Interview with Bob Cetera (FA 1098)

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Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview 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's June 23, 2014. And this is Brent Björkman director of the Kentucky Folklife Program working on our Ranger Lore project, talking to different people who have worked as rangers in the park service. And today, we are in Cave City, Kentucky, continuing our work. And we're with Bob and, and Zona Cetera. Bob is on camera. And Zoa, Zona is around here somewhere. You’ll here her from time to time. We’re going to talk to them about their careers. It's, like all of these wonderful interviews, it’s so diverse in how people came to the park, came to this kind of work, and I’m excited to, to talk to Bob and, and Zona. Particularly, one of the reasons is because they, like a few people I interviewed several months ago, had come to it as seasonals and then became permanent employees. They were educators, either in other states or, and we’re going to hear that story. And we’re going to start out like we normally do. Bob could you introduce yourself, and then, and, and talk about, you know, what you ended your, your rank at the, with the, with the National Park Service, and then also maybe talk about how did you first get connected to becoming a ranger, or maybe it was Mammoth Cave, or I know you have something to say about that.

BOB CETERA: Well, my name is Bob Cetera, as you said. I’m from Illinois. My wife and I lived in Illinois for quite a few years. And we taught. And not having a lot of money, being a teacher, vacations, what we had of them, we would travel, but we didn’t stay in high-priced motels. We stayed in national parks, state parks, and so on.
Sometimes even going without showers for a few days, then we got, thought we could afford to go to a little bigger campground and get a hot shower, something of that sort. And somewhere along the line we speculated, how would it be to work at a national park? Knew nothing about it whatsoever. Well, we met a young couple on a fire watch. I don’t even remember the park. Do you, Zona?

ZONA CETERA: No, it was western, top of the mountains [ ].

BC: Yeah, anyway, they had to be there all the time, one of them. One of them could leave to get food and so on, but they didn’t leave. I wondered, what would you do if you were isolated for two months, three months. Would you read? Would you write? Would you go crazy? What would you do? So we started applying to national parks that next year. Well, we did it all wrong, and the response we got, “You did it all wrong.” Or, “Don’t call us, we’ll call you.” In those days, you applied to individual parks. And so, you’d apply to fifty parks, hoping you’d get a job at one. We were looking for a park out west, up on a mesa top we thought was lovely. And we applied to them. And just for no reason particularly, Mammoth Cave was about the only park east of the Mississippi—sorry—yeah, east of the Mississippi that we applied to. Well, lo and behold, Mammoth Cave gave me an offer. I couldn’t believe it. So I wrote back, I would be happy to, you know, work for you, and so on. And then, just like a week later, or something, the park we were really interested in also said, “We’d like to offer you a position.” Well, I said, sorry, in the intervening time, we had accepted a
position, and, and we’ll have to turn it down. Now, they offered me a job, but not Zona at that time. So that was 1972. So we were teaching and then coming down here. Teaching, coming down here for quite a number of years. And that’s how I got interested in the park. (Laughs) You asked how much did I progress in the park service. I was a seasonal. I think I got as high as a GS6 supervisor, it, as a seasonal. Then I got a permanent job, and I never got higher than GS5 before it was all over. But the rank, it wasn’t a career for me. It was something we loved doing. I always wondered why Zona didn’t get offered a job at the same time. And there was a lady who was looking at ladies’ applications, women’s applications, saying, you know, what, maybe you could improve your score. She looked at, at Zona’s and said, “Well, you've not getting credit for this, you're not taking credit for that, you're not taking credit for this.” She changed her application. I think it was like our second or third year, she was also hired. So we worked together at the park system all those years.

BB: In interpretation?

BC: In interpretation. Now, you want me to go on? [0:05:00] First day at the park. Hardly knew what the park was. Had a hard time finding our way in. Mammoth Cave this way, Mammoth Cave that way. All the things. Got to where we’re supposed to be, in time, and I look around, and there is a crowd of people that are first, new, new hires. Well, I thought, what, why did they hire me? I mean, these people have history degrees, they have geology degrees, they have environmental degrees, and so on. I
Know. They have busses. I used to drive a bus. I bet I’m going to be driving a bus for the National Park Service. And a man who gave me my start, Cutliff, Lewis Cutliff, he said, “Are you Bob Cetera?” And I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Come along with me. This won't apply to you exactly.” And I went along, and he said, “You're going to be a park photographer. You're going to guide a photography tour, you and another guide, and also manage a, a small darkroom, and take pictures for us and the superintendent.” So that's how I started at Mammoth Cave, as a park photographer.

