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Interview with David Alexander (FA 1098)

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Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription

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Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman
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Technical Considerations: Audio file was created from the compiled video files for the purpose of transcription
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Transcribing Conventions:
Use of square brackets [ ] indicates a note from the transcriber.
Use of parentheses ( ) indicates a conversational aside.
Use of em dash — indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.
Use of ellipses … indicates a discontinued thought.
Use of quotations " " indicates dialogue within conversation.
Use of italics indicates emphasis.
Use of underline indicates movie, magazine, newspaper, or book titles.
Names of interviewee and interviewer are abbreviated by first and last initial letters.
Time is recorded in time elapsed by the convention [hours:minutes:seconds].

Note: This 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. Today is April 17, 2014. This is Brent Björkman, director of the Kentucky Folklife Program. And I'm working on a Library of Congress project about the working lives, the occupational folk culture of park rangers. I've been here at Mammoth Cave for a few months and talking to a different people that, who work in different capacities, have different job titles and duties and st-, lengths of stay as, as employees. And David, could you, could you say your name and, and your current position here?

DAVID ALEXANDER: David Alexander and I'm in the law enforcement, emergency services division at Mammoth Cave National Park.

BB: Well, tell me a little bit about yourself and, you know, your, your connections maybe to the park and, and to the job itself.

DA: I grew up about eighteen miles west of here in a little town called Brownsville, right on the borders of the park. And I guess as far back as high school I wanted to do something in law enforcement. But I didn't really want to do the traditional law enforcement job. I've always loved the outdoors and being in the, in the outdoors. And my brother is a state trooper with the Kentucky State Police. And I didn't really want to do that as far as working the road all the time, so my dad was a fish and wildlife conservation officer when I was young, and I, I remember him and his job and, and the officers that would come to the house. And I guess that that part of it appealed to me. So I looked at something with the state at first, and then eventually I realized the park was right in my own backyard, so I thought, what a great opportunity. I could do law enforcement, be a park ranger, be in the outdoors and do something like that. So that, I think that's what led me in this direction. And I applied and while I was going to college at Western Kentucky University, and was lucky enough to get hired on as a cave guide here at that time, to get my foot in the door, because they hired a lot more cave guides at that time. So I needed to get that opportunity. So I got hired on. I worked three seasons or three years as a cave guide doing a lot of,

variety of things, even worked in environmental education with school groups at one point. And once I graduated from Western, I went and got my law enforcement training in North Carolina, my basic law enforcement training, at the seasonal academy down below the Smokies there. And they were nice enough to hire me back. And I came back here in 1992, started doing law enforcement here and have been here ever since that time with my career.

BB: Wow, so that's the, we're going on, what are we going on—twenty-two?

DA: I started here in '89, 1989 as a cave guide and I started doing law enforcement here in 1992. So I've been here a while. (laughs)

BB: Right. Right.

DA: Not quite as long as the cave, but I've been here for a while.

BB: Right. So your first day, let's go back to the, the cave guiding things, the first day.

DA: Um-hm.

BB: You know, how did that, how did that work with your, your mentors or the people that you worked with? Do you remember, do you remember that day?

DA: I—

BB: Or that time?

DA: I absolutely loved that time, to be honest with you. And I've, I've told my friends that when I finally decide to turn in my, my law enforcement and my gun belt, I wouldn't mind going back and doing some, some touring, doing cave tours again. I enjoyed it. It, I was

always very shy and I can tell you the first time that you lead a group of people into that cave, you get up on that rock and you start telling those corny jokes that we tell in the cave, and you get some reaction from those people, it's addictive. And you really, you really enjoy it. It's a great way to meet a lot of people. I grew up in the little town of Brownsville. And at the time I was growing up, I think the population of the town was about 600 people. The whole population of the county wasn't much more than maybe 10,000. And here I was working in a place where I was meeting people from all over the United States and all over the world, because we have inter-, you know, we have such a huge international visitation here. And you know, it was a great opportunity for me to meet a lot of different people, a lot of different cultures. And it's great for networking, also. If you, if you're looking at this as a stepping stone for another career, I lost track of how many people would give me business cards after we'd got off a cave tour because they were looking for people that could work with the public and that were good with, you know, socializing with the public and, and just outgoing, professionally. And I had a lot of, lot of job offers at that time. But, of course, I already had my mind made up on what I was going to do, so.

BB: Right.

DA: Yeah.

BB: Yeah.

DA: But I, I, I really enjoyed it. I, I loved the people I worked with [0:05:00] It was a good group. We had the, the folks that had already been here for a long time, a lot of the permanent guides that had been here. My first day on the job was sort of exciting. We went through a two-week orientation program where they would take us in the cave and show us different locations and then we would go over group dynamics and how to deal with, with tour groups and, and different people. How to talk about the history and interpret the resource, which is what we were supposed to do, explain that to the people. So I show up the first day on the job and I had looked at the schedule and I was expecting to be on two

