammoth Cave—

BB: Okay. Take two.

VC: (laughs) I am Vicky Carson. I’m the public information officer here at Mammoth Cave National Park.

BB: Okay, Vicky. Can you tell me a little bit about how park, the park came into your life? Maybe your origin story if you have something like that.

VC: Um-hm. I grew up in Wisconsin. I was a Girl Scout all my life. Went all the way through high school in Girl Scouts. And we did a lot of family camping. We travelled a great deal. My father was a, a teacher and had summers off. My mom was a registered nurse, but Dad said no wife of his would ever work in, you know, outside the home. So Mom was home, but she
volunteered for everything under the sun, including my Girl Scout leader. And so we travelled a lot. And we mostly went to national parks and state parks. Mom and Dad were very frugal, and we camped and we went places for free. So I saw a lot of national parks, because national parks don't charge very large fees. And never went to amusements of any kind. You know, amusements, that meant “a muse,” that means not thinking. (laughs) And so we did not go to amusements and, for anything. It was all nature and culture and history and archaeology and a wonderful thing that I wish I could have given to my own kids. But taking a month-long trip is, is just out of the question for working people anymore. But it was a wonderful, wonderful gift that my parents gave to me and my sister. But then I went to college. And pursued natural resource management, which involved a little bit of forestry, a little bit of wildlife management, a little bit of soils management, a little bit of nat-, just natural resource management in general. And then also outdoor education. And then I started looking for a job. And I remember applying for a job in Wisconsin on Door County, which is a wonderous, beautiful place. It was a county nature center. It was going to be a new, brand new place, brand new building. And at the same time applied to be a seasonal guide at Mammoth Cave. And it was, well, I, I was about a year out of college. My mom had been ill and I had been staying home with her. And, and I remember getting the call from these folks at the nature center and they said, they, they had chosen somebody else. And I turned to my mom and, and she had, she was short, but she had lost some height because of her illness. And I remember putting my head way down on her shoulder and saying, “I guess I’ll go to Mammoth Cave.” (laughs) So, so that was in 1978, you know. And now it’s 2014, I think. And except for going back for visits, you know, this is my home now, so.

BB: What was that first year like? What were you hired as and, and, and tell me about that first couple of weeks, if that’s something you could share.

VC: Okay. Yeah, well, yes. I was hired as a seasonal guide and at that time, and I think still today, new guides get about two weeks of training because there’s a lot of information to learn about Mammoth Cave, to learn about the underground, the surface, the area, about
the park service as well. And so there’s a tremendous amount of, of intake that, that you have to, that you have to learn just to, to get started as a guide. And so I had two weeks of training and I was waiting for my uniform to come. I remember there were several of us that year that there was a problem with the uniform company. And I don’t think I got my uniform, I, well, I started about the first of June, and I don’t think I got my uniform until about the middle of July. [0:05:00] And so they had these horrid like double-knit VIP vests, which that’s Volunteer-in-Park vests, that we would wear. It had an arrowhead on it, but it also said Volunteer across the top, so I had to wear just street clothes with this horrid sort of gold-colored double-knit vest. And there were several of us that had to do that. But it, it, it wasn’t like wearing a flat hat, certainly, and you know, people didn’t acknowledge you exactly, because you weren’t the ranger on the trip. But anyway, and eventually I got my uniform and—

BB: You were trailing? Were you trailing?

VC: Trailing. I had to, I had to also guide as well. But it was just different, you know, having to do that in a, without the uniform. The uniform really gives a, a presence. And it draws people to you. I noticed that even when—

BB: There was a difference, in July, the middle of July when you finally got that uniform?

VC: Yes. Yes. Uh-huh.

BB: And that’s when you couldn’t wear the hat without the full uniform. Is that correct?

VC: That’s right. Yeah. Um-hm. Yeah. Had to have the, you never wear just part of your uniform. You have to wear the whole uniform. So you’re in uniform. (laughs) That’s the, that’s the purpose of the whole thing, so we all look alike.
BB: That’s right. Your coworkers during that time, you know, tell me a little bit about the, the way you worked together, learned from, learned along with, alongside, the process about that maybe.

VC: Um-hm. Um-hm. Okay. There was a, there was a large group of us that came in that year. And in hiring seasonal guides, what I’ve seen over the years and, and in, in talking to the folks that are still in the guide force, they can tell you this better than me, but some years, there’ll be a lot of new guides that come in and someti-, sometimes just a few. And I think this particular summer is one of those years where we’re not hiring any new guides. Where all the returning, all the ones who’ve guided before are returning, and so we don’t have to have a new hire, we have rehire training, but not new hire training. So that particular year when I came in, in the summer of ’78 it was one of those years where about twenty new guides came in at the same time. It, it was a big influx of new guides. And so that, that’s a big responsibility for the old guides who are here, because they have to carry the new guides for a certain amount of time, you know, in guiding tours, until the new one is ready to step up onto the rock and do the speech. (laughs) And so, because, another thing you have to learn is the cave. You have to learn the resource. And, and here, the only way to learn the cave is to be in the cave. And otherwise, you, there’s no way to look at a map and say, “Well, I’ll do this here, and I’ll do this here.” It just doesn’t work. You, you have to go there and, and learn the cave and, and learn what it’s, what it looks like, what it feels like, what it sounds like. And where you can fit this many people or this many people. That sort of thing. So, my, my summer I spent with a man named Duke Jenkins. Charles Jenkins. He was, he was the man that I worked with. He was the man that trained me. And he was a, a PE teacher from Elizabethtown. And he worked here in the summertime. And he, he had the, he was a tall man and had the sort of the gait of “The Duke,” John Wayne. And certainly he had a, a Southern way of talking, much more Southern than the way I talked, coming from Wisconsin. (laughs) And The Duke really changed, trained me in, in how to give a tour. I did half-day tours, four days a week. It was a half-day and a Frozen, which now we call the, the Grand Avenue. But it was the four, four mile, four and a half hour tour. And then the short Frozen Niagara Tour. So that was my day. That was four, four days of my week, I did
the, the half-day tour. And then on the, on the Friday of my week, I did Historics. So I felt like I barely knew the Historic route. I really got to know the Grand Avenue route, but the Historic route was like foreign to me. And I really had trouble going in there and, and, and, and guiding in there because I spent so much time. One thing, in ’78, we were still having the very big crowds, so in the summer, sometimes we had, if I remember correctly, I think we would, we would take three hundred people at a time on a, on a half-day or Grand Avenue trip. [0:10:00] And, and I think sometimes we took more than that, but I’m, I, I don’t remember for sure. But it’s a huge number of people. And you really just end up walking them through the cave. You stop just a very few times, and then just walk them through the cave very slowly. And so The Duke taught me the gait. This is, this is the pace you take. And it’s a, it’s a strange game of almost like crack-the-whip where if, if you’re walking too quickly in the front, the people at the end have to really run to keep up. So I know the gait of the proper pace for taking, you know, a hundred people through the cave or three hundred people through the cave. (laughs) And I think I’ll always remember that pace of walking along (laughs) and very, it’s, it’s plodding, it’s slowly, but that way, it’s, it’s just a management tool of, you know, managing where, where the people are and how bunched up they are or how spread out they are. But, so, to me, so much of a cave tour is allowing people to see it and to see it comfortably. And as a guide, it’s my job to enhance their experience in the cave. The cave tour is not about me. The cave tour is not about the interpreter. Certainly the stories, the descriptions, answering questions, that’s all very important. But the people come to see the cave. They come to see the park. And what we are here to do is to help them see it and help them understand it.