BB: Wow.

BC: Yeah.

BB: I interviewed Lewis a few weeks ago too. So it’s been a—

BC: Oh, Lewis is like—

BB: Tell me about him first, I mean, I, you told me about your initial contact with him, but tell me about how you worked with that superintendent over the years.

BC: Well, Lewis was at that time the head of the guide division. And I didn't know the superintendent. But his father or uncle did photography for the park. He did some. He set up a small black and white darkroom in the visitor's center. And he
wanted somebody to operate it. And he hired two of us to do that at the time. And it was just a great break. So for several years, I guided this tour and did park photography. And a lot of the stuff was, you know, the superintendent shaking hands with so-on and that type of photograph. Some was geology, the park geologist at the time would bring in some film, say, “I want this printed, and I want twenty copies of this picture, and twenty copies of that picture.” And then sometimes, I’d go out and just take pictures on my own of something. And that’s pretty much how it evolved. But eventually, their budgets, I guess, were lowered, they couldn’t offer, economically, the photography tour anymore, and so I went to regular cave guiding. Lewis, though, anytime you asked him a question, he, he knew the answer. He knew the whole park. His dad had been involved. His family had been involved. He knew the old guides. And I did get a little taste of that when I first started. I met some of the guides who were there before it became a park. And I wish I had known more of them. I think you mentioned Joe Duvall. He knew a lot of the old guides from the early days, before it was the park service.

BB: Um-hm. Yeah. So, the interpretation part, the guiding, you started, you started—

BC: A few years later, then, I went on. (Laughs) In fact, my first year or so, a lot of guides didn’t know who I was, because I was out in the cave or somewhere on my own, and I’d come into the guide lounge, and everybody would keep quiet for a while, because they didn’t know, am I a spy? Is this an administrator? What’s going
on? And then, I heard later that one of the guys, and they were all jokers, I’d leave, or, and one of the guys said, “Be careful. He’s with the FBI.” (Laughs) And for a season or two, I think some of them believed I was an FBI man for one reason or another. I did a lot of work with Zona in the cave, though.

BB: The two of you worked together?

BC: Yeah. At first, when she wasn’t employed, she’d go into the cave with me, lug equipment, and cameras, flashbulbs, reflectors, cord, and so on. And then we’d try to take pictures. And one of the way we did it was set up at a location I knew the guide was going to stop, the church, or whatever, and say, “Look, when you come in, I’m going to be there with my flash equipment. Don’t get upset. Would you be able to get there and, say, stay there five minutes longer than you normally do so I can take a couple shots before you go on?” And almost every guide would cooperate. And that’s how we got the lantern picture shots that you saw, wild cave pictures that people would pose, and that’s the only way you could do it. This is pre-digital days. Zona then got hired. And was it immediately, Zona, did you go into environmental education? [0:10:00]

ZC: Um-hm.
BC: She had her master’s degree in environmental education. So she was yanked over there during the day, so that we’d start going in at nights and conning our friends, “Would you pose for a picture? Would you help carry equipment?” And I don’t know if you’ve interviewed Kevin Neff?

BB: I have.

BC: He had, he would pose. “Yep. Where you going? What do you want to do?” He stood in fifty-four degree water with a wild cave tour and posed so, it was one of those rare times where we had had high water that season, and he was standing in water up to his waist. Probably the other people were freezing to death. And I’d say, “Hold. Wait a minute. Hold. Wait a minute.” And we’d take a picture. “Can we do one more? Hold. Wait a minute.” (Laughs) And he’d be there for fifteen or twenty minutes in that cold water. And thanks to him and a lot of other people, we got the pictures we did. Some of them, we had published, but most of the time, it was an NPS credit. You know, we’d go into somewhere as an NPS photo. But we enjoyed it. Then, did a lot of, did almost every tour they had there. Did Wild Cave Tour, in my slimmer days. Did all the other tours. Some tours no longer exist. Paddled a boat on Echo River for a short period of time. I think there were one or two seasons that they reopened it, and I got a chance to do that. Zona got a chance to do that too.