Historic tours and a Frozen Niagara tour that day. I showed up here that day, and they had me on two Echo River tours and a Frozen Niagara. Well, the Echo River tour, which is not even given any more, it's not even offered, that was where we would take a group of sixty people down to the basically the basement of the cave, down to the river, put them in a couple of small aluminum boats and paddle around on, on a stretch of river in the, in the cave and explain things to them. I had never even been to the river. So I was scared to death. But they had put me with Jeff Foster and Jeff, you couldn't ask for a better, better person to be paired with. Jeff's no longer with us, he, he died a couple of years ago. But he, he kind of took me under his wing and, and we, we got started. And I'd always heard horror stories about this trip because it's very shallow down there, and if you don't turn around at the right spot, you'll get stuck. So here I was, first day in uniform, scared to death, and I'm going to have to be in a boat by myself with these people and paddle and talk to them at the same time. So I've got all this going through my head. And we start on the tour, and Jeff's leading, and my job at one point when we stopped was to go ahead of the group and get the lifejackets ready for everybody. So I'm taking off down this passageway I'd never even been down before, and there's this huge plywood box that's there on the side of the trail that's full of these lifejackets. Well I've got all this stuff going through my mind, and I'm racing down that passageway. Next thing I know, I'm looking, and I'm at the river. And I'm looking at the boats. And I thought, well, I, there's supposed to be something else here. So I turn around and go back, and I meet Jeff with the rest of the group at the lifejacket box. And I'm talking about something that's ten feet wide, and, you know, ten feet high, and I walked right past it. And here he is, getting everybody with the life jackets ready, and I, I said, "You know, Jeff, they moved that lifejacket box on me again." And he said, "That's okay, Bubba," said, "We got it all taken care of." So I was nervous, but I had a, I had good people to work with and the visitors, you know, some, some were easier to deal with than others, but I really enjoyed my time doing that. That was a, that was a great, it was a great training thing for me. It was a great time. And it taught me a lot about dealing with people. And it helped me later on with the law enforcement job, which is, you've got to be able to talk to people and, and deal with them. So it, it was great training. And it gave me a chance to get out of

that small town, I guess mentality, or, or, it broadens your, your view of, of things. And, and it was a great experience. I really loved it.

BB: And that led you into, that, I mean, like you just said, it assisted with your law enforcement work as it went on.

DA: It did.

BB: So after law enforcement training, you were lucky enough to be hired back. So you came back here straightaway? You didn't go, you know—

DA: Right. I came back here and started here in the spring of 1992.

BB: Right.

DA: As a seasonal law enforcement officer and worked as a seasonal law enforcement officer for about three years and then they, they converted me over to what's called a term position. And at that time, my money, my position was paid out of funding from the regional office, and it was all based on drug eradication money. So during the summer, my job, basically mine and another seasonal that I worked with for several years here, our job was basically to come in in the summertime, dressed in camo, camouflage, and we would go and hit the woods and look for marijuana cultivation in the park and illegal activity like that. And then sometimes, we would work in the campgrounds, in plain clothes, dealing with drug type of offences and alcohol offences and things like that. We would also conduct checkpoints, watching for DUIs for drugs, you know, alcohol intoxicated people behind the wheel and things such as that, so during that period of time, I got to see a lot of the park. We walked, that was how we, we would look on a map, find an area [0:10:00] on a map that was, was likely to maybe have some activity going on. What we called exotic gardening going on out there. And we would go and, and basically either get dropped off or park somewhere and we would walk all day long and search for illegal activity. And so I got to

see a lot of the park. It, it was very rewarding. It was frustrating at times because you are looking for a needle in a haystack. We've got fifty-three thousand acres here, and you're looking for something that's probably not much more than twenty feet across at the most, you know. Most of your small patches are twenty, thirty feet across. And you, you really had to work it down to a science and, and narrow areas down. It was scary at times. I was a fresh, brand-new seasonal. I started in '92, and around 1994, we had located a patch here in the park and located it early in the season and was able to work out a pattern where we knew the grower was coming to the patch and visiting it. And we set up surveillance on that and myself and one other ranger were right on the perimeter of this patch. And I was tucked down in a little briar thicket, you know, with a camera. And basically what I was going to do is try to videotape this, this suspect as they came into the patch and tending the, the plants, and then we would, once they got to a predetermined spot, we were going to take that person down and, and arrest them. And lo and behold, on the second day we were there, somebody showed up and, and here I am as, you know, as close as, closer than from me to you, at one point I could have reached out and touched this person. And I'm videotaping them while they're tending these plants in front of me, and, and of course, you could hear my heart beating on the camera. And it, I'm, I'm, you know, brand-new to this and never done anything like this before. And, you know, the adrenaline was really flowing. But at that, that point, he got in between myself and, and the other officer. The other officer stood up and identified himself. Of course we had watched him really close to make sure and see if he had any weapons. And immediately, as soon as the other officer identified himself, this guy let out a scream like he had been branded and just took off running, just as hard as he could. And I chased after him, and, and chased him for about seventy-five yards, I guess, through the woods before he finally decided he didn't want to run anymore and, and turned around and gave himself up. And we caught him and then there was another sus-, suspect that was in a vehicle that had dropped him off, and we caught that person too, on the road. And that was scary but it was also very rewarding because nobody else had ever done that here in the park. And it was the first time we, we had ever actually caught somebody like that. So, I was, I was pretty excited at that point. And I, I had the bug at that point too. I, I loved working that type of activity and have always enjoyed working anything