BB: You learned the gait from Duke. Did you also learn the narrative at the different points where you stopped with people from him? Was it a, tried to copy that, or what was the process of, of, of you becoming Vickie Carson?

VC: Um-hm. Um-hm.

BB: Or, guide.
VC: The narrative on the tours. I studied. I mean I certainly studied geology and the history and the prehistory. And there were certain things that we would pick up from one another that, that helped provide, I guess you’d say, I heard some people call it “edutainment.” (laughs) So that you’re not dry as dust as you’re talking to folks, but I always tried to speak to them very openly, very honestly. And I, I, I think at first, I maybe did some stories, mimicking The Duke or mimicking other people I worked with. But I soon found that The Duke, who was, you know, over six feet tall and had this Southern accent could get away with some things that would, just didn’t translate to me. (laughs) So I had to find my own way of, of speaking and telling the story. One person that had a really profound impact on me in speaking and writing was taking a class with a gentleman named, a gentleman named Arthur Palmer. And he’s a geologist. He literally wrote the book on Mammoth Cave geology. And I took one of the Western Kentucky University “University in the Park” classes. I think it was in 1980, and it was just the Mammoth Cave geology class. And Art Palmer has a wonderful way of conveying the most complex concepts in simple terms. And I thought, oh my gosh, if I could do that, you know, that’s what I want to do. And so, I don’t know, I, I hope I didn’t dummy things down for people. And, and Art never did in what he was doing. But just such a talent of being so understandable, of really helping people connect with the resource and helping them take something home with them that might have just gone over their heads otherwise. But they could internalize it and maybe even apply it to something, you know, around their home. But very talented man in, in how he can speak and, and, [0:15:00] and teach. And he’s still teaching. He’s a, a great caver and, and he’s from New York state, and teaches at one—or I think he’s retired now, but he still comes and does the “University in the Park” class here now, or “Karst Field Studies,” it’s called now. He and his wife, both cavers, Peg and Art Palmer. They tell, they love to tell the story of how they met. They met caving. And they, they never knew each other vertically, they just knew each other horizontally. (laughs) And like it was something very racy, but it, it wasn’t, you know. They just, they just were crawling around together in caves and that’s how they met. But two great people. And Peg is always there when Art’s doing a class helping him out.
BB: Um-hm.

VC: Very, very knowledgeable and, and just talented. Really talented.

BB: It’s a close group of people it seems, over the years. So, thinking of Peg and Art, you just spoke of, I know you're married to somebody who—

VC: Um-hm.

BB: Works here.

VC: Um-hm.

BB: And how did that happen? Was it here that you met or—

VC: Yes.

BB: It was? Okay.

VC: Um-hm.

BB: Bobby Carson.

VC: I need, I need a drink of water. Excuse me.

BB: Sure. Of course.

VC: Bobby Carson.

BB: Your husband. Yeah.
VC: Yeah. Yes.

BB: Did you have similar jobs or did you, was he interpreting as well——

VC: No.

BB: Was he doing something else?

VC: No. I guess, well, well, I lived in the seasonal apartments here that first summer. And so that’s a group of, let’s see, oh, twenty-four people that live in the seasonal apartments. Bobby had a full-time job here at the park monitoring radon gas. It was something that had been discovered in the cave in ’75 or ’76, I can’t remember. And, and they hired him on then to monitor radon gas in the cave. And he would hang out with the, with the seasonals. He was still a young man himself. And I think when I came here, I was twenty-three. And so, there were a bunch of us. We, we’d either be out there in the evening doing something or we’d go to Bowling Green and—you have to remember this was disco time. (laughs) And we would line dance and disco dance and go listen to, you know, music and, and so anyway, there were a bunch of us in the summer that just all went out together, and, and Bobby was one of those, and I was one of those. And we’d have barbecues and stuff. And then when fall came, the seasonal jobs were gone. And the complexion of the place changes a lot when the summer’s over with because the summer guide force can be up to seventy people in the summertime. And then in the dead of winter, it goes down to about ten. And again, ask others who are over there now for these numbers exactly, but that’s about what it is. And, but along in the fall, there are people who go, either go back to university, or they go back to their teaching jobs, and then they come out on the weekends to, to work. So I had a chance to take a job and stay, stay in Kentucky, and it was a job called the Youth, or no, excuse me, the Young Adult Conservation Corps. There was one of those camps here in the park. And it was a, a daytime job and so I took a job with that and stayed here. And called home and said, “I’m going to stay. You know, this, this job will last me about a year, and I’ll
see what I have then,” but, you know, anyway. So I was going to stay. And so the group that we all went out together with just got smaller and smaller and smaller. (laughs) And then just one day we looked at each other and we thought, well, he said, “Well, do you want to go to a movie?” I said, “Yeah.” (laughs) And so we did. We started dating and we, that was in September, and we married the next May.