ZC: Also.
BB: Hm.

BC: And so, it’s just been great. I think the great thing about it, one of the great things about it is that I met so many fantastic people. I taught with intelligent, caring people all the years I taught. Now, to come to another guide and get the same experience, intelligent, caring people. They may not have all, myself included, did a great job on any given time, but they wanted to give the people they were, had a tour with the best possible tour they could give them, and they always, always did. And a lot of them were fantastic at it.

BB: Um-hm. How did that work for your interpreting? How were you brought along in the process of sharing this information with the public? Did you work with a, along a guide that’s been there for a long time, and then work your way into it? What’s your, what’s your experience like?

BC: That’s, that’s usually the experience, at least it was. I can’t speak for later years. But you would go with somebody and when you thought you were ready, you might ask them to do a stop, or you might ask them to do part of the tour, or do the whole tours. The old guides could really throw you. I think on my second lantern tour, or something like that, the old guide I was with, he said “Okay, Bob, you’ve done it once. You’ve been on it once. Here you take it.” “Uh....” So, but he was kind enough to walk
up in front with me once in a while and say, “Bob, you’re coming up to Mummy Ledge. You don’t want to miss that, do you?” Because without them there, I probably would walk right on by it and not know. But then, you learn that way, and then you read a lot. Early, they brought in a guide from Austin, I believe, to try to improve the interpretation. He got into themes and outlines, and how you’d handle your stops, and so on. And I think the interpretation, you know, got different. That’s not the word I want. I want to say better, but I don’t mean the older guides weren’t good. It was a just different way of approaching things. And you’ve talked to Joy Lyons. She stressed a lot historical accuracy. You know, don’t say something if you really don’t know it’s true. Well, we had repeated stories so long that it has truth. It had to be true, I’ve been doing this for five years, or I’ve been doing it for whatever it is. And some of the old things were, oh, I’m trying—the second oldest visitor attraction in North America. Well, how do you know that? Uh...uh... it’s one of the oldest. Niagara Falls is probably older. But this, trying to say it’s the second oldest tourist attraction. Eighty-four and three-quarters percent of the saltpeter that was sh-, used in the War of 1812 came from Mammoth Cave. No, not necessarily. So, over the years, she has done a lot to try to get misinformation out of the tours.

BB: Did she, did she or did they, the, the lead interpreters, did they try to get you to do your own research as well?

BC: Sure.
BB: Or follow your heart? And, and what were some of the things that you felt compelled to maybe—

BC: Well, I think, for example, she has had a big interest in the black contribution to Mammoth Cave. And she has written on the subject. She has encouraged others to write on the subject. And so, from that point of view, she also, I, I think I just bought a book, *The Cave Wars*, and I think in the—I haven’t read the book yet—but in the credits, acknowledgements, he credits Joy for letting him doing this during his summer months, and get into this topic, and he’s published a book from it. So she’s done a lot.

BB: How would say, what was a typical day like? I know the typical day, that’s a very loaded—

BC: Yeah.