dealing with resource, the resource is why we're here. If it wasn't for the resource, which that's the park, the plants, the animals, the cave, the river, and that includes the visitors too. If it wasn't for the resource, I wouldn't have a job. And so I take it very serious as far as protecting that resource. That's, that's what drew me to this job is that, that ideal of the park ranger and what our job is to protect these places, because they are very, very unique and very special. And I, everybody has different things that they enjoy. Some of the guys like to write speeding tickets. They like to work the highway. Some of the guys, they like to work the river. They like to get out there on the boat. And my thing has always been the, the forest or the woods. I'll walk for miles and, and enjoy it, and whether it's working pl-, plant poaching where somebody's digging up ginseng or taking plants like yellow root or things like that here in the park where they're not supposed to take that. If they're illegally hunting—there's no hunting allowed here. Or if it's marijuana or meth, methamphetamine, whatever it is, I enjoy working those type of investigations and, and working those type of cases and always have. The archaeological resources, we have people that dig here in the rock shelters that take not only pottery and, and stone, flint, arrowheads and spear points, they also take bones. They'll take, they'll dig up graves and they'll take the bones of Native Americans, and, and of course not only is that to me grave desecration and just a horrible thing to do, but it, it takes away from that resource once again, that, that history of this area. And I think being from this area [0:15:00] makes it that much more offensive to me, I guess. It's, it's like if you come and visit my home, I want you to have a good time. If you come and visit this park, that's part of my home. And I want you to enjoy yourself. And if somebody comes in here and decides to, to ruin that or to take that away, take that experience away from you, I take that personally. And it's just part of the, part of the person that I am, and part of the job that I carry, the responsibility that we carry.

BB: So growing up around here, did you traipse around in the woods?

DA: Oh, yeah.

BB: I mean, the topography is, is similar to, in your boyhood home as it is here.

DA: Oh, it is. Yeah. This is just like, I mean, there's no difference between, it's just there's more of it I guess is what it is. I grew up. I would be gone—of course, I grew up on a farm so we, we farmed when I was younger. We, we grew tobacco, burley tobacco and we had beef cattle and corn, and I guess we raised pigs a couple of years, which I hated that. But I grew up, when I wasn't working on the farm I was out in the woods, whether it was hunting, just climbing all over the hills and the, the hollers as we called them and the bluffs and things back here. I grew up doing that. And I, I absolutely loved it. And I think that's another reason why I, you know, I enjoy this job is because I still, I guess we all have a little, the little boy in us still, as we grow older. And, and I still enjoy getting out here in the, in the woods. Just now I get paid for it. (laughs)

BB: So you've had this long career. It's built up over time.

DA: Um-hm.

BB: Building relationships with the environment, but also building relationships with your coworkers—

DA: Um-hm.

BB: And you mentioned Mike Adams about the initial, was that your—no?

DA: Jeff Foster.

BB: Jeff Foster.

DA: Um-hm.

BB: Excuse me. How about some other, how about your other coworkers at, over the line? I mean, how do you, you've imparted knowledge to some of the younger ones, but you've also learned some things. Is there any—

DA: Oh, man. Wow. That's, I've had, of course, in interpretation, Joy Lyons was one of my first supervisors when I first came here, and she always wanted us to be professional, you know, and, and carry on that, that ranger type of, of persona, you know. And, and be good to the people. Lewis Cutliff, when I first started here, Lewis, he was the man that you wanted, he had been here so long and everybody wanted to, wanted his respect. And you had to earn that. Lewis was always big on uniform. And that's great. I am all about uniform and being professional about things. And I think if you want to be respected and people to look at you with respect or confidence in you, you need to look the part. And he was always about having your hat on when you needed to have that on and having your shirt tucked in, your shoes shined, and your boots, you know, and, and having your, your belt adjusted for your gig line and all that stuff, which some people will know what that is and some won't, but, having everything lined up and, and looking, looking sharp. And you learn those things, and you carry, you carry that knowledge with you and you try to pass it along. I learned a lot from them. I've had people, Brad McDougal, who's retired now, he was my supervisor at one time in law enforcement. And he was a former Marine and he had that, you know, ship-shape, had that Marine attitude, that gung-ho. And, and he taught me a lot about, you know, picking your battles and, and being careful out in the field, and knowing when to approach something and when you needed to back off and go call some more of your friends and then come back and re-engage, you know. It's, we can have a ranger party if we need to, you know. But you learn a lot from these people and, you know, one of the things with Mammoth Cave is you have a lot of people that come here and they stay here. There are a lot of people that have been here for, for ages. Joe Duvall is one of the guides here, and Joe's been here over thirty years guiding tours here. I've got, when I first started, I was the youngest person in my division when I first started here. And that was, you know, I was in my late twenties. Now I'm the oldest person in my division (laughs) which is kind of depressing sometimes, because I tell them something and they say, "Well, I wasn't even

born when that happened," so I have to explain all that again. But, you know, it, when you have that type of what we call institutional knowledge, when you have people that have been here for years and they retire or they leave this park, they take that knowledge with them. And I can tell you right now from experience, I have in my division, in the law enforcement division, I'm probably the only person in that division right now that knows where some of these things are in the park or some of these locations are, whether it be in the cave, because I've got experience underground, but then on the surface also. I know [0:20:00] where things are located in this park that probably very few people in this park know even exist. And it's hard to be able to ex-, to explain that to somebody. And, you know, they'll, they'll come and ask me, "Where's this place at?" or "What are they talking about?" and I realize that once I leave, and eventually I will, a lot of that is going to be gone in, in our division.