BB: Very nice. So you made your careers here. You met, met here and made the careers and, and stayed here for quite a while.

VC: Um-hm. Yeah. Well, I worked for the Young Adult Conservation Corps for four or five months I guess, [0:20:00] and then I, I was applying for jobs with the park service here. This wasn’t a, a park service job. It was a, a like a project sort of job that was here. And so I applied for jobs here and then also at Lincoln’s Birthplace. And I got an interpreter job at Lincoln’s Birthplace in February and I, I started there on Lincoln’s birthday (laughs) in ’79. That was my first permanent job there.

BB: In ’79.

VC: Uh-huh.

BB: And then stayed there for a number of years?

VC: I just stayed there for about nine months, and I was, I came back here, so. But after we married, then we lived in Horse Cave and I drove north and he drove south, so. And we lived in Central Time, but I worked in Eastern Time. It was one of those fast time/slow time things. So I left for work really early, but I got home before I left, so. (laughs)

BB: Right. Got it. And you know, most, a lot of the, it’s an interesting park, Mammoth Cave National Park is.
VC: Um-hm.

BB: Because there, like some state parks, talking to state park workers, it, there are people that have been drawn from this area and they stay in this one place. And, and you seem to have been drawn there. But you did leave for a period of time due to, you went to another national park? Or in that, in the system of it or something?

VC: Um-hm.

BB: Is that right?

VC: Yes. Yeah. Well, well I worked at Lincoln’s Birthplace that short time and I’d like to say something about that too, Brent, just because it’s a small park. It has a small staff, and it’s history oriented. Here we’re more science oriented, but in that do, that we do these long walking tours, it’s, it’s also recreation. And so the interaction between visitors and, and rangers here is quite different than at Lincoln’s Birthplace. What they do is, is much more formal. People come and, and see that grand granite, you know set of steps out, up to the, the memorial building and go inside and see the cabin there. And, and it’s just a very formal feel to it. And people speak in hushed tones, you know, where here in the cave, you say, “Hey!” (laughs) “Hey! Ranger! Tell me something!” It’s, it’s very casual here, where it, it’s interesting as you go across the park service, what kind of interaction or almost mood or aura, you know, surrounds each park. It’s quite different.

BB: Is that one of the things that drew you to this park after?

VC: Well—

BB: You called it casualness, but just the demeanor or the—
VC: Yes. Yeah. I, well, at that time, I didn’t appreciate the differences, and I, I just, I, I, or maybe it was the casualness or I just wanted to be back down here at the big park. I didn’t, I don’t think I fully understood what I could learn there and I could draw from Lincoln’s Birthplace. Now I do and it’s, it’s funny. We have so many reports we have to make. You know, we’re government, we’re bureaucracy. And, and here we have a staff of over a hundred people, Lincoln’s Birthplace has a staff of about eight. They have to make the same reports that we do. (laughs) That just, I don’t, it overwhelms me now to think of, of what small parks have to manage, you know, and have to do, so.

BB: [ ] plus.

VC: Exactly. Yes.

BB: Well, that’s interesting. I guess these, these thoughts about thinking this through, the type of park characteristics has come over time as you, as you’ve been part of this [ ].

VC: Yes.

BB: And you were out west in a different capacity, but not in a park? Or in a—

VC: Um-hm. Yeah. We moved west. Bobby applied for this job. It was kind of a, a dream job, in Denver. It was a Washington office located in Denver, if that makes any sense at all. But that’s, you know, how things are done but, it was working for the Air Resources Division which is a Washington level office, but it was located in Denver. So we were both GS7s here in the park, which is, it’s a sort of a technician level job. And he was to, [0:25:00] he was, he applied for this job, and it was a 9-11-12, which would take you up into, like middle management kind of level. And those jobs just don’t come along. I mean, like, ever. Never. I don’t know as I’ve ever seen a 9-11-12 announced anywhere ever again, (laughs) but, but they were, they happened to be looking for field people to come into this office. So he applied for it and he got it. And we had just had a baby. We had bought a house. And it was
like, what do we do now? (laughs) And so we just thought, well, we’ve got to go. And, and so we did. And so I went out and looked for a job as well, and the superintendent who was here at the time was Dave Mahalick and he knew the regional director in Denver. And Bobby wasn’t working for the regional office, he was working for this other office. But it was also located in Denver. But there was this regional office that took care of, coordinated work for six states. And so I applied there into the public affairs office and they asked me for a sample of writing and an interview. And so I went and interviewed with my baby. (laughs) And they accepted me, so. And there just my eyes were opened to a whole different type of work in the park service because it was a regional office and because I had worked in a park by then I had worked here, I guess we went out in ’89, and so I had worked in a park for ten years. And I had, while I was here I worked in interpretation but I also worked in resource management here. Joy Lyons and I were called “split” employees. So six months of the year, we were in interpretation and six months of the year, we were, we ran the campground. Joy was in interpretation in the wintertime, and ran the campground in summer. Joy was in interpretation in the winter and ran the campground in the summer. And so I was just the opposite. So I was in the cave in the summer and when there was so much going on and I could guide any tour that was available, so I did like Wild Cave and I did evening programs and hikes, you know, surface hikes and nature walks. That kind of thing, as well as doing cave tours, other cave tours. But in the wintertime, the campground got really quiet. And so I would go out with some of the other rangers and check cave entrances or go on the river. I mean, checking cave entrances is, is you’d have to walk, hike out into the woods using your compass and map because there was no trail there, and find the cave entrance, and then just see if there was anything that had changed around it. If it was gated, then you’d check the lock and make sure it was okay and, and sound. And, and then just, you know, make notes about these things. And I was also in with the, the law enforcement guys, the law enforcement rangers at that time. And every year they had to do a forty, a forty-hour law enforcement refresher. And so they always had me sit in with them. And oh, I got so paranoid through that period of my life (laughs) because there are horrible, there are horrible things that they have to be aware of and, and deal with on a daily basis and, and I just, they encouraged me to, to become a law enforcement
ranger, but I never wanted to. I, I don’t want that kind of responsibility or to have to keep that kind of mindset. It just, it, it was unpleasant. I learned a lot of stuff (laughs) but I didn’t like it. But anyway, so I had all this park experience, and so when I went to the regional office, and was working with, oh let’s see. It was the Dakotas, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah. Those were the, the st-, the parks in those states. So there were really big parks, but there were really small parks too. And people in the regional office seemed to seek me out, even though I was a low-level employee, they’d seek me out, say, “Oh, so you’re from a park. You’ve worked in a park.” Because a lot of people had never worked in a park before. And they seemed to, [0:30:00] to value just what I might think of something or, you know, how would a park take this kind of thing.

