

## Smithsonian Folklife Festival Interview

Phillip Dobbins  
Forest Service Cave Guide, Blanchard Springs Caverns  
Ozark National Forest, Arkansas

July 2004

Interviewer: Connie Lee

Philip Dobbins (PD): Hi. My name's Phillip Dobbins. I work on the Sylamore Ranger District for The U.S. Forest Service. I was a guide for approximately eleven years, and I'm now a guide supervisor. I've been here for a total of thirteen years. I'm also the Wild Cave coordinator. We started that in January of 2000. We started it for a couple reasons. One, nothing like that was being done in the Forest Service, and in this area nothing was really being done like that. And we had a lot of interest in people going wild caving. And since we started we've taken approximately twenty-five hundred people in the back part of the cave. And the wild cave trip consists of taking people in the undeveloped part of the cave for four to five hours at a time. You have at least three people to go; we will take up to twelve. It's been very successful. We provide the helmets, the gloves, kneepads. We will provide pad... or, backpacks, if people need them. We have a list of certain gear that they bring. So far we've had real good experience with it. We're trying to show people how to go caving; how to do it safely, correctly. We're also concerned with the cave, how to protect the cave. So we're trying to do a little teaching as we do the wild cave trip. We still want them to have a lot of fun. We want them to be safe. And so far we've had a great experience with it. We're hoping possibly to open up another wild cave trip or a couple more later on in the future. Obviously taking twenty-five hundred people through the cave, we've had some real characters on the cave trip. I guess part of my favorite part is seeing guys come in, talking a lot of trash, real excited, real blowed up like they're the ones running the show, with their wife or their girl friend; and then them get back in the cave and being petrified, scared to death, and then to hear their girl friends laugh, going, oh honey, come on, you can do it, it's going to be okay. And them giving all the encouragement. And by the time we come of the cave, the guys have their head down and the girls are like, yeah, I'm bad, aren't I? You know, and it's kind of nice to see that role change because the guys think, I'm in charge of this, and it's kind of neat to see even the young people, the ten-year-olds, the eleven-year-olds, the girls that we've taken through have done great. We've had people that had no self-confidence to start with, and I'll get a letter back when we first started, and say, I want you to know, through the wild cave trip my daughter is now taking a karate; she's working toward her black belt; it gave her so much confidence that she never had before. She never thought she could do anything like that. And that's some of the stuff I never really thought about when we started doing it, those kind of by-products. And that's been really good to see, besides just introducing people into the cave that never would have gone caving. And we also wanted to do it so mom and dad and the kids could go. So that's been really good to see, because it is something the whole family can do together. And that's been real successful. And we've had people bring people back, other family members,

and that's a real positive and we've enjoyed that a whole lot. We've had things from... One of our first aide packs, we've never kept long handle underwear or underwear in it. Why'd we do that. Well, we've had people busting out the seat of their pants, it's something we never thought about. It puts you in kind of a funny situation. Some people are not real modest, and that's kind of embarrassing when you're in the cave. Some are more modest than others. But we have incidents like that, that are kind of funny, but it's just part of taking a lot of people through the cave. [Looks off camera] What else do you want me to say?

OFF-CAMERA VOICE: [inaudible]

PD: Yes. Ten, eleven, and twelve-year-old children have to be accompanied by an adult. Not so much their parent; by an adult. I really like a ratio of at least two-to-one with that. I don't want one adult to bring eight eleven-year-olds. We like to have an adult ratio that's pretty good. Thirteen and above do not have to have an adult. They can go alone. We don't have an upper age limit. We've taken people seventy years old on the trip that have made it and have done really well. And that's another, again another thing we never solve. Some of these older folks that haven't done a lot; they had a real sense of accomplishment when they went, and that's real enjoyable to see. We haven't had a lot of injuries. We've had some nicks and cuts. That's been a real plus on this. We haven't had to actually rescue anybody out of the cave.

Connie Lee (CL): Do people go in and then they change their mind?