BB: I wonder if there's a way that that transfer can be more assisted? I mean, I don't know.

DA: I, you know, I think they're, they're, they, they're working on some of that. I, and what you're doing right now is, is something that's similar I think to some of the things they had talked about, is interviewing some of the, the older, whether it be the guides or whoever and trying to get some information about where some of these things are, cataloging things, doing maps and, and things such as that. It's, you know, there, even going back to the cave tours, there were tours that were offered when I first started guiding here that are no longer even offered. We don't go to, we don't do the Echo River tour anymore. We don't go down there. They may go part of the way, but then they turn and come back out. A lot of the bridges and a lot of the, the structures that were down there have already been removed and taken out so nobody even goes down that far anymore. There are things that were done, we threw torches when I first started here, which was, I'll have to admit was really, I guess, cool or neat at that time, and it was part of the history. And, and I'm all about history. I love the tradition and the history. That's one of the things about this park is there's so much history here. But I also understood that it was harming the, the environment in the cave with all the smoke and the burnt cotton material that we were putting in the

environment down there. And I understood when it had to go. I'm actually surprised that it lasted as long as it did, to be honest with you. But those type of things are no longer here. And I can bring that up with some of the guides that are over there now, and they look at me like, "Really? We don't do that," or "Why did you do that?" It's just, there's such a, a difference in the generations and there's been so much time now, you know, 1991 to 2014, that's a, that's a lot of time and, and a lot of that stuff goes by the wayside.

BB: Yeah. And there's a lot of changes. You talked before, before we started, you know, all over, it's not particular to parks, I don't think, but we're asked to do more with less.

DA: Um-hm.

BB: And, and that's probably been part of, you know, part of being inventive.

DA: It is.

BB: And thoughtful about shifts and all that sort of thing. Do you, can you speak to that at all or is it something that's changed over, resource allotments and things or—

DA: Oh, it has.

BB: Yeah. Yeah.

DA: That's, that's one thing, and I know it's with all government agencies. There's, everybody's looking for their piece of the pie. And there's, there's less of the pie than there used to be. So we have to get a smaller piece, it seems like. When I first started inthis division, in the law enforcement division, there were twelve of us. Right now there are five, counting me. I've seen, steadily as people retired, either those positions were done away with or just the funding wasn't there to fill those positions so you are having to do a lot more with less resource. And that gets frustrating because the people that I've got in my

division right now that I work with, we've very duty oriented. We've very responsible and we want to be proactive and right now, we can't be. We're basically, we're, we say that we are going and we are putting out fires. We're responding to things instead of going out and, and you know, taking care of the problem before it actually becomes a fire. We, we can't do that. When we've got two people, basically working a shift during the daytime. And if we have an emergency in the cave or something like that, then we may have to bring somebody else in, if they're available for overtime. We can't get out in the backcountry like we'd like to. We can't cover the trails because you have, it is a destination park and you have the visitor center and the cave is, even though we have over eighty miles of trail, and twenty-six miles of river on the surface, and fifty-three thousand acres of surface area, we've got the cave, which is a big draw. And in the summertime, especially, during one single day, you can have as many as three thousand people or more going just into the cave. And that's not counting just the people who go to the visitors center and travel in and out of this area and the campground. So you have thousands of people concentrated in one area. And we get sucked into that, that location, and you can't get away from it. So when you're dealing with that, and like I said, the people are part of the resource also, then the other resource, the natural resource, it suffers [0:25:00] because we're not out there able to cover those areas where we have horseback riders that are riding off trail that are making their own cut-throughs, or if we have somebody out there cutting trees down or digging in those archaeological sites or, you know, what-, whatever it is that, that people do sometimes. We can't be there to cover that. And it's frustrating. It really is. But that doesn't keep us from coming in here every day and trying to do the best that we can with what we do have to, to work with. And we hope someday that will, you know, it will get better. We've, I've seen, over the twenty-plus years that I've been here, I've seen the, the feast and the famine. There'll be good years and then there'll be a lot of bad years. And then you'll, you'll have another good year. So it's the ups and downs. And sometimes I guess maybe I look at it a little differently because I have been here for so long and, and seen how this operation works, it's hard to get some of the younger guys to understand that sometimes. They, they don't quite see it the way I do, I guess. And, but we, like I said, we've got a good

group, we do the best that we can, and we, we keep doing what we're doing. It just gets, it does get discouraging sometimes.

BB: Yeah.

DA: It really does.

BB: And being mindful of that generation gap and—

DA: Um-hm.

BB: Maybe that brings you back to when you were young and didn't really think about [ ].

DA: Right. Right. That's why I keep my haircuts so short. I don't see all the gray in here, hopefully. (laughs)

BB: You're covering a lot of great stuff.

DA: I'm rambling is what I'm doing.

BB: No, no, no. It's very articulate. And you're articulating these points really well.

DA: I'm not sure. You'll have to edit that out of here.

BB: Oh, yeah, yeah. And this is just a whole, I mean there's no—

DA: [ ]

BB: This isn't, any, any, for any certain thing.

DA: Now, you, you said that I had been here—I have been here my whole career—

BB: Yes.