BB: Hands-on experience.

VC: Yes. Yeah.

BB: Practical person.

VC: Practical experience. That’s right. Yeah. And oh, let’s see, there I had to do brief, Congressional briefing statements. I had to keep up on media and, you know, what was in the media about the parks. I briefed superintendents. I was very much a staff person doing what either my boss wanted—there were two of us in the public affairs office there—and then he worked directly for the regional director. And it was, it was very interesting to see that dynamic and to learn what a regional office does. From, if you’re only in a park, you think, what do those people do? (laughs) But it’s a very, it’s a very different, very needed, very necessary work to keep parks running. So much of it is administrative. So much of it is budget, personnel, and, and for, well like for a park like Abraham Lincoln Birthplace, where they don’t have like a hydrologist on staff or they don’t have an archaeologist or they don’t have a, an engineer. They don’t have a planner. All those people are in the regional office for them. And certainly for Mammoth Cave, we, we rely on those people as well. But it was
interesting to see, to, to work at a regional office and to, to sort of brush elbows with some of the big boys and—

BB: And then you did that for a period of time, but then you returned to park life?

VC: Yeah, we were there for about five years. And then it was in the early ‘90s when, during the Clinton administration, there was a downsizing of the federal government. And offices were the first things that were downsized. And we were, Bobby and I were both in offices. And we saw the writing on the wall and by that time we had three children, and we really wanted to get back east. We didn’t enjoy the desert all that much. The mountains were okay, but we didn’t ski, and we, we just weren’t big on the mountains. We enjoyed them, but—and it was so dry, you know. Here, you get, in Mammoth Cave it gets fifty-two inches of rainfall a year. In Denver, it was fifteen. And we had a schedule for watering our lawns, you know, whether you’re on the odd or even side of the street. (laughs) It was very, very different. And so we were anxious, anxious to get back east again. And my folks had passed by that time and, and Bobby’s dad had. So our only grandparent was his mom and she lived here in Kentucky. And so we were hoping to get back here. So we were able to come back and, but it was a difficult move and it, it—it—park service-wide there are a lot of people who are couples in the park service, but many of them don’t live together. They work at different parks. And we had seen that with friends of ours, where their entire married life, their entire career life, I should—not married life—career life, they had, they hadn’t lived together. And so when we went to Denver, we went with the priority that we would be together. That, why, why be married and have a family if you’re not together. We just didn’t get that. So that was our, that was our priority. And so we were able to come back. But there were bumps in the road, certainly when we got here and the park hired me and Bobby was hired by the regional office. And, and, but he was able to work here. But at one time they wanted him to, you know, pick up and move to Atlanta and, and anyway, that passed and finally the park hired him as well. And so we decided we were not going to try to move again. And now we’re, you know, getting very close to retirement and we’ve made it. (laughs)
BB: And so that’s when you, you cut your PIO chops out there. You learned your press releasing—

VC: Yes.

BB: And—

VC: Yes.

BB: Creating dialogue and discourse between the people—

VC: Oh.

BB: You needed to bring together and keep apart, and.

VC: Yes. One of my greatest lessons out there, I was talking to my boss about something. I don’t, I have no idea what it was now, and [0:35:00] I, I really had a gripe about it. And it, it wasn’t right, you know. There was something that just wasn’t right about it. And he said, “Well, why don’t you go talk to the regional director about it?” So I said, “Okay. I will.” So I did. And I, I went in and it was Bob Baker. And I went in to Bob Baker and so I laid this out, the whole thing out to him. And it, it took several minutes to do this. And, and he just looked at me. He said, “Well, that’s all well and good, but what do you want me to do about it?” And I didn’t know what to say. (laughs) I was left with a (gasp sound). Well I just have this gripe, you know—but I didn’t say that, but you know, I was like, I, I, I have no idea what I said, because it took me so off guard and I thought, oh, I’m so ill-prepared. Why in the world did I do this? You know, I just wanted to slink out of the room. But, but that was one of those moments that has really prepared me for working with management. Because when you go to your manager and give them a big gripe, you know, it’s like, “Well, do you have a solution to this whole thing? You know, you’re the one who’s right in it. Is there
some solution to what you’re telling me?” (laughs) You know, so I always remember that moment.

BB: And?

VC: Yeah. Yeah. So, and I was just up there agape.

BB: Slack-jawed.

VC: Yes.

BB: Agape. Yes.

VC: Agape. Yes. (laughs) Certainly. So, so now in my chal—

BB: So were you, do you, were you hired as a PIO here when you returned?