BB: It’s a one word, during the interpretive time, what kinds of things were, did you do three or four of the same tour each day, or were you assigned to different things, or how did that work?
BC: It was usually assigned to different things. Sometimes you’d get—well, first of all, they used to have the Half Day Tour, which they’ve changed the name to the Scenic Tour, to something else. Well, you obviously couldn’t do two of those. That would be longer than a workday. So it would be coupled with a quote-quote shorter tour. You might have two Lantern Tours. With preparation of lanterns and getting your people together, doing your tour, working on the lanterns, you’d be ready for your second tour, you’d do the same thing, and it was a work day. Sometimes, you had the evening program. And I had those a lot over the years. Well, sometimes you’d be coupled with an afternoon tour, and then doing the evening program, or canvassing the campground, or whatever the case may be at that time. So I really think that in the, well, it’s an eight-hour day, but you, half an hour for lunch is your time, they get a lot of work out of the people that work at Mammoth Cave compared, maybe, to some other park interpreters. The numbers (Laughs) that we used to handle, and they still do, is phenomenal. You don’t know, you, how do you interpret to 300 people in a cave in semi-darkness in less than ideal conditions? And we had tours of 200, 300, 400. Sometimes we’d split them, and part of the group would go early with a guide, and then the other part of the group would go later with the guide and a trailer, and so on. But you may handle 600 people or more in a day. And if—you’ve been in a cave, obviously—can you imagine getting—I’m very lucky. You can’t tell it today. I have a big voice. I used to tell people, “I may not be good, but I’m loud.” And part of that’s from theatre background and so on. And I had a sense of where to put people maybe where they could see me, and I can see them. But that’s,
you learn that, or you come with it, but boy some of those early guides, young
guides, when, after I came, I think they were just blown out of the water when they
saw what size groups they have. And we visit a lot of other, or did visit a lot of other
national parks. Well, we’ll go on a nature walk with three, five, you know, things of
that sort. So, I’m very proud of the people who work at Mammoth Cave in
interpretation. Now, does that hurt interpretation? To a certain extent it does. You
don’t have that close personal contact. Your age group is from hardly can walk, well,
my age now, to infants. It’s not like you have an age-specific group. You don’t have
an interest-specific group. When I started, I had a photography tour. You had to have
a camera. You could bring a tripod and your interest had to be photography. It was a
small group, and some of those people knew much more about photography than I
ever will. But on a general tour, you know, you may be talking about something—
unless you can find a way to make it interesting to them, they couldn’t care less. And
so it’s a challenge, I think, there, maybe more so—you may correct me, maybe
you’ve been to other parks—than any other park. We’ve been to Carlsbad. It’s a
beautiful place. Stalactites from one end to the other. Mammoth Cave—on the
surface, I was going to say (laughs)—doesn’t seem like it’s very beautiful. Most of it
doesn’t have stalactites and stalagmites. So, they aren’t just going, “Ooh. Aah. Oh,”
you know, all the time. It’s what you bring to them while they’re in the cave that will
make a big difference. [0:20:00]
BB: That size, it is a huge size. I don’t know if they’ve changed it. I think it’s been alluded to that it’s, it’s not as large as it was in the ‘70s and, I mean, and before [ ].

BC: Yeah, well, we had strange things happen. It, first little philosophies have changed. I shouldn’t talk park philosophy. I was on the ground levels, I was entry level, so to speak.

BB: Yeah.

BC: So, I had nothing to do with policy. But my perspective, what I thought their perspective was, if they show up, we’ll give them a cave tour. We’ll find a way to give them a cave tour. Now, you could be sold out for cave tours for the whole day. And so people may come, and they can’t get a cave tour. Or the cave tour they want that day. They’ve instituted a reservation system, which didn’t exist before. So the people, almost everybody, I assume, now knows there is a reservation system. But when they first brought it in, they’d come in and say, “What do you mean, reservation system? I thought it was first-come, first-served.” So, you, you can make angry people, but I think they’ve, I don’t know what their limit is today. I’m no longer an employee. Maybe a hundred and twenty might be the—

BB: That sounds about right.
BC: Sold out tour in some tours. The Lantern Tour will be smaller. The Wild Cave, I think is still fourteen. That's a, again, a different kind of interest group. I know I'm leaving tours out, but the idea—Evening Tour, maybe a Gothic Avenue, I think is small, maybe thirty or forty max. You get a better chance, I think, of contacting people and making a difference, without preaching.

BB: Right. So, what else is interesting, some people met and started their relationship, life relationships with someone else when they met at the park, and that’s not the case in yours, but you brought one another to the park in a sense.

BC: Yeah. Yeah.

BB: And that, and how was that with your relationship? Did you, did you live at the park and where? Did you, did you connect socially then with, with other married couples?

BC: Yeah.

BB: Or did you have any connections to the seasonal, the youngsters and—

BC: The vast majority were not married. They were young seasonals, and they lived in the seasonal apartment. Some people lived locally, so they lived in Cave City, or
Glasgow, or even Bowling Green, or something like that. But they had some seasonal apartments. When we first came there, I worked, Zona didn’t. I was not qualified, I could not qualify for seasonal apartments. So we started, we lived in a pop-up camper for several seasons with about 400 pounds of dogs, a Great Dane and a Newfoundland, no air condition, in a mom and pop campground. Later we bought a trailer. Later we bought a motorhome. So we lived that way. And a lot of other people did that, too.