DA: But I've had a lot of opportunities to, to travel too. I mean, that's one thing I like about this job.

BB: For training or—

DA: Training and for details. We have special details that we go on. We have, we're trained, and that's part of the thing I like about this job is the variety. No two jobs are the same. We do everything. I mean, here we are exclusive federal jurisdiction. So the state has no jurisdiction inside the park boundary. If they do come in here, they have to contact us to do anything, like serve papers or make arrests, anything like that. The only way they can really come in here is if they're in pursuit of somebody. Otherwise, the state gave up their, their jurisdiction or their power here when the park was established. And because of that, we are not only the police force, we're also the emergency medical services that first respond to anything. We're also, we do wildland fire. If we have a forest fire here, we're the fire, we're the fire response. Now, we have agreements with outside volunteer fire departments to come in and, and assist us, but we are the first responders for that. We also do search and rescue and that means not only the cave, but river and trail. And we do a lot of that. We do a lot of that because people just don't, they don't prepare and I, I don't know, I guess I call it the Walt Disney gen-, generation where they all think that the animals all sing and dance and, you know, the, the woods are our friends. And they just don't come out here and prepare for it. And they'll overextend themselves. Or they'll go out and get lost, and, and we'll go pick them up and bring them back to their vehicle. And they're all happy again, hopefully. It doesn't always work out that way, but usually.

BB: One moment.

DA: But I, I've been here my whole career, but I've also had the opportunity to travel a lot. When Hurricane Andrew came through back in the early '90s. I spent thirty glorious days down in south Florida in the Everglades, supplementing their law enforcement down there because their people were affected by the damage from the, from the hurricane. So we had several of us from different parks that went there and stayed there for thirty days. And we took care of the park while their people went and took care of their homes and their families. So that was, that was eye-opening. I'd never been to the Everglades. And it was an interesting, really to be honest with you, don't care if I ever go back again. If you like mosquitos and you like snakes and alligators, it's a wonderful place to, everything down there wants to either eat you, bite you or stick you, so. Of course we were there at a bad time. The, the mosquitos were, were migrating inland and we had no electricity. Everything was running off of generators. It was, it was absolutely, it was absolute destruction down there. I spoke with a, [0:30:00] one of the military personnel when I was there. I said, "This looks like a warzone." And he said, "No," said, "It's worse than a warzone because you'll have pockets in a warzone that are not affected." And he said, "Everything's messed up here." So that, that was interesting. And then I've also been able to travel, been to the Smokies, I've been able to go to the Rocky Mountains, and I've been able to see things that I would never have had an opportunity to see. I've been to Hawaii on a detail there for Pearl Harbor Day and did ceremonies at Pearl Harbor and was able to be there on the, on the USS Arizona Memorial during a cer-, a couple of ceremonies that nobody else other than media, military, high-ranking military officials and survivors from Pearl Harbor actually get to see.

BB: So you're speaking of your, and you're alluding to this. Not all of this, but to your honor guard. Can you explain a little bit about—that's a special thing that—

DA: It is.

BB: It's a very unique thing that—

DA: And it's something I'm very proud of. I, I am a member of the National Park Service Ranger Honor Guard. And we have been established since 2003. I was one of the first ten members of that group. We had no honor guard in the park service and what happened, the honor guard, what our job is, we basically do a full, what you would see as a military honors funeral for fallen law enforcement officers and firefighters. And then we do also ceremonial, ceremonial things for park service employees that die in the line of duty. National, national regulations require certain, certain ceremonial things for law enforcement officers that a regular employee does not get. And it's, that's not something that, we're not trying to distinguish between the two, it's just, that's a national, that's something that's established nationwide. That's not something that we just made up. But we do everything from the firing party where we do the—and it's not a twenty-one gun salute—the only person that gets that is the, is the president. But a firing party where we do, we do the three volleys. We fire those with blanks. We do the flag fold. We do the casket carry. We do casket guards. We, we practice everything, hoping that we don't have to use it, even though I have been on, on several funerals for fallen officers and a lot of ceremonies. But we also, we also do a lot of special ceremonies. When national police week comes around every, every year, in, in May, we, we go to Washington, DC to the National Fallen Law Enforcement Officers Memorial and we conduct ceremonies there and at, and at the Department of Interior building. We also do special ceremonies. When Flight 93 Memorial was dedicated, we, we, we sent a group there and did the posting of the colors. We took the flags in, like you would see at a, at a ballgame or something like that and posted that. We had three presidents there, which was very impressive. We had, when they completed the Natchez Trace Parkway, I was there for the completion of that. That was seventy-five, or I think seventy-five years or sixty years, something like that, to complete that. And then probably one of the highlights though was the trip to Pearl Harbor, when I was there for their seventy-fifth, I think it was seventy-fifth anniversary, Pearl Harbor Day. And got to meet—which I love history—and was able to meet a lot of the survivors from, from that, that battle or that, that terrible day. But to be able to see that and to be able to go out to the USS Arizona and be a part of the ceremony out there—they had a special prayer ceremony where they had Japanese priests that come and then they had other multi-denominational

leaders that come. And they do a prayer ceremony there. And the only people that are allowed are the high-ranking military officials, survivors and their families, and maybe a couple of media. And we were there. And that was very, very—I was very proud to be a part of that and be able to honor those people. It's not about us. I mean, we, we dress up in all our parades and our brass and we shine up and everything. But it's not about us. It's about honoring those people that, you know, gave the last full measure. And that includes our, you know, our brothers in arms, our, our law enforcement officers and other employees that have died in the, in the line of duty. I was in Seattle, Washington, two years ago. Margaret Anderson was a law enforcement officer that was killed on New Year's Day out there. And I spent five days out there on a ceremony. And we were part of her funeral ceremony. I was a pallbearer for her. [0:35:00] And that—