VC: Yes, I was. There had been a PIO here, and she moved on, and so that position was open and I was hired back as a PIO here. Now, while I was in Denver, I had moved up the ladder and my boss, it was funny. He said, “I am so impressed with you.” And what he was so impressed by was, he, I would do what he asked me to do. (laughs) I thought, this is like one of those things you learn in kindergarten, you know, but, okay, I’ll do what you want me to do. And he just, he loved that. And, and so he would ask me to do a menial thing, I would do that. He would ask me to do something more complicated, I would do that. He also taught me, really taught me how to write. He came out of the newspaper world. And, you know, there’s no such thing as writer’s block: you write. You write. And you get it done. And you get it all in there. You know, you get the whole who, what, where, why, all that in the first sentence and you break it down from there. (laughs) So it was, it was wonderful to work for him. And sometimes I felt like I could just tap into his brain and download it into mine. And he had a great strategic mind. And I remember he would write, he would write speeches for
the regional director and the one I remember the most was when the regional director was a woman. It was Lorraine Mincemeyer. And this man’s name was Ben Moffett. And, and Ben knew Lorraine very well. And, and he would write these speeches and she was park service through and through. And I remember him writing these lines like, “You know, I think park service all day long. I’m putting—it’s like whether I’m singing in the choir or I’m putting nail polish on, you know, I’m thinking park service all day long.” (laughs) And sometimes he would read these speeches to me and, and I’d think, I just wanted to stand up, it was so patriotic or something. I’d want to stand up and walk around the room with the flag and just wave the flag (laughs) but he had a great talent and, and could, could write different ways for different occasions and I, I just really learned a lot about writing from him. It, it was a great experience and, and I’ve certainly used that a lot now in my job because I, I write, you know, news releases, I write stories, I, I write briefing statements, I write reports. I’ve started into writing plans. Just a lot. And another person I’ve learned a lot from is my colleague Tracey Moore. He’s another great writer and great editor and critiquer. (laughs) Oh, and another thing Ben Moffett did for me is, is he would read my writing and he wouldn’t tell me how to fix it. He’d just say, “You need more detail here.” And he would tell me why I needed more detail. Or he’d say, “I think you’re going the wrong direction with this.” But he wouldn’t say what to do. He would just give me a direction I guess, and then I had to figure it out for myself. It was excellent. [0:40:01]

BB: So when you, when you brought something back, it was working in his mind too? He’d say, “This is much better,” or “There you go.”

VC: Yes. Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Um-hm. It was excellent, excellent teacher.

BB: So coming back here as the PIO for Mammoth Cave, your, your interpretive, I mean, you used, I’m sure you used things. It helped enlighten you to how to write better because you had that first hand experience.

VC: Um-hm. Um-hm.
BB: Was it different? Did you have friends here, that you returned and now you have a
different job? Was it hard, easier, just different?

VC: It was different. And I came back, I wasn't in uniform either. I hadn't worn the uniform
in the regional office. And it was a while before I got in uniform. I think I was actually still
on maternity, I think I had just had a child, so maybe that's why I wasn't in uniform, but I
wasn't in a uniform for some time before, when I came back here. So that was odd. That
was different. And then I was in an office job instead of being out in the park either in the
cave or out on the surface. And some people assigned your worth as to how much you're
out of your office, that you need to be out in the park. And you know, it's a personal
opinion. And so I, I got that from some people, you know. “Well, you know, what are you
doing here?” You know, you're not, you're not doing something, you know. And yet the
office work is necessary right along beside the, the fieldwork. You have to have both. You
have to do both. And more and more reporting is required so much more of government
now that even people who are in the field spend a lot of time at their desk reporting what
they see in the field.

BB: Um-hm. And you had this great, fuller look because you’d been there and saw that cog,
that cog part of the machine is needed, so.

VC: That's right. Yeah, yeah. I had a different perspective. Uh-huh. Um-hm.

BB: How about, so was there pay equity there? I mean, I was thinking about like if you’re a,
do you, or do you not know? I mean, it was, like, you think they paid you the same as you
would from a gender, gender equity—or maybe that’s—

VC: Let's see. Let me think. Get another sip.

BB: Sure.
VC: In my jobs, I, I think there’s, I think there’s always been pay equity. Looking back on the early days of guiding, there, the guides had a stigma, locally, that I, I found out about after I started working here. That, that me as a woman coming in to work with the male guides, that that was something I shouldn’t do. I didn’t know this when I was back in Wisconsin, (laughs) and certainly I wasn’t the first woman to, to walk in and work with the guides. But being a, a woman in a, in a pretty traditionally, or a traditional male role of either guiding or rangering, is, is sort of different. And I, I’ve worked mostly with men all through my career. And I just recently got a woman boss. And I wondered what that was going to be like. (laughs) But it’s worked out okay. We both put a, a great importance on hair appointments and, (laughs) but there, there was some, there was some sexual harassment. There was some sort of kidding that was a little too, too much of a jibe, you know. When I rangered, the guys all respected me and had, we had a great time in working together, but sometimes they’d call me “satchel ass.” (laughs) And it really didn’t, I, I can’t remember [0:45:00] if it offended me or not. I don’t think it did. But, but that was one of their nicknames for me. (laughs) It, it was, it was a different time period and I don’t, I don’t think that would be acceptable now.

BB: So that was in, you said like ’78 into, as we entered the early ‘80s.

VC: The early ‘80s, yeah. Um-hm.

BB: So, so talk about, you know, that, and I think you’re leading me to a, a movement over time—

VC: Um-hm.

BB: And, and a change in this maybe, I’m not sure. It seems from others that I’ve talked to that there was a definite change from about that period.
VC: Um-hm. Um-hm.