BB: Um-hm.

BC: And, they, and that’s the other thing. At one time, I think there was a movement to, to have a lot of people from outside the area, but it puts a lot of stress. If you hire a local person, if you’re short, if the people scheduling tours don’t have enough people to take care of them, they can call to Glasgow and say, “Hey, Bob, can you come in tomorrow for part of a day, a whole day?” And you can cover yourself. You have experienced people right in the surrounding area.

BB: Um-hm. That’s an interesting cave for that reason. Some of the understandings that have come to me is there, this seems to be employees drawn from a local area.

BC: Um-hm.
BB: Or they’ve come here and stayed here, I guess.

BC: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, I know a few people like myself and Kevin and a number of others came here and lived down, decided to live down here. But I’ll be honest with you, that was not a plan when we started. You know, if you’d told me you were going to do this for thirty years or something, I, I would have laughed. I, there’s no way.

BB: As a second career, I mean?

BC: Yeah, you know, well, “Let’s, let’s come back next summer. And let’s apply for next summer. Let’s apply...” And we kept on applying, coming back every year. And when I retired from teaching, when we both retired from teaching, we were going to plan to do something like that yet. In fact, we even thought about volunteering in parks. We had done a little volunteering in parks. We thought that might be the way to go. But when we found out that there would be a couple permanent positions open, we applied and got them. And that’s why we’re here.

BB: Um-hm. Do you have any—

BC: I think—
BB: Go ahead, please.

BC: Go ahead. I’m sorry.

BB: No, I was going to go, take, take me where you were going to go. You were saying—

BC: Well, I was just saying, Mammoth Cave, [0:25:00] you probably, I think most people who work here love it, remember it. I’m, we’re on a committee, a guide committee. Chuck is on it. He’s more or less the driving force now. Where people, is it every five years?

ZC: Um-hm.

BC: They come back. We had, what, eighty or ninety guides? They’ve gone to other careers. They’ve gone on to careers in the park service. Some of them have become superintendents in other parks. Yet, they come back to Mammoth Cave where they started. And I think Mammoth Cave has given a lot of people starts in the park service.
BB: What do you think it is about Mammoth Cave? There’s a special, they have a, certainly a special thing, and that’s why I’ve really concentrated these, these interviews over the last few months.

BC: Oh.

BB: What, you know, and you’ve been to many parks.

BC: I wish I could—I wish I had worked at other parks for comparison. I don’t know how other parks do things. So if, when I used to get mad and complain, for all I know, I was complaining about something that every park does that way. So my view is very, very limited. But there, just a qu-, wonderful place, interesting place to work. And when we first started, you were given a lot of access. Well, as photographer, all I had to tell them was, “I’m going in the cave today, and I expect to be back at four o’clock,” or something. And I had access to the cave. And that’s unusual for, everybody has access to the Grand Canyon. You walk around. You go down to the, the canyon, and so on. You don’t have to have a uniformed person with you to see the canyon. You don’t have to go to an evening program. But here at Mammoth Cave, if you want to see a cave, you go with a uniform. And you’ve got a chance of really learning something, and the person taking you has a chance to give you something. I’ve worked information desks, and it’s great. But it’s not like taking people in the cave.
BB: Um-hm. Yeah.

BC: Did I throw you off? (Laughs)

[Interruption—Pause in recording]

ZC: I enjoyed working with all the kids, but I can’t talk much about the program and the program development, you know.

BB: Oh, that’s fine. Yeah.

ZC: They would, they’re the ones that brought it into, into what it is.

BB: Sure.

BC: And it was a struggle in some cases, you know, getting the program developed, getting the people, get them to, to supply the people to run the program.

ZC: The money to run it.

BC: The what?
ZC: The money to run it. (Laughter)

BC: Yeah. The money. And I think Sharon, and Zona, and those people did a wonderful job. And they had some neat people in that program too. And I don’t know how many times I’ll be doing something somewhere, Glasgow, or wherever. And, “What’s your name?” “Bob Cetera.” “Do you know Zona?”

BB: Hmm.

BC: Because she contacted so many school kids of different ages throughout, you know, while she worked there. And it was really a, a, she’s more remembered than I am. I’m a cave guide. She was the guide, the gal that went to their school and did a program for them or something of that sort.