[INTERRUPTION—RECORDING STOPS]

BB: Okay. Sorry. So beyond, I mean, her funeral and this, this—

DA: Right. We were in, we were in Seattle for her funeral and the park service is a small group. I think there are only about 1400 officers, as far as law enforcement officers go, in the park service nationwide. So you, you work with a lot of the same people when you go somewhere for a, for a ceremony. Or if you go on a detail, so we're like a family. And you meet and that's something they tell you when you're in the park service. You're, no matter where you go, you're going to find somebody that knows somebody that knows you. Or the other way around. I mean, that's just the way it's going to, you, you do work with a lot of the same people. And so that's, that's one of the things with the Honor Guard, that we've always been aware of and, and is that at any time, we could be going to a ceremony that is somebody that we know. And we've had to do that. A couple of the members of our Honor Guard actually had worked with Margaret. And when we went for her funeral, it was, it was tough, but they, they did a great job. And they wanted to honor her and that was their way of doing that. So it, it's a, it's a rewarding, something I'm very proud of, because I am a very,

I'm a traditionalist. I'm a very traditional person and I, I like the, the history and what we stand for and so the, the Honor Guard's a way of me being able to, you know, return—

BB: Yeah.

DA: Some of that, that honor and some of that respect to those people that have gone on before us and everything. But we were part of the, I was one of the first ten. They sent out applications. My chief came to me and, at that time and, and he said, "Here, you need to fill this out." And I thought, Well, okay, I'll, I'll do it, but never dreamed that I would actually be a part of it. And then a couple of months later, I get a letter saying, and then a phone call, and they said, "Come on down. We're going to start training."

BB: What do you think your classifications were? How did they make those decisions?

DA: Wow—

BB: Not that you're not a great person.

DA: Oh, no. (laughs) I'm a very humble person. I'm humble to a fault to be honest with you. But we, we had to fill out, we did an, we did a, some background. And we basically had to write a page on why we wanted to become part of the Honor Guard and what our thoughts were on the park service. And so they went through that. They did reference checks and there was a ten-person board that went through and evaluated all our applications and apparently they said it was unanimous, that the ten of us that were picked were, you know, immediately on the team. So I guess, apparently, I must write really well, I guess. But out of those ten, there are three of us that are still on the team that are from the original group. And it, originally it was supposed to be a two-year appointment. And to be honest, it takes two years just to figure out your left foot from your right foot because we have to march. I was not in the military so I had to learn not only the rifle movements and the marching and all the facing movements and then folding the flag. It is, it is brutal at times because you're

trying to learn all this. And we only, we only are able to get, get together twice a year other than when we go to ceremonies, because it costs so much, because we're scattered from, basically from sea to shining sea. We're all across the United States, and it's expensive to get us together. So it's, it's hard. And with something like that, with, and if anybody knows, dealing with a ceremonial type thing, the key to it is doing it all together as a group. If you got ten or twelve people and you're all trying to move at the same time, if one person goes the wrong direction or is a little bit off, you notice it, or at least we do now that we've trained it. So that's the hard part, is being able to do it as a, as a unit, as a group. It's just like military. So once you get one of those movements down, you're pretty pleased with yourself, until you forget it and then you have to start all over again. But it, there's three of us, and I've been with it since 2003 and I don't know, I'll probably stay with it a couple more years, then let some of these younger folks do it again. But it, it is very, it is very rewarding. It, it's tough at times, emotionally, because, you know, dealing with families. And, and we do liaison with families too at times. And survivors and even our own co-workers, you know. When we go to these ceremonies, like I said, it's a small group, it's a small family. And you, you interact with those employees at these parks where these tragedies have taken place. And it, it's tough. It really is, because you could look at it and say, "That could be me right there." So, it's a—

BB: Um-hm. And you can also think what a comfort you are. I mean—

DA: It, and it is. That's the, that's the good part about it. The, the compliments. And like I said, it's not about us. [0:40:00] We're there to help them. And it's an honor for us to be there and be a part of the ceremony. But the compliments that we get and the comments that the family and the, the coworkers make, it, it helps, it helps a lot. That lets you know that you did help in some way. And, and was a comfort to somebody. But at the time it's going on, well, it's kind of tough. Yeah.

BB: And you belong to this group here and they're your group too, aren't they? Your—

DA: Oh yeah.