BB: And what is it like today? Or was there a, was there a graduated period that you can even identify? Or just, and now today, it’s—

VC: No, I don't know. I, I think it's something, I, I think there was this, this sort of, there was a stigma with the guides, or there was a perception with the guides, and I don't know that it could be held to be true in all cases, certainly.

BB: Sure.

VC: You know, there were a few, but not in all cases. And I can remember this one would say, “Oh, look at that young girl. She just needs a few more ice cream seasons.” And then they'd sort of, the, the, the men would sort of look over the, the new guides coming in, you know, to see what the new guides looked like in the new season. And after a few seasons, you caught on to that pretty darn quick, you know. And thought, oh, I was one of those new guides at one time, back a few seasons ago. But I think, I think now, I, I think there is better equality. And I think it's something you have to watchful of at all times. And not, not make assumptions about people or make assumptions about groups of people. Just this week, I was working on something about the, somebody's coming here. She's writing a book about slavery and the Underground Railroad. And we really don't have any, any history. We, we don't have any narratives. We don't have letters. We, we don't have anything that points to Mammoth Cave being used in the Underground Railroad. So I, I was a little put off with this, because I thought, well—and I told this author this, and she said, “Well, but just because there’s no evidence doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.” And so I explored that. And I explored that with colleagues here and in the regional office in Atlanta. And then I spoke with the Underground Railroad coordinator in Atlanta. And it, it just, it's messing with my mind, because I’ve thought, well, this is something I know. You know, this is, these are the hard facts. This is what we know, that Mammoth Cave was operated as a business. There were people going and coming on cave tours all the time. But certainly there are caves all over
here, you know. Mammoth Cave is four hundred miles long, but that’s just one of four hundred caves in the park. And then there are caves just everywhere across this part of Kentucky. And so this woman from Atlanta, the Underground Railroad coordinator, said, “Well—” [INTERRUPTION—RECORDING STOPS] Okay. Well, as I was saying, so I was speaking with this, the woman who’s the coordinator for the Underground Railroad in the park service regional office in, in Atlanta, and she started asking me questions. She said, “Well, you know, if this woman has, if this author has any information, we want that from her. But you have to think about it sort of in her terms as well, that just because we don’t have research to support it doesn’t mean it doesn’t, it hadn’t happened.” And really, in this part of [0:50:00] Kentucky, from what I understand, it hasn’t been fully explored yet. There certainly was some movement from what I understand, on the Louisville to Nashville Railroad, or Louisville to Nashville road. But more than that, it just really hasn’t been explored. So, she said, you know, “Where were the people coming from? Where were they going? You know, had they travelled here with their masters? You know, had they been servants that travelled here? Did they have interactions with the slave guides who were working in the cave? Or the other slaves that were working in the, in the hotel?” And she was, and the author was focusing on the 1840s. But, well, I love things that make me think and make me sort of dwell and dig a little bit. And, and this one has. And so I’m still thinking about, has this uncovered something in me about, brought to light some prejudice that I have in some way? Has it opened up a new way of looking at research? A new way of looking at history? And, and I’m still working on that. And I don’t have an answer for that yet. But I, I’ll work with this author tomorrow and we’ll go in the cave and take some photographs.

BB: She’s here now? Or he or she will be—

VC: She’ll be here tomorrow morning. And, and, and visit with her and ask her these questions and, and just see where it goes from there. And, his-, history, one thing we’re learning here all along and there’s a lot of things about Mammoth cave we don’t know. And it’s not just the length of the cave, it’s not just what the cave looks like and where it is. But
our history as well. And, and Joy Lyons would say this so many times. She just knows there are answers in letters in somebody’s attic. (laughs) Answers to questions that, that we have always asked. Like Stephen Bishop. He was such a prominent figure here and sort of a superstar of the, the cave guides, the slaves that were cave guides. And yet he passed away in 1857, 1858, and nobody knows what he died of or, or what the circumstances around his death were. And he’s buried here in the park, but, but it’s, it’s a gap in history. So, him being so famous, surely it’s written down somewhere or, you know, that someone was here visiting and, and Stephen died while we were here. Or was he up at Locust Grove in Louisville where the owner of the cave—that was his family that owned Locust Grove too—and was he up there visiting and, and did he pass away while he was there? But so, this different way of looking at this Underground Railroad thing that, that’s just making me think. That’s a good thing.

BB: I think that’s what’s kind of come across in these interviews collectively is people are drawn to this place for a many reasons as workers, as rangers.

VC: Um-hm.

BB: And one of them, I think, may be this—

VC: Um-hm.

BB: This, just to be, the exploring.

VC: Um-hm.

BB: Not just the physical exploring.

VC: Um-hm.
BB: But I'm just a folklorist that's asking these questions, so. It's really interesting.

VC: Yeah. Yeah. One thing that I love to do in working with authors or working with filmmakers or, or just other media is to leave that unknown thing out there. And to, to sort of use that as a theme with them and to pique their interest with it. Certainly we need to tell young people that there's, the unknown is still here. That human beings are pretty darned small and we don't know everything. (laughs) That there's a lot more to learn. And I love working, like, with Western. There's some microbiology folks down there. They have discovered bacteria in the cave that's not been found anywhere else. And they're called—oh, shoot, what is it?—geotrophic, or, no that's not quite right. But anyway, they're rock eaters. They're rock-eating bacteria. So does that change our idea of how long it took for the cave to form? Was it actually eaten out by bacteria rather than washed away by water? (laughs) So some of these things are pretty fantastic.

BB: Or some of both.