BB: Right. One of the things I talked about this morning with, with Brad was, and it’s a re-occurring theme, is being able to do more with less, and increasingly so, and, you know, it’s, it’s kind of universal I guess in our world today, in federal government, and agencies, and things.

BC: Um-hm.
BB: But can you speak to that? About the, I think it’s, I mean, you’re protecting the resource, but you’re also a, a, a group of resourceful people, and you have a lot of pride in your work, and it’s, maybe a story about how you were able to do, I don’t know—

BC: Well—

BB: The fortitude to get through something, or I mean, it seems like it’s increasingly been that way.

BC: Yeah, it’s, again, I've been out of it, how many years since I quit doing, I call it occasional guiding?

ZC: Almost eight years now.

BC: How many?

ZC: Almost eight, I think.

BC: Almost eight years. So, I’m, my friend next door, John Yeagle lives right out that door in the next house, he taught with me in Addison, Illinois. He was the head of the art department where I taught. I was doing theatre. He was the head of the art
department. We worked together at the school. I retired, came down here, how many years later? They bought the property next door. They built a house next door. And he’s working at Mammoth Cave. And I contributed a lot in photography. If they had needed something photographed, whatever it was, they’d call on me. And he has supplied a lot of artwork and design for them. If, I don’t know who you’re going to interview, and, and so on, but he’s, [0:30:00] he’s really an interesting man and a, a close friend. So, a lot of times, you, like, you’d, you’d do the work even though it wasn’t on your hours. I’d work on photography here, or I’d develop pictures here. It wasn’t during the eight and a half hours of paid time. It was just because I didn’t mind doing it. I enjoyed doing it. John has taken artwork home and designed things on his own time. And now sometimes, they’ll do, what is it called? You get some time off. Can’t think of the term right now. Where they give you four hours of compensation time, or something like that. But there are a lot of people have done a lot of work over the years, on their own time, and haven’t charged a cent for it, materials and so on. I, I bought a lot of my own film, I’ve, not all of it, but a lot of my own film, bought my own cameras—they had a camera—because I enjoyed doing that.

BB: Um-hm.

BC: And I think the park service has allowed people to do that.
BB: Um-hm. I think people enjoy the park too. I, I’ve had a few interviews where people talk about on their days off just doing surface stuff or that sort of thing.

BC: Sure.

BB: And I’m wondering if that connects back to your photography again?

BC: Oh, yeah. Sure. We worked, we would go in and take pictures. I don’t know if it was a, somebody told me there was a need, or told us there was a need, or there was a perceived, we don’t, really don’t have many pictures of nature walks. So, we’d go in, and carry some cameras, maybe a strobe or two, and take pictures of nature walks. We’ve tried some things successfully, not so successfully, like their opening bike tour, trails. I was going to see if I could get some bike pictures. I never really got that accomplished. So, I think everybody, most everybody, really contributes a lot of time to—when you do an evening program, all the preparation time, some prep time is given, but if you’re really going to prep for a program, you’re really doing it on your own time, at home, and putting pictures together, and getting text together, and so on. And maybe sometime, also, at the park, during your workday. But a lot of that’s done on that person’s time, not on park time.

BB: It sounds like it’s a direct correlation between how you work your life as an educator, what you have to do to make your classroom successful.
BC: Well, don’t get me on—I have a whole series of ramps, and—rants, and one of them is how, I think, at the current time, teachers are getting a bad rap. Somebody said there’s countless, zillions of incompetent teachers in California, said, Dr. So-and-so. Somebody called him, and he said, “Where’d you get that figure?” He said, “I don’t know, I just kind of made it up.” So, we’re basing our decisions on poor information. I think sometimes federal employees, park employees in particular, do get a bad rap. Like, and by the way, they’re conscious of it at the park. You, you try to make contact with people as quickly as you can, but if somebody, I know how I feel when I go to a restaurant, and the person who’s doing the waitering doesn’t seem to even look at me. Well, same thing is true in a national park. If you come in the visitor’s center, but nobody greets you, says “Hello. How can I help you?” they’re going to go home ticked. If the, and, especially at the park because, I’m paying your salary, they think, and you’re ignoring me. But I think Mammoth Cave, and I assume all parks, are very conscious of this. At least, I know it was true in Mammoth Cave when I was there, that, be conscious of people. Go out early. Make contact with your visitors ten minutes ahead of time. See if there are any problems. Walk around. See if anybody has a problem. Stay around afterwards to answer questions, even though the tour is technically over. People really appreciate that. And you’ll get letters from people who appreciate that.