BB: Your—is it men? Is it only men or is it—

DA: Right now, now our, we just had our former chief just retired in November, a few months ago, and I've been in the acting position for about four months as the acting chief ranger. And then Josh Clemons, another one of the rangers has filled in for a little while. We have a new chief that's coming in, I think it's going to be the first female Chief Ranger that we've had here. Laura Peppers. And she's going to be coming in in about a month and starting her new position here. But Laura grew up here. Laura and I actually went to high school together and she left here the year I started. I started here in June of '89 and she left here in August of 1989 and got on permanent down at what we call St. Augustine or Castillo San de Marcos, down in Florida, and got on permanent there. And then she's been all over the park service. So she's coming back home. And we see that a lot. We see a lot of people—you know, I, I've been fortunate. Most people have to start their career somewhere else and then work their way back home. I've been fortunate enough to be here at my home, my career, and do something I love and be close to my family and, and be close to an area that I love but still get to travel enough to make it interesting, so it's the best of both worlds, really. I, I've been very, very blessed and very fortunate when it comes to that.

BB: So you've seen lots of changes. Do you have some things that, share about where you see the future or—

DA: The new visitors center that we have is, is very impressive compared to the old Mission 66 building that we had here that was, I think, dedicated in '64. And to tell you how much I like history, I've actually got a program from the day that that was dedicated, back in '64. I've got that at home that my wife's aunt was one of the first female rangers here, supervisors, Rachel Wilson. And she has a lot of that memorabilia and she has passed that down to me and, and I've got that which is really, really neat. But the new visitors center, I never thought I would see something like that here at, I thought that old building was going

to, was going to stay here forever. So that's, that's a great thing. We've seen a lot of changes in the, in the, the cave environment itself. The cave never changes, but we do make modifications. We've made changes to some of the trails, the surfaces. We've added some, some stepping stones down there in places to make it more stable. The roadways here, I've, everything here has had three or four different names since I've been here. All the roads have changed names at least three times. But you know, the faces always change. You get a lot of the same folks that have been here for years, but then you get a lot of, of new people. Like I said, I'm the oldest one in my division right now and we've got a lot of guys that, seems like I've known them all my life, but you know, I get to looking at it, they really haven't been here all that long. So some things change, the things we modify, but for the most part, the park still, I mean, it still, that's what we're here for is to help—it, it's a fine line between preservation and conservation. You want to preserve it, but at the same time you have to allow people to enjoy it and have access to it and when you do that, you're going to have changes, you're going to have modifications. So we, we've seen a lot of changes like that.

BB: So in your mind, preservation, conservation are—

DA: They're two different things. When you preserve something, that, that would be like me putting, that's like me putting something into a jar and sealing it up and never having access to it. It stays the same all the time. Conservation is, you're, you're protecting it, but you're still using it. You're conserving it, but there's still going to be some change.

BB: I agree one hundred percent.

DA: It, there, there is a big difference. Some places are, are, in the park service, some places are considered wilderness and there is very little, even limited access to those areas. And, and really, human, human contact is very limited. We don't have that here. This is not a wilderness, it's not designated as wilderness. And in fact in the legislation of the park, it says that it's here for the enjoyment of the people. And so we have to allow that. [0:45:00]

Now we've got over four hundred miles of cave below us. And we tell everybody we've got a heck of a basement down here. But we only show a small portion of that, fourteen, maybe seventeen miles at the most. So we're, we're protecting and preserving the bulk of it, but we still allow access to part of it. Because the people need to enjoy it. And the same way with the trails. We have a very small portion of this park is actually developed. Very few buildings in this park, especially on the northside of the river where the backcountry is. We have the trail system over there, but the bulk of the park is, is just forested wild territory. And to be honest, there's probably a lot of it that people have never walked or set foot on, other than maybe back in the pioneer days and back in the days before it became a park. So very, actually only a small portion of the park is really utilized by the people. And that's kind of nice, to be honest with you. I, like I said, I walked a lot of this park over the years, put a lot of miles in. And I've walked into areas that I know I may have been the first person there in, in decades. And you can look around and you can tell that. So it's kind of nice to see those areas still, still out there, some of those wild areas.

BB: Are we allowed, are we allowed as citizens to go any, anywhere or are—

DA: In the park. Unless there is an area that is designated as closed to the public or restricted.

BB: And it would, it would have a nice—

DA: If there, there should be a sign. Yeah. There should be a sign. There would be a sign there. Otherwise, you know, there's no way to enforce something like that. Otherwise you can walk anywhere in this park that you want to. Now you can't go underground. You can't go in any of the caves without a permit from the superintendent or, or special permission. And that's as much a safety issue as it is a, a resource issue because we have over three hundred different cave entrances that we know of in this park. And if you go into one of those and something happens, if you didn't, especially if you don't tell somebody where you're going, where we going to start looking? (laughs) We're going to start on the surface

first and then we're going to work our way into those caves. And that's probably going to be the last—

BB: It'd be lost—

DA: The cave that you're in is probably going to be the last one we check, to be honest with you, so.

BB: It'd be Lost John.

DA: Exactly. It'd be worse. Well, yeah, it'd be pretty—

BB: (laughs) You don't know if [ ].