VC: Or some of both. That's right. So and then the prehistoric people and just the things that, that we're still learning about them. We have to work with seven tribes that aren't present here. Some are in Oklahoma, some are in North Carolina. But they all have [0:55:00] a claim to being in this part of Kentucky at one time or another through history. And so as we are working in the cave or working on the surface, and the thing we work with them the most about is if there's an inadvertent discovery. Which means, if a body or part of a body is unearthed. And that occurs sometimes out in the backcountry. We have over a thousand archaeological sites in the park and then it sometimes occurs in the cave as well. So then we have to call up the tribes and talk to them, talk to their tribal historic preservation people. And say what we're going to do and, you know, how we're going to handle this. And, and working with the tribes has been very interesting too, just because it's a completely different culture, completely different mindset, completely different concept of, of time, whether it's time in history or, or, or present time. And their concept of the cave, and that the cave represents the underworld where there's darkness
and chaos and the surface represents an upper world where there’s order and light. And then wherever there’s a connection between the two is a sacred place. So the Historic Entrance is considered a very sacred place to them. And just getting a better understanding of that has been fascinating to me. But, but you know, certainly in animals and plants, we have more, we have more plants in this park, we have more flowering plants in this park than Great Smokey Mountains does. But not everybody knows about, about it. (laughs) And you know, we have Green River, the most diverse river in the United States, and the state mussel biologist has told me that it’s the most important diverse river for mussels in the entire world. There’s just these treasures, you know, here in this park, in this place. One thing I learned when I was in Denver, about that time was when DNA testing came about. And do you know where DNA testing came from? Where that science came from? It came from the thermal paint pots in Yellowstone National Park. There was research done there. Those paint pots—you know, it’s a very strange environment. You know, most national parks, if they’re a natural park have a very strange, unusual, unique environment. And so here we have the cave and, and Yellowstone is these thermal features that they have there. So there’s some, some enzyme in the paint pots that a researcher found and was a, developed that into some, into DNA testing. And now, of course, that’s like a household word, you know. It’s in every detective show that you watch, you know. And for some families, it’s, it’s something that used, you know, to find out birthright and that sort of thing. So one thing my old boss back in Denver, he, he latched onto this pretty darned quick and said the reason that that was discovered was because that had been kept as a national park. It was an area that had been set aside, protected and preserved, not developed. And so everything was continuing in that spot as it had been. So national parks are these little, little places that are set aside where man doesn’t change what’s there. Now here, you know, this was, this area was developed. I mean, there were farms here, there were communities and all that sort of thing. But the cave itself really hasn’t been de-, hasn’t been developed. And then the river, it hasn’t changed, or portions of the river haven’t changed through the years. And, and so in, in these places, who knows what’s there. Who knows what’s still there that, it hasn’t been changed, hasn’t been altered, and it’s just been as it’s been since it
happened, since it cre-, was created. And it’s just there and who knows what [1:00:00] answers are there that, that humans need answers to. It’s a cool thought.

BB: Yeah. And the un-, these unknowns, they’re still—

VC: Yes.

BB: Unknowns out there that will help us.

VC: Yeah.

BB: As we discover along the way perhaps.

VC: Yes. Yes. Yeah. And well, and, and I, you know, I’m a God-fearing person. And God says he, you know, he gave us everything we ever needed. And so are some of these things maintained in national parks and we just don’t know where that, that they’re there, so.

BB: How are your—is it daughters? Do you have a son too?

VC: Uh-huh. We have two daughters and a son. Um-hm.

BB: Do you, how do they, growing up in this environment, this, here, in the park, national park, is it something they’ve been drawn to, repelled by, a little bit of both?

VC: (laughs) That’s funny. A little of both I guess. (clears throat) Excuse me. They, well, let’s see, this is, this is partly who Bobby and I are. Bobby’s dad was a preacher. My dad was a vice principal at a high school. We both grew up with the phrase “Don’t ever do anything to embarrass your father.” And so our kids, we let our kids grow up not really knowing too much about our jobs. They did because we often did some work at home or they, they were aware of, of what we did. But you know, they certainly came out here. They went in the
cave. I would use them as models sometimes, ad nauseum, yes, one behind me there. She’s grown up now, but there she is. But then they, they, the girls decided that they wanted to get the student jobs here in the park, so they’re still both working while they’re in college. They’re both working here in the park. And our older daughter sees it as a good paycheck, and at times she, she has thought, well, maybe I’ll want to do this. And then our younger one, she is pursuing a, a degree in environmental science. And so she’s, as she has gone through different courses, she’s, she picks our brains constantly about this and that, and this and that. And you know, right now, she’s in toxicology (laughs) and there are things that have happened here, you know, certainly there’s the white nose syndrome with the bats. There was a time when we had e. coli problems in the cave with the water dripping in the cave. Just various things. Invasive plants that are coming in, invasive animals that are coming in, insects that are coming in. And so she picks our brains about all these different things, and that’s been interesting. And then our son, he’s twenty and he’s, he’s an outdoorsman and a sportsman and he loves to fish. And he doesn’t fish here so much, he fishes other places, but I, I consider him to, he’s on the edge. He’s, he might be coming in, I’m not sure. But one out of the three is a, is a nature nut, so.

BB: That’s great.

VC: And, and Bobby and I are not totally defined by this place either. So they all have bits and pieces of us, different bits and pieces of us.

BB: What are some things that we haven’t talked about that you might be thinking, were you going to ask me about my work here, about this particular thing? Do you have something else to, that you wanted to talk about?

VC: (clears throat) I don’t know now.

BB: We’ve talked, covered a lot of ground and you’ve shared a lot of great, really great stuff.
VC: Um-hm. There’s, there’s so many stories about some of the old-timers. And, well—

BB: I’d love to hear some, a couple of those.

VC: Yeah. (coughs) Excuse me again.

BB: Sure.