PD: Yes. Today is a good example. We had twelve scheduled to go today, and I got a call that two of them had changed their mind. We have a place called the Grand Canyon that we go to, and it's a very steep embankment that goes down and up, and we tell them at that point, if you realize it's something that's not for you, we will refund your money and get you out of the cave. And we had to do that with two people today. It hasn't happened a whole lot, but it does happen from time to time. Also it happens you get somebody in the cave... I had a young man one time, that about halfway to the Titans he stopped and said, I'm not going any farther. I didn't want to go, my mother made me go, and I'm not going. And you can't make me. Well his mother... He was a young man you could tell that didn't get out much. He stayed home, was indoors a lot, and his mother was a triathlete, really in shape, and she was trying to get her son to enjoy some of this stuff. And she was in the back of the group, and I said, mom, come up here and talk to me. And she came up and said excuse us just a minute. And she took her son off to the side, and you could hear this whispering, talking. And she came back up and said, we are now ready to continue. He never said another word, and after the tour was over I said, mom, whatever you said, you did good. She said, I'm not putting up with this. He's going to have fun. And he ended up having fun. When he got out he was so proud that he had done it, and he said, I didn't think I could do it. And you could tell, he was just so tickled he did it. And mother was also proud. But mother didn't have a lot of compassion. It was kind of like, yes, you're going. But she was real polite, got him away from everybody, didn't embarrass him, and continued on. But I think it's funnier to me to watch the guys that just really think they're in control, and they're kind of macho. And their wives are small and don't say a word in the building. 'Cause you can tell they're nervous. And the guy's like, aw, it's okay, I've done mountain climbing. This is not going to worry me. And when they get in and get petrified, and to see the wives put their hand on them and go, you're going to be okay, honey. That's really enjoyable to me, because the guys

hush talking, they quit talking trash, and they're pretty humble by the time they come out of the cave. And that's, I kind of enjoy that. Well we've had real good success with it. Again, the repeat customers that Tony and I have seen really speak well of the thing, because we've had some that have gone four times. Bring people from their companies over and over, which is really a good sign. And we've changed the trip up a little after the first two years. This past month we just took a hundred and fifteen people. Already this month, this is July twenty-third, we've already taken a hundred and seventeen this month. So it keeps getting better and better, and as long as we do it safe and... And we have some really good guides, I'll say that too. I'm doing this talking, but if it weren't for Tony—we have six other guides that have helped do this—this would have never taken place. Even Bob Reeves, the other supervisors. It's really a big team effort because... Charlie [Richmond?]. I look at everybody, right up the ladder from Joe Dabney, now Cindy. If they weren't behind this, there'd be no way we could do it. They first thought we were crazy when we started doing it anyway. They were like, what is wrong with you? Nobody else is doing this here. So they, it's really been a group effort and team effort. And that's really good too, because even the guide staff, they take a lot of pride in this, even though they don't do it, I have to call them in, we have a wild trip. If it wasn't for them we couldn't have it because we have to have guides to take the other guide's place. So I look at it as the whole force really is responsible for us getting to do this, or it would never have happened.

CL: And you have taken Forest Service employees through, and how has that fared?

PD: You bet. When we first started this we took what we called guinea pig trips. We said, okay, anybody that wants to take this, you can go. And I don't know if you... Everybody's familiar with this young lady, her name's Lillian, works at the [name unclear]. On her trip I probably heard her talk to God more than any other person I ever have seen on the trip. She was so scared. She could not hear me. She would not get up off the ground. I said, Lillian, you have to stand up. And she was just literally petrified. And this bank is very steep, and you have to handle people sometimes. And you have to pull them and push them. And I can remember Lillian's comment is, I don't care where you have to put your hands on me, please get me up this hill. But she was one of these, you had to pull a foot, go back behind her, push her foot, pull her foot. But I find people like that probably enjoy the trip more when they're done than somebody like Tony or I who's fairly athletic, and can do it. Because she had a lot more sense of accomplishment than I would. And when she got out, she was one of those that you would have thought helped map the cave. Because she was like [Throws arms wide open] I did it. And she said, then she started talking trash about her husband. He can't do it. And he's not... And he did, he did not hear the end of it. She ran her mouth the whole time. And then when I see her in Russellville. There he is. That's the guy who took me on the trip. Come here and tell them what I did. She's still talking about it. So I look at people like that... And then I have some that say, I never want to do this again. But I am so glad I did it. I never thought I could do it. And I understand that a whole lot, because it's not for everybody. But the part I didn't really think we could get out of it is the self-accomplishment people have done. And it's built their confidence up, which is kind of neat to see.