DA: That or Wandering Willie, I guess, as they used to say. Find you in there clicking a couple of rocks together. But yeah, there, the park itself though, you could walk anywhere and basically it's, it's open to the public. That's what it's here for. It's a—and the other thing too is people have a misconception, and we dealt with this a lot during the recent government shutdown, which I hate to even bring that up, but a lot of people were upset at us because of the fact that the park was closed. We had no facilities open—now we had some of the primary roads open so commuters, the local public could travel back and forth from Point A to Point B through the park, but the trails and the, the campgrounds, the cave tours, all the visitor facilities, including the hotel were closed to the public. And a lot of people were upset at us because of that. And, you know, when that happens, I've been here during two government shutdowns, the one that happened back in the, in the early '90s, I was here for that one also. And you know, we have no choice in the matter. We're, we're doing what we're mandated to do. And if I don't do that, they'll get rid of me and they'll bring somebody else in that will. And I know that. But the people had a lot of misconception. They were calling this public land. And they said, you can't close this. This is public land. We own this. And I have to explain to them that this is not public land. It is

federal land, administered by the federal government. There's a difference between public land and federally administered land. And this national park and all national parks are federally administered. Basically the government owns these properties and they administer them. They take care of them. They're the stewards of this land. Public land is, is different. That's like what you find out west where they have grazing and things like that. They'll have regulations and limitations on those, but they are public lands. And they're, they're regulated differently. So it was, it was hard to get people to understand that because the, the semantics of it and, you know, mis-, misinterpretation of it. And so we had to do some educating. And it didn't go over too well sometimes. (laughs) It, and it was difficult for us too. I mean, we're not, I'm not here to turn people away from the park. That was never my intention or my job. That was just something that was mandated to me. We're here to help people enjoy the park. And so that was a difficult, that's always a difficult part of the job. It was back in the '90s when it happened and it was in 2013 when it happened. So, it is what it is.

BB: Encapsulating this idea of stewardship in your eyes. What is stewardship in your eyes? You've talked about it in many ways for the last—

DA: Right.

BB: Twenty, forty minutes or so.

DA: Has it been that long? (laughs) [0:50:00]

BB: No.

DA: We are stewards of this land. I mean, and to me, what that means, it's, it's the protection. We're here to protect it. I mean, that's what my primary job is now. And even when I was guiding tours, I had a responsibility to protect this, this. Not only to interpret it and explain the significance of it, why it's here, why we're protecting it. You know, people

walk in the cave and they walk into the rotunda and the big room down there with the saltpeter mining operation that's still down there from the eighteen, early 1800s. They look at that and they see a pile of logs. If I don't explain to them why that pile of logs is still there and what the significance of it was and interpret that to them, and explain it to them, it's just a pile of logs laying in the middle of a pile of dirt inside of a big cave. So that's part of the stewardship is to explain the significance of it and why we're protecting it and why it needs to continue to be protected. And then we have what I'm doing now which is protecting not only the resource from the people, as we talked about, but also the people from the resource. People have to understand that it is a, a national park and it is a beautiful area. A lot of people have the misconception that nothing bad ever happens in a national park, and that's as far from the truth as it ever could be. And, and a lot of criminals understand that too. They can come here and blend in. Where if they went to my little town of Brownsville, they'd stand out like a sore thumb, you know, real quick. They'd, everybody would know they don't fit. They could come here and blend in with the crowd and, and nobody would ever give them a second look. And they, people leave their camping equipment lying around the campground and the doors unlocked on their RVs, and, because they have that idea that nothing bad ever happens. But my job is to help protect those people and also their, their lives and their property but also the resource itself. And that's the stewardship to me is making sure that, that this is protected, preserved or conserved, whichever way you want to look at it, for my children and my grandchildren and the future generations. And that's, that's what we're here for. Whether it be Mammoth Cave National Park, whether it be the Liberty Bell, whether it be the Grand Canyon, Pearl Harbor. All of these places are unique and special for a reason and you know, a lot of this, when I went to school, like I said, I loved history, and a lot of history was taught back then. You know, we had what we called Civics, which was, you know, I had to learn the Preamble and I had to learn all about the, the Bill of Rights and things. And a lot of that stuff, I don't know if it's even taught anymore. A lot of history is not taught, or it's been watered down, you know, to keep people, I don't know, make it politically correct, I guess in a way. But I think we need to know our history and understand these things, these little things that happened. The saltpeter mining operation here, I can talk about the war of 1812 and the

impact that this cave had on that effort during that war and the, the impact that the slaves had on that operation and, and then I can go into you know, the, the history of slavery and, and indentured servants and things like that. Everything builds on itself and there's a story there. And you know, it's our responsibility to, to protect and preserve that information and spread, you know, pass that on to the next generation also. So it, I don't, stewardship means a lot of things. I, I guess I've touched on a lot of stuff and rambled on. But it's, it's, it's a huge responsibility. But it is protecting and preserving not only the, the physical resource, but the history and the knowledge that goes along with it. I think that's very, very important, so.

BB: That was a perfect encapsule. I mean it, all of it was. It was good. Do you have any final thoughts before we end?

DA: I appreciate you taking the time to do this. I, I think it's something that's important. We do need to, to pass these stories on and that knowledge and, you know, it, like I said, I've got a lot of people I work with and have over the years that, that are dedicated to this job. And they don't, it's not so much a job, but they look at it as a, as a career or a way of life. And you take it serious. You know, when you, when you put on the badge or the shield or whatever we wear, it, you take that serious. And the job that we have is taken very serious. Now we may joke around and we may cut up and—but that's just to keep our sanity sometimes. (laughs) But you know, we are a dedicated group and when you're down at this level on the, you know, on the front lines and, and, and what we call our field, field people, you got some really dedicated people out here that, that really want to do good job. And I'm very happy to be doing what I'm doing.

BB: Right. Thanks David.

DA: Oh, you're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]