VC: And it’s the stories about the old-timers I don’t remember real well. There’s just a few that I remember. But when I, when I started in the late ‘70s, there were still some of the original first guides, first national park guides that had, had been hired in, in the 1940s and early ‘50s. And oh, gosh, [1:05:00] Jack Borden, Ed Logsdon, Shorty Coates, well I know I’m forgetting who they were. But these were some of the gentlemen that I got to work with. And they were just that first generation park service. And that was interesting to know them. And, and to hear how they presented it, a cave tour, and, and how they presented the park. And, and that was fun to, to hear them and, and be part of that before they retired. That was cool. There’s, there have always, there’s always been mischief in, in the guides. And trying to make you lose your cool. So, you know, whether it’s somebody standing behind the crowd making faces or, you know, while somebody’s making their presentation, you know, while they’re speaking, or at the information desk when you have to make an announcement. One of your fellow workers might be pulling your socks down or untieing your shoes or, you know, poking you in some way or another, trying to make you lose your water. And it, so, so much of it is, is good natured fun and family kind of stuff. There’s one story that I’ve heard about, Franklin Jolly. And I didn’t know Franklin Jolly, I didn’t work with him. But this one story just sticks in my head. And I’m not really good at remembering stories. But this one sticks in my head. It was the wintertime. And one man showed up for a, the four and a half hour tour. Franklin sold tickets. So he told this gentleman, “Well, so-and-so is going to be your guide. And he’s sort of hard of hearing, so you’ll need to speak loudly to him as you go through the cave.” So then the guide came to check out how many were on the tour and who was on the tour. So Franklin told him, “Well, this man came up and he
spoke so loudly, I’m sure that he’s hard of hearing, and you’ll have to speak very loudly to
him as you go through the cave.” And those two men yelled at each other all through the
cave for four and a half hours. They didn’t realize it. And Franklin just ha-ha-ha’d, you
know. (laughs) What a, how do you come up thoughts like this? How do you come up with
schemes like this? But it’s, and there’s so many more Franklin Jolly stories, and, but that’s
just the one that has stuck in my head. But I love that. That you would, you know, just pull
that kind of benign prank on one, on one another. That’s wonderful.

BB: It’s quite the camaraderie.

VC: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, the guide, the guide force has always been very close. And in the
make up of the park, if I can think about this right, the guide force makes up maybe a
quarter of the number of people who work here at the park. And then it’s, it’s larger in the
summertime when we have all the summertime guides. The maintenance crew has always
been the largest portion of the park employees. And then we have administrative people,
science people, law enforcement people, and managers. The guides are the ones that are
before the public, so they’re the ones who are really seen. The administrative people never
get out, they’re never seen. (laughs) They’re, they’re doing budget and payroll and ordering
things and purchasing things and, and then the law enforcement people, they’re out there,
you know, in patrol cars or parking cars or, and sometimes they suit up in camo and they
go back in the woods to find a marijuana plot, you know, or a meth factory, anymore. And
they deal, the can deal with some very dangerous situations. Their jobs are such that they
have to be ready for anything that might happen in the city, but they have to be the friendly
ranger at the same time. It’s very tough, very tough. And the maintenance fellows, they
keep everything rolling, everything happening, everything in good shape so [1:10:00] that
people can come here and enjoy ninety miles of trails. I think it’s eighty miles of roadway.
You know, parking lots, bathrooms, picnic tables, campgrounds: it’s a lot to maintain, a lot
to take care of. And our science guys are out there doing strange things. You know, they’re,
they’re examining, oh, let’s see, they’ve been doing acoustic monitoring of bats and through
acoustic monitoring they can tell, oh, well, I can’t remember which, which instrument they
use for what, but they can tell the species and how many and what time they’re active and that sort of thing. We’ve had one researcher come in and put antennas on the backs of bats, like between their shoulders and he just uses superglue to put this tiny antenna on it, but then they do monitoring of the bats and eventually the, you know, the skin cells grow and slough off and the, and the antenna sloughs off too. But for a short time, he can— weird stuff. (laughs) Looking at the mussels in the river, looking at the fish in the river, looking at, at mercury, you know, how much bioaccumulation has, of mercury has occurred in the, in the plants and the, the animals in the park. And mist-netting birds, putting these tiny little, very fine nets out to, to capture birds and then just look at them, see if they’ve already been banded, look at their health, look at their age, look at their sex, look at, you know, do they belong in this part of the country or not, their general health, and then band them again and send them out. We have eagles nesting on the river now, and we’re monitoring those eagles. They’ve nested for three years and produced two young every year. Going in the cave and looking at the airflow in the cave, looking at the cultural resources that are in the cave. Taking care of the, the stone walls that were built by the CCCs. Just many, many, many different things.

BB: Um-hm.

VC: And then I have my job. And my job is just to boast about the park which I really enjoy doing. So I try to keep track of, of all these different things going on. And do stories on different ones. And certainly do stories on activities in the park and, and then I try to be as responsive as I can— well, one thing I should say is, is the, the federal government does not give, does not allot any budget to national parks for marketing or advertising. My salary is to provide information and to be responsive, but I ca-, we can’t buy ads in any way. So it, it’s the tourism people from around the park and in the, in the state offices that purchase advertising that says Mammoth Cave on it.

BB: So you need to be strategic.
VC: Yes. Yeah. Well, and I, I try to be as responsive as possible. Very responsive, to almost any, you know, very simple request or big request. Like this week, a lady sent me a note. She keeps a, she does a website for family travel. And she needed a couple po-, pictures of children having fun in the park. So guess what I had? Pictures of children having fun in the park. And so you know, I got those out to her. She said, “Oh, they’re perfect. They’re just right.” So it’s amazing, just the small things I can do to try to connect with people, connect with the businesses outside of the park, connect with the, the state tourism department people, and just how much we can help each other within my boundaries of what I can do, so.

BB: Resourceful and strategic.

VC: (laughs) Yes. Yes.

BB: Just like writing the variety of stories and placing them in different places that you did.

VC: Yes. Yeah. Yeah, my boss in Denver taught me that. You know, find the right, the right venue for the right story. And, and push it there, so.

BB: Is there anything else you want to tell me before we conclude?

VC: Shew. I’ve told you enough, I think, [1:15:00] but this has been, it’s been fun.

BB: Thank you. Thank you. It’s great. It’s just. We’ll end there.

[END OF INTERVIEW]