CL: And don't you think they go back and talk to the other family members, or kids in school?

PD: Oh, no doubt, word of mouth is so good to this. Even though Tony puts out four hours, she talks to the radio stations. We do our part on that, but it's the people talking, 'cause that's, when somebody calls us. My brother went on it, he says it's the greatest thing he's ever done. We want to go. As a matter of fact, we still get a lot of people that try to bring their nine-year-olds. Well we want to go. The word of mouth is really good. But again, it's just a team effort, of everybody talking about it. Because I go places, and somebody says Blanchard Springs, and they don't sometimes talk about the commercial tour. So-and-so went on the wild trip. They really liked it. And something else I'll say is the other caves around here promote us also, which I really appreciate, and we do them too. They will talk about it, just like the Hurricane Trip. I hear them talking, they'll recommend us, and we will recommend, when people leave here, we'll recommend that cave. And the cave Association is real good to us too. They talk about us and promote caves. Just like we send people to Missouri caves and caves in this area. Well yesterday, I had a guy from the Park Service come here. He'd been all week at Buffalo Point. He said that the ranger... He did everything [you do at Buffalo Point]. What can I do next? He said, what you can do, be sure you go to Blanchard. I said, what was his name? And I called him at Buffalo Point. I said, I just want to thank you. He said, well Phillip, I try to send as many people as I can. I said, I know that, but I never take the time to say thank you. And I said, I appreciate you all doing that, because we send a lot of people to [a few words unclear] to Buffalo Point. And he said, well it's great, and everybody I ever talk to that goes down there has nothing but good things to say. And again, it's that same thing about word of mouth. That we get a lot of real positive things [from them].

CL: how old were you when you first started caving?

PD: My dad... I'm from here, and my dad took me to a cave [up by the house?] when I was nine years old. And I got to come in this cave when they were developing it. My grandmother was a member of the garden club. This cave, this is Blanchard Caverns, and they started bringing, when they were developing it, they were bringing garden club, lion club. They were trying to show interest in [word unclear], and also to let them know what was being developed over here. And they had the old wooden walks in the back of the [word unclear?] room, and they would bring groups in, and they had the old work lights strung up. And I can remember coming in with my grandmother-- I think I was eleven then-- and thinking it was pretty cool, but didn't know much about the cave. But my daddy crawled around in a few holes. But I think the first time I was about nine years old.

CL: Okay. So even though you made ten as the cut-off point, you felt that that was [overlapping voices].

PD: My dad did not have real good sense [Laughter]. And he still doesn't. And that probably wasn't the smartest thing to do. Matter of fact, we took my grandmother, who was about sixty-five, down into this cave. And it was a vertical cave and we put a ladder and a rope in it. And I look back at that now and go, you were insane. For doing it. And my grandmother climbed down this ladder. And I thought it was great as a kid, but I look back there now and go, what were you thinking? Obviously not a lot. But we had a big time and nobody got hurt. Now what you've just said is really true, 'cause Tony and I have talked a lot about it, and we know a lot of eight-year-olds that would do very well in the cave. But I have also taken some twelve- and thirteen-year-