BB: Um-hm. Have you got some letters yourself?
BC: Oh yeah. I don’t save them, but yeah, I've got some nice letters over the years. And Zona’s got a lot of letters over the years. And we got a couple of awards and so on. But, you know, it’s a rare person in the old days, maybe it’s not true today with email and so on, that people take the time to write a letter. But we’ve gotten a number of—but they’ll also write complaints, too. (Laughs)

BB: Right. So you were taking, you were doing some photography when, and, and I think Ronald Reagan was the only President to visit, right?

BC: Right, well, I also have another rant. I don’t think Mammoth Cave is recognized enough by the park service. And yes, to my knowledge, Ronald Reagan was the only one, the only President who ever visited Mammoth Cave. And I was just at the right place at the right time. I was considered the kind of park photographer. And Secret Service said, “We can only have one video photographer in the cave with him, and one still photographer.” And so, the superintendent said I will be the still photographer, so I got to go in the cave, in the Frozen Niagara section of the cave, and not get in the way, but try to get some pictures. Pressure? No, not any. Not at all. Over the years, you hear stories and history about all the famous people, actors, performers, this and that, who have visited Mammoth Cave. But no, no American President.
BB: Do you think it changed the perception of visitors or anything after we got the, the newer designations about the UNESCO and the World Heritage designations? Do I have that right?

BC: Yes. To a certain extent, some of it positive, and some of it negative. Some people think, are they storing guns down here in the cave? You get questions like that. And the first time you heard some of these things, you were just thrown for a loop. I don’t know what they’re talking about. But Joy and people like that say you make it a question about this: we’re hearing that other parks are getting questions about that. And they try to prepare you so you’re not just going, “Duh. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Yeah, I think it gave it some national recognition, international recognition. I wish more specials were done about Mammoth Cave. You see Yellowstone, Yosemite, all the time. It’s a very rare time. But Mammoth Cave is a, in the top ten of visited, visited parks. W.K.—Western Kentucky University did a beautiful special on Mammoth Cave. So it does get recognition, but because I’m prejudiced, I think it needs to get some more attention.

BB: Right.

BC: I also wish, prices have gone up at the cave during the time I was there. The prices have gone up everywhere. But it just, I wish they could keep, and I guess they are low, but I wish they could keep prices very low so any family, no matter how
modest, can go on a cave tour with their kids, and don’t come thinking, gee, that was a lot of money. If we, if we go on this cave tour, and do this and that. I wish it were for free, but that, that’s not going to happen.

BB: Um-hm. What would you say to somebody who maybe wanted to, some of the people I’ve talked to, it’s very right place at the right time when they actually wanted to get into their full-time position after being seasonal, but what would you say to somebody who was really enamored with the park, thought, this might be for me. What would you, what kind of advice would you give them?

BC: I can’t give advice on how to becoming a permanent, because that was never my intention in the first place. I sort of fell into being a permanent. But then after I got a permanent, Zona and I got a permanent, we knew at this stage in our life, retired teachers and so on, we were not going to have a career in the National Park Service. The old days, used to be, the way you went up the ladder, I think, was go from park to park. A position would come in that was a slightly higher grade than you have right now, or gave you different and enhanced the experiences, and you, you applied for it, you moved, and if you had your family, you moved your family with them. And a lot of them got in. For a while, I don’t know how it is now, it was almost impossible even to get, to be a seasonal. When I came to some, this park, somebody said to me, “For every applicant, for every job we have to offer, we must have a stack of applications this high.” So, and then they go by a—what do you call it, a merit
system? That, it may not be the right term. But it’s a scored application. And so, they have their pick of people. And it’s, it’s very hard to get into. But I don’t know how long, if you have a family, how long you keep on trying, and trying, and trying, I don’t know. So I have no info-, no advice. It just worked out very well for me and my wife, and what we wanted to do. And we, you know how some people [0:40:00] retire and go to Sarasota or something, know nobody, don’t know what to do, bored to death. I knew I was going from a cave, a job I’d done for, what, thirty-five, whatever years, of teaching, to a job I’d already done, I don’t know, fifteen or so seasons as a seasonal. I knew people down here. I knew people who I was going to work with. I knew my supervisors, so it was a very smooth, you know, transition. Worked well for us.

BB: Sounds like a good life.

BC: Well, yeah. You don’t get rich.

BB: No.

BC: At least you’re not supposed to, I don’t think, so.

BB: Right. What would you hope for the future, for, for Mammoth Cave, for the park service?
BC: I don't know if, what we want to get into here. There are changes—you can strike something if you think it's controversial, right?

BB: Say whatever you want. Yeah, yeah.

BC: Okay. Well, at some point, they decided that part of the money that’s, comes to the park stays in the park. And you can use that for a certain type of development. Before that, all the money went to a general fund. And then Mammoth Cave would say, you know, we need a new stairway. And it goes up, and they say, “Sorry, denied this year. No, sorry, denied this year.” Eventually, you’d probably get it. Now, you try to squirrel away money so you can get money built up, so you can build a new visitor’s center or do a project that you want to do. So there’s an indirect profit motive. In other words, if you can make a little money on your tours, you can use that to stay in your park. That’s as far as I can go with that, because I don’t know how the system works exactly. Like, is that money shared then, maybe, with parks that don’t have any income at all? You know, I really don’t know.

BB: Um-hm.

BC: But I just th-, I don’t know, I, I would love Americans to come see the national parks. I would like visitation to be large, not so that it’s a bad situation when you visit, it’s a mob, but some way to let parks accommodate the numbers that might be
coming, within reason. But the problem with our park, and probably all parks, we’re seasonal. So the bulk of your people come, what, in three months or so? And then it drops down drastically, except for holiday weekends and things of that sort. So you can’t have a permanent large staff because most of the time you don’t need, in interpretation, because most times you don’t need them. It’s in those summer months, and those peak seasons. Now, this park has found a way to handle that, to a great degree, by bringing in, like, John next door on a fall weekend, where he normally wouldn’t work, but because they expect large groups, they’ll ask him to come in that weekend, and so on. So you try to keep your staff flexible. But I just wish, I don’t know, more people—we don’t have an entrance fee. And I think that’s good. But that would be one way also to increase revenue, I assume. I don’t know. Don’t get me into revenue.

BB: Okay.

BC: I’m not an administrator.

BB: Right.

BC: I don’t know how it works.
BB: Is there anything else that—you have a lot of passions about this job, and it sounds like it's been a good experience.

BC: Oh, yeah.

BB: Is there any last things you’d like to share?

BC: Zona, anything I’m—

BB: Zona?

BC: Sort of kicked in with?

ZC: No, I don’t think so. It’s been a great place to work. It’s a fascinating []

BC: And the other thing, it’s been a great place to work, and I think at one time, probably still is, the different divisions worked together pretty well. Whether that’s still true or not, I don’t know. You know, law enforcement, and maintenance, and administration, and interp. Interp here, I think maybe is the largest division as far as number of people are concerned. So, you know, I, I like that camaraderie. When I first came, we were kind of all in the same building. And in small parks, you know, everybody knows everybody else, and everybody else does everybody else’s job.
There’s not really hard divisions of, of responsibility. So, at one time, for example, they had a split system where you would ranger part of the year, and then you’d do interp part of the year. Henry did that. Henry Holman did that. He was a great interpreter, and then he also worked law enforcement. That’s where the career is. And probably your chances of getting permanent are probably in law enforcement or in science and resource?

ZC: Um-hm.

BC: Those are the divisions where you’re more likely to get a permanent position, I think. I don’t know. No, I just think it’s been a great place. Both Zona and I have enjoyed it. It’s taken a big chunk out of our lives. I did about thirty, we did thirty-some odd years in education, and thirty-some odd years, probably, directly or indirectly with Mammoth Cave. Overlapping—we’re not eighty years old, or ninety years old.

BB: Um-hm. Um-hm. Yeah. I did the math and realized, yeah, that’s right. Well, thank you so much for today.

BC: Oh, thank you. I hope this is available to people if they want to see it and so on.

[END OF INTERVIEW]