olds and I've said, I would never want you in the cave again, alone. So we had to come up with a number, and we still don't know if that's exactly right, because it's not fair denying... We were going to do height, we were going to do... We had to pick something, so we set on ten. And this other trip we're talking about doing, it may be thirteen and up. It's going to involve a little water, maybe. So we're still working with that, and I don't know if there's an ideal number. Because I know some... Just like I told a guy the other day. He brought a kid that was going to be ten years old next week. And I told the dad, I understand. That child is not going to be any different next week than he is right now. We'll take him then. Now we have had kids... this happened just a while back. We had a child, we got back in the titans, and one of the guides said, there is no way. He said, you must not be nine years old. Well no, but I'll be ten in two weeks. But her father had told us that he was ten. So what do you do? And I've had that happen a few times; once you come out. It scares me to death, but as long as we put out our policy and what age you should be. We're not going to check birth certificates, but we've had that happen some, because they want them to go so bad. And I understand. We have had some nine-year-olds that did great. But we'd rather that not happen.

CL: Now what are the titans? Is that like t-i-g-h-t-e-n?

PD: No, as in titan missiles I think is what they were named after. They're big, white formations, and they're right behind you on that picture, but they're big, massive stalagmites that are growing up from the floor. And, Tony, how tall do you think they are?

Tony: (off-screen) I always thought about eighty.

PD: That's a good guess, 'cause I don't really know. We've tried guessing, but they're about seventy to eighty feet tall. [Words unclear] solid white, gorgeous. And that's a turn-around point on the wild cave trip, and that's where we sit and eat and take a break.

CL: Now I've seen pictures of some of the people you work with that have been in a tiny crack. That's why I thought those might have been the "tightens". [Laughter]

PD: No, those are fat ones. [Pointing to the pictures] Yeah.

Tony: (off screen) Phillip, you might want to explain about what it's like to go on the Wild Cave Tour, what you actually see, what it is that you're doing.

PD: Well this trip, the Blanchard Springs Wild Cave Trip, we try to incorporate everything from great big, massive, open areas, which we have; big walking passages what we have; we have some crawling; we take you down by the stream; we also take you into what we call the Corkscrew, which is a nice climb and a crawl up through some small maze-like passage. And when you really look at this trip that we have, it involves just about everything you can do in a cave. Except getting under water or in water with scuba tanks. We don't actually physically crawl in the water on this trip, but everything else you can encounter in a cave except really tight, small stuff, we do on this trip. And our goal was is to have one trip like this first one we did at Blanchard as kind of an introductory trip, and hopefully in the year to come to have different levels. We're going to have one trip, we hope, where we're going to have a squeeze box Tony's

going to incorporate in our new visitor information center, that if you can't through this squeeze box you can't go on the trip. There's some seven, eight, nine inch stuff. So it's not going to be for everybody. What we hope to have eventually is, my goal is to have about four trips. One everybody can do; mom, dad, grandparents. One intermediate that's a little harder. Then a real hard trip. And we're even talking maybe, hopefully one day if we can ever work out, a lantern tour, which we could have for a lot of people to go. And that's one thing I—we go back to families, but—I really like the idea of being able to take grandma, grandpa, the grandkids. Get everybody involved. At least get them up here, so some are going to go on the commercial tour; some will go on the wild trip. And that's what we've seen too. Even a family of four comes, maybe two will go on the wild trip, two say, I don't want to; I'm going on the [name unclear] Trail. That's fine, because we're still getting them up here and getting them involved. Or they'll camp, or go to Tony's programs. At least they're involved with what we're doing up here. And that was part of our goal too, is to get them up here, and... Because some of them, what I've found, they go on the wild trip, they have never been on either commercial tour. And then when they get up here and go on the commercial tour... And I have had that happen, I've had them come up here and camp, go on the wild trip, so they're spending two nights up here on the campground; and go on the wild trip, then the next day go on both commercial tours. Well that's great for a family to come do that with us. And in just that word of mouth... They're going back and saying look, there's a lot to do; you can spend a whole weekend up there. And that's been really a neat byproduct that I never really envisioned when we started this.

[Off-screen inaudible remarks between Tony and CL.]

CL: I think that'll work.

PD